Immanuel Kant’s Universal Moral Religion: 
A Solution to Contemporary Religious Servitude and Conflicts

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Abstract: This paper sets out to prove that the contemporary practice of religion characterized by servitude and conflicts needs to be scanned using the lenses of Immanuel Kant’s universal moral religion posed as an antidote to the problems created by denominational multiplicity. From the inability by human reason to obtain epistemologically fruitful results from the world beyond sense – experience, this transcendental realm of existence becomes a source of the ideal of the object of a will governed by moral laws whose uncompromising character make them divine commands thus paving the way for religion as an edifice based on morality. Though morality can exist without religion, religion cannot be genuine without the necessary moral foundation that gives it rationality and universality. We argue that the contemporary practice of religion has lost touch of the moral foundation that would have made it relevant in the quest for an ethical commonwealth or God’s moral kingdom on earth. In this light, a return to Kant’s moral religion becomes indispensable in the resolution of conflicts resulted from differences in modes of divine worship.

Introduction
The changing fortunes of our time are characterized by man’s unending quest for the closest possible relationship with God, conceived to be the Supreme Being, creator and controller of the universe. A fulfilling relationship with God is not only a source of hope for salvation promised by religion but also and above all a source of hope for the ideal of God’s moral kingdom on earth in which the practice of morality as the only means to become pleasing to God puts all human beings together, united in hearts by the rational bonds of uncompromising moral laws whose respect can build a healthy and sane society in which differences of modes of worship will no longer breed conflicts. The practice of morality is a duty when our actions are independent of our ever changing sensible desires and on the object of the action. A moral action is thus disinterested, unconditional and necessary because it is carried out for the sake of the action itself. Kant’s religion is based on morality in such a way as to make the good life - conduct the only means of making ourselves pleasing to God, the moral ruler of the universe.

From the failure of rational theology to prove God’s existence, moral theology institutes the respect of duty as the path to God such that the role of religion should consist in quickening the moral dispositions in man. God is not an object of knowledge. God’s existence however is a moral necessity that makes the religious undertaking a projection of the good life-conduct that leads to God. Kant’s treatment of God, morality and religion is not only profound but systematic and critical, in conformity with the founding principle of philosophy of religion as a free, unprejudiced rational inquiry into the meaning, nature and purpose of religious beliefs as well as a justification of man’s continuous adherence to them. Our exploration of these three notions is in line with the intention of Immanuel Kant to lay the foundations of religion on morality so as to rid it of fanaticism and sectarian conflicts, all odious to social sanity. What are the conditions of possibility for Immanuel Kant’s universal religion based on morality to become a solution or at least the beginning of a solution to the divisions, servitude, tensions and conflicts created by denominational multiplicity? Why is it not anachronistic to use a system of religion set in 18th
century Germany as a solution to the contemporary problems of denominational multiplicity in Cameroon, and by extension, Africa in the 21st century? Is the ethical commonwealth a possibility in our era or an illusion?

**Immanuel Kant**

In the town of Königsberg (Prussia) on the 22nd April 1724 was born Immanuel Kant, one of the most meticulous system-builders of the Western philosophical tradition. Kant was fourth of the eleven children of Johann-Georg Kant, an honest, hard-working saddler, and Regina Reuter, whose piety was reflected in the strict moral education she gave to Kant. His parents’ devotion to morality and religion greatly gave shape to Kant’s system of religion and morality. By the time Kant lost his mother at thirteen, the Friedrich Pietistic School, under Albert Schultz, had inculcated in him the moral training his mother would have desired. In 1740, Kant made his way into the University of Königsberg where he learnt the philosophy of Christian Wolff, a disciple of Leibniz. His university studies also led him to get acquainted with the physics of Isaac Newton. Due to financial difficulties in 1741, after the death of his father, Kant dropped his university studies and taught for nine years as a private tutor to children of wealthy families. He later returned to the university to take his degree, and in 1770, he was given a university chair in logic and metaphysics in Königsberg. Kant hardly left his home town where he, with time, became a celebrity from the profoundness of his thought and his enormous repertoire of books on which his fame rests.

Beside the wit of an outstanding philosopher that he was, Kant’s life was full of anecdotes worth recalling. Firstly, as Bryan Magee notes,

*Rather surprisingly, Kant was the first great philosopher of the modern era to be a university teacher of philosophy. Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume - none of these taught philosophy. Nor did most of the major philosophers in the century after Kant, the nineteenth century: the obvious exception is Hegel; but Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill, Nietzsche - none of these were academic philosophers.[…] In the modern era, it is only when one gets to the twentieth century that nearly all important philosophers are academics.*

Secondly, Kant’s life was so organised and his programs were so accurately respected that the inhabitants of his home town could set their watches by him as he went about his daily routine. According to Heinrich Heine in *De l’Allemagne*, 1853,

*The neighbours knew that it was exactly half past three when Immanuel Kant, wearing a grey dress, […] left his house and moved toward the small path of lime trees which till today is named in souvenir of him The Path of the Philosopher; he ascended and descended it eight times a day […] and during bad weather one could see his servant, the old Lamp, keeping watch over him with a look of vigilance and concern and an umbrella in hand.*

Kant’s meticulous lifestyle extended into his intellectual output: from the brilliance of his lectures as a university professor of Philosophy to his great collection of publications, the Königsberg philosopher was a real symbol of German Enlightenment (Aufklärung) and a turning point in the history of thought. Elements of Kant’s system of thought baptised “The Critical Philosophy” first appeared in 1770 with the publication of the *Inaugural Dissertation* that was to change the shape of Philosophy. Kant’s ideas, conveyed by his publications before 1770, were those of the popular traditional German rationalist thinker, Leibniz, through his celebrated follower, Christian Wolff. The *Inaugural Dissertation* sowed the seed of Critical Philosophy mainly in the sharp distinction between things as they appear to our sense organs and things in themselves. No doubt it took Kant a decade (from 1770 to 1780) to nurse the ideas of Critical Philosophy that finally took shape in 1781 with the publication of the first edition of his massive masterpiece, *Critique of Pure Reason.*

**The Place of Religion in Kant’s Project of Critical Philosophy**

Dubbed the first *critique* because it was followed by the second and third critiques, the *Critique
of Pure Reason recommends that the human faculty of reason (the power of the mind to produce, combine and arrange ideas into a coherent and consistent explanatory system of phenomena) should be circumscribed. With Kant, reason, as an epistemological tool or as a cognitive faculty, has limits which must be known, and it is the lack of knowledge of these limits that misleads metaphysicians to think that they can know and rationally demonstrate everything including the nature and existence of the Supreme Being. In the preface to the first edition of the first critique, Kant announces the intentions of his critical philosophical project which is not a criticism of books and systems of thought but a delimitation of the bounds of knowledge that reason endlessly goes beyond with no fruitful results:

It is, in fact, a call to reason again to undertake the most laborious of all tasks - that of self-examination, and to establish a tribunal, which may secure it in its well-grounded claims, which it pronounces against all baseless assumptions and pretensions, not in an arbitrary manner, but according to its own eternal and unchangeable laws.⁴

Kant’s critical inquiry led to the conclusion that the venerated human faculty of reason can only know things within the bounds of sense-experience; and that beyond the phenomenal sphere, reason lands in contradictions that cannot enrich our stock of knowledge.

The Kantian critical enterprise laid bare the pretentious claims of metaphysics in a domain that concerns us particularly: the philosophy of religion. Since God is not a phenomenal reality, rational knowledge of Him⁵ is impossible. Critical Philosophy thus attacked domains that were hitherto considered sacred and untouchable. The institution of religion was not left out in this new era of Critical Philosophy, an era of reforms in thought and action especially in spiritual matters. Kant announces the ambitions and challenges of this new era:

Our age is the age of criticism, to which everything must be subjected. The sacredness of religion and the authority of legislation, are by many regarded as grounds of exemption from the examination of this tribunal but, if they are exempted, they become the subject of just suspicion, and cannot lay claim to sincere respect, which reason accords only to that which has stood the test of a free and public examination.⁶

Our venerated institution of religion thus has much to gain from opening up to the uncompromising inquiry of Critical Philosophy. Since religion must be based on morality, the conceptual trilogy of God, morality and religion finds systematic treatment in Immanuel Kant’s critical philosophy.

