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The Kingdom of God Is at Hand!" (Did Kant Really Say That?)

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“The Kingdom of God Is at Hand!”

(Did *Kant* really say *that*?)

I. Glimpses of the Kingdom?

It was 11:55pm on the 28th of October 1992. Hope and expectation were in the air at Seoul’s Dami Missionary Church, as Rev. Lee Jang-lim and thousands of other faithful members of doomsday churches all over South Korea patiently prepared themselves for the long-awaited rapture. This moment was to mark the arrival of the kingdom of God in all its glory, as signified by the second coming of Jesus Christ. They would be taken up to heaven at just the moment when seven years of war, flood, and famine were to begin annihilating the earth, paving the way for a millennium of peace.¹ Imagine the intensity in that place as the clock ticked past midnight and these devout believers gradually came to the painful realization that the moment they were waiting for had not arrived.

This, of course, was hardly the first time such dramas had been played out on the stage of world history—nor was it the last, as the subsequent tragedy in Waco, Texas demonstrated. Memories of Jim Jones were, no doubt, echoing in the minds of the Korean police as they stood watch, lest the passion of expectation spill over once again into the illusion of mass suicide. Indeed, the hope that a heavenly kingdom will come to create a new and better world is probably as old as religion itself: Jews await their Messiah; Christians await the second coming; Muslims await the day when all nations will bow before Allah; even followers of Eastern religions await the end of this world’s cycle of suffering through the experience of peaceful “release” (i.e., *Nirvana* or *moksha*). And non-religious people are not exempt: they too often find themselves thinking in eschatological terms: Nietzsche encourages us to look forward to the “Superman”, who will give meaning to a meaningless earth; not too many years ago the Cold War encouraged many to await in dread the nuclear “war to end all wars”; and politicians repeatedly encourage us to await the next election, in the hope that a change of government will do away with the evils of the old world and usher in “a new world order”.

Are such hopes in any way reasonable? It is easy enough to criticize the Korean believers for their foolish hopes: they were obviously wrong, otherwise they would not be here to tell the story! Nevertheless, the very ubiquity of the human hope that the world will eventually experience a radical change (whether for better or for worse) suggests that there may be at least a grain of truth in their all-too-common outcry. *Is there anything in those people’s actions that is a meaningful reflection of a real human hope? Or were they simply crazy?*

In this essay I intend to use Immanuel Kant’s Critical philosophy to explore how we might answer such questions. Kant’s political philosophy is traditionally interpreted as a dry, ultra-rational defense of our most cherished assumptions concerning liberal politics. We are all familiar with the Kant who seems to defend (especially in his *Metaphysics of Morals*) our

modern conceptions of freedom, democracy, and human rights by developing a metaphysical science of the “right” actions a state can properly enforce through external means of coercion. What is often ignored is the fact that his political philosophy is significantly qualified by his previously-elaborated theories of the religious *nature* and political *history* of mankind. And without seeing it in its proper context, we are bound to misunderstand the true intentions of Kant’s political thought. In the following pages I want to provide a glimpse of those intentions, and in so doing, demonstrate that Kant himself was not immune to the kind of thinking employed by his own favorite religious teacher, when he proclaimed: “*The kingdom of God is at hand!*”²

II. Religion and the Coming of the Kingdom of God

Kant’s political philosophy cannot be fully understood unless we approach it through the spectacles of his philosophy of religion. There are at least three good reasons for this. The first is simply that Kant did not write a book on politics until *after* he had written one on religion, namely, *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (hereafter referred to as *Religion*). This may seem like an irrelevant point, until we recall that Kant was careful to write his books in a specific, previously determined order, as guided by his “architectonic” plan for a complete philosophical System.³ Briefly, this architectonic plan can be interpreted most clearly in terms of a hierarchy of systems and subsystems, comprising four “levels of perspectives”. For our purposes, we need only consider the second highest level, on which Kant distinguishes between (what I call) the three basic “standpoints” reason can adopt in applying itself to the world:

1. The *theoretical* standpoint is the subject-matter of the great *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781; second edition 1787), and its two supporting works are *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783) and *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (1786).
2. The *practical* standpoint is the subject-matter of the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and its two supporting works are *Foundation of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) and *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797). The latter contains two parts: “The Science of Right” deals with politics (i.e., *outer* morality) and “The Science of Virtue” deals with ethics (i.e., *inner* morality).
3. The *judicial* standpoint is the subject-matter of the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), and its two supporting works are *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (1793) and the unfinished *Opus Postumum* (notes written between 1796 and Kant’s death in 1804).

As the above dates make clear, simply attending to the *chronological development* of Kant’s thought would require us to consider Kant’s systematic work on religion (1793) before considering his systematic work on politics (1797).

