

Religion and philosophy: Immanuel Kant and the possibility of a *philosophical religion*

Alexandru Petrescu*

Abstract: In the following, there is an attempt to make some arguments about the possibility of *communication* between philosophy and religious thinking. At this level, it is important to identify “the data of a possible analogy” from the perspective of issues such as the object of metaphysical philosophy and that of theology, and the pragmatic language and intentionality assumed by the two types of “cognitive experience”. Next, given the reporting of philosophy to religion – as a specific area of human experience, reporting by several specificities of the religious discourse (philosophy of religion, metaphysics, phenomenology of religion, cultural anthropology, etc.) -, the focus is on the Kantian point of view, aiming at capturing *the possibilities and the limits of philosophy in relation to religious thinking and experience*. Kant is also aimed at as somewhat provocative from the perspective of the question: How much justification does the philosopher have when proposes a new meaning for religion; actually, a kind of “philosophical religion”, which Kant calls “pure rational religion”, or “moral religion”?

Keywords: philosophy, religion, Kant, transcendental ideal, moral theology, rational faith, pure rational religion

RELATIONSHIP OF PHILOSOPHY WITH RELIGION

Usually, *philosophy* is assumed as a *spiritual attitude*, a way of referring to ourselves and to the world; it is the *reflection and meditation* on the world and on our own being, whose sense, meaning we wish to figure out to conquer spiritual autonomy; b) a *cognitive approach*, a form of rational knowledge and an explanation of existence from the point of view of consciousness; c) a *way of valorising existence* according to the aspirations and interests of man; d) knowledge oriented towards the guidance of life towards wisdom.

* Alexandru Petrescu (✉)

Faculty of Political Sciences, Philosophy and Communication Sciences, West University of Timișoara, Romania
e-mail: alexpetrescu257@gmail.com

As a particular way of research and interrogation, philosophy concerns areas such as knowledge, human nature, language, being, etc., areas to which it relates by a specific way of argument and a specific conceptual language. At least since Kant, it is critical or not. *Religion*, on the other hand, is a type of human experience that involves faith, ritual, ability to perceive an eternal divine order, a specific language meant to edify, awaken, turn man to God, then hierophantic acts, dogmas that are not to be questioned critically or conceptually, being, on the contrary, an object of faith, etc. All this is meant to recouple the believer to spiritual origins. When a believer tries to assimilate rationally his/its own faith, it can lead to a speech called theological, to what, for example, Thomas Aquinas called “sacred science”. In Christianity, in the earliest sense, *theology* designates Scripture, which, for the Christian, outlines the incarnation of the divine Logos: even when Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite speaks of “mystical theology,” he understands by theology the ascension of our spirits to the “mysterious heights of Scripture.” Theology, as “participation, in Christ, in unity and the fullness of the Trinity”, requires that the human intellect gives up thinking of Revelation with its measure, thinking *by Revelation*, in a spiritual, creative manner. The latter meaning requires what is called “communion theology”, which, to everybody’s knowledge, involves multiple nuances, especially the function of different cult organization. It is easy to see how their theoretical exposures often go, and without interruption, to texts of prayer and dialogue with Christ (See *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, 1987).

In a first instance, philosophy and religious thinking appear much different. Philosophy is knowledge and interpretation, theology is “sacred science”, rational or mystical; and religion, which also assumes a theological discourse, is much more than that, implying attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, different spiritual experiences, etc. As a theologically fancied religion, Christianity addresses man most often to alleviate his suffering, showing him the cause and suggesting his cure; it is a doctrine of salvation for any man, philosopher or illiterate. On the contrary, philosophy is addressed to a more expressly specified audience, carrying an exercise of knowledge exclusively in rational terms.

Does it operate a living form of *communication between philosophy and purely religious thinking*? And if it is possible, which is the base of such a communication? Let us think, for example, that the same

name, *arche* (principle, origin, beginning, source) signifies the being as a being (of metaphysics), on the one hand, and the divine (or divine thinking), on the other. If these are still one, why does it take two meanings? If, on the contrary, the ‘divine’ and the ‘being as a being’ are not identical, how come they can stand as a name of the beginning with the same dignity? These are questions that open up the possibility of capturing the resemblance between metaphysics and theology that is always grounded on an essential difference. Next, there is an attempt to identify the ‘data of a possible analogy’ from the perspective of issues such as the object of metaphysics and theology and the pragmatic language and intentionality assumed by the two types of ‘experience’.

