

**Ryszard Panasiuk**

Professor Emeritus  
Uniwersytet Łódzki

## GOD AND RELIGION OF THE ENLIGHTENED MAN ACCORDING TO KANT

### Abstract

Having revealed an illusion of man's cognitive efforts, Kant sealed the progress of enlightenment inscribed into a historical process, with a deep conviction that an ancient Greek prescription to "know thyself" was finally fulfilled. A man became aware of being equipped with a mind, and accordingly, with freedom as well as the ability to act morally, still remaining a finite natural being with limited cognitive skills. This critical self-knowledge of an enlightened man relieved him of his nonage to open his eyes for a new vision of both the world and a man himself regarded as a self-conscious subject and active creator of his fate.

The character and ontological status of religious beliefs, the enlightened man confesses, are in fact defined by the famous Kantian formula: *as if (als ob)*. Driven by moral reasons, they are distinguished with a rationality for which a fundamental value is the Highest Good, purely rationalistic construction, a kind of God thought to be an essential being and a ration for existence of the phenomenal world.

### Keywords:

Enlightenment, God, Kant, metaphysics, religion

The study of the nature and function of religion in the lives of human individuals and societies is seldom placed among those of Kant's contributions to modern philosophy that are his title to fame as one of the most important thinkers of the period. It is a pity, because his originality and intellectual boldness to take an analytical and critical position with respect to this important and perennial phenomenon of human spiritual life are manifested there stronger than in any other field of reflection. Studying the works of Kant we realize immediately that when he takes up the problem of analysis and critique of religious thinking as well as accompanying metaphysical reflection, he enters the area which has fundamental importance for the formation of the worldview of the epoch that started with the advent of modern natural sciences and lasts until now. For this

reason, bearing in mind that considerations concerning the phenomenon of religiosity are an important part of this worldview, we can say that he can be rightly called a modern thinker and, in a sense, our contemporary. Perusing the writings from the two centuries that have elapsed since the death of the sage from Königsberg, we can easily come to the conclusion that not much was added to his achievements, nor were they seriously challenged by any other thinker.

When we look for the origin of Kant's approach to the problem of religion, if we want to understand properly his intentions, both analytical and critical, concerning this important aspect of man's spiritual heritage, we have to go back for at least two centuries from the times he lived in. It is then that the Western world initiated and started forming a new way of thinking in the issues concerning God, man, and the world, it is then that a new understanding of things, both divine and human, started gradually emerging as a result of a conflict with the ages old vision of reality. The development of natural sciences since the time of the Renaissance inevitably challenged traditional views concerning not only the outer space and the laws that govern it but also the way of explaining the natural processes occurring on earth.

492 In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the traditional visions of heaven and earth that were closely woven into the religious beliefs sharing the same concepts of geocentric cosmos were replaced with the vision of infinite space, in which the earth became only one of numerous planets orbiting in it; this was bound to shake the established worldview and radically change the understanding of the mechanisms that govern the cosmos, as well as the visions of God's and man's places in it. The collision of the new visions of reality with their traditional, age-old forms became a radical confrontation, principally because it did not engage some eclectic collections of beliefs but complex theoretical constructions, in which natural science formed a whole together with religious doctrines on the basis of the philosophical fundamentals originating in the writings of late ancient thinkers. According to the supporters of the old worldview science and religion formed a fundamental unity, whose everlasting functioning was guaranteed by the dogmatic system as well as institutional protection. For this reason, modern scholars who were also Christians were somehow made to develop a new vision of cosmic order that could be in agreement with the fundamental assumptions of evangelical teaching. This kind of agreement, however, could no longer be based on the traditional understanding of the latter. It required such reformulation of earlier religious doctrines, which would make it possible to coordinate them with the achievements of modern science.