More important than the chronological order of these works, however, is the different *weight* Kant put on each of his three standpoints. A common tendency among casual readers,

promoted especially by some superficial introductions to Kant's philosophy, is to assume the theoretical standpoint is the main focus of Kant's System. The reason for this is quite simple: the first *Critique* is by far the longest, the most radical, and the most influential of all Kant's writings. More informed readers, of course, are not misled by matters of length and influence. For Kant himself makes it very clear that, when it comes to a comparison between the claims of theoretical and practical reason, the *practical* standpoint always takes precedence over the theoretical.⁴ What is often neglected, even by the most informed scholars, is that, over and above *both* the theoretical *and* the practical, Kant places the *judicial* standpoint, as the final arbiter of all conflicts between the theoretical and the practical. Indeed, the "judicial" standpoint, the standpoint of *judgment*, is, for Kant, the proper home of reason herself. Since *Religion* belongs to *this* standpoint, whereas the "Science of Right" belongs to the *practical* standpoint, we should beware of interpreting his politics without recognizing the qualifications placed on both ethics and politics by religion.

The third reason for examining Kant's view of religion before trying to understand his view of politics is perhaps the most significant of all. The practical standpoint as a whole is devoted to the task of understanding the *ideal moral character* of human nature. Thus, the *Foundation of the Metaphysics of Morals* prepares the way by arguing that the philosophical account of what is and is not morally right cannot take into consideration "impure" motives based on happiness; the *Critique of Practical Reason* then establishes the proper basis for the "pure" motivation provided by freedom and the moral law; and the *Metaphysics of Morals* outlines the particular examples of inner and outer duties that would be necessary, were human beings ever to follow the moral law as they should. What all-too-few critics recognize is that Kant's theory of religion throws into relief this *entire picture* of the supposed possibility of "human moral perfection". *Religion* does this by adopting not the practical standpoint, but the *judicial* standpoint,⁵ on the basis of which Kant argues at the very outset that our capacity to obey the moral law is *inevitably corrupted* by the presence in human nature of a foreign power he calls "radical evil". Because of the reality of evil, the entire Enlightenment project of constructing a better world by applying *reason* to the task of building scientific, ethical, and political structures is called into question. In other words, it is a grave error to interpret the ideas Kant develops from the practical standpoint as if they represent his last word on mankind's ethical and political nature.

What then do we learn about the *real* human condition when we take Kant's judicial standpoint as the focal point around which his entire System revolves? We learn, first of all, that we are hopelessly incapable of accomplishing in our own strength the requirements placed on us by the moral law. Although our essential, original nature (or "predisposition", as Kant calls it in *Religion*) is *good*, and so points us toward the possibility of realizing the ideals we glimpse in the moral law, our existential, historically-determined nature (or "heart") is naturally *evil*, and forces us to acknowledge our failure to realize our potential. Religion arises in human culture, Kant argues, directly out of this tension between potential goodness and real badness. Human beings see the good they *ought* to do, and yet find themselves

unable to put it into practise. The only possible solution is to place our *hope* in a higher Being, who alone can effect a fundamental change in our disposition, so that our evil hearts can be changed into good hearts. Although this begins as an individual experience of God's grace, it must be followed by a commitment to join together with others who have experienced such a change, in order to form a "church". Because the corruption of our hearts comes through the influence of other human beings more than any other single factor, we can truly begin to realize our potential to obey the moral law only when we agree to cooperate with each other in the context of such a religious organization. But in order to prevent the church from becoming just as corrupt as its individual members were before their change of heart, we must always insure that our service of God is focussed on our desire to obey the moral law he has put in our hearts, *not* on the various *nonmoral* beliefs and actions set up by any particular ecclesiastical organization.⁶ Those who wrongly interpret Kant's *Religion* as promoting merely a religion of "works" are fooled by his insistence that morality be at the *core* of any religion into thinking (quite wrongly) that he believes human beings are capable in their own power of *achieving* the moral goodness necessary to please God. Kant never *disallows* nonmoral elements in religion; he rather insists that these always be viewed as only the means to the true end of all religion: pleasing God through obedience to the voice of the moral law which he has placed in our hearts.

With this "bird's eye view" of Kant's system of religion in our mind, we can now look at the specific aspects of that system which make it particularly relevant to any discussion of Kant's politics, especially one concerned primarily with his views on political *history*. Kant's writings on morality (i.e., those adopting the *practical* standpoint) argue that the true purpose, the true *end* of human life on earth, is to work toward the realization of "the highest good". Yet even in these works, Kant insists that the highest good, as the perfect correlation between human virtue and human happiness, cannot be achieved by human beings on their own, but requires us to "postulate" the existence of God and the possibility of life after death.⁷ This dry and on its own rather unconvincing attempt to provide a *practical reason* (though not a *proof*) for believing in God is given life and breath in *Religion*, when Kant shows how it applies to our real, historical situation. At one point he proposes what I call his (much-neglected) "religious argument" for the existence of God. By recalling a few of Kant's basic assumptions, his brief argument [in *Religion*, pp.97-99(88-91)] can be supplemented and summarized as follows:

1. *The highest good*: The true *end* of human life on earth is to realize the highest good, by seeking to be worthy of happiness through obedience to the moral law. It is a human duty to work toward this goal.
2. *Radical evil*: Human beings on their own are wholly incapable of achieving the highest good, because of the radical corruption of the heart of each individual.
3. *Politics fails*: No organization based on *externally* legislated rules (i.e., no "political commonwealth") can achieve this goal, because the moral law can be legislated only *internally* (i.e., through an "ethical commonwealth").