Considering metaphysically the classical philosophy, its *object* is pure being able to be speculatively known by pure reason. *Being* is the universal. It can be considered either as ‘being in itself’ or as a ‘being of being’ or as assuming transcendence and immanence alike. In its turn, the *divine* of religion implies the identity between the ‘being as essence’ and the ‘existence’. In the matter of Christian religion, the quality and superior value of the divine – *as a person* – is also recognized. On the other hand, both emphasized terms (Being-as being and the divine) not just call the Absolute, but they also assume (for metaphysicians and/or theologians) the same *conditions*, such as uniqueness, illimitation, indeterminateness, self-identity; and their *reference* leads to something that *exists*.

As regards the language, if philosophy is well placed in the space of knowledge, the language of theology is, by excellence, a language that tends to edify, to awaken and/or to form. In theology, language becomes “an environment of spiritual life”, through which man can be more easily restored in his raw data. Therefore in the religious discourse we find themes about the eschatological order of the world, about salvation and communication with the *source of life*: “a break-up of the eschatology in history” (Mircea Eliade 1959), etc. However, one can talk about the significance’s closeness of these two ways of language. For example, the possible conjunction between philosophical and religious consciousness can be highlighted by the way some concepts work in philosophical and theological discourse. Here is an example through the concept of *presence*: the Stoic philosophy frequently stresses the idea of a divine presence in each thing, “to close the parts that make it up”. Divinity is present with all and has a certain communication from them all, overseeing all things (See Epictetus, *Discourses*, I. xiv. 9). The presence of the divine in the world is

ecumenical. The universe is the common house of men and gods. Providence is the ruling rationale of the universe: it manifests itself impersonally as a cohesion force in all things.

In Christianity, God's presence establishes spiritual interiority, being the condition of transgressing the materiality of the human condition. Divine *Parousia* and the *openness* of human being are the terms of a double *ex-statis*. On the one hand, it is the exit of the mind from the state of ignorance, of indifference and self-hiding, that is, its openness to its own interiority. On the other hand, it is the unfolding of the divine Absolute, through *presence*, in the unity of this interiority.

With regard to the *intentionality* assumed by the two types of experience (that of speculative thinking and that of religious experience), the focus is firstly on a larger idea about similarity between religious prayer and philosophical thinking. Metaphysics registers, from time to time, the intention to move between a common register of judgment and a critical reflection or a phenomenal act; always, *intentionality* involves the frame of knowledge and of values.

In the Christian religious space, the communion with the *source of life*, salvation, atonement, etc., supposes a certain *way of life*, which is assumed as such only connecting to faith and communion with Christ. In these circumstances, the meaning of a faith-filled life, the pragmatic intention taken by one's religious acts refers to incessant communion with God opened not only through knowledge, be it speculative.

It is believed that, historically, after the *kenosis* of Christ, the relationship between philosophical and Christian thinking stood quite a lot in the sign of the problem, and Kant's position on religion seems to maintain that character as well. We briefly consider some moments in the history of the relationship in question. All begins with Paul the Apostle, who set out the Christian attitude's strategy towards traditional philosophy and culture: rejection, in its principle, and then reintegration, for the historical legitimacy of Christianity. It is Paul's speech on the Areopagus presenting the new teaching: "God disregards the times of ignorance and now commands all men to repent." (*Acts* 17:30) The rejection would follow the bringing of Greek tradition into a new perspective: "For in him we live and move and have our being; as even some of your own poets have said" (*Acts* 17:28). The end of the episode is, otherwise, symbolic: after rejection and recovery, the Apostle leaves the Areopagus accompanied by several Athenians who "have sided with him". During the coming centuries, as in the Apostle's program, the first component (establishing Christianity as a

universal doctrine in the field of consciousness) logically follows the second one through the works of Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine of Hippo and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. It is worth just mentioning the Justin Martyr's statement of his *Second Apology* (Chap. X – Christ compared with Socrates): “Christ [, who] was partially known even by Socrates” (In Roberts, Donaldson, and Cleveland Coxe 1885, 191).

Theologians and philosophers alike, Gregory of Nazians, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas emphasized both ways in order of knowledge, opening towards what in nowadays is used by ‘Christian philosophy’ expression (a problematic one). Not just the relationship between philosophy and theology received reliefs, nuances and changes, but also the process of self-individualizing each other registered a significant evolution over time.

Philosophy had to proceed by assimilating some contents from the Christian regime, for example. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel refers to philosophy as “divine service”; the search of the eternal truth makes the object of philosophy and of religion, each of them being “divine service in its own way”; the author unfolding his interpretation from the position of a philosopher and not a theologian (Hegel 1995, 431, 432).