Kant’s philosophy progressively demonstrates reason’s inability to prove the existence of God, the usefulness of the idea of God in morality, and finally a recommendation of religion based on morality as a solution to man’s quest for the closest relationship with God. This treatment of the notions of God, morality and religion gives us an opportunity to understand the function of religion that goes beyond fidelity to a particular cult or religious denomination. Such an understanding leads us to rethink our relationship with God that goes beyond fanatical exhibitions and is based on personal commitment to the practice of morality as a duty and as a commandment of reason.

Such a treatment of God, morality and religion cannot leave a contemporary Cameroonian indifferent. Our contemporary Cameroonian society is going through a crisis marked by a multitude of religious denominations which, if not checked, can sow seeds of social strife. Beyond the fanaticism and traffic of influence that go with denominational multiplicity, this crisis stems from, and is proof of, the fact that the 21st century Cameroonian is continuously dissatisfied about his relationship with God. For the sake of social cohesion and tolerance, man’s quest for a satisfactory relationship with God brings religion to the limelight for a profound reflection whose impact can prevent unnecessary social conflicts. Kant’s philosophy of religion puts us face to face with our destiny in a world where the noble role of religion tends to be corrupted by the desire for personal aggrandizement.

Our exploration of Kant’s philosophy of religion is justified by the exigencies of the 18th century
German Enlightenment which have not ceased to demand our attention in the 21st century. Kant’s problem remains our problem today: the consecration of the autonomy of reason in religious matters as a mark of intellectual independence; a clarion call that aims at putting an end to religious infantilism as a highway to the mental and material exploitation of man by man; and finally, a return to the glorious ideas of morality as the path to the most befitting relationship with God. Our contemporary religions, more than ever before, need to review in order to readapt the demands of Enlightenment to the changing fortunes of our time. We have to use Kant’s philosophy as a valuable means to reduce religious servitude and fanaticism, all odious to social cohesion and sanity in thought and action. From a philosophy of religion to a religion based on morality, Kant’s Critical Philosophy will surely stand the test of our time.

Critical Philosophy establishes reason’s inability to prove God’s existence. Speculative reason (made use of by rational theology) fails in its claim to know the nature and prove the existence of the Supreme Being because its object (God) lies beyond reason’s domain of competence (sense – experience). Yet, the human tendency or even temptation to go beyond sense-experience leads reason into contradictions and confusions that make rational theology a misadventure. However, reason’s failures in the speculative domain finally find success in the practical domain (morality). Here, the idea of God and the promise of a world, invisible to us now, give meaning to the glorious ideas of morality. Though the moral law imposes itself on us as a command of reason, but especially as a duty for its own sake (for no other end external to, and beyond itself), the unconditional and unconditioned practice of morality inevitably prefigures a Supreme Author of the universe. The God of Critical Philosophy is thus a God whose existence is not proven but felt in man’s daily practice of morality. Kant’s moral argument not only ‘practically’ makes up for reason’s speculative failures but also and above all lays the groundwork for a religion worthy of the name. Since a religion indifferent to morality is unthinkable, man’s practice of morality as a duty, besides leading to a religion void of conflict, fanaticism and exploitation, also and above all salvages man’s relationship with God. The God of Critical Philosophy puts man in a harmonious relationship with himself and with others through the practice of morality. Religion thus finds its foundation in morality and has as end-product an ethical commonwealth or a community of men who have adopted practical faith or fidelity to morality as the unique path to God.

The path to the God of morality scrupulously avoids the thorny path to the God of earthly and visible churches whose purported servants can become obstacles to spiritual and material well-being when earthly interests and desires replace the spiritual quest for the heavenly kingdom. A religion that guarantees human freedom in thought and action, a religion that does not use God as a means to earthly ends: these were the exigencies of the 18th century German enlightenment; and our 21st century Cameroonian society is still far from the Kantian ideal. Our aim here is not to sue our contemporary religions for the non-accomplishment of their noble task; we just want to show that the guiding ideas of Kant’s philosophy of religion are still at least as vital today as they were in 18th century Germany. They are even more vital today than ever before because elsewhere around the world (the Middle East, for example), we know how religious differences and fanaticism have led to a now seemingly endless and fatal conflict where human lives are sacrificed on the altar of man’s unending quest for God.

In a world that is becoming a global village through the wonders of the information and communication technologies and where religious intoxication has become the order of the day, a revisit of Kant’s age-old philosophy of religion can be a stitch in time to at least raise awareness and convoke public opinion for a profound reflection on a phenomenon (denominational multiplicity) that might just be concealing a social conflict in the making. Our point, here, is that from Kant’s philosophy of religion, a revisit, a revaluing and a transmission of moral values to man through religion are indispensable needs in a world where good and evil continue to coexist. Given the radical evil in human nature, it is but normal that we should try to build a sane society from Kant’s moral religion by which the evil principle in man can be combated most efficiently. We thus lay our hope of a contemporary ethical commonwealth on the possibility of a moral
religion amidst the alarming multitude of ecclesiastical faiths. From rational theology to moral theology, and from the moral religion to the ethical commonwealth, our study of Kant’s Critical Philosophy of religion is conditioned by the problems of our era which systematically get solutions in Kant’s conception of God, morality and religion. Since most of the solutions proposed by Kant have either been misunderstood or worse still, neglected, it is worthwhile to give Kant’s philosophy the place it deserves in our era. It is equally good to evaluate the practices which today bear the name of religion in order to know where we have gone wrong, because the detection of an error is a major step to its correction. The main error today is that of not having given religion the moral basis it deserves. It is thus important to highlight those beliefs and practices that lead man to digress from the true moral service of God into pseudo-service.

Religious Servitude in Cameroon

The multiplicity of religious denominations in Cameroon has become an alarming phenomenon. In all the neighbourhoods of towns and villages, the dramatic display of diverse modes of divine worship leaves no one indifferent. Very often, people get used to the phenomenon and act as if it were not a problem until a scandal erupts in one of the “churches of revival” in the neighbourhood. As Martin Mateso puts it in an article entitled “Cameroon: les églises de réveil: ‘l’opium du people”, these churches are bearers of illusions that can only lead to scandals: “They stretch their arms to everyone and promise love, money and prosperity, real peddlers of illusions who master all the skills of communication.”

It is hardly about spirituality; above all, it is hardly about morality which is the true service. It is about material gains and hence it is about creating more obstacles to the creation of God’s moral kingdom on earth.

As from July 2012, the Cameroon government officially recognized only 46 religious organizations in the country. Soiron Fallut holds that when a pastor creates a church in Cameroon, it always starts as a prayer unit, the nit becomes an assembly. When they do not get the necessary authorisation from the state, they operate under the ‘cover’ of another church that is already recognised by the state.

Many of the new churches in Cameroon thus operate clandestinely and the public gets used to the nuisance of the noise they create at every time of the day. The authorities only intervene when there is a scandal and the scandals are never too far to fetch in these churches.

In August 2020, pastor Caleb Ngoa Atangana of the “tabernacle de la liberté” church situated at the “Jouvence” neighbourhood in Yaoundé was arrested because he prevented students of the school under his church from wearing face masks. The students went to Government Bilingual High School Biyem Assi (another neighbourhood in Yaoundé, Cameroon) to write their end of course exams on 5 August 2020 and were denied access to the centre because they were not putting on face masks at the time when the corona virus was at its peak causing deaths in Cameroon. As per instructions by state authorities no student could be allowed access to the examination centres without a face mask. The students of the school of this pastor returned to their pastor and missed the exams leading to a blank academic year for them. Contacted on phone, the pastor declared that “his followers do not wear masks because they are protected by the blood of Jesus and that the corona virus does not even exist.” The pastor was arrested and later released and his church sealed. This is just one scandal among numerous other scandals created by the multiple religious denominations that crop up like mushrooms to instill religious servitude in the Cameroonian society.

The mode of operation of the “revival churches” in Cameroon is characterized by everything decried by Immanuel Kant especially the absence of morality in the theatrical display of divine worship in moral indifference and thus losing the substance of religion to chase its shadow. Rodrigue Nana Ngassam outs it squarely when he highlights the kind of words used by these peddlers of illusions to gain new members in their churches: “Great crusade against demons and provision of miracles, special program of divine healing, night of deliverance and prophecy” are some of the types of adverts polluting the walls and publicity placards in the economic capital of Cameroon which is Douala.”