4. “*Ought*” implies “*can*”: Anything reason calls us to do (i.e., any human duty) must be possible; if it seems impossible, we are justified in making assumptions that will enable us to conceive of its possibility.
5. *People of God*: The only way a human organization can ever hope to become such an ethical commonwealth is through the assistance of a higher Being, who legislates *internally* the moral law to each individual, thus insuring the unity of their actions.
6. *God exists*. In order to work toward the fulfillment of the highest good, we must therefore presuppose that God exists as a gracious moral lawgiver, and that to obey the moral law is to please God.

This argument, as such, occupies Kant’s attention for little more than a few sentences. Nevertheless, it marks an important turning-point in his discussion. For without this argument, Kant’s view of religion would be thoroughly *anthropocentric* (as, indeed, it is typically assumed to be); but with this argument, the equally *theocentric* emphasis of Kant’s view of religion becomes apparent. {MOST OF THIS PARAG. USED IN KSP2:VII.3.A}

Once Kant has demonstrated that an ethical commonwealth cannot succeed without viewing itself as—indeed, without *being*—a People of God, he goes on to relate this notion of the “true church” to the religious idea of the “kingdom of God”. This is where the relation between Kant’s philosophy of religion and his philosophy of political history comes into full view. For he concludes the first Division of Book Three of *Religion* with a section entitled “The Gradual Transition of Ecclesiastical Faith to the Exclusive Sovereignty of Pure Religious Faith *is* the Coming of the Kingdom of God” [p.115(105), emphasis added]. In this section Kant argues that real historical expressions of religion (i.e., “ecclesiastical faiths”) naturally tend to begin by emphasizing the nonmoral aspects of religion, such as historical traditions concerning rituals and statutes, and by regarding the task of obedience to the moral law (i.e., “pure religious faith”) as only secondary. As history progresses, our awareness of the true “universal religion” increases, and people begin to recognize the priority of the rational (i.e., the moral) over the historical (i.e., the nonmoral). What critics of Kant’s approach often neglect is that he never claims the historical elements are *irrelevant*, nor does he claim we can eventually *dispense* with them completely. Although historical faiths can never be more than a “vehicle” for “pure religion” [*Religion* 115(106)], they are nevertheless *necessary* for the proper development of the pure moral core of religion: “some historical ecclesiastical faith ... *must be utilized*” [109(100), emphasis added], even though no single empirical model can be taken as absolute. On this basis, he argues, people will gradually come to recognize more and more that *history serves a rational end*, and not vice versa: reason is *not* the handmaiden of history! Since true religion can be *defined* as “the recognition of all duties as divine commands”,⁸ this gradual dawning of the rational end of all religion can be accurately described as “the *coming* of the kingdom of God”. In other words, God’s gracious gift of his kingdom on earth is manifested in us as the recognition of the centrality of our moral nature in our religious life.

What Kant refers to as the kingdom of God in *Religion* is closely related (if not identical) to what he normally refers to elsewhere as a “realm of ends”. He explains that the term “realm” refers to “the systematic union of different rational beings [i.e., *souls*] through common laws.”⁹ A realm of ends, therefore, is a picture of all human souls working together for the common good, through their mutual obedience to the moral law. Although it is “only an ideal”, it is “a very fruitful concept”, for it can drive us toward a more complete realization of the highest good, just as the analogous ideal of a “realm of nature” can drive us toward a more complete scientific understanding of the world.¹⁰ The guiding principle informing this moral ideal is the necessity of *viewing humanity as an end in itself*, which first surfaces in Kant’s System as the second formulation of the categorical imperative.¹¹ From this principle Kant derives not only his doctrine of humanity as the final end of creation,¹² but also his elaborate system (in the *Metaphysics of Morals*) of what is *right* for us as real human beings.¹³ The realm of ends is simply the term appropriate to the practical standpoint for the ideal which, viewed from the judicial (religious) standpoint, is properly called the kingdom of God.

Kant regards Jesus Christ as the first person ever to perceive clearly the vision of the coming kingdom of God as a radically *moral* kingdom, rather than one based on religious observances and/or political structures. Moreover, I believe one of Kant’s two central purposes in *Religion* is to demonstrate that Christianity itself, properly interpreted, *is* the universal religion of mankind. But this essay is not the proper place to elaborate on these views [cf. note 6], since this would require us to stray too far from our central concern. What is important is to recognize that Kant’s theory of religion points us directly to a vision of the true goal of human history: the establishment of a world-community (a “realm” or “kingdom”) in which all people, humbly acknowledging their inability to live a morally good life, receive from God the power needed to obey the moral law, whatever their historical situation and whatever particular statutes and rituals they use to express this fundamental, rational faith. That the coming of the kingdom of God is *possible* is the unique message of Jesus’ radical life and teaching; to make it a *reality* is the responsibility of each human person, aided by the grace of God. This is the heart of Kant’s interpretation of the Gospel.

The true end of religion, therefore, is to bring into being something which might best be called a “theocracy”, provided we take this term literally rather than in its common meaning.¹⁴ Kant states this rather explicitly (though without using the *term*) in passages such as *Religion*, p.121(112), where he quotes from 1 Cor. 15:28:

... in the end religion will gradually be freed from all empirical determining grounds and from all statutes which rest on history and which through the agency of ecclesiastical faith provisionally unite men for the requirements of the good; and thus at last the pure religion of reason will rule over all, “so that God may be all in all.”

