

Enlightenment and religion in Kant

Maria Borges^{1*}

¹Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC), 88040-900 Florianópolis – SC, Brasil

Abstract. How can we reconcile religion and Enlightenment in Kant? I begin by analyzing Kant's conception of a rational religion and the key concepts of radical evil and ethical community. I refer to many instances of overcoming evil in Kant's work. First, I show that in the *Anthropology*, the cultivation of society is one possibility, while in the *Idea for a Universal History*, the unsociable sociability plays a role to accomplish a moral end. In *Religion*, on the other hand, only an ethical community can defeat evil. Since evil has its source in social relations, only a society of virtue can counteract passions. Second, I ask whether we can reconcile religious faith with rational Enlightenment or if some concepts used in *Religion*, such as radical evil, are only a disguise for anti-Enlightenment conceptions. Finally, I ask if it is reasonable to argue that we should keep religion as an important social practice or if it always brings a higher risk of anti-Enlightenment outcomes such as fanaticism. I analyze the case of Brazil, where the Evangelical church helped to elect a right-wing president with a very conservative and anti-Enlightenment agenda.

Keywords: Kant, ethical community, church, evil, fanaticism, passions

1 Introduction: Religion as a way to deal with evil

In the presentation of the book *Kant's Anatomy of Evil*, Sharon Anderson-Gold and Pablo Muchnik (2010, p. 2) claim that “as a result of the excessive influence of the *Groundwork* in the Anglo-American reception of Kant, however, Kant's reflections on evil have been largely ignored in the secondary literature.”

Although it is true that there is no reference to evil in the *Groundwork*, Kant explores the concept of evil in some later texts. In the *Anthropology* (1797), Kant claims that the destiny of the human being is accomplished through the cultivation of society and this can be a way to overcome our evil inclinations. “The sum total of pragmatic anthropology, in respect to the vocation of the human being and the characteristic of this formation, is the following. The human being is destined by his reason to live in a society with human beings and in it to cultivate himself, to civilize himself, and to moralize himself by means of the arts and sciences” (*Anth*, AA 07: 324; Kant, 2007a, p. 420). Kant acknowledges in the *Anthropology* that there is evil in human beings, which “is an inclination to desire actively what is unlawful, although he knows very well that it is unlawful” (*ibid.*). He also recognizes that passions are

* Corresponding author: mariaborges@yahoo.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-4606-7919

cancerous sores of reason and does not attribute any good property to them. However, some hope remains since passions, even if they are sores for pure practical reasons, can be overcome by the cultivation of arts and sciences. This socio-cultural development, not of the individual but of the species as a whole, will be able to counterbalance evil and accomplish the natural destiny of the species, which is to attain full rationality.

In the *Idea for a Universal History* (1784), Kant claims that “the greatest problem for the human species, to which nature compels him, is the achievement of a civil society universally administering right” (*IaG*, AA 08: 22; Kant, 2007b, p. 112). In the *Idea* the just civil institutions are considered enough to develop the aim of human nature and to accomplish our moral end. The idea of unsociable sociability plays an important role in the *Idea* as an explanation of how immoral passions can engender a moral outcome. This unsociable propensity, Kant affirms, “[...] is this resistance that awakens all the powers of human being, brings him to overcome his propensity to indolence, and, driven by ambition, tyranny, and greed, to obtain for himself a rank among his fellows, whom he cannot stand, but also cannot leave alone” (*IaG*, AA 08: 21; Kant, 2007b, p. 111).

In *Religion* Kant rejects the idea of a possible moral outcome from immoral passions and he does not consider the possibility that passions will find their way to morality. He suggests that the only way to overcome the propensity of evil in human beings is through an ethical community: “Inasmuch as we can see, therefore, the dominion of the good principle is not otherwise attainable, so far as human beings can work toward it, than through the setting up and the diffusion of a society which reason makes it a task and a duty of the entire human race to establish in full scope. For only in this way we can hope for a victory of the good principle over the evil one” (*RGV*, AA 06: 94; Kant, 1998, p. 106).