The moral message is completely ignored and the good – life
conduct that is supposed to make us pleasing to God and thus ready for salvation is replaced by dramatic displays by miracle – seekers and the pastors become miracle providers peddling illusions in God’s vineyard. The case of Cameroon just a microcosm of what obtains in other African countries and thus the country stays true to its slogan as ‘Africa in miniature’ in the popularization of these religious illusions.

The Duty of Morality: Kant’s Foundation of a Universal and Rational Religion

To understand the concept of duty, we must eliminate all actions based purely on selfish desires. These are immoral actions which sometimes even lack legality, like cheating and stealing. This first case of actions contrary to duty has no moral worth at all. The second case consists of “[...] actions which are really in accordance with duty, yet to which men have no immediate inclination, but perform them because they are impelled thereto by some other inclination.”xii In this second case, the action is in accord with duty but has not been done from duty, that is, by respect of the moral law, but from selfish interest. A political leader, for example, who takes very good care of his troops, does not do so because he likes the soldiers but merely because he wants them to be effective in times of war. There is an interest attached to the action in its origin, a deviation from the unconditional respect of the moral laws; such an action, though in agreement with duty, has not been done from the principle of a will under moral laws. The action therefore has no moral worth.

The third case refers to the situation where “[...] the action accords with duty and the subject has in addition an immediate inclination to do the action.”xiii These are actions which are really pleasing to an opportunistic individual who enjoys what nature or fortune has given him. But such actions accord with duty merely by accident, that is, our inclinations are in harmony with duty, but we do not do the actions from duty, and they have no moral worth because the commanding principle is that of desire for selfish gains and not the moral law. For example, it is a duty for everyone not to steal, but an individual who does not steal because all is well with him financially is not acting from duty but because of his favourable financial situation. It is not the duty not to steal that is commanding his will but rather his financial self-sufficiency that is making him not to steal. We do not know if this individual would do otherwise in a less favourable financial situation; all we know is that there is an accidental agreement of his inclination with duty, inclination having the upper hand and really giving him pleasure. Such an action cannot be judged to have any moral worth.

Finally, the fourth case is that of actions which agree with duty but are against our immediate inclination. The greatest test of the goodness of the will is when an individual respects duty against his immediate desires. For example, an individual who does not steal, as a duty, though his financial situation is deplorable and stealing could very well satisfy his inclinations for financial comfort. This is a good example of an action done from duty, and thus has an undisputed moral worth. Of course, naturally, all human beings would like to find themselves only in situations of the third case and avoid the second and especially fourth cases as much as possible. Kant did not however recommend that men should put themselves into distress in order to test the goodness of their will because “to secure one’s own happiness is a duty (at least indirectly); for discontent with one’s condition under many pressing cares and amid unsatisfied wants might easily become a great temptation to transgress one’s duties.”xiv But this happiness must be subordinated to morality such that, though it is not the determining principle of our will, it can only be a consequence after the exigencies of the moral law would have been fulfilled as priority. This can lead to what Kant prefers to call intellectual contentment whereby the action is in agreement with duty and is done from duty.

This leads us to an understanding of the meaning of duty as an action of a certain kind, an action whose determining principle cannot be situated in the aim for which the action is meant. The determining principle of the will must be independent of the end of the action, as this principle is judged from the disinterested purity of the moral law: “An action done from duty has its moral worth, not in the purpose that is to be attained by it, but in the maxim according to which the action is determined. The moral worth depends, therefore, not in the realization of the object of
the action, but merely on the principle of volition according to which, without regard to any object of the faculty of desire, the action has been done.”xxv When the will gives priority to its guiding principle over the purpose of the action, conformity to duty and action from duty emerge and the moral worth of such actions leaves no one in doubt. The purity of the will has now been established by clearing the will of all prior relations to the faculties of desire. But determining the purity of the will is not enough, Kant still has to give us the kind of principle that can command such a will for all rational beings. Rational beings must have the chance to fulfill all the conditions of duty and we must clear the path for this possibility to emerge in morality that leads to God. The idea of the categorical imperative makes it possible for the will to become a law to itself independently of the effects that such a disposition can produce; a disposition which, based on the formal conditions of the moral law, should at the same time be expected to serve as a model for all human beings. An action that serves as a model should be a microcosm of the universal intentions of humanity.

The categorical imperative must be distinguished from the hypothetical imperative; the latter, based on the whims and caprices of our faculty of desire, gives priority to the purpose for which the action is meant, making this purpose the condition of the action. The inclinations are so variable from one man to the other and from time to time that they only remain subjective and destroy all moral worth. On the other hand, though the decision to abide by the categorical imperative is subjective, the form of the law on which it is based and the requirement for all rational beings to abide by it gives it objectivity. The objectivity of the moral law results from its independence of the corrupting material content, and the intentions of inter-subjectivity announced by the categorical imperative. The principle expressed by the categorical imperative unconditionally commands the will, and the intention to make it universal demands the conformity of everyone to this principle thus giving humanity an objective ground for moral practice which avoids the ultra-subjective and short-lived inclinations. The categorical imperative is thus the condition of possibility of duty, and Kant is clear on the matter: “[…] there is nothing left to serve the will as principle except the universal conformity of its actions to law as such, i.e., I should never act except in such a way that my maxim should become a universal law. Here, mere conformity to law as such […] serves the will as principle and must so serve it if duty is not to be a vain delusion and a chimerical concept.”xxvi Duty therefore refers to action based on the categorical imperative.

Since the moral laws are commands to all rational beings with an autonomous will that can serve as a law to itself, it becomes a duty for man to preserve and never to destroy life because such an action can never be willed into a universal law for humanity. It is even a law of nature to preserve life, but this preservation of life becomes a duty when equal efforts are made to preserve the life of the self as well as that of the other, and it is the universality of the will to preserve life that can salvage humanity by making man an end in himself. Man, as a rational being, is a being of morality and a morally-determined will can never work to destroy that which is already an end in itself. The second formulation of the categorical imperative thus acknowledges the sacred and untouchable nature of human life: “[…] act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means.”xxvii Man has the peculiarity of being gifted with reason, the source of all morality which makes him an end, that is, all actions are aimed at preserving life for morality to persist. The humanity of rational beings is sacred in Kantian morality. The categorical imperative, expressed in humanistic terms, makes man a keeper to himself and to his fellow-men; the safeguard of man and his destiny are individual and collective undertakings to which everyone should feel attached by the now sacred bonds of morality. God, through our reason, has passed the moral laws of His will to His creation; we cannot render a better service to Him than working to preserve that which is dearest to us as His creation: life, humanity and the moral consciousness that we bear as rational beings.

**Kant’s Moral Religion: a Battle Against Illusions and Servitude**

Kant’s view that the end of creation is in the glory of God makes the role of religion vital in
helping with promises and threats to make us glorify God in an uncompromising manner: the glory of God is in the practice of morality. But if man glorifies God in morality, what may he hope? This, in disguise, is the third question of the Kantian trilogy whose answer is now completed in and through religion as an edifice erected on a moral foundation. The role of religion is to cultivate the seed of the moral service of God in man:

For nothing glorifies God more than that which is the most estimable thing in the world, respect for His command, the observance of the holy duty that His law imposes on us, when there is added thereto His glorious plan of crowning such a beautiful order of things with corresponding happiness.\textsuperscript{viii}

Religion makes morality holy by giving it a sacred destination that is lacking in its foundation. The Kantian morality, which in itself is independent of any end, is now adapted to the religious doctrine of hope for eternal happiness. By promising eternal happiness, religion adds a detail that counts in man’s quest for God when all the moral efforts have been made good.

Moral efforts are already demanded by the moral laws themselves as commands of reason. However, the moral laws now acquire a new status in religion where we are expected to regard them as divine commandments. By upgrading moral laws to divine laws, Kant’s conception of religion finally reinforces the umbilical link between our conceptual triplet: God, morality and religion. What difference does it make to consider moral laws as divine commandments and not merely as commands of reason? The moral argument makes God the Moral Author of the universe because the respect of moral laws makes us feel the presence of God which cannot be proven rationally. We are therefore led, as a matter of necessity, to regard these laws as divine commands. To differentiate this divine consideration of moral laws from the morality itself, Kant has recourse to religion which can then promise eternal happiness as the ultimate meeting point of all actions that strictly conform to God’s commandments. Kant was clairvoyant enough to admit that this promise of happiness was a defect in morality that religion made up for.