In the Preface to *Religion* Kant compares the relationship between pure religion and the present manifestations of historical religion to a pair of concentric circles [12(11)]. Any historical faith which is truly religious (i.e., *moral*) will have elements of the rational religion

at its “core”, though the latter might be relatively small in comparison to the outer circle of extra (i.e., nonmoral) ecclesiastical elements. But as human history progresses, the rational core increases in size relative to the outer historical “shell”. In the “end”, to which Kant refers in the passage quoted above, these two circles will be not only concentric, but coextensive: historical religion will manifest in its entirety the pure religion of reason. Being the most *rational* picture of human destiny, this is the end toward which all rational beings should *hope* the world is moving.

III. Politics and the Ultimate Goal of Human History

Religion is not the only area of human life which Kant believes will play a significant role in bringing about this world’s true end: science and politics are equally relevant. Indeed, these three areas correspond directly to the three basic “ideas” of reason—God, freedom, and immortality—which Kant discusses at length in each of his three *Critiques*. Kant’s Critical examination of the idea of *God* (especially in its tension with the evil nature of *mankind*) led him, as we have seen, directly to an examination of the metaphysical basis of that idea in *religion*. His Critical examination of the idea of *freedom* (especially in its tension with the determined nature of the *world*) likewise led him directly to an examination of the metaphysical basis for that idea in *science*. And his Critical examination of the idea of *immortality* (especially in its tension with the mortal nature of the human *soul*) led him directly to an examination of the metaphysical basis for that idea in *politics*. In examining the implications of each of these three ideas, the main focus of Kant’s System is on determining what we can rationally hope to be true. The first *Critique* demonstrates that we are incapable of gaining *speculative knowledge* of the reality of these three ideas; the second *Critique* demonstrates that each idea is nevertheless necessary in one way or another if our *moral action* is to be justifiable; and the System reaches its pinnacle when we determine, from the judicial standpoint of the third *Critique* and its supporting works, just how our *hope* in such ideas can be most *rational*.¹⁵

Such an overview of Kant’s System, like that of his explicitly systematic works given at the beginning of the previous section, unfortunately fails to call attention to one of the most important areas of application Kant saw for his three *Critiques*: namely, that his interest is not just in politics, but in political *history*. He emphasizes the importance of understanding and believing in an ideal politics of freedom as early as the first *Critique* [see pp.373-374]. So it is no accident that a large proportion of the minor essays he wrote after 1781 were devoted to topics relating to the political history of the human race. This reflects his recognition that, in spite of his lack of emphasis on it in his main Critical writings, this issue actually plays a constitutive role in his System. These essays, therefore, form (along with his view of religion) the indispensable background for any proper understanding of Kant’s political philosophy.¹⁶ For all but one of them were also written *before* the *Metaphysics of Morals*, and together they place important qualifications on the rational foundation for liberal politics provided in Part I of the latter. Let us therefore look briefly at the contents of some of these

works.

A cursory reading of these essays is sufficient to reveal that Kant's interest in political history was an intentional application of his overall Transcendental Perspective¹⁷ to the final (i.e., *ultimate*) problem of the end or *destiny* of the human race. The essays rarely give an account or interpretation of any specific historical events. Instead, as their very titles suggest, they pose questions about the *necessary form* of human history, such as: What was the "Conjectural *Beginning* of Human History"? (1786), "What is *Enlightenment*?" (1784), "... Is the Human Race Constantly *Progressing*?" (1798), and What is "The *End* of All Things"? (1794). Kant's goal, in other words, was to discover an "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective" (1784) which could bring "Perpetual Peace" (1795) to humanity through a full realization of the highest good.

Michalson accurately explains that "the aim of all [Kant's] speculations on history ... is to give an account of the course and destiny of the life of rational beings who can genuinely 'know' only about the world of appearances."¹⁸ These speculations (or *hypotheses*, as I believe Kant would want us to call them) "are not so much predictions as they are 'rational hopes'" about the ultimate purpose of history itself; as such, they are regulative, rather than constitutive.¹⁹ In other words, they are intended to be taken as hypothetical explanations of a *plan* (a "politic", we might call it) for human history as a whole—a plan that develops as a direct result of the tension between the soul's life in this world and the metaphysical idea of immortality. As Kant explains: "Even if we are too blind to see the secret mechanism of its workings, this Idea [of Nature's "plan or purpose" in human history] may still serve as a guiding thread for presenting as a system ... what would otherwise be a planless conglomeration of human actions."²⁰ Although Kant himself never presents us with a fully elaborated system of human history, his various essays on political history do provide enough clues to allow for a fairly accurate reconstruction—a task I intend to carry out elsewhere.²¹

At this point it will suffice merely to point out that Kant explains his conception of this rational plan in sufficient detail to offer some concrete suggestions as to how a proper recognition of "the unsocial sociability of men" can provide a solution to "the greatest problem for the human race"—viz., "the achievement of a universal civic society which administers law among men."²² One of the most important requirements is that a body of international law must be set up with "the ultimate *end*" of establishing "perpetual peace".²³ This will require, among other things, that "standing armies ... shall in time be totally abolished",²⁴ since "war itself ... will be regarded as a most dubious undertaking."²⁵ When adopting the perspective of real politicians, who "must proceed on empirical principles",²⁶ Kant admits that such hopes must be regarded as "impossible", or at least "impracticable";²⁷ nevertheless, he acknowledges that from another standpoint, there are indeed grounds for hope that such a universal community "will come into being as the womb wherein all the original capacities of the human race can develop."²⁸ Given the theocentric character of all three metaphysical ideas,²⁹ it should therefore come as no surprise to find, alongside these

specific, concrete guidelines, that Kant's plan includes at the same time "a philosophical eschatology" which "carries a strong endorsement of the Christian world view".³⁰