As the result of those actions concerning the new image of reality neither the cosmos nor its creator resembled their traditional pictures anymore. The creator no longer had to intervene in the natural course of

events, since nature was subordinated to the rigorous and immutable laws it had been given in the act of creation. The new cosmos was an eternal natural and moral order that reflected the wisdom and goodness of its creator. The finality of divine omnipotence became one with universal determinism of nature. In this new reality, faith and science were to be a uniform whole. Moreover, what is especially interesting for us because of Kant's later involvement in debates concerning the issue, in their more radical formulations, religious beliefs were to become scientific axioms, perfectly transparent for scientific insight. The modern proponents of this idea often expressed the belief that it was only then that the application of scientific methods developed by modern science made it possible to ground theoretically the truths of the faith.

The unfailing methodological tool was provided by mathematics, which had already contributed to the triumph of modern natural science. After all, it was mathematics that had the means which allowed the human mind to give a new description to the mechanics of heavens and to discover the rules governing the natural phenomena. From that moment on, human reason armed with mathematical instruments has been able to penetrate the mysteries of God and man alike. Nothing stood in the way for his cognitive feats. On the other hand, mathematics was at the source of an illusion that it can be treated as an operational tool not only for analysing nature but also extra-sensual reality, which gave rise, as it was noticed by Kant (cf. FM, XX: 262), to the rationalist metaphysics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, so widespread in German speaking lands. It is worth mentioning that in his early writings Kant, the enthusiastic reader of Newton, shared, together with the representatives of Leibniz-Wolff school, the belief in the unlimited cognitive potential of human reason that could penetrate not only the mechanisms of nature but also the mysteries of the extra-sensual world (NTH, I; Panasiuk, 2010: 96 ff.).

As we know, Kant's reading of Hume woke him up from the dogmatic slumber and resulted in a shift of his philosophical orientation. Kant realized that man, regardless of his natural cognitive capacities, both sensual that make it possible for him to perceive phenomena of the world that surrounds him and intellectual ones that allow him to analyse the sensory material, is unable to go beyond the empirical cognitive horizon (Prol, IV: 257 ff.; KrV: A 395). If going beyond the realm of possible experience is unfeasible, then hopes which were kindled in the minds of many modern thinkers, filled with awe by the achievements of mathematical physics, would only be a baseless illusion. The new vision of reality, funded on the results of modern studies in natural sciences, which was to replace the no longer defensible traditional worldview, turned out to be mission that cannot be accomplished.

Kant was aware that his discovery of the delusion concerning the cognitive potential of human reason could not have been a coincidence. His critique of the cognitive capacities of reason is a part of his concept of historical process as a progress in ever fuller application of reason by man, whose history demonstrated that this capacity could be developed and perfected (cf. IaG, VIII: 18–19; FM, XX: 264, 286–287, 342). As it turned out, in his application of the capacities of reason, man did not subject them to critical analysis and, consequently, was unable to notice the limits of reason. This resulted in the period of dogmatic rationalism in early modern times, which was manifested, mostly by the followers of the Leibniz-Wolff school, in the belief that human reason is able to penetrate completely the whole world of empirical experience as well as mysteries of extra-sensual reality (FM, XX: 305). The critical analysis of those hitherto highly appraised cognitive capacities allowed Kant to discover yet unknown limitations of those capacities. It turned out that human natural perceptive apparatus makes it possible for him to capture only the phenomenal level of reality subject to his senses without the possibility of penetrating its ontological fundament. Natural phenomena, given to man in an act of sensory experience and coordinated into chains of causes and effects with the help of the intellect, cannot be attached to their fundament that is unattainable for the senses.

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As for the character of the reality that is placed completely outside the cognitive capacities of the subject, Kant offers an interesting explanation. As long as we speak of the realm of nature, we can or, in fact, we must admit the existence of something that is the fundamental ground for our perceptions, the “unknown something” (Prol, IV: 315); however, when it comes to Reason’s uncritical ideas about dealing with extra-sensual beings, it has no grounds to believe that they are cognizable, let alone that they exist at all (FM, XX: 296). In their earlier history, neither the philosophical speculation, popularly known as metaphysics, nor the intellectual reflection on religion sharing the same characteristics, achieved any cognitive results; moreover, according to Kant, they were unable to do so. A thinker tries to penetrate the mysteries of transcendent beings in vain; in fact, he is dealing with *ideas*, i.e., constructs of his own mind rather than independent entities of another reality.

