

Kant's Doctrine of Atonement as a Theory of Subjectivity

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It is well known that Immanuel Kant, in *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* of 1793, sets for himself the task of rationally reconstructing the moral-practical substance of biblical revelation, i.e., of traditional Christian dogmatics. Obviously a revision of positive religion according to the "pure religion of reason" cannot be expected to verify directly any dogmatic proposition, or to "rescue" Christian faith by philosophical means, as so many contemporary authors had in mind. For Kant, the philosophical linkage between moral autonomy and religious belief does not result from a lack of a rational foundation of morality and a need for a religious foundation; the competence of practical reason in this respect is fully sufficient. Rather, it is the imperative demand of practical reason itself for the realization of morality under finite, empirical conditions which establishes religion as an authentically philosophical subject. And thus it is the clarifying of the relation between practical reason as such and empirical subjectivity which obliges Kant's philosophy of religion not only to criticize the dogmatic tradition but also to reconstruct a rational analogon of Christian dogmatics.

Such a reconstruction clearly must be based on a philosophical concept of the human being, namely of a free being obliging herself to absolute laws just by her reason: it is an anthropological task. Christian theology, however, has to consider serious reasons for speaking of religion not only in anthropological terms but, in categorical differentiation, also in Christological terms: in this life the difference between empirical self-consciousness and true self-consciousness is, in Christian faith, irreducible. Now it is just this difference, in terms of empirical

and transcendental subjectivity and its irreducibility, that is a crucial problem for Kant's philosophy of religion. Kant's discussion of dogmatic Christology, therefore, does not indicate a compromise with dogmatic theology or even an accommodation to it but arises from a genuine motif of Christological argument. In particular, it is the doctrine of Atonement to which Kant turns his philosophical attention.

Christology, however, represents the *topos* where the counterdistinction between revelation and rational religion, as Kant characterizes it, is an essential presupposition of Christian dogmatics itself. Without history (just what the pure religion of reason does not embody), no Christology can be formulated. How, then, should Kant use Christological arguments in defining the relation between practical reason and empirical morality? Does Kant's theory of subjectivity include a Christological difference?

In the following I want to point out, on the one hand, that Kant's concept of the Atonement indeed verifies important elements of dogmatic Christology. To be sure, it does so better than the modern theology of his time, known to him most probably through J. J. Spalding (1748, 1772), J. S. Semler (1774), the Wolfenbüttel Fragments (1774-78), or even C. F. Bahrdr (1781). On the other hand, I want to show that Kant's concept of Atonement does not do justice to classical Christology, although it argues in some sense more traditionally than the conservative theology of his time, known to him through J. F. Stapfer (1746), J. D. Heilmann (1761), or J. D. Michaelis (1760, 1779). To be sure, just in its surprising traditionalism, Kant's concept represents an abstract theory of subjectivity.

Kant speaks of Jesus Christ as the personification of the Good, the Ideal of moral perfection—in religious language, humanity in which God is well-pleased. The Ideal presented to the senses in Jesus Christ dwells in an incomprehensible fashion in practical reason, which gives the moral law. There, independently of experience, it is objectively real. In it, therefore, inheres not only the claim to be the model of moral behavior but also the requisite power to be such.

Its realization, of course, is difficult: we cannot cancel out the indebtedness that accompanies our exodus from an evil attitude and its accompanying evil behavior, even if we adopt a good attitude and the good behavior that goes with it. The

debt cannot be removed by good works; they are simply duties, and when they are done nothing is left over. Nor can it be taken over or wiped out by another person—Jesus Christ for example—since the debt of sin, the most personal liability of all, is nontransferable. Punishment, required by the notion of righteousness, must be administered. It may not be visited, however, on that person who once was evil but who has in the meantime become another person. In view of her good attitude, she has become an object of divine goodwill.

The dilemma can be resolved only as follows: because a human being suffers the pain that accompanies the exodus from evil (and which occurs only as a result of entry into the good), he bears the punishment he deserved as Old Man but now as a new, moral person. Indeed, in terms of his empirical character he still is the Old Man. In the very putting on of the New Man, the Old Man is put to death. Before the most high, divine righteousness, therefore, on the basis of his new attitude, this person as intelligible being is therefore his own representative, savior, and intercessor (R 67ff./72ff.).