This outline reveals a striking parallel between Kant's view of how the visible manifestations of religion relate to the truly rational (i.e., *moral*) religion and his view of how the visible manifestations of *politics* relate to the truly rational (i.e., *just*) political system. However, there is no need for our present purposes to enter into a more detailed interpretation of Kant's essays on political history, nor of his other works on political themes (most notably the "Science of Right" part of his *Metaphysics of Morals*). Instead, we can conclude our examination of Kant's view of the ultimate goal of human life on earth by summarizing what we can call his "vision"³¹ of human destiny—i.e., his explanation of how we are to respond in the *here and now* to our awareness of the present reality of God's kingdom.

IV. Kant's Vision of the Historical Transition to God's Kingdom

When we see Kant's political philosophy in its proper context, what are we to make of the traditional picture of Kant, as one of the Enlightened "fathers" of modern liberal democracy? Is this Kant a mere fabrication of the commentators? Is Kant really the champion of democratic freedom, legally enforced justice, and universal human rights, as we have all grown accustomed to viewing him? None of these play any constitutive role in his vision of the ultimate goal of human history; so why does he devote so much attention to them in his "Science of Right"?

The answers to these questions are too intricate to be dealt with in full here; but we can begin answering them by pointing out that Kant's "Science of Right" should be read as primarily a description of what *is*, in light of what *ought* to be. Metaphysics for Kant is a descriptive science: it is *analytic* in contrast to the *synthetic* method utilized by the discipline of Critique. The bulk of Kant's political theory (which appears in his System as part of the metaphysical structure built on the foundation of Critique) is therefore not to be regarded as a prescription for the absolutely perfect political system, but as his best effort at explaining how the moral law could best be applied externally in the historical climate of his day. And, although he certainly did regard freedom as the core value of his entire moral system, this did not lead Kant into the naive faith in the absolute value of democracy that we find among so many political philosophers today. On the contrary, in following Aristotle's distinction between autocracy (i.e. monarchy), aristocracy, and democracy, Kant claims that "democracy is, properly speaking, necessarily a despotism, because it establishes an executive power in which 'all' decide for or even against one who does not agree; that is, 'all,' who are not quite all, decide, and this is a contradiction of the general will with itself and with freedom."³²

As long as the highest good has not yet been manifested on earth, some externally legislated political system will be necessary. This political system will be "right", Kant argues, only if it maximizes the freedom of individuals, thus allowing them to follow the *internally* legislated moral law as much as possible. Accordingly, just as the categorical imperative defines what is morally *good*, the following principle, Kant claims, defines what

is politically *right*: “Every Action is *right* which in itself, or in the maxim on which it proceeds, is such that it can co-exist along with the Freedom of the Will of each and all in action, according to a universal Law.”³³ All Kant’s (sometimes outmoded) suggestions as to how this principle gives rise to a system of political rights should be taken not as eternally binding legal truths, but as imperfect measures whose purpose is to bring humanity at a particular point in time closer to a realization of its final goal.

Kant’s metaphysical description of modern politics may be in many ways a confirmation of the suitability of democracy for the modern political situation; but as we have seen, Kant was not a democrat in his deepest convictions. For politics, according to Kant, can never be anything more than a *means* to a higher or deeper end. The moral law only needs to be applied *externally* to human societies as long as the individuals in a given society are not themselves applying it *internally* as they should. The greatest danger of all political systems is that they may actually *hinder* people from seeing the moral law as an internal reality rooted in God himself, and cause them to see it instead as an external code on the basis of which they will incur punishment if they get “caught” disobeying it. Hence, the true goal toward which the highest forms of politics work is the *dissolution* of all politics. Even Kant’s insistence on the need for a “federation of states” is based not on his conviction that the “rule of law” is the final answer to all political problems, but rather on the recognition that the best way to break a nation’s unhealthy power over its citizens is to subordinate its laws to a higher authority.

Although the world-wide federation of states is ultimately only a temporary measure in Kant’s idea of the rational plan of human history, it is nevertheless one of two key signs that human history is approaching its ultimate destiny. The first sign is the advent of a religion that teaches people how to deny the validity of all external forms of religion in order to focus on its inner meaning. This, Kant says, has already come in the form of Christianity. The second sign, the federation of states, was not yet on the horizon in Kant’s day. The establishment of the United Nations in our century might be regarded as the beginnings of the fulfillment of this second sign. In any case, we must be careful to keep in mind Kant’s insistence that in both religion and politics, the *external sign* is only a “vehicle” for the true goal: when individuals and nations all learn to submit themselves willingly (i.e., without any external coercion) to the demands of the moral law, then no outward form of religion or politics (not even Christianity or a world-wide federation of states) will be viewed as necessary in itself.