Kant’s discovery of the illusion that to his day led astray men who were taking up the cognitive task is an important turning point in the history of philosophy. The era of widening application of reason in cognitive acts, which is how the progress of enlightenment is seen in history, ended on a high note: at last man was able to answer the call of the ancient philosophers: *know thyself*. Man finally realized that he is a being endowed with reason and, consequently, freedom and ability to exercise moral acts;

at the same time, he realized that he is a finite natural being with limited cognitive capacities. That was a self-knowledge characteristic for the enlightened man of the new epoch of criticism. It was then, in the times our philosopher lived, that man finally liberated himself from the burden of immaturity that he had to carry for most of his history. A new vision dawned upon him, a new vision of the world but also of man, conscious of himself, of his vocation, and of his possibilities of a free being becoming a subject of history and an architect of his own fortune.

It is clear that the acquisition of self-knowledge concerning his cognitive capacities by the human subject radically changes his situation in the cognitive process itself. In his critique of pure reason, Kant poignantly and repeatedly stresses that once man becomes aware of the fact that in his inquiry concerning what is beyond the realm of possible experience, he no longer deals with real beings but with *ideas*, sc. products of his own intellect, he cannot simply study their natures, because it makes no sense. What he can do is to reflect on the formation process of such beings that can be presented in the human mind only conceptually and to ask about the source of such thoughts in it: why does man, as witnessed by the history of metaphysical and religious speculation, continually engage in that futile action? Since his discovery, the object of a philosopher's research should be especially man, characteristics of his nature, motives for action, and the reasons of his vain pursuits of the mysterious extra-sensual world (FM, XX: 296).

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Following that path Kant concentrates, first of all, his attention of a critical analyst on the ways of arguing that are aimed at proving the existence of the most important inhabitant of the world of metaphysicians and theologians, viz. God. Later on, he will concentrate on the critique of arguments, which were supposed to discuss the characteristics of God. All the time, however, he is not interested in the critical analysis of religion understood as a commonly shared creed of a group of believers but a theoretical ground of religion that must be subjected to the arguments aimed at turning belief into knowledge. This kind of reasoning was pretty widespread in the West even before Kant, especially in the intellectual circles interested in the developments of natural sciences. The achievements of naturalists were often seen as inspiration for those thinkers who were looking for ideas that could serve as indubitable arguments for the existence of an omnipotent creator of everything that exists. The old argument of St. Anselm, reminded to his contemporaries by Descartes, was not forgotten either. That argument, together with the physico-theological and cosmological ones, popular in the school of Leibniz and Wolff, were subjected to penetrating critical analysis by Kant already in his pre-critical period, even though he still did not doubt in the possibility of reaching the absolutely necessary being with human reason (BDG, II: 72 ff., 155 ff.).

In the later period, when he had already formulated his programme of the critique of reason, he perused the opinions of the supporters of those arguments and showed the baselessness of their reasoning.

The final conclusion of Kant's critical argument concerning the attempts to prove the existence of God is as follows: man cannot prove the existence of a being, whose properties he gets to know with the help of reason, by means of his cognitive powers. Man's God thus remains only an *idea* – a purely intellectual concept devoid of any grounding in existence. Hardly anywhere else had human reason struck the limits of his capabilities in the quest for knowledge. The problem encountered by reason when it attempts to grasp the nature of the being that it has showed itself as the necessarily existing cause of the perceptible world is not limited to the mere existence of that being. The characteristic of that being, situated completely beyond the perceptive capabilities of the subject, constitutes another problem, since already in its initial intuition it has to be conceived as radically different from both other perceptible objects and the subject of cognition itself. When it comes to the perceptible world, which is grasped by the intellect as a multitude of objects of accidental character, negation of that character comes almost spontaneously. Consequently, it must be an infinite, eternal, necessary being. If the subject of cognition strives to discover its other properties, however, it will learn that they can only be expressed with help of descriptions that, according to Kant, have an anthropomorphic character. Such human qualities as rationality, free agency or free will, moral sensitivity, goodness etc., which are proper only to man, are presented then in the superlative form with respect to that unusual being (Pölitz: 310).