It is worth stressing the obvious process of the two perspectives' autonomization in the time preceding Im. Kant. Thus, Martin Luther was seeing philosophy as a terrible removal from God; and René Descartes will favour the metaphysical discourse by comparison with the theological one (not faith). But they separated only what was seriously articulated. Trying to philosophically and rationally prove the God's presence in the world, as Descartes set out in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, is to make theology a way or a chapter of philosophy, a version of conceptual thinking. Somehow prolonging this mode of seeing things, but also differently, Kant will establish his philosophy of religion.

THE IDEA OF GOD IN KANT'S PHILOSOPHY

The question of the *existence and justification of the Supreme Being* is a defining one within Kantian works. Seeing that man, as a moral being, is the greatest purpose of God's creation, a “moral theology” is to be learned. It is not about about the possibility of demonstrating, at the level of knowledge, the existence of God, but to affirm that our

moral life is possible only if God exists. So, Kant distinguishes between “rational theology” – attempting to demonstrate, in theoretical terms, the existence of God - and “moral theology” - according to which God can be targeted by what the philosopher calls “moral faith”: the cause of nature and a condition of the possibility of the supreme value of moral life, and also a guarantee of moral order, moral ideal and supreme moral lawmaker.

In *Critique of Pure Reason*, the idea of God, as Unconditioned, as an absolutely necessary being, is targeted as a *transcendental ideal* determined by an idea, as a prototype of perfection necessary for all that is contingent and determined in our sensitive existence – what we can do to reconcile sensitive experience with the absolute being is to assume an extra-phenomenal reality designated as a transcendental object: we assume its existence, but we cannot know it. At this level of discussion comes Kant’s criticism of deistic *rational theology*, which turns the transcendental ideal into a real object, especially through the so-called “ontological argument”. For the German philosopher, the ontological argument of God’s existence lies in the transition from the concept of the perfect being to its existence. In his *Meditations*, Descartes has said that God, thought of as a perfect being, necessarily exists because, in the idea of a perfect being, is also contained the attribute of existence. Kant points out, however, that the ontological argument does not leave the strictly logical framework. The perfect being can be thought out because it does not involve any contradiction, but the logical possibility is not the real one. The latter implies agreement with the conditions of existence, which are something other than those of thought. Secondly, existence is not a simple predicate, a concept contained in other concepts. Kant then believes that we can conceive the ratio between concept and existence in two ways: analytically and synthetically. In the first case, existence is inferred from the concept as part of the whole, in which case existence is of the same nature as concept. The concept exists only in the spirit of man, so the existence that results from it is purely ideal, it is the “idea of existence”, not existence. In the second case, it can be admitted that existence must be added to concept, following a synthetic report. There is, in the human spirit, a faculty that allows the connection between absolutely heterogeneous things. That is how experience is born. But, Kant says, admitting a synthetic link between the concept of a perfect being and its actual existence, it is impossible because the perfect, absolute being would cease to be so. However, in Kant’s opinion, the

weakness of the rational arguments concerning God's existence does not prove His non-existence. The only valid conclusion that can be drawn is that the existence of the Supreme Being goes beyond the powers of human reason. Human reason cannot prove the existence of God. But – and this is no less important – it cannot prove His non-existence either. It is also worth pointing out that highlighting the illusory nature of the deistic arguments does not mean giving up the project of a religion based on reason.

In *Critique of Practical Reason*, God no longer has before Him the human intellect, whose imperfection He comes to counteract, but the human reason acting by will. Man's will should cope with antinomic tendencies towards moral law, imposed by the right thing, on the one hand, and to the desired happiness of sensitivity, on the other hand, which is impossible for man to achieve by his own forces. In these circumstances, Kant invokes the idea of the *sovereign good* that human will should pursue, considering it the ultimate value of moral life. Since the *sovereign good* is understood as a synthesis of virtue with happiness, and because its premises are the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, Kant postulates them in such a way that,

In this manner, the moral laws lead through the conception of the *summum bonum* as the object and final end of pure practical reason to religion, that is, to the recognition of all duties as divine commands, not as sanctions, that is to say, arbitrary ordinances of a foreign and contingent in themselves, but as essential laws of every free will in itself, which, nevertheless, must be regarded as commands of the Supreme Being, because it is only from a morally perfect (holy and good) and at the same time all-powerful will, and consequently only through harmony with this will, that we can hope to attain the *summum bonum* which the moral law makes it our duty to take as the object of our endeavours (Kant 2004, 133).