When the ideal goal of realizing the “universal religion of reason” [*Religion*, p.122(113)] is finally fulfilled, religion and politics will actually *merge*, though both will at that point be thoroughly transformed: they will both be legislated *entirely from within*, through the agency of the moral law (regarded as the voice of God) speaking to each individual, and uniting all human beings in a whole which no human political system could ever sustain. That Kant had such a merger in mind can be seen at various points in *Religion*, not the least of which is in his use of the paradoxical term “ethical commonwealth” as a description of the true church.

Thus it should come as no surprise when he ends the first Division of Book Three with a clear allusion to the *political* implications of what he earlier called “the Coming of the Kingdom of God”:

Such, therefore, is the activity of the good principle, unnoted by human eyes but ever continuing—erecting for itself in the human race, regarded as a *commonwealth* under laws of virtue, a *power* and a *kingdom* which sustains the victory over evil and, under its own dominion, assures the world of eternal *peace*. [*Religion*, p.124(114), emphasis added]

Of course, Kant is often quite reluctant to discuss his vision of the ultimate destiny of the human race, not only because of its thoroughly hypothetical nature (as befits all good metaphysics), but also because of the great danger of mistaking such a *vision* for a real set of *policies* intended for immediate historical implementation. Kant is well aware of the tension between the ideals of reason and the realities of history. This is why he devotes most of his attention in Part I of *Metaphysics of Morals* to the construction of a political philosophy which is capable of being applied in the here and now. In order to use such principles in the most appropriate way, however, we must view them as *interim* measures, valid only during the long transitional period which we call human history. Hence, his is a *qualified* theocracy: the common maxim “All Authority is from God” should not be interpreted to “express the *historical foundation* of the Civil Constitution, but an ideal Principle of the Practical Reason.”³⁴ *Critical* politics does not *deny the validity* of such theocratic ways of viewing the world, but rather insists that we view them *from their proper perspective*, as ideals toward the realization of which our imperfect political systems ought to work.

With this in mind, we can now adapt Kant’s own model of concentric circles to summarize his vision of the rational plan of human history. The human race, like all human individuals, began in a state of innocence, but was corrupted by the radical evil which infected the first moral act. When such individuals joined in groups, conflicts of various sorts inevitably arose. Their attempt to make agreements which could resolve such conflicts was at first legislated only externally, through both political and (nonmoral) religious forms of coercion. As a result, the internal “seed” of moral religion remained dormant within humanity [see Figure 1(a)].³⁵ External legislation is the proper domain of politics; internal legislation is the proper domain of true (moral) religion. But at this early stage in human history, neither religious nor political agreements bore much resemblance to the idea of freedom that lies at their base. “Progress” in human history happens whenever individuals learn to utilize more of the internal power of freedom, so that both the religious and political “vehicles” of goodness can conform more closely to their pure rational core.

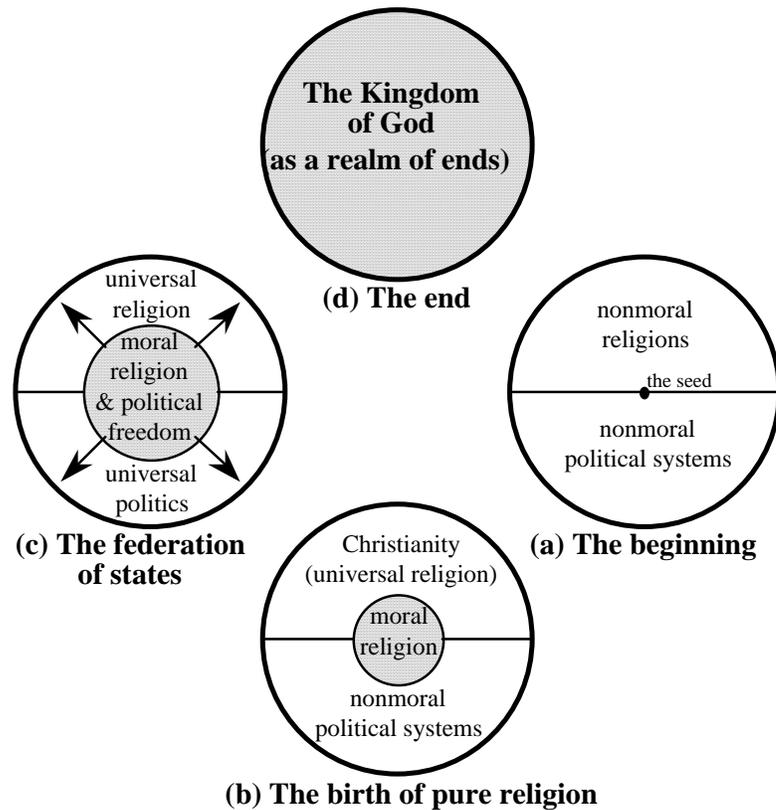


Figure 1: The Four Stages of Human History

In *Religion* Kant portrays the rise of *Christianity* as the first historical faith to reflect accurately the pure rational core of all *true* religion. As such, the authentic forms of *Christianity* (i.e., the ones that encourage individuals to make use of their freedom to be self-legislating) have marked, during the past two millennia, the first major step toward the realization of pure moral religion in human history [see Figure 1(b)]. But nonmoral political systems (like the false attempts of many “ecclesiastical faiths” to legislate externally) have continued to dominate human societies during this period, so that the core of moral religion has been unable to progress much further. In his minor essays Kant therefore predicts that we can enter the next stage in human history only through the formation of a world-wide *federation of states*, an historical political structure which would accurately reflect the pure rational core of all *right* politics [see Figure 1(c)], just as *Christianity* provides an historical representation of universal religion. Some would say that in the twentieth century we have seen a partial fulfillment of this prediction, in the form of the United Nations, though this federation is still far from realizing the ultimate goal of establishing a universal political system, promoting *internal* self-legislation.