This being is understood as the ground, principle, or even creator of everything that exists; it is reason but not the Absolute Reason, its will has an unlimited power, etc. It should be noted, however, that those qualities, proper to man as a rational and free being, drastically change their meanings which he discovers in himself when they are attributed to that absolute, omnipotent being and, consequently, we are unable to know precisely the functioning of divine reason and will (FM, XX: 303 ff.). As a result, we are left with arguments *per analogiam*, which retain the anthropomorphic character and create only a semblance of rational inquiry into the realm that remains completely out of reach for human cognitive powers. Even assuming that this being exists, its nature is totally inaccessible to human mind, which merely transfers the properties of orderly and teleological processes discovered during observations of its natural environment to its own metaphysical creature and ascribes to it the role of the efficient cause of those processes. Realizing the inability of human mind to transcend the limit of its cognitive capacities Kant claims that the only thing that we can achieve in such attempts is to imagine the world *as if* it proceeded in



its existence and internal character from some highest intellect (Prol, IV: 359; FM, XX: 341). Thus we can see that the famous Kantian *as if* (*als ob*) is the only result of the relentless struggle of a great number of scholars of philosophy and religion, who tried, over the ages, to discover the ultimate cause of all that we experience in our earthly lives.

A question arises here: why is this struggle taken up over and over again with no signs of abating even though it is bound to fail, as shown by the critical analysis. The reply to it is of crucial importance for understanding Kant's critical endeavour and sheds light on the way in which he presented the status, role and function of religious awareness in human life. He points out that man, a being that belongs to the realm of nature but at the same time is endowed with reason and free will, should not be content with the knowledge that he achieves on the basis of experience. Modern natural science, construed by the intellect on the basis of sensory experience discovers the world that surrounds the subject of cognition as a system composed of accidental beings which are all subject to strictly deterministic laws. As a rational being, however, man wants to find such relations within the system that would complement it with sense and teleological character, thus allowing him to move from accidental to necessary being, from determinism to freedom. This process, according to Kant, takes place on the theoretical plane, which means that reason must supplement the cognitive act of the intellect based on perception with such data that are clearly beyond the powers the intellect can muster (FM, XX: 279–280, 286 ff., 293 ff.). Such is the nature of man that he is never satisfied with what the intellect drawing from sense perception data can bring it. Finding that this was a struggle that the Reason could not have brought to any result was possible only thanks to Kant's critique of it. His critique, however, did not disavow the value of the struggle for man who sees his vital aim in it, as it makes it possible for him to unite the doctrine of science with the doctrines of metaphysical and religious character. The supreme objects of his cognitive quest are, after all, God and the immortality of the soul. According to Kant, the path of theoretical inquiry, chosen by rationalist dogmatists, who believed that the extra-sensual world could be adequately analysed with the same research procedures that proved successful with respect to the world of possible experience, was a dead end road. Besides, if it were possible to traverse that path, it would mean that man's cognitive efforts can move him beyond the phenomenal reality to its ontological fundaments; that, in turn, would result in negation of human freedom, which, after all, is the property that makes him man out of a natural being (LBI: XVIII: 667–668). Man can be a free being, because in its ontological ground the world of nature is not subjected to radical determinism, which excludes freedom.