The only way to overcome the evil of passions is through a community based on the ideal of virtue. Fighting against the evil of passions implies the effort to build a society that might counteract passions: “Envy, addiction to power, avarice, and the malignant inclinations associated with these, assail his nature, which on its own is undemanding, as soon as he is among human beings. Nor it is necessary to assume that these are sunk into evil and are examples that lead him astray: it suffices that they are there, that they surround him, and that they will mutually corrupt each other’s moral disposition and make one another evil” (*RGV*, AA 06: 94; Kant, 1998, p. 105).

Only an ethical community, based on a unifying principle of virtue, can overcome passions and therefore defeat true evil. The Kantian conception of this community has an analogy to the juridico-civil society. As long as we can oppose the idea of a juridical state of nature to the first, we can oppose to the ethical state an idea of an ethical state of nature. While a juridical-civil or political society is the relation of human beings to one another under public juridical laws, an ethical-civil society is a community, in which men are united under the laws of virtue alone, without being coerced. They can coexist and be composed by the same members. “An association of human beings merely under the laws of virtue, ruled by this idea, can be called an ethical and, so far as these laws are public, an ethico-civil (in contrast to a juridico-civil society), or an ethical community. It can exist in the midst of a political community and even be made up of all the members of the latter (indeed, without the foundation of a political community, it could never be brought into existence by human beings” (*RGV*, AA 06: 94; Kant, 1998, p. 106).

In a political community, the political citizens are still in the ethical state of nature. The citizens cannot be coerced to enter an ethical state, but they can do it. This decision rests on the person’s will, since the citizen of the political community remains totally free: “The citizen of the political community therefore remains, so far as the latter’s lawgiving authority is concerned, totally free: he may wish to enter with his fellow citizens into an ethical union over and above the political one, or rather remain in a natural state of this sort” (*RGV*, AA 06: 96; Kant, 1998, p. 107).

2 The controversy

Allen Wood claims that the aim of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* was to explain to an audience of Christians how to reconcile their faith with rational Enlightenment morality. However, this book has been criticized by both groups. While “Christians, and religious people generally, typically charge him with ‘watering down the faith’, [...] unsympathetic secular philosophers view the *Religion* as proof that Kantian ethics is at bottom nothing but traditional superstition” (Wood, 2010, p. 144).

The controversial nature of the text seems to attain its climax with the idea that only an ethical community is capable of overcoming evil and making the moral destination of human beings possible. Why is this controversial? It is very disappointing for a supporter of Enlightenment morality to find that Kant’s last word about the moralization of human beings refers to a community that is also a church. It is also problematic since he proposes in other works different ways towards the moralization of human beings.

Neither the radical historical optimism of the *Idea* nor the cultural confidence of the *Anthropology* seems to be enough to overcome evil. In *Religion* there is a new condition of this development, – the establishment of an ethical community, which is not guaranteed by the suggested cultivation of human beings in the *Anthropology*, nor by the progress of history and political institutions of the *Idea*.

An ethical community should supplement a historical and cultural solution to evil, since even the most perfect civil political society will never attain full morality. In *Religion*, Kant has a diagnosis of evil that differs from the other texts: men are evil even in civil and cultivated society. Here Kant also abandons the idea that only nature is responsible for the immoral acts of human being. If human beings examine the circumstances that lead them to evil principles, they will find that they are not related to their raw nature but to the corruption of the will that one man produces over the others. If a human being considers himself poor, for instance, he does so “only to the extent that he is anxious that the other human beings will consider him poor and will despise him for it” (*RGV*, AA 06: 93; Kant, 1998, p. 105).

The raw nature of human beings, although it can produce strong inclinations that are difficult to master, does not lead to corruption of the human heart. Kant is unequivocal in asserting that only the association of men is able to produce pure evil. Inclinations are not by themselves the source of evil, nor are our affects. The passions of envy, addiction to power and avarice are awakened by the mere interaction with other human beings, even if there were no such thing as bad behavior from others. Human beings are not evil because they have been corrupted by those who are already wicked. Mere social interaction makes human beings evil, because this interaction awakens the comparison between people. Kant also claims that comparison is the source of this social evil: the human being feels that he is poor because he compares himself to others, and the fear of being despised or dominated produces the evil passions of ambition and greed.

Since the evil of passions is connected to society, only a social remedy can overcome these cancers of pure practical reason. However, here the republican cure is no longer considered the final remedy that will heal the patient. Kant claims that the only way to overcome evil is through a community based on the ideal of the moral good. Also, virtue in the sense of an individual strength is insufficient to counteract passions unless a society is set up which will rule over passions.

