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“With Religion, not from Religion”

Christian Antimoralist Moralism and its Impact on Moral Formation

Bernd Oberdorfer

This essay has a historic part and a systematic part. Historically, it sketches the processes of differentiation between religion and ethics in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophy and (Protestant) theology, which changed the understanding of the impact of religion on moral formation. Systematically, it aims at rationalizing the intuition that it is exactly an “antimoralist” impulse which models a specific Christian contribution to moral formation.

Outsourcing Religion, Outsourcing Ethics: Kant and Schleiermacher on Religion and Ethics

Since the eighteenth century, Christian morality has been under pressure, from “outside,” as it were, as well as from “inside.” From outside, the need for a Christian justification of moral arguments has been doubted, if not contested. Morality, according to Kant, must be justified in itself, that is, by reason. Religious motives spoil morality, making it heteronomous. This critique is directed even against Enlightenment philosophy and theology, which interpreted Jesus as the “new Socrates” (J.A. Eberhard)¹—as a teacher of morality—and, thus, thought to have given religion a proper place in a rational system of orientation in life.

Kant himself, however, did not cut every link between morality and religion. First, he attributed to religion the function of a “vehicle” of morality: religion can give individuals additional strength to materialize or put into effect the moral intentions they have developed in a process of autonomy, by means of pure reason

¹ Cf. Johann August Eberhard, *Neue Apologie des Sokrates, oder Untersuchung von der Lehre der Seligkeit der Heiden*, vol. 2 (Berlin/Stettin: Nicolai, 1772–78; reprint, Hildesheim: Olms, 2010).

without religion.² Second, he implemented the idea of God as a necessary background assumption (“postulate”) of autonomous morality: God warrants the justice of the universal moral order by safeguarding a just correlation between virtue (*Glückswürdigkeit*) and happiness (*Glückseligkeit*, eudaemonia) in the eternal lives of souls.³

From “inside” religion, Schleiermacher accepted the separation of religion from morality and even radicalized it, defending the intrinsic dignity of religion. In his 1799 speeches *On Religion*,⁴ he distinguished religion, metaphysics, and morality as three different basic ways of dealing with reality. They cannot be derived from each other, nor can one of them be regarded as a dependent epiphenomenon of any other. Thus, religion is neither a form of world theory nor a doctrine of how to act in the world. This does not mean, however, that religion has nothing to do with metaphysics and ethics. Religion, according to Schleiermacher, is not supposed to orient but rather is to accompany human acting. “Everything with religion, nothing from religion.”⁵ Religion—to paraphrase that statement—means and constitutes an attitude of being in the world; it forms the fundamentals of understanding oneself and the world, and exactly this is ethically relevant. If religion is a way of feeling oneself as an interwoven moment of the universe and prevents one from egocentrically distancing oneself from the world, it constitutes an ethos of “forming oneself” (*Selbstbildung*) in the horizon of the world.⁶ Forming themselves is, thus, the way individuals participate in the realization of the “highest good” (*höchstes Gut*), which—according to Schleiermacher’s *Lectures on Philosophical Ethics*—is the substance and aim of human history, understood as the process of shaping nature by reason.⁷

² Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* (Königsberg, 1793), in *Kants Werke in zehn Bänden*, vol. 7, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983), 647–879.

³ Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (Riga 1788), in Weischedel, *Kants Werke in zehn Bänden*, vol. 6, 103–302.

⁴ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion. Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* [1799], in Idem, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. I/2, ed. Günter Meckenstock (Berlin/New York; DeGruyter, 1984), 185–326; in English, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. John Oman (New York: Harper & Row, 1958).

⁵ “alles mit Religion . . . , nichts aus Religion” (KGA I/2, 219).

⁶ Cf. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Monologen. Eine Neujahrsgabe* [1800], in Meckenstock, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. I/3, 1–61.

⁷ Cf. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Ethik. mit späteren Fassungen der Einleitung, Güterlehre und Pflichtenlehre* [1812/13], ed. Hans-Joachim Birkner (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1981); in English, *Lectures on Philosophical Ethics*, ed. Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

In this process, religion is part of one of four substantial functions of social life, the function of *individual symbolizing*. Religion, in other words, is a form of individual expression of the process of “humanizing nature.” It is *individual* (not general, as science is), and it is *expression* (not production [*Herstellung*], as politics and economy are). Thus, religion in itself is a specific form of human acting—this is further developed in Schleiermacher’s *Christliche Sitte*⁸—but, as such, it also has (indirect) impact on the other forms of human acting (like in politics, economy, law, and sociability [*freie Geselligkeit*]). In his *Glaubenslehre* [doctrine of faith], therefore, Schleiermacher characterizes Christianity as a teleological form of religion, which means that Christian religion gives the believers impulses to act.⁹ More exactly: the “Christian pious self-consciousness” (*christlich frommes Selbstbewusstsein*) experiences itself as a consciousness of God which has been liberated from its weakness by Christ to be a full confidence in God, enabling the individual to realize acts of finite freedom.