We specify that the need to postulate God's existence at the same time as intelligence and will, as the cause of nature, but also as what the sovereign good makes possible, is only a *subjective* one, meant to maintain hope in the union of virtue with happiness: if we act as well as it stands in our power, we can hope that what is not in our power will come from elsewhere, whether we know or not in what way. To be an *objective* necessity, it should be given as a duty, which is not possible. It is a subjective need because he who follows the moral law, who acts more and more *of duty*, wishes (and deserves) to be happy.

Or, as it is well known, moral conduct does not guarantee proportional happiness in the sensitive world. That is why virtuous man has the strongest reason to believe in the repair intervention of a higher power. This power will have to be *all-knowing*, so as not to be wrong about everyone's right to happiness, *almighty*, in order to be able to consistently complete a proportional division of happiness, and *holy*, in order to be able to do it without mistake. Thus, we are led to the idea of a supreme being, as a moral ideal and as a guarantee of moral order. "Morality thus leads ineluctably to religion, through which it extends itself to the idea of a powerful moral Lawgiver, outside of mankind, for Whose will that is the final end (of creation), which at the same time can and ought to be man's final end" (Kant 1960, 14).

The Christian doctrine, Kant says, even not regarded as a doctrine assuming revelation, but only as a moral one, offers the only concept of "sovereign good" that satisfies the demands of practical reason; its name is the *kingdom of God*. In this way, the moral law of duty, through the concept of sovereign good, leads to religion, for which debts are recognized as divine commandments.

In Kantian context, religion gets an exclusively moral substance. The one who follows the moral imperative only in anticipation of reward and for fear of punishment beyond the grave is not a moral subject. Because God's will is determined only by moral law, acting according to His will means acting according to the prescriptions of pure practical reason, by categorical imperative. This is the meaning of characterizing the *religion of reason* as *recognition of all our duties as divine commandments*. In opposition to what Kant calls the "cultic religion", that is, religion in which duty is seen as a man's obligation to God and in which the promise of eternal happiness appears as a reward for virtuous life on this earth, in the "pure moral religion", fulfilling duty is a man's obligation to himself as a rational being. Let us note, however, that the philosopher did not oppose happiness to strict respect for moral duties. By claiming that moral philosophy should teach us not how we should be happy, but how we should be worthy of happiness, Kant believes that, by doing his duty, man will not have to give up his natural goal which is happiness: "according to my theory, the only purpose of the Creator is neither the morality of man itself, nor happiness for himself, but the agreement of both." (Kant 1960, 123)

In *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant strongly emphasizes that religion lacking a moral foundation would satisfy only

its outer side, assuming cult activities, as moral lacking religious postulates could not give human being the hope for moral process finality. Still here, he appreciates the “religion of reason” as the *core* of Christian tradition, and the rest of the Gospel content as its “helpful teaching”. In the case of *ecclesiastical faith* in the content of the Gospels, Kant argues, only what God has done to help our weakness, whereas *pure moral religion* is aimed, above all, at what we should do to become worthy of divine help. To note that, in this writing, Kant also strives to highlight, in relation to Christian tradition, the meanings that are in harmony with the imperatives of moral law. In fact, he appreciates the *Bible* in its huge force of moral affiliation. With reference to cultic-religious practices, Kant approves, for example, prayer, if moral beliefs are strengthened through it, but rejects it as soon as its purpose would be to fulfil a selfish desire. He also acknowledges communion as a symbolic sign of the unity of a moral community, but rejects it as a guarantee of salvation under priestly control. For us, it remains a mystery what God is in Himself, how He proceeds, and how He works on our moral fulfilment; it is more important to understand what God stands for – for us as moral beings. Kant also admits

Investigation into the inner nature of all kinds of faith which concern religion invariably encounters a *mystery*, i.e., something *holy* that may indeed be known by each single individual but cannot be made known publicly, that is, shared universally. Being something *holy*, it must be moral, and so an object of reason, and it must be capable of being known from within adequately for practical use, and yet, as something mysterious, not for theoretical use, since in this case it would have to be capable of being shared with everyone and made known publicly (Kant 1960, 206).

In this maturity work, Immanuel Kant considers *pure rational religion* as the core of the Christian religion; actually, the moral content hidden in its dogmatic coating. We get his philosophical approach as a re-interpretation, in the spirit of moral faith, of the historical-cultic aspects of the Christian experience.

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