3 Radical evil: A moral or a religious concept?

Allison (2012, p. 99) calls attention to the surprising idea of a propensity to evil in Kant’s *Religion*: “Perhaps nothing Kant wrote has proven to his contemporaries as perplexing to present-day readers as his account of radical evil in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere*

Reason. The very idea that there could be such a thing as a propensity to evil in human nature proved shocking to his contemporaries because of its suggestions of the doctrine of original sin, which is the feature of Christian orthodoxy that was most inimical to the views of Enlightenment.” In the article “On the Very Idea of Propensity to Evil”, published as a chapter of the book *Essays on Kant* (Allison, 2012), Allison tries to deny that this is a new disguise for the orthodox idea of original sin by showing how the idea of propensity to evil is not in disagreement with the Kantian system as a whole. He aims to show that the idea of evil can be grounded in a conceptual analysis of the conditions of imputation. According to the incorporation thesis, an incentive is not a ground for an action unless it is taken in the maxim as a motive. The third degree of evil is nothing other than taking the incentives of self-love as the motive in the maxim, and not the incentive of moral law. Since it is not in contradiction with the incorporation thesis, Allison denies that evil is something beyond the rational morality of the Enlightenment.

Kant talks about a propensity to evil. Why does he not claim that there is a propensity to good? Here, Allison (2012, p. 104) claims that Kant uses empirical evidence: “[...] universal human experience provides abundant evidence of evil”. What Allison fails to consider is that the propensity for evil is indeed a new disguise for original sin. What Kant is trying to do here is to explain religion in terms of rationality; instead of using the concept of sin, he replaces it with the concept of evil. It is true that this is not in contradiction with the system as a whole. Besides Allison, Muchnik (2009, p. 2) also tries to show that the Kantian account of evil in *Religion* is not against the well-known texts of practical philosophy. Both Allison and Muchnik are right regarding the fact that the *Religion* does not contradict the system as a whole. However, since they think that Enlightenment is atheism, they fail to recognize the religious concepts that Kant employs in the *Religion*. But Enlightenment is not necessarily atheism. Genevieve Loyd (2013, p. 162) claims that “[t]he Enlightenment is now often associated with the hostile repudiation of religious belief”, however, she warns us, “yet this legacy [...] is more nuanced than is suggested by the familiar narrative of progress away from old religious influences towards secular modernity”. She calls the attention for the real enemy of the Enlightenment “[t]he enemy they address is not religion but religious superstition. The aim was not to destroy religion, but to accommodate it into a shared public space of reason” (Loyd, 2013, p. 162).

It is reasonable to think that Kant, as a philosopher of the *Enlightenment*, but not as an atheist, would like to incorporate religion into his rational system. In our secular age we no longer have the need to justify religion in a comprehensive moral account, as Kant did. However, according to Gordon Michalson (2010, p. 58), the Bible usually works for Kant as a reminder or an illustration of “what we already know, in the case of the recovery from radical evil it serves as a needed substitute for what Kant himself cannot state or argue more directly.” Should we still keep a place for religion in an Enlightenment project?

4 The Brazilian religious-political project

It is crystal clear that Kant believes religion has a role in the project of Enlightenment, which consists in fighting evil, the propensity to act contrarily to the moral law. Was he right? Is religion good for a society based on reason?

If we examine the impact of religion in our societies, what we see frequently is that religion plays a very irrational role. I only need to refer here to wars and terrorist attacks made in the name of religion. I will analyze the case of my own country and the role that religion is playing in a very conservative and right-wing government.

From 1964 to 1984 we had in Brazil a dictatorship. This was followed by democratic elections. For 13 years, 2003 to 2016, we enjoyed a very popular and democratic government under President Lula and President Dilma. This government has created many social

programs to eradicate poverty and has raised 32 million people out of extreme poverty. It has created 20 million jobs and has promoted inclusion of low-income people and Afro-descendants in the universities.

However, since 2013 we have noticed the rise of a very conservative movement in Brazil, which led in 2016 to the impeachment of President Dilma and to the imprisonment of President Lula. And part of this conservative movement was composed by members of the Evangelical Church.