However, religion cannot just content itself with making up for a defect of morality by means of a mere promise. This is because if man is naturally inclined to morality, then the role of religion would prove to be negligible. But that is not the case; for man, according to Kant, is inhabited by two dispositions: the good and the bad, in an endless struggle for supremacy. It is clear that sometimes the bad or evil disposition takes the upper hand over the good. This explains cases of moral decadence or sheer immorality in human societies past and present. Religion is expected to do better than morality (by reinforcing the latter spiritually) so as to help man reduce to the strict minimum the influence of the evil disposition in him. If good and evil are natural tendencies in man, and if evil sometimes dominate the human heart, then the role of religion is much more complex than we might have thought. How better placed is a religion based on morality than morality alone to crush or at least minimise the evil disposition in human nature? Book One of Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone which deals with “Radical Evil in Human Nature” recounts how the existence of good with evil not only intensifies the complexity of human nature but also and above all gives an uphill task to morality and religion as we struggle to neutralise evil with good.

In Kantian philosophy of religion, the natural tendency to evil in man consists in the possibility of adopting rules of conduct other than those of morality. Kant’s conception of duty and the categorical imperative identifies objects of actions as elements that cannot constitute the determining principle of a moral will. It is clear that the unconditional decision to respect moral laws is full of obstacles one of which is personal desire which ultimately leads to moral evil when taken as the determining principle of the will. The point is not how many times we judge a man’s actions to be evil but the possibility for us to trace the origin of these actions in rules of conduct contrary to morality, that is, in the determining principle of the will. The possibility of adopting an evil principle for the will means that this evil principle dwells in man together with the good principle. This leads to what Kant calls natural innate evil, but the blame should not be on nature but on man himself who finds and uses the chance of allowing his will be determined
by a rule of self-love.

We cannot identify the basis of evil in experience because the free adoption of maxims or rules of conduct is and should be prior to all forms of experience. Kant moves beyond acts observed in experience that are contrary to morality to postulate their origin in freely-chosen maxims that give man total responsibility for evil. But if the basis of evil is not in experience, then the evil principle is innate or present in man from birth when tangible experience begins. Therefore, it is not one man or another that is evil but the human race as a whole. Even the best men have this natural tendency to evil because we are not judging from their particular actions but from the ground or possibility in them of adopting evil principles of conduct: “We call a man evil […] not because he performs actions that are evil (contrary to law) but because these actions are of such a nature that we may infer from them the presence in him of evil maxims.” Kant identifies evil as a principle that is in constant battle with the moral law for the determining of the will. This evil is present in all men, in those involved in good actions as those involved in evil actions.

Putting the blame for evil on man, to Kant, means that man has the possibility to freely and as a rational (moral) being make his will a law to itself in the adoption of moral laws as the determining principle of his will. When man continuously allows his desires (mainly selfish desires) to determine his will, then the responsibility for evil falls on him, in the same way as responsibility for good if he adopts the moral law as his will’s determining principle:

We shall say, therefore, of the character (good or evil) distinguishing man from other possible rational beings, that it is innate in him. Yet in doing so we shall ever take the position that nature is not to bear the blame (if it is evil) or take the credit (if it is good), but that man himself is its author.

If evil did not have this status of an innate principle in man, there would have been no need for morality and, in the Kantian perspective, religion because the good principle would reign unrivalled in the human will. Man, as a rational being, is gifted with a moral consciousness which gives him the ability to make out good from evil in order to go for the former and avoid the latter because both are realities of human nature.

Mankind is prone to good or evil by birth, and there is no possibility of situating in time the acquisition of good or evil principles. With Kant, we can only say that good or evil, which also means good and evil (in battle for domination), have always been present in man from birth. But the presence of two conflicting principles in man does not stop him from freely giving priority or precedence to one over the other. The subordination of the evil on the good principle, that is, the predominance of the good over the evil principle in man is a possibility that morality and religion intend to make good. As far as nature is concerned, mankind or the species of man constitutes a dwelling for the good and evil principles: “[…] the man of whom we say, ‘He is by nature good or evil,’ is to be understood not as the single individual (for then one man could be considered as good, by nature, another as evil), but as the entire race […]”. That the human race is naturally good or evil implies that in man there is a possibility of going for one or for the other. But to go for one or the other, the two principles must exist as a matter of logical necessity. Yet, it is clear from Kant’s morality that all rational beings should treat the practice of morality as a duty. Evil is thus a corrupting element that contradicts duty. It is the possibility of this corruption that condemns humanity to evil not only as actions contrary to moral laws but as the tendency to make evil the maxim or rule of conduct for a will. This is, however, not a fatality because man still has as responsibility to make good the possibility of the reign of good over evil in his maxims of conduct.

Kant’s conception of radical evil inevitably leads to the conclusion that the propensity to evil in human nature is a mere corruption of an original predisposition to good: “This evil is radical, because it corrupts the ground of all maxims […].” If our rules of conduct determining the will have been corrupted, then one can validly doubt the possibility of the impending victory of the good over this corrupting evil principle in human nature. A question now comes up as to how man can be good despite the presence in him of radical evil. This question, according to Kant,
goes beyond what man can do or should do to be good, to what man should have done to be good because in as much as we cannot situate the origin, in time, of radical evil (for it has always dwelled in us), we must identify the original predisposition to good (which must be supposed to be always in us despite the corruption of radical evil). This gives man the original responsibility not only to have been good but to be good because the predisposition to good has equally dwelled and will always dwell in him. This explains why man, as a rational being, is naturally a moral being. In fact, we cannot think of the possibility of the loss of the good principle in man because to Kant, if this principle were to be lost, there would be no possibility of regaining it and the moral enterprise would be brought to ruins.

Given that we cannot situate a temporal origin of evil, we must situate its rational origin in the adoption of maxims or rules of conduct. It is this rational origin that makes moral improvement a perpetual possibility for humanity. This possibility is that of the final victory of the original predisposition to good over the propensity to evil, a possibility which makes good the rule of religion as a consolidation of man’s moral consciousness against all odds, that is, against radical evil. But it would be an illusion to think that the battle is won once and for all because as we have seen, even the best of men is still liable to the corruption of his maxims by the evil principle. It is merely a matter of continuous effort, an obstinate commitment to good principles.

The evil man is therefore not necessarily one who has always done evil (from particular actions), but the entire human race which remains liable to evil, but which, nevertheless, retains the responsibility to be good as the most venerated aspect of rationality. So venerated and exalted is this aspect of human nature that Kant considers the unconditional commitment to morality as a sacred undertaking that religion should reinforce.

The original predisposition to good is a human rational potential that must be realizable, otherwise, the moral and religious undertakings become idle dreams. Kant can therefore make a realisable recommendation for the future from an observation in a past that is in dire need of improvement:

*However evil man has been up to the very moment of an impending free act (so that evil has actually become custom or second nature) it was not only his duty to have been better, it is now still his duty to better himself. To do so must be within his power [...]*. xxiii

The conception of corruption implies a substratum (predisposition to good) which has always and will always constitute the guiding principle of a moral will. No amount of corruption can completely do away with the moral substratum in human nature or prevent man from giving priority (as he is supposed to have always done) to good over evil. Thus at any point in time, man (the human race) should be in an endless process either of seeking to give priority to good over evil or ameliorating the predisposition to good so as to better withstand the present and future corruptibility of radical evil.

The role of religion in the victory of good over evil is therefore not an instantaneous achievement. It is a dynamic process that needs even more than a life-time for accomplishment. But while we are part and parcel of the phenomenal world, as rational beings, we must do our utmost (in the good life-conduct) to either eliminate evil or bring it to its minimum. Given the radical nature of evil, it would be too ambitious to think that we can completely eradicate it. Yet, we cannot afford to live with and in evil without doing anything about it. The role of religion becomes clear when we suppose that man would have done his best or put in his utmost effort to be good. Is the best of man’s efforts good enough to save him from evil? Immanuel Kant’s conception of religion supposes the utmost of human efforts which, though insufficient, make man worthy of the grace that religion promises. Kantian religion, therefore, does not make the possibility of grace an object of contentment in evil but a reinforcement of man’s moral efforts to deserve the grace. The role of religion, above everything else, is a recommendation of man’s endless commitment to duty as the only path to grace.