Interpreting Kant's position in this respect we cannot but agree that it is actually beneficial for man to have limited cognitive powers with respect to the realm of *noumena*. At the same time, man's inability to reach the abode of the absolute being, which endows the world not only with existence but also with sense and order, puts him in a difficult existential position. This is because Kant is convinced that even though it is inadmissible to treat nature as merely phenomenal, there is hardly any certitude that the world which was created by metaphysicians and believers in supernatural beings is real. Critical analysis of the latter clearly shows that we are creators of the ideas that make it up, that they are beings, "which perhaps have no existence at all outside our idea and maybe could not exist [...]" (FM, XX: 296–297).

Consequently, since the scientific path of inquiry does not allow human reason to reach God and various opinions concerning his nature and immortality of the soul, which persist in human minds, have only subjective character, one must ask a question about the way out of that embarrassing situation. Finding a solution for such a problem, so pertinent for human existence, in the moment in which reason has finally achieved self-knowledge, is of vital importance for Kant's whole philosophical project. Once he has shown the futility of reason's attempts to penetrate the mysteries of extra-sensual reality, he goes on to show that this scientifically impenetrable and ineffable realm plays an important role in human life. When reason abandons all attempts to reach that realm, man becomes reduced to merely natural existence with no references to order and sense that would go beyond the realm of finite beings. Man is thus contained in the world of natural objects whose dynamics is studied by mathematical natural science.

Another question is put forward by Kant here: Can an enlightened man continue to believe in religious truths unperturbed by doubt, even though he is aware that they are completely out of reach for his reason? He is bound to have doubts, especially once he has realized that he himself is the author of those truths. A way out of this dramatic dilemma, which Kant offers, is to point out that there are reasons other than the theoretical ones, which prevent us from giving up the extra-sensual world, notwithstanding its inaccessibility for reason. Those arguments in defence of religion are of a practical character, which means that they refer to man's moral sphere. It is there, in the area of his moral activity, that man, a rational and free being, manifests his humanity most of all. His ability to choose between good and evil, his responsibility for conscious acts of will make him man, the exceptional being among other natural creatures. It turns out, however, that his vision of the nature and sources of moral acts was as much flawed as his opinions concerning cognitive acts. He used to believe that moral commandments, which he should obey, come from



a transcendent deity. Although this omnipotent and awe inspiring being was variously understood and presented by peoples of various times and cultures, everywhere it was supposed to dictate to people what is good and what is bad, threatening them with harsh punishment if they do not abide by his orders. Moreover, the omnipotent deity promised happiness and eternal life as a reward for obedience.

According to Kant, belief in transcendent sources of human moral sensitivity is a delusion, and yet it should be treated as the most important reason for the positive evaluation of the role of religion in the history of humanity. Immature, not fully aware of his capacities and position in the universal order, man needed help in his moral actions from an extraneous authority (cf. RGV, VI: 103; SF, VII: 36–37). Attaining self-knowledge as a result of the critique of his rational powers was a watershed in his history. It has turned out that his very nature as a rational being endowed with free will makes him a supreme moral lawgiver for himself. Henceforth religion is no longer needed to dictate his actions to him: he can freely choose between good and evil and take the responsibility for it (RGV, VI: 3).

It would be an error, however, to believe that Kant rejects religion as a system of ideas and beliefs that is worthless and devoid of function in human life. On the contrary, he stresses the role and importance of religious beliefs as essential components in the process of forming man as a rational and moral being, not only in the past but also now, when this process has achieved the stage in which man has emerged as conscious of himself and his capabilities. We have already stressed that after putting to question the status of religion as a result of the critique of man's cognitive capacities (notwithstanding the attempts of many scholars to save it with the help of science) man, as a thinking subject, was set against the senseless, purely deterministic world. This was a radically new situation: he realized that he no longer had access to what was most important for him. Accepting the fact that *theoretical*, i.e. scientific, procedures cannot guide him towards the axiological order, man intensified his *practical* actions by declaring his faith in the existence of a reality whose nature made it possible for him to function as a moral being. As a result, the moral subject that refuses to accept his finite nature and the world without values creates a new reality through a *practical* act of faith in order to replace the one which escaped him, when he tried to reach it by means of cognition proper for modern science. In this *practically* restored order, man can expect that if he merits a prize for his moral behaviour, he will receive it, regardless of the doubts the intellect may raise. This prize is happiness (*Glückseligkeit*), the state of bliss that cannot be reached by means that pertain to man understood as a natural being. The concept of happiness includes, among others, the hope for eternal life after death.