All these conservative movements have led to the election of Jair Bolsonaro, who is himself a member of this Church. The slogan of his political campaign was *Brasil acima de tudo e Deus acima de todos* (Brazil above all and God above everyone).

His Cabinet of Ministers is composed of very conservative members who explicitly fight against a democratic and enlightened conception of public life. They fight against feminist movements, gay movements, against what they call “globalist conception” (climate forum) and “gender ideology” (feminism and LGBT thought). They support many of their conceptions with the Bible, e.g. that a family is composed of man and woman – going against gay rights – that women should have their role as a housewives stressed and, as the Minister for women’s affairs stated publicly, “girls dress in pink and boys in blue”. And one of the Secretaries in charge of primary education said that the children will learn mathematics and sciences from the Bible. However, as a result of criticism from the scientific community, she lost her position some days after making that claim.

Saying that this government is anti-Enlightenment is not a criticism from the political opposition but is proclaimed by its own ideologists. One of them, who has a Youtube channel where he gives lectures on philosophy – although he is not a philosopher – claimed that Kant was a radical anti-Christian who could be held responsible for the killing of Christians. In 2019 some Brazilian Kantians – including myself – had a public discussion with him via newspaper and social media and, as a result, Kant was one of the trending topics of Twitter in Brazil in February 2019.

5 Conclusion: Is there a place for religion in a (Kantian) Enlightenment project?

May an Enlightenment project have a place for religion? This has been a controversial question since Kant’s times. Some intellectuals at the end of the eighteenth century believed that there was no such place, since religion would always be the realm of irrational superstition. But Enlightenment, as we have seen, could be the denial of superstition, not the refusal of religion itself. This seems to be Kant’s position about religion: to preserve the rational parts, while rejecting the irrational ones.

It is true that Kant tried to overcome religious mysticism in his writings on religion. The question is: Was he successful in such an endeavor? Some commentators deny that radical evil is a disguise for traditional religious concepts. This is the position of Allison and Muchnik, as we have already shown. However, this concept does not appear explicitly in other texts. In the *Groundwork*, Kant refers to a good will but never to a radical evil. In the *Anthropology* and in the *Idea for a Universal History* it seems that moral cultivation and refinement, as well as the development of civil institutions, are enough to counteract passions.

Gordon Michalson (1990, p. 2), in the book *Fallen Freedom: Kant on Radical Evil and Moral Regeneration*, says that he “struggled with Kant’s shifting idioms as he developed what frankly seemed like a thinly disguised recasting of the doctrine of original sin, framed for the most part in the language of his ethical rationalism”. Michalson seems to be right when he refers to shifting idioms. Even if Kant is trying to translate the religion language into the language of rationalism, he is not completely successful in this enterprise.

According to Michalson, one of the challenges of reading Kant's *Religion* is how to reconcile the Christian and Enlightenment language. And perhaps these two kinds of languages are irreconcilable.

References

- Allison, H., 2012. *Essays on Kant*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Anderson-Gold, S. and Muchnik, P., 2010. *Introduction*. In: S. Anderson-Gold and P. Muchnik, eds. 2010. *Kant's Anatomy of Evil*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-12.
- Kant, I., 1998. *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. Edited and translated by A. Wood and G. Giovanni. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, I., 2007a. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. In: I. Kant, 2007. *Anthropology, History, and Education*. Edited by G. Zöllner and R. Loudon, translated by R. Loudon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 227-429.
- Kant, I., 2007b. *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*. In: I. Kant, 2007. *Anthropology, History, and Education*. Edited by G. Zöllner and R. Loudon, translated by R. Loudon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 107-120.
- Loyd, G., 2013. *Enlightenment shadows*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Michalson, G.E., 1990. *Fallen Freedom: Kant on Radical Evil and Moral Regeneration*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Michalson, G.E., 2010. *Kant, the Bible, and the Recovery of Radical Evil*. In: S. Anderson Gold and P. Muchnik, eds. 2010. *Kant's Anatomy of Evil*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 57-73.
- Muchnik, P., 2009. *Kant's Theory of Evil*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Wood, A., 2010. *The Intelligibility of Evil*. In: S. Anderson-Gold and P. Muchnik, eds. 2010. *Kant's Anatomy of Evil*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 144-171.