The role of religion in waging a battle against evil simply projects the possibility of grace if, and only if, morality is incorporated in man as an unconditional lifestyle that can make him worthy
of God’s help:

For despite the fall, the injunction that we ought to become better resounds unabatedly in our souls; hence this must be within our power, even though what we are able to do is in itself inadequate and though we thereby only render ourselves susceptible of higher, and for us inscrutable, assistance.xxiv

The possibility of assistance from God is conditioned by the unconditional commitment to duty. Religion thus makes morality a path to God’s grace. This explains why Kant’s definition of religion necessitates our treatment of moral laws as God’s commands. If morality is the only path to God, then moral laws are His commandments intended to make man pleasing to Him in a good life- conduct that can then be assisted and not merely rewarded by His grace. It can be considered, to a less extent, as a reward for having stood firm to morality against the impending radical evil that does not cease to threaten the grounds of our maxims with corruptibility which, when avoided, can be a source of contentment for a job well done against many odds. It is, to a great extent, assistance for no matter how hard we try, our efforts alone will never be enough to crush evil. Thus the question as to how much we need to do for God to help us is answered by Kant in the view that we must do the best we can within our power to deserve God’s assistance.

In morality alone, the expected assistance from God cannot be the guiding principle of our will whose actions are realised independently of the object of volition. This is because morality can already stand on its own as an independent foundation even if the religious undertaking does not follow from it. But since religion has to, and does, follow from morality, we must note, with emphasis, Kant’s point that religion, without making the possible assistance from God the condition of morality, necessarily makes this assistance the consequence or ultimate culmination of our utmost moral efforts, efforts which in themselves and by themselves neither need God nor religion to become worthy of our obstinate commitment to them. Religion merely proposes the possibility of assistance which can on ly serve to reinforce our moral commitment which henceforth becomes the greatest glory of God. With religion, we become aware that the moral laws, already present in us, are God’s laws, and since no better service can be rendered to God than the respect of His laws, religion simply makes morality a path to divine assistance. A moral religion, morality that leads to religion or a religion based on morality is a conception that comes to free religion of corrupting earthly temptations to evil, in much the same way as Kantian morality comes to free the will of corrupting determining principles mainly that of self-love.

The true and universal religion is one that knows no sectarian divisions and that renders true service to God. A question now arises as to how God wants to be honoured (a preoccupation closely related that of the end of creation). Kant distinguishes between two types of religion: natural religion based on morality as a form of reason and supernatural religion based on revelation and manifested through divine worship. The moral religion (manifested through the good-life conduct) is one that fulfils the most fundamental condition for a true and universal religion because the service of God is a moral service and above all because the moral element, at its basis, is a possession of all rational beings. On the other hand, a religion of divine worship, based on revelation, makes use of historical accounts which are not accessible to everyone. It is therefore difficult for revealed religion to acquire universality since its history of the forms of divine worship does not apply to everyone. Revealed religion loses the true (moral) foundation when divine worship (church rituals) is made to have priority over the good life-conduct.

However, Kant notes with emphasis a weakness of human nature: that of always seeking an empirical representation of that which is already within him. As such, despite the uncompromising commands of the moral law, man, beside the good life-conduct, always seeks external (statutory) laws to orientate his worship of God. Man thus finds himself in a religion of divine worship with a set of dogmas which when mistaken for the true (moral) service of God, the result is what Kant calls “the stupidity of superstition and the madness of fanaticism.”xxv To avoid this situation which neither serves God nor saves man, Kant proposes that the elements of revelation should be conditional by morality such that the advent of a true and universal religion
should consist in a systematic elimination of those elements of divine worship that are either indifferent to morality or worse still go against it.

To prepare supernatural (revealed) religion for universality (morality), the church ministers who are mere teachers of morality (not intermediaries or favourites of the heavenly kingdom) have a new role to play, that of adapting the elements of revelation to the demands of morality. Since the elements of revelation vary from one denomination to another (depending on the history of the faith), men can have different approaches of divine worship but united in hearts by the one element of a true religion (morality) in the midst of a multiplicity of approaches of divine worship.

In Critical Philosophy, rational, moral or practical faith refers to the commitment to morality in a good life-conduct as the only way of becoming pleasing to God. This moral faith is the foundation of a true religion and is distinguished from what Kant calls ecclesiastical faith which is belief in the dogmas of revealed religion. Ecclesiastical faith, based on the history of the denomination concerned, recommends respect of statutory laws in a religion of divine worship manifested in ceremonies and observances believed to make man pleasing to God. To avoid confusion in the use of the term religion (which property speaking is one and universal), Kant sharply distinguishes it from faith which designates the different denominations of divine worship. The various forms of divine worship are non-essential elements of religion because the true religion is borne in the moral disposition in man:

*There is only one (true) religion; but there can be faiths of several kinds. We can say further that even in the various churches, severed from one another by reason of the diversity of their modes of belief, one and the same true religion can yet be found.*

This brings us to an important element of Kant’s conception of religion: the view that there is and there should essentially be no difference between members of one faith (denomination) and those of another because when their diverse (non-essential) forms of divine worship shall be conditioned and brought to a point of unity by the moral substratum, the result would be diverse belief systems for the sole purpose of man’s moral improvement. There is thus no hierarchy among denominations because for religion (one and universal) to reside therein, they must all converge (in their modes of worship) toward the unilateral direction of morality. Kant emphatically warns against the misuse of the word religion which essentially knows no divisions:

*It is therefore more fitting (as it is more customary in actual practice) to say: This man is of this or that faith (Jewish, Mohamed, Christian, Catholic, Lutheran), than: He is of this or that religion. The second expression ought in justice never to be used in addressing the general public [..] for it is too learned and unintelligible for them; indeed, the more modern languages possess no word of equivalent meaning. The common man always takes it to mean his ecclesiastical faith, which appeals to his senses, whereas religion is hidden within and has do with moral disposition.*

The first implication of Kant’s conception of religion and faith is that non-essential differences in the modes of worship should not be used to sow the seeds of social strife for such differences must have a common base in morality. We are here interested, at any point in time, in knowing whether or not these modes of worship serve to cultivate the seed of morality found in each man. Between Christianity and Islam, for example, we should not seek to establish any hierarchy based on taste and sensible desires which vary from person to person and from time to time (like the case of a Moslem becoming a Christian and vice versa), we are rather interested in how far each of these faiths can go in improving man’s life-conduct. Any faith whose mode of worship is either indifferent to morality or goes against it is disqualified as a candidate for the true universal religion which has morality as its fundamental condition of possibility. The universality of this condition is justified by the fact that the moral disposition is found in each person, unlike the dogmas and revelations which are not found in all men and cannot even be made acceptable to all.
The second implication of Kant’s position is the non-negligible semantic innovation in our understanding of the words faith and religion. To say that a person is of one religion or another is technically meaningless in Critical Philosophy which sees religion as a universal and singular undertaking that cannot vary from one man to another. Strictly therefore, what we wrongly call religious conflicts are merely acts of intolerance resulting from differences in modes of worship between faiths. They cannot really be religious conflicts for no one can stop another from practising the religion within him, that is, the religion based on the good life-conduct. Whenever we talk of religious conflicts and religious differences, we should understand the dogmas of each faith, the rituals, observances and practices of divine worship in revealed religions. The religion based on morality, against all odds, fulfils the most fundamental condition of possibility of a true religion because it resides in the heart of each person, and through it conflicts and acts of intolerance can be systematically avoided.

At the origin of the so called religious conflicts are claims by some faiths of being universal and others protesting against the declared hegemony. According to Kant, such claims and counter-claims lead to social strife mainly because the claim of universality is not based on the moral disposition which alone can make religion acceptable and practicable to all men. When such claims are based on the non-essential and variable dogmas for divine worship in each denomination, the result can only be protests, accusations and counter-accusations that create tension between men in search of God’s saving grace. If priority is given to the good life-conduct which makes man most pleasing to God, all differences would be canalised toward man’s moral improvement, otherwise these differences would engender social conflicts as is always the case.

To illustrate his view with concrete examples, Kant takes the case of Catholics and Protestants in claims and counter-claims of hegemony and universality, claims which (more often than not), based on ecclesiastical mode of worship, miss out on the true (moral) element of a universal religion. When one church claims universality and another protests against this claim, the result is a dramatic cacophony:

> If a church which claims that its ecclesiastical faith is universally binding is called a catholic church, and if that which protests against such claims on the part of others (even though oftentimes it would gladly advance similar claims itself, if it could) is called a protestant church, an alert observer will come upon many laudable examples of Protestant Catholics and, on the other hand, still more examples, and offensive ones, of arch-catholic protestants [...].