It is difficult to evaluate Kant's dilemma concerning religion in the Modern era, which appeared when the awareness of progress in natural science started gradually entering public knowledge. He realized that man's act of faith that should replace his incapacitated reason is not an emotional act but one that is a rational recognition of the truth of "a theoretical statement, e.g. *there is a God*, by practical reason" (FM, XX: 297) because of its importance for moral acts. The subject of that rational act of free recognition of theoretically unavailable truths is in a peculiar situation. He must silence the protests of theoretical reason and give all rights to the practical one but at the same time he must be aware of and accept the fact that everything that he receives from the latter as practical, moral teaching is, in fact, of his own making and thus is bound to remain invariably in the realm of subjectivity. There is no doubt that the type of certitude concerning the truths of religious teaching that emerges from this discourse is completely different not only from that of rationalist metaphysics but also from that of traditionally conceived belief.

The enlightened man accepts the truths of faith, religious beliefs, and treats objects of worship as if they were real only because of moral reasons. Already mentioned above, Kant's famous formula *as if (als ob)* defines the character and ontological status of the enlightened man's religious belief. It is a rational belief, which holds the Highest Good to be the supreme value; God is thus a kind of purely rational construct, conceived as an absolute and necessary being, and constituting a *raison d'être* for finite beings, i.e., the world of sense-perception, by giving sense and meaning to those beings and to man, too. Conceived in this way, religion is actually reduced to that belief, accepted solely for practical and moral reasons (KU, V: 425 ff.). It does not allow for any institutional form, clergy, or system of dogmas. In such religion, Church becomes an invisible spiritual community of people sharing the same beliefs. This form of belief, in contrast to the multitude of so-called historical religions, can be only one, because its nature and character are derived from its proper ground, the human reason, which is one. One can enter this spiritual community of believers in "the religion within the limits of reason alone" only by an act of free participation (RGV, VI: 120 ff.). This state of events is the result of man's reaching the fullness of enlightenment, intellectual and moral maturity through which he enters history and becomes its conscious creator.

It is worth noting that most of the essential views concerning the religion of the enlightened man, who has freed himself of the superstitions that were a burden for his spiritual life and finally attained complete autonomy, is actually not different, in any important sense, from other such ideas, which were popularized in various ways by the intellectual circles in the times of Kant or even earlier. A peculiar feature of his project of

rational religion, which makes it possible to distinguish it from those of other thinkers of the period, probably with the exception of Hume, is his ability to show clearly the inaccessibility of the transcendent world for human reason, the impossibility of reaching the *sacrum* that was supposed to radiate the divine light bringing order to all inhabitants of the earth. Kant's attempt to re-sacralise the cosmos after its disenchantment by modern natural science could only be an attempt *als ob*. It has turned out that only the *als ob* version could save the spiritual message that had animated man until the truth of the cognitive capacities of his reason was recognized by him and became completely and clearly known.

Together with Kant and enlightened by him, we have entered the world of uncertainty. Looking at his work from a historical distance we can say that this thinker ushered man into the kingdom of both self-knowledge and uncertainty having liberated him from the delusions, which he had entertained before. We have to be aware that the community of free, completely autonomous subjects, the dreamland of liberated human beings, the Kingdom of God of "universal rational belief" that is to come one day, is possible as the Kingdom of God *als ob* with respect to its metaphysical ground (RGV, VI: 121).

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