To summarize my point: religion, according to Schleiermacher, is something nonmoral which has moral implications or consequences.

In the later nineteenth century, Albrecht Ritschl, most influentially, affirmed Schleiermacher’s basic idea of religion as an independent source of dealing with reality, but with reference to Kant he put emphasis on the moral implications. Thus, Ritschl polemicized against any form of religious life that was of no practical use—for instance, in his view, Pietism and mysticism—and he identified religion in itself as a means of realizing the kingdom of God as the perfection of human society.¹⁰ In this concept, religion maintained its independence from science but lost its independence from morality. In the current essay, however, I refer principally to Schleiermacher’s intuition of a difference between religion and morality, including religion’s interferences with and impacts on morality, rather than to Ritschl’s idea of religion as a form of ethical impulse.

Christianity and Moralism

The second part of this essay analyzes the relations between religion and morality from a different angle, highlighting a Christian perspective on moralism. I begin

⁸ Cf. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Die christliche Sitte*, ed. Ludwig Jonas, 2nd ed. (Berlin, 1884).

⁹ Cf. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube*, 2nd edition [1830/31], ed. Rolf Schäfer (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2003) (= KGA I/13,1 and I/13,2), esp. §11; in English, *The Christian Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

¹⁰ Cf. Bernd Oberdorfer, “Albrecht Ritschl. Die Wirklichkeit des Gottesreiches,” in *Theologen des 19. Jahrhunderts. Eine Einführung*, ed. Peter Neuner and Gunther Wenz (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2002), 183–203.

with an observation: secular criticism often associates Christianity with a restrictive moralism, of which historic examples are easily found: the Puritan ban on dancing, smoking, and alcohol; Calvinist paternalistic control; Catholic discrimination of sexuality and general disdain of corporality; and on and on. Christianity seems to stand for a big “NO!” that overshadows any life-affirming impulses. To be Christian, in this view, means to follow rigid rules. The Christian impact on moral formation, then, would seem to be the implementation of these rules in social life, legal systems, and education. And, of course, the adequate secular reaction could only be to limit the influence of Christian churches in the name of freedom and autonomy.

Not incidentally, this critique is often complemented by an allegation of hypocrisy. Christians, from this viewpoint, enforce rules for others that they are unable or unwilling to comply with themselves. They preach water and drink wine. Or, even worse, they pretend to act altruistically while they actually follow a hidden agenda of egoism. In other words, they claim to observe spiritual norms while actually pursuing very earthly goals.¹¹ In our time, the disastrous consequences of the diagnosis of hypocrisy drastically became apparent in the context of the (especially Catholic) church’s scandal of sexual abuse. The obvious contradiction between rigid moral norms (and, more, the rigid enforcement of these norms with reference to divorce and remarriage) and the violation of these norms by church leaders—even violating more fundamental norms of human dignity and sexual integrity (or tolerating it in church officials) caused a general loss of credibility of the church’s moral teaching.¹²

This example, however, deserves further examination. To diagnose an institution’s hypocrisy implies the accusation of not complying with norms that the institution itself has declared to be morally binding. Thus, the critique of hypocrisy does not deny but rather presupposes that the institution formulates moral expectations and commitments, because this critique reminds the institution of those commitments by stating that it has not complied with them. The critique thus can have at least a threefold form. First, it can *affirm* the norms and simply challenge the institution to observe them more seriously in the future. This happened, for example, when the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century, at the Council of Trent, decided to maintain the norm of celibacy for priests but to implement the norm more strictly. Second, the charge of hypocrisy can *challenge* the norms themselves, asking whether they are still plausible or should be modified or abolished. This happened, for example, when the sixteenth-century Reformers

¹¹ This, e.g., was the focus of anti-Pietist criticism in Luise Adelgunde Viktorie Gottsched’s famous Enlightenment comedy *Die Pietisterei im Fischbein-ocke* (1736).

¹² A striking example is the results of referenda in Ireland, where a huge majority voted in favor of same-sex marriage (2015) and less-restrictive abortion legislation (2018), both against the declared will of the Catholic Church.

introduced marriage for priests. Third, the charge of hypocrisy can challenge the *forms* of making and implementing norms. This happened, for instance, when, as noted above, Catholics in Ireland (and elsewhere) started to doubt the unqualified (and unqualifiable) binding character of the Catholic Church's moral teaching and changed their attitude toward it.¹³

It is important to see that this analysis does not mean to contest the moral relevance of the Christian faith but rather reveals the intuition that a legalist misunderstanding of that moral relevance must be overcome. In this essay, I would like to follow this train of thought by showing that there actually is something like a Christian ethos, and that this ethos does actually *include* moral norms but goes far beyond them, because it develops sensitivity to the potentially destructive consequences of blindly enforcing norms (or, in other words, of moralism) and moreover entails specific forms of dealing with deviance. This complex structure, then, constitutes a Christian impact on moral formation.

It is obvious, first, that a faith