This solution, however, is not good enough; Kant himself admits it does not theoretically resolve the antinomy produced by the connection which is claimed between faith in a vicarious satisfaction or cancellation of punishment and the confidence that through subsequent good behavior one can be well-pleasing to God. A theoretical resolution through insight into the causal determination of human freedom is not possible, although a practical resolution may well be.

If there is to be a moral sense to the belief that the insufficiency of one's own action requires a justifying complement through an actor or judge other than the self, then it is clear that self's own action must be and remain the point of departure for the moral exercise of free will. In Christological terms, the proper object of saving faith is the principle of a life pleasing to God as ideal in our reason, not its possible or real appearance, and consequently not Jesus Christ, either, as an example of it (R 156ff./168ff.).

Kant's philosophical reconstruction of the Christian faith and the Atonement between God and man in Jesus Christ is more closely related to the then-contemporary enlightened Protestantism and its theology, the so-called Neology, than it may seem, when read under the heading "reason and/or revelation."

Kant is in full agreement with the Neologians especially with regard to the axiom, contradictory to the traditional doctrine of Atonement, that no person as moral subject can be vicariously represented; under no circumstances, consequently, can guilt and merit be transferred from one agent to another, because that would abolish the agent's subjectivity itself along with her own responsibility. This is the neological criticism of dogma, especially of the doctrine of original sin and of vicarious satisfaction. In 1771, a reviewer in F. Nicolai's *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek* characterized the metamorphosis of the Reformation's religion of conscience in the critique of Christology with the rhetorical question, "How can God grant me obedience, which is not mine? Does an alien virtue give me peace and contentment or make me morally better? And without this inner consciousness that the Good in me results from my own decision, virtue cannot exist, still less the sentiments necessary for salvation."

The key words, "consciousness" (*Bewußtsein*) and "sentiments" (*Empfindungen*), represent a further aspect of the close connection between Kant's philosophical-religious doctrine and the neological theology. For, characteristic for the latter, too, was the basic decision to establish itself not as the exposition of Christian viewpoints but rather as a critique and reconstruction of them. That had been so ever since the transition from traditional natural theology to a rational philosophy of religion as the "horizon of plausibility" of Christian theology, the theology which expounds the Christian tradition (J. J. Spalding, 1748).

The neological principle, of course, is independent empirical subjectivity, which is to say, experienced inner perception. The critique and the construction which proceed from this point could accordingly affirm only the experience of the pious, enlightened individual. Against that, Kant's transcendental reduction of empirical subjectivity permits analyzing it from the perspective of the philosophy of religion. Kant is therefore able also to reconstruct the content of Christian concepts which Neology could only criticize, or—better said—amputate. In the context of the doctrine of Atonement this reconstruction bears especially upon the assumption (emphasized so strongly by Reformation theology) that a Christian is and remains wholly just and wholly a sinner at the same time. In anthropological terms, this is the assumption that a human being as person is

neither primarily nor ever constituted through her actions but is constituted as person prior to them. The Kantian formula of radical evil, the spectacular exponent of this anthropology, does not represent a fallback to a pre-enlightenment level, however, but progress toward an enhanced (self-)critical and constructive competence of reason against the contents of the Christian revelation.

With a view toward the supposed rehabilitation of pre-enlightenment theologoumena which imply heteronomy, Kant has not been the object of criticism only; even theologians have praised his overcoming of Neology's flat moralism and eudaemonism. How questionable this praise is, however, can be demonstrated by a theological-historical analysis of Kant's apparent traditionalism. The punitive righteousness of God—which corresponds to Kant's thesis of radical evil—is the thesis especially at issue in the doctrine of the Atonement. It is true, of course, that Kant on this point consciously contradicts Neology, which based its critique of the Anselmian satisfaction theory on the notion (derived from Arminianism) that punishment cannot aim at revenge or expiation but at betterment alone and, in accord with the axiom of the untransferability of morality, at the improvement only of the one punished (J. G. Töllner, 1768; J. J. Spalding, 1772; J. A. Eberhard, 1772; J. S. Semler, 1774; G. S. Steinbart, 1778; C. F. Bahrtdt, 1781; F. Chr. Löffler, 1796). It is also true that the theologians who opposed Neology (G. F. Seiler, 1775, 1778; J. D. Michaelis, 1779; G. Chr. Storr, 1789, 1793; see also, on this point, G. E. Lessing, 1773, and J. Chr. Döderlein, 1780) were not able to offer a basis for their opposition, because for them, too, the external punishment had to serve the purpose of deterrence or of divine training. In other words, they more or less clearly repeated Grotius's concept of punishment as example. Against them all Kant defined the sanction for moral guilt as well-grounded precisely as requital and thereby reconstructed the strict concept of the divine punitive righteousness. If one desires to pin things down historically, one might say that he renewed the Anselmian approach—albeit on the basis of practical autonomy, as the discussion of the right of punishment in *Die Metaphysik der Sitten* shows (MMJ 99ff. / 331).