Religion is surely more than just a game of claims and counter-claims, religion is an institution of the good life-conduct; the moral and henceforth religious disposition in man should surely stand above the cult of differences and conflicts nursed by self-seekers and fanatics. Obviously, these differences take the upper hand over morality each time man wants to use religion for something else than moral improvement. The dogmas of each faith cannot be made acceptable to all, but it is not about making them acceptable to all, it is all about basing them on morality to attain the universal goal of the good life-conduct as the only way of rendering true service to God. If we cannot make ecclesiastical faith acceptable to all, we can at least make it suit the demands of morality such that we can hope for unity (through morality) in the diversity of modes of divine worship.

However, it should not be thought that Kantian religion is a total rejection of ecclesiastical faith in favour of moral faith. In an approach peculiar to him alone, Kant attempts a reconciliation of the intelligible elements of morality and the empirical elements of divine worship based on statutory laws. In much the same way as ideas of pure reason are never sufficient as a path to knowledge until we seek and find the possibility of an empirical representation of such ideas, the moral laws as laws of reason alone are never enough as norms of conduct. Due to a weakness in man of always seeking an empirical representation of that which is already within him, the statutory laws of revealed religion fulfil this need. It is a human weakness because the moral laws on their own are enough as norms of conduct. Yet, due to the possibility of the corruption of our moral maxims by evil principles, the role of religion as a means of moral reinforcement is
obvious.

The need for statutory laws or norms based on the history of ecclesiastical faith, on scriptures and on an empirical authority to reinforce the moral dispositions in each man makes good the possibility of a combination of natural and revealed religions. The conditions of possibility of such a combination are enough to make man’s empirical life in revealed religions a reflection of the intelligible and moral disposition within him. The possibility of a combination of natural and revealed religions is also the possibility of a combination of what Kant now calls empirical faith and moral faith. Empirical faith is man’s commitment to the statutory laws of a denomination or ecclesiastical faith with a history and a set of dogmas. The commitment results from the weakness in human nature of never finding satisfaction in reason alone, that is, the need to have moral laws (which come from within) established externally in statutory form based on the external authority of the history, revelations and scriptures of an ecclesiastical faith. Kant takes into account this human weakness and even makes use of it to propose a religion whose conditions of possibility remain at the reach of man as a being in an empirical world and as a being with intelligibility, source of all moral dispositions. The religion of Critical Philosophy seeks the best of both worlds.

Morality thus remains the most fundamental element of a true, universal religion, but henceforth, this true religion would be a utopian day-dream if human realities (especially the need for an empirical representation of the laws of reason) were not taken into consideration. From a natural and inevitable human need to the diversity in the forms of divine worship, Kant now seeks the possibility of a moral interpretation of revelations, that is, giving a moral meaning to the scriptures and dogmas of ecclesiastical faith to make them have significance in man’s quest for the good life-conduct. It is about making this human need which was originally a weakness an asset:

[...] a church dispenses with the most important mark of truth, namely, a rightful claim to universality, when it bases itself upon a revealed faith. [...] Yet, because of the natural need and desire of all men for something sensibly tenable, and for a confirmation of some sort from experience of the highest concepts and grounds of reason (a need which really must be taken into account when the universal dissemination of a faith is contemplated), some historical ecclesiastical faith or other, usually to be found at hand, must be utilised. xxix

Revelation alone cannot lead to universality because it is not accessible to, and verifiable by, everyone. The revelations and the accompanying dogmas of divine worship can at most appeal to a negligible minority of the population in need of salvation. This explains why no particular denomination or ecclesiastical faith has succeeded to attain universal approval. The human senses are very capricious and easily corrupted by immediate needs. The element of universality in religions should thus be sought in the moral dispositions. Whether or not the revealed data of supernatural religions can be made to accurately suite the needs of morality is a preoccupation that Kant dealt with squarely. In a categorical manner and without any ambiguity, Kant makes it clear that “the theoretical part of ecclesiastical faith cannot interest us morally if it does not conduce to the performance of all human duties as divine commands (that which constitutes the essence of all religion).” xxx This gives the priest and pastors the role of teachers of morality who must do their best to interpret the scriptures or sacred texts of each ecclesiastical faith in such a way as to make man better and thus pleasing to God.

A question now arises as to whether or not all the sacred texts of ecclesiastical faiths can be given a moral interpretation. How much of morality (doctrine of the good life -conduct) is found in the scriptures of revealed faiths? How easy or difficult is the task of priests and pastors in giving an accurate moral interpretation to texts of revelation? It is implicit from Kant’s position that it is possible to identify passages of some sacred texts which are either indifferent to morality or simply go against it. In either case, the church ministers have the uphill task even of forcing a moral interpretation out of a sacred text whose moral content can be seriously put to question. According to Kant, the wise men of each faith have always done their utmost best to
give a figurative, symbolic moral significance to some of the wicked actions orchestrated by the gods as described in sacred texts.

The possibility of a moral interpretation of the scriptures is a giant step toward the true universal religion. To Kant, it is even better to force this interpretation than to directly transmit information of a doubtful moral content (and sometimes an anti-moral content) to the faithful of the various denominations. A direct transmission of accounts of acts of vengeance and wickedness orchestrated by deities and venerated personalities in the scriptures is counter-productive to the religion based on morality. Scriptural scholarship is put at the service of morality for an improvement in the life-conduct of the members of the ecclesiastical commonwealth. The priests and pastors are expected to, as much as possible, seek a moral significance of even the grotesque accounts of immorality in the scriptures: “Frequently this interpretation may, in the light of the text (of the revelation), appear forced - it may often really be forced, and yet if the text can possibly support it, it must be preferred to a literal interpretation which either contains nothing at all helpful to morality or else actually works counter to moral incentives.” These forced moral interpretations of revealed texts open up the possibility of progressively adapting the church dogmas to universal morals norms giving rise to the true and universal religion. Moral religion is the super sensible origin of revealed religions and the scriptures must be put at the service of the good life-conduct: “For the final purpose even of reading these Holy Scriptures, or of investigating their content, is to make men better […].” It is difficult to think of how man can read the scriptures with the evil intention of promoting moral decadence. If the scriptures were written for a sacred and noble purpose, and if in them we find passages whose original (good) purpose can be put to question, then only a religion based on morality can make the purpose for which the scriptures were written coincide with man’s quest for the good life-conduct. The clergy thus has as job to situate the circumstances in which the events described in the sacred texts occurred to the needs (moral needs) of our time. Scriptural scholarship should provide the intellectual qualities needed for a perpetual and contextual reading of the holy books.

In view of a better (moral) interpretation of the scriptures, Kant has an idea of the intellectual qualities needed by our clergymen and pastors. Since the scriptures of ecclesiastical faiths may not have originally been written in a language accessible to us, the job of translating, interpreting and adapting the scriptures to the moral needs of our time is one that needs learning.

Hence the expositor, in addition to being familiar with the original tongue, must also be a master of extended historical knowledge and criticism, in order that from the conditions, customs and opinions (the popular faith) of the times in question he may be able to derive the means wherewith to enlighten the understanding of the ecclesiastical commonwealth.

Historical knowledge is needed here to relate the events of the time when the scriptures were written to those of our time. The clergymen and pastors should also question the meaning supposed by each passage of the scripture so as to get the underlying moral lesson (if any) or force one (if none) that can help to make man pleasing to God. Like a teacher who must know the intellectual and moral needs of his students before each lesson, the clergyman or pastor should know in advance that the faithful need to become pleasing to God in the good life-conduct above everything else. Still like a teacher who must work on the information in text books to make it meet the needs of his students, the clergyman or pastor should know that the scriptural passage in its literal framework is either not easily accessible to the faithful or can easily mislead them if not well (morally) interpreted. In either case, the priest or pastor is merely a teacher of morality and not a self-imposed favourite for the heavenly kingdom.