The ultimate end of this entire process will come about when there is no longer any distinction between the empirical manifestations of religious and political systems and the pure moral reason to which they conform [see Figure 1(d)]. When these are fully identified, the external forms of religion and politics as we now know them will no longer be necessary; instead, politics will finally be seen in its proper perspective, as the expression of God’s rule

guiding the actions of all human beings, thus creating a society of lasting peace and true justice. Though often gravely misunderstood, this hope that the world's political and religious kingdoms will become the universal kingdom of God *is* the kernel of rational truth Kant would see in the type of religious extremism mentioned at the beginning of this essay. For when its proper end comes into full view, the idea of immortality will no longer refer merely to a hope for everlasting life in *another* world—as it properly does at our present stage of human history, in which we can only hope to “rest in peace” after we die. It will then refer also to the realization of another *way of life* in the *present* world: a life in which the autonomous domains of religion, science, and politics cooperate for a single purpose, being guided by the rational ideas of God, freedom, and immortality, fully regulative in the heart of every human person. And this way of life Kant himself describes as one in which “the kingdom of God is at hand.”³⁶

FOOTNOTES

¹See the Reuter's articles in *The South China Morning Post*, 28 October 1992, p.11, and 29 October 1992, p.1.

²The "he" in this sentence refers to both Jesus and Kant. For Kant was quite fond of quoting Jesus' references to God's kingdom to support his own view of religion. Thus, in his main book on religion [tr. T.M. Greene and H.H. Hudson as *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (New York: Harper, 1960[1934]), p.151(139)] Kant quotes approvingly Matthew 6:20 (see also Luke 11:2), from which the title of the present essay is taken. He likewise quotes Matthew 12:28: "We have good reason to say, however, that 'the kingdom of God is come to us' once ... the universal religion of reason ... has gained somewhere a *public* foothold" [p.122(113)]. See also p.101(92), where Kant quotes Matthew 6:10. For more on the relationship between the ideas of Jesus and Kant, see my "Four Perspectives on Moral Judgement: The Rational Principles of Jesus and Kant", *The Heythrop Journal* 32.2 (April 1991), pp.216-232.

References to all Kant's works will cite the pagination of the standard German (Berlin Academy) edition, with the exception of references to the first *Critique*, which will cite the pagination of the original *second* ("B") edition (1787). For references to translations which do not specify the German pagination, the pagination of the English translation will also be given in parentheses (as in the preceding paragraph).

³For a thoroughgoing description of the form and content of this System, including an explanation of why Kant was justified in claiming a logical "completeness" for his System, see my book, *Kant's System of Perspectives* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1993). An early version of the central argument regarding the exact form of Kant's "architectonic plan" can also be found in "The Architectonic Form of Kant's Copernican Logic", *Metaphilosophy* 17.4 (October 1986), pp.266-288.

⁴See especially *Critique of Practical Reason*, pp.119-121.

⁵Kant's *Religion* most emphatically *cannot* therefore be regarded as merely an extended "footnote" to his theory of ethics, as is so often wrongly assumed. To adopt this traditional assumption before reading Kant's *Religion* is to render all its key arguments unintelligible; for without seeing them in terms of the *judicial* standpoint, their true intention cannot be clearly perceived. I explain and defend this point more fully in "Does Kant Reduce Religion to Morality?", *Kant-Studien* 83.2 (1992), pp.129-139.

⁶This brief sketch of the four stages in Kant's system of religion is outlined in greater detail in "Does Kant Reduce...?", pp.140-146. A full account of the twelve steps in this system, and of their compatibility with Christianity (which Kant uses as a test case throughout *Religion*) will be given in my forthcoming book, *Kant's Critical Religion* (Hong Kong: Philopsychy Press, 1994).

⁷See *Critique of Practical Reason*, pp.122-132.

⁸See *Religion*, p.153(142); see also *Critique of Practical Reason*, p.129.

⁹*Foundation of the Metaphysics of Morals*, tr. L.W. Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), p.433.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, pp.433,438; cf. 462-463.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p.429.

¹²See e.g., Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, p.435, and my *Kant's System of Perspectives*, pp.301-304.