There can be no question of repristination here, even when we take into account Kant's contradiction of the Anselmian

theory from the point of view of epistemology, that is, the assumption that God is (infinitely) subject to affront and is wrathful. Here, with the Neologians (since W. A. Teller, 1772), Kant falls in with the rejection of the notion of the wrath of God that was made, especially by the Socinians, on the basis of natural law: humanity, not God, must be reconciled with God. But, contrary to first impressions, his concept of punitive righteousness corresponds to the modern concept of God, which is characterized by natural law. By putting the moral individualism of Socinian practice into the forensic horizon of the Anselmian satisfaction theory (which on this point is similar to the Arminian one), he identifies the divine claim to restoration of wounded honor as a claim of transcendental subjectivity (MMJ 103–04/333–34). Atonement then is a requirement of subjectivity to itself and in itself. The doctrine of the Atonement, therefore, when reconstructed from the salient features inherent in reason as such, raises exclusively the question—despite experience to the contrary—of the “unreasonable demand for self-improvement” (R 47/51). This includes, to be sure, the surplus of good reckoned by grace, both as it is necessary due to the discrepancy between the empirical and the intelligible subject and as it is possible without further conditions, in the other direction (R 70/75–76, cf. 60/66–67).

If one does not want to introduce the distinction between intelligible and empirical subjectivity here (and, in my judgment, one cannot), Kant's doctrine of Atonement remains an abstract theory of subjectivity. In the theory, the self sits yet unmediated, avoids the pain of the otherness of another, and holds tightly to itself without a detour over the failure of direct self-determination. It was just this detour, however, that gave theoretical substance to the traditional (Western) Atonement doctrine, which admittedly was formulated under far simpler theological circumstances. But Kant's reconstruction is also deficient against neological Christology. To judge by the commotion attending the publication of the Wolfenbüttel Fragments (especially *Vom dem Zweck Jesu und seiner Jünger*, 1778), and in view of the ensuing challenge by G. E. Lessing (1780), Neology attempted to adjust its own, justly admonished Christological deficiency in two directions. One was through the development of a historical-psychological hermeneutic (among others, J. G. Herder, 1796, 1797); the other was through the transformation

of the problem of reason and revelation into that of revelation and history (J.F.W. Jerusalem, 1768, 1792; J. J. Heß, 1768; J. G. Herder, 1784). Convinced as he was that the historical could contribute nothing to improve human beings, and was therefore "completely insignificant" (R 102/111), Kant was unable to profit from these steps forward. To be sure, he had sharpened anew the theoretical conditions; his epistemological proof of the impossibility of the Christological knowledge that had formerly been affirmed was, of course, an exoneration of historical positivism against the naturalistic denial of any revelation at all; this exoneration, however, still did not mean the solution of the Christological task, as was shown by the arbitrary juxtaposition of its rationalistic, its supernaturalistic, and its combined formulations (e.g., J. H. Tieftrunk, 1789, 1797; K. Chr. Flatt, 1797; C. F. Stäudlin, 1794). If the announcement, "the historical faith is 'dead by its own hand'" (R 102/111) is therefore the last word, even for the theoretical claim implicit in dogmatic Christology, then a Christology in a strict sense is unattainable.

The Christologies of Hegel on the one hand and of Schleiermacher on the other (which, of course, continue the neological approach in a transcendental fashion) were not the first to justify a certain scepticism toward Kant's Christology. It was rather Kant's Christology itself, with its premise of theoretical subjectivity and its antinomy of reason in the problem of Atonement (admitted by Kant himself), that did so; attempts to harmonize this antinomy, among others that of T. Krug (1802), were not successful. Already the faithful Kantian, J. H. Tieftrunk (1797), against the Storr pupil F. G. Süskind (1796), could only defend his master, and argue that the forgiveness of sin is a postulate of practical reason (obviously under the condition of betterment), by assuming that the universality of the moral law could be realized in the empirically particular, that is, it could include Atonement. In other words, Atonement not only demanded adherence to the law but made possible unrestrained love of the law.

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