On the role of the clergy and pastors as teachers of morality, Kant outrightly comes up against the supposed supernatural insight linked to this role based purely on scholarship (on reason). A teacher of morality is not a superman, that is, he is not closer to God than other men merely by virtue of his position. Even the teacher of morality can only make himself pleasing to God by a firm and practical commitment to the doctrines he preaches about. A mystical consideration of
the role of priests and pastors leads to what Kant calls a forced hierarchy that has no place among free men:

For history tells how the mystical fanaticism in the lives of hermits and monks, and the glorification of the holiness of celibacy, rendered great masses of people useless to the world, how alleged miracles accompanying all this weighed down the people with heavy claims under a blind superstition [...].

To Kant, the priests and pastors are teachers and not rulers; as such, the only favorites for the heavenly kingdom are those who do the best they can each day to become better, to improve morally so as to win God’s grace. When the teachers of morality are considered rulers, the resulting superstition, fanaticism, exhibitionism and extremism can create nothing but social strife.

The Kantian critique of the miracles associated with the role of the clergy and pastors is directly related to his critique of all the miracles of revealed religions. The miracles of revealed religions need to undergo profound reforms and a progressive elimination to embrace the true universal religion based on morality. We can now restate the necessity of a combination of natural and supernatural religions based on the human weakness of ever seeking an empirical verification and confirmation of the commands of reason. Kant clearly situates the place of ecclesiastical faith vis-à-vis the religion of morality:

[...] ecclesiastical faith, [...] as the popular faith, cannot be neglected, because no doctrine based on reason alone seems to the people qualified to serve as an unchangeable norm. They demand divine revelation, and hence also an historical certification of its authority through the tracing back of its origin.

To consider a doctrine of reason insufficient can only be qualified as a weakness because all the elements of revelation must, in the final analysis, be made to suit the same doctrine of reason.

Since the service of God is necessarily a moral service, it is a weakness for man not to completely accept moral faith as enough to make him pleasing to God. Men thus find themselves in a predicament because they are “not easily convinced that steadfast diligence in morally good life-conduct is all that God requires of men to be subjects in His kingdom and well pleasing to Him.”

Taking into account this human weakness, the possibility of a combination of natural and supernatural religions must follow an order of precedence or priority, the former taking an upper hand over the latter. In this possible combination, the clergy or pastors must make a moral interpretation of the scriptures as mere teachers and not glorifiable dignitaries, because the function of a teacher of morality has no supernatural or miraculous basis. The progressive replacement of miracles by moral doctrines is one of the conditions of possibility of the emergence of the true universal religion.

The progressive elimination of miracles is one of the exigencies of a true religion. However, Kant acknowledges the historical role played by miracles in helping to impose the authority of a revealed religion on the ecclesiastical commonwealth. The miracles and the accompanying rites and observances are necessary elements of a religion of divine worship. These elements serve as forerunners of a moral religion. But as soon as the conditions of possibility of a moral religion (mainly a good course of life) are made good, the miracles are called to disappear as a matter of necessity. The Kantian critique of miracles is based on the fact that the laws according to which they occur are unknown and unknowable to us because of the absence of a link with experience. This absence of empirical verifiability is also at the heart of Kant’s critique of rational theology. The occurrence of miracles is not warranted by any known laws of reason and cannot thus constitute the essential element of a true religion. When any ecclesiastical faith becomes a candidate for the true religion, the rejection of its miracles becomes inevitable.

Kant’s definition of miracles announces their downfall in a rational (moral) religion. In the General Observation to Book Two of Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone, Kant defines miracles as “[…] events in the world the operating laws of whose cause are, and must remain,
The belief in such occurrences is thus based on superstition that is incompatible with the exigencies of reason much venerated by Kant as the origin of morality and thus the true origin of religion. As such, in the final section of Book Four, Kant defines the resulting faith in miracles as “the belief in knowing through experience something whose occurrence, as under objective laws of experience, we ourselves can recognise to be impossible [...]” From the accounts of a direct encounter between man and God to God’s manifestation of His presence to the supposed chosen ones of ecclesiastical faiths or the supernatural deeds of men of higher faith, none of these accounts can be verified objectively through experience. Kant merely puts to light an inherent contradiction in the faith in miracles: the impossibility of verifying and proving through experience that which is supposed to have occurred in experience. When two contradictory attributes are predicated of the same subject, reason lands into sophistry. No religion worthy of the name can be based on miracles which occur in experience and yet cannot be verified in and through the same experience.

Due to the incongruity of miracles with their supposed basis in experience, a moral religion must progressively rid all ecclesiastical faiths of all their records of miracles. At this point, we can question the Kantian critique of miracles because being an element of revealed religions, miracles, some of which are narrated in the scriptures, may also be given a moral interpretation even if such interpretations are forced for the good of the ecclesiastical commonwealth. Whether or not a moral significance can be found in miracles, Kant’s point is clear that miracles are called to disappear in the moral religion because “if a moral religion (which must consist not in dogmas and rites but in the heart’s disposition to fulfil all human duties as divine commands) is to be established, all miracles which history connects with its inauguration must themselves in the end render superfluous the belief in miracles in general [...]” If we suppose the existence of a given ecclesiastical faith with its set of miracles, then the introduction of a moral religion must begin with the miracles on which the authority of the revealed religion was founded. But after this initial step has been taken, the confirmation of the authority of the moral religion consists in a systematic elimination of these miracles. From there, we will only talk of miracles to situate the historic moment when a moral religion was introduced to take control over what used to be a revealed religion.

The error, to Kant, consists in taking a mere historic moment for an essential component of religion. This is because the mere belief in miracles cannot replace the good life-conduct as the most venerated religious act. The place of miracles in a given historical moment in the evolution of a faith toward maturity (morality) cannot in any way constitute a moment or object of adoration but merely a thing of the past with no value for the present. As such “[…] it is essential that, in the use of these historical accounts, we do not make it a tenet of religion that the knowing, believing and professing of them are themselves means whereby we can render ourselves well-pleasing to God.” Kant then puts to light another reality of human nature of never wanting to give up the belief in miracles and yet not wanting this belief to have any practical effect in his ordinary business of life. This is because men know that for vital purposes and especially in the quest for the closest relationship with God, the belief in miracles either has no role to play or is actually counter-productive when such a belief is given priority over the commitment to morality.

Upon the establishment of a moral religion, therefore, men of sound judgement refer to miracles and their progressive elimination to draw a line of demarcation between the revealed religion and the moral religion to which it gave way or at least to which it becomes merely a subordinate. To the members of the ecclesiastical commonwealth now working towards the realisation of the ethical commonwealth, the place of miracles is clearly situated: “[…] miracles occurred of old, but they have not tolerated new miracles.” From Kant’s position, the addition of new miracles to those recorded in the history books of revealed religions is prohibited by the laws of reason, which does not mean that the laws of reason tolerate the miracles in history books; this simply means that those in history books are enough because the age of Enlightenment can no longer bear such unfounded stories. The era of Critical Philosophy goes for the essential in religion, that
is, the good life-conduct to which all rites and prayers should be oriented.

Given that the service of God is a moral service, the role of prayers in making our requests, wishes and thanks known to God can be seriously put to question. Is the mere act of making an inward or verbal request to God enough to win His grace? To Kant, prayers only play a role in religion, like every other thing, when they help to awaken the moral disposition in us. As such, prayers, on their own, have no direct effect on God as to win His grace, but if the prayers help to cultivate the seed of morality in us, then we are on the path to God’s grace. But as long as we end at the level of asking for grace (in prayer) without doing anything (in our life-conduct) to earn it, we completely miss the point. Prayers or a mere expression of wishes and requests cannot be demanded of everyone as a duty because a person committed to morality already has what Kant calls the spirit of prayer which awakens our moral dispositions. No one should thus pass through prayers as a direct means of pleasing God, but at most as a means of awakening his commitment to morality.

Kant’s radical critique situates prayers as a means of speaking to and with oneself, for the most intelligible means of speaking to God is in the good life-conduct. On the distinction between the spirit of prayer and prayer itself, and the rejection of the latter in favour of the former, Kant notes:

[…] the disposition, accompanying all our actions, to perform these as though they were being executed in the service of God, is the spirit of prayer which can, and should be present in us without ceasing. But to clothe this wish (even though it be but inwardly) in words and formulas can, at best, possess only the value of a means whereby that disposition within us may be repeatedly quickened, and can have no direct bearing upon the divine approval and for this very reason it cannot be a duty for everyone.