¹³Because of his emphasis on the importance of respect for humanity, Kant is often cited as one of the fathers of our modern concern for human rights. Although there is obviously some justification for this view, I shall argue in *Kant's Critical Politics* that Kant's conception of the "right" departs in some important respects from today's emphasis on *defending* one's own "human rights" at all costs. For Kant, it is not the individual person *as such* who, as "the end of creation", has a set of inalienable rights deserving of the highest respect, but only *humanity as a whole* [see e.g., *Religion*, p.60(54) and "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View", tr. L.W. Beck in *Kant On History* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), p.18]. Therefore, rather than presupposing a naive "equality" upon which the rights of all individuals are based—a view often imputed to Kant [see e.g., Louis P. Pojman, "A Critique of Contemporary Egalitarianism: A Christian Perspective", *Faith and Philosophy* 8.4 (October 1991), pp.483-486]—Kant seeks to determine what is politically "right" in various situations by examining how and to what extent individuals *participate* in the cosmos of rational beings known as "humanity".

¹⁴In its *proper* sense, the term "theocracy" refers to a political system based on the internally legislated "rule of God" in human hearts. In *Biblical Theocracy* (Hong Kong: Philopsychy Press, 1993) I argue in detail that theocracy is properly regarded as the most basic form of Christian political philosophy. Unfortunately, the word "theocracy" is nearly always misused as a reference to a political system characterized by the "rule of the church". Yet this is the very opposite of true theocracy, and ought rather to be called "ecclesiocracy" [see *ibid.*, pp.52-59], or "clericalism", as Kant suggests in Book Four of *Religion*. Kant himself often uses explicitly theocratic language, as when he describes God as a *person* "possessing law-giving power over all rational beings" [*Opus Postumum* 22.35, quoted in W.H. Werkmeister, *Kant: The Architectonic and Development of His Philosophy* (London: Open Court, 1980), p.193].

¹⁵Kant emphasized the priority of hope over speculation throughout his entire career. For example, as early as 1766 he says [in his *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*, tr. J. Manolesco (New York: Vantage Press, 1969), pp.349-350 (68)]: "The scale of reason is not quite as impartial as we might think: the lever carrying the inscription: 'Future Hopes' has a mechanical advantage; it always succeeds in outweighing, even with the smallest weights on its side, the speculations of far greater weight placed in the opposite tray. This is a defect which truly speaking I cannot remove, nor do I want to remove it ever."

¹⁶Kant's views on science would also be relevant here, if we had time and space to examine them. Indeed, his picture of the ideal human situation is succinctly described in the following

maxim: “Every man his own doctor [cf. science], every man his own lawyer [cf. politics], every man his own priest [cf. religion]” [William Wallace, *Kant* (London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1901), p.47]. The professions Wallace names here are arguably the three most oppressive in modern western culture: they claim to provide physical, legal, and spiritual freedom; yet in ways neither Kant nor Wallace could have foreseen, they now all too often end up *taking away* freedom from those they “serve”. Using this Kantian maxim to suggest a prognosis for the ills of our contemporary situation is not as difficult as actually putting it into practise. The functions given over to doctors, lawyers, and priests must be reclaimed by individuals who see these as community services rather than money-making professions. Those who are gifted and/or specially trained in one of these areas should give their services to others free of charge, and earn their living through a separate means of employment, thus gradually returning a sense of responsibility for physical, mental, and spiritual health to each individual person. Nobody who sees Kant’s vision for the human race should earn a living at the expense of other people’s freedom!

¹⁷This highest and most general “level” of perspectives in Kant’s System is identical to his “Copernican” assumption: i.e., that objects conform to the subject, rather than vice versa (as appears to be the case, according to our ordinary Empirical Perspective on the world). See my *Kant’s System of Perspectives*, pp.61-62,67-68.

¹⁸G.E. Michalson, *The Historical Dimensions of a Rational Faith* (Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1979), p.140.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp.150,152.

²⁰Kant, “Idea for a Universal History ...”, p.29.

²¹This reconstruction will be one of the main topics of the projected fourth volume of *Kant’s System of Perspectives*, entitled *Kant’s Critical Politics*.

²²Kant, “Idea for a Universal History ...”, pp.20,22.

²³Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, Part I tr. W. Hastie as “The Metaphysical Principles of the Science of Right”, in *The Philosophy of Law* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1887), p.350(224).

²⁴Immanuel Kant, “Perpetual Peace”, tr. L.W. Beck in *Kant On History*, p.345.

²⁵Kant, “Idea for a Universal History ...”, p.28.

²⁶Kant, “Perpetual Peace”, p.343.

²⁷Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, p.350(224).

²⁸Kant, “Idea for a Universal History ...”, p.28.

²⁹See *Kant’s System of Perspectives*, pp.317-323, and Chapter I of *Kant’s Critical Religion*.

³⁰Michalson, *Historical Dimensions*, p.139.

³¹This is the term Michalson uses in *ibid.*, p.157.

³²Kant, “Perpetual Peace”, p.352. He adds in a footnote on p.353 that the office of monarch is “an office too great for man, an office which is the holiest God has ordained on earth ...”.

³³Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, p.230(45).

³⁴*Ibid.*, p.319(175).

³⁵This figure, and several paragraphs throughout this essay, have been adapted from Chapter XII of *Kant's System of Perspectives*.

³⁶See above, note 2. I read an earlier draft of this paper at the February, 1993 colloquium of the Department of Religion and Philosophy at Hong Kong Baptist College. I am grateful for the helpful suggestions of various students and colleagues who attended. I would also like to thank *HPQ*'s anonymous editorial consultant for offering several very significant suggestions for revision, without which this paper would have been considerably less clear.