Prayers should not serve the purpose of flattering God because until the formulas and words make us better, God will never really be pleased and the individual devoted to prayers alone would remain far from God’s grace. Kant is not completely rejecting prayers, far from it. In critical fashion, Kant does not want that prayers should be a mere group of words carefully chosen and decorated to buy God’s grace. “Rather must one labor to this end through continued clarification and elevation of the moral disposition, in order that this spirit of prayer alone be sufficiently quickened within us […]”

It follows that prayers are useless when the words and formulas are not accompanied by moral improvement (indifference to morality) or, worse still, when prayers are accompanied by acts contrary to moral norms. When prayers are unguided or misguided toward ends other than those of moral improvement, the result is superstition and is futile in bribing an incorruptible God.

Kant was not really lenient in his critique of prayers as a means of pleasing God especially when the prayers are either accompanied by indifference or contradiction to morality. In very severe terms, Kant denounces the obsession with prayers in total neglect of moral duties which are God’s commands: “Praying, thought of as an inner formal service of God and hence as a means of grace, is a superstitious illusion (a fetish-making), a wrong way of showing determination to earn God’s grace. Since God’s grace is earned and not asked for, the place of prayer leaves much to be desired “for it is no more than a stated wish directed to a Being who needs no such information regarding the inner disposition of the wisher”, an undertaking whose futility is known in advance. If God requires only a moral service of us, then the fate of every prayer is declared, because “nothing is accomplished by it, and it discharges none of the duties to which, as commands of God, we are obligated” and for Kant to conclude emphatically that by and through prayers, “God is not really served” and our original aim of becoming pleasing to Him is not attained.

All the elements and acts of divine worship including praying should be canalised toward the moral improvement of man. The possibility of a combination of revealed and moral religions is the possibility of giving a moral orientation to all forms of divine worship. In the religion of morality, priority is given to what we can do to earn God’s grace and not to what He can do for
us. But bearing in mind that whatever we do and no matter how hard we try, our efforts are never enough to get to Him, at one point in time (when our utmost moral efforts have been put in), we can look up to Him for grace. The point now is that of knowing if a sudden change of heart toward morality can annul the evil deeds of our old habits. Is it because we can count on God’s pardoning grace at one point in time that we can be contented in sin? Should the hope for God’s grace be the condition for our commitment to morality or should our commitment to a good course of life be the condition to deserving God’s grace? The last question is what Kant calls the antinomy of human reason with itself. The solution to this antinomy is the possibility of the victory of the true (moral) religion over false cults.

Ecclesiastical faith recommends church rituals, observances, and the dogmas of divine worship as means of becoming pleasing to God together with the hope of pardoning grace for our sins. Moral faith recommends the good life-conduct as the unique means of becoming pleasing to God and earning His grace. Kant now introduces a third type of faith which he calls saving faith with a precise definition: “we call the faith of every individual who possesses moral capacity (worthiness) for eternal happiness a saving faith.” Saving faith involves what man can do and what man can no longer do to win God’s grace. Man can no longer at any point undo the immoral acts of his old habit; and no matter how hard he tries, we cannot say that his countless immoral actions of the present are enough to annul the wicked actions of his past, for in that case it would suffice to do evil even intentionally and then neutralise it with future good actions. It is not the number of good actions that one does now and will do in future that matters but whether or not such actions result from a complete change of heart toward the good as was supposed to have even been the case in the past.

The point now is not only that of knowing how much man should do to atone or make amends for his past sins but also and above all whether or not the belief in God’s pardon should take the upper hand over continuous commitment to morality in a good course of life. It is about knowing whether or not the hope of grace can lead to a good life-conduct or vice versa. The antinomy of human reason with itself is thus stated and developed: “[…] either […] the faith in the absolution from the debt resting upon us will bring forth good life conduct, or else […] the genuine and active disposition ever to pursue a good course of life will engender the faith in such absolution according to the law of morally operating causes.” It is in disguise a conflict between moral faith and ecclesiastical faith for precedence. If we take ecclesiastical faith merely as a means of propagating moral faith (which is the condition of possibility of a true religion), then it is the good life-conduct that earns God’s pardoning grace.

If we suppose that the belief in God’s grace alone (which is passive because it suffices to accept that the sins of man can be, or even have been, forgiven and one is saved) can engender a good course of life in the future, then not only our past sins have been annulled but we have been rendered, in a way unknown to reason, immune to sin in the future. This second supposition is unrealisable because by it no human efforts are required to get to God, as if wishes were enough to make even the wicked heart virtuous. Kant’s position on this apparent antinomy of human reason is clear:

"[...] it is quite impossible to see how a reasonable man, who knows himself to merit punishment, can in all seriousness believe that he needs only to credit the news of an atonement rendered for him, and to accept this atonement [...] in order to regard his guilt as annihilated, - indeed, so completely annihilated (to the very root) that good life-conduct, for which he has hitherto not taken the least pains, will in the future be the inevitable consequence of this faith and this acceptance of the proffered favour."

Kant’s solution to the antinomy is practical and not theoretical because no amount of speculation can lead us to know whether faith in pardon leads to the good life-conduct or vice-versa. As an antinomy of practical reason, priority is on what we have to do to become worthy of His grace and not the mere belief in what He Has done, a belief which being passive, cannot lead to any practical effort. Man must do the best he can to improve his life-conduct, and when the utmost
moral efforts would have been put in, he can then hope for higher assistance from God. Besides, giving priority to ecclesiastical faith over moral faith runs the risk of leading to “the superstitious belief of divine worship, which knows how to combine a blameworthy course of life with religion”\cite{1}, a combination that can never be warranted by any religion based on reason. The solution to the antinomy in the priority given to the good life-conduct thus serves God and saves man.

Kant’s position is easily understood in that it is very easy for man to take the easy way out trying to bribe God through rituals and observances intended to console him in wrong doing. No religion worthy of the name should give priority to anything above the good-life conduct. Like the step from the state of guardianship into enlightenment, the step from evil to good (the change of heart for the good of morality) can at times be difficult especially if wrong doing had become a second nature; yet, it is better to dare take this step for once the step is taken, it is easier and safer to live with the original or first nature (moral dispositions). The role of religion consists in helping us adopt the good life-conduct as the unique path to God. Religion should not be like a consolation in sin but a call for, and a spark of, hard work to face difficulties with the utmost of our efforts before hoping for God’s assistance. If church rituals were enough to get to God, then morality would lose its place as it would suffice to pay for our sins or to ask someone else to pay for us in the ceremonies and sacrifices of divine worship. Man would in that case buy a clear conscience with ceremonies and bribe God with observances. In such a case, the plea of the clergy and pastors for divine worship would win favour against that of the moralist for a good course of life. Making good the requirements of morality in all ecclesiastical denominations is the most appropriate path to a healthy society void of religious servitude and void of sectarian conflicts.

Conclusion

This paper has proven that Kant’s system of religion set in 18th century Germany has not lost relevance in the 21st century Cameroonian society. This is because the ideal of a moral religion is made difficult to realise divisions and differences in modes of divine worship which are like a bomb in the shell. These denominational divisions are a source of potential conflicts in a society that needs peace. A religion of peace cannot ignore the needs of morality because morally upright human beings avoid evil and thus avoid conflicts. In the era of conflict – resolution, what could be more rewarding than seeking to build peace through sacred institutions like religion? The task is not to be achieved instantaneously. The ideal of an ethical commonwealth as God’s moral kingdom on earth is an on-going process full of difficulties and obstacles much of which can be overcome by opening the human heart and the human mind to the true meaning of religion. This religion has much to borrow from Kant to have a rational or moral basis that will make it a vector of peace and not a vector of the kind of divisions and dramatic illusions as well as potential conflicts in our society.

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2 Quoted by Georges Pascal, Pour connaître la Pensée de Kant, Paris : Bordas, 1966, p. 15.

3 The second critique, Critique of Practical Reason, was published in 1788, and the third, Critique of Judgement, in 1790.


5 Throughout this dissertation, we shall use the upper case of ‘h’ in the pronouns He, Him and His to refer to God.

6 Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, …, op. cit., Note 1, p. 2.


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13 Ibid., p. 1066.

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15 Ibid., p. 1068.

16 Ibid., Second Section, p. 1058.


18 Immanuel Kant, Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone..., Book One, p.16.

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20 Ibid., p. 21.

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22 Ibid., p. 36.
xxiv Ibid., pp. 40 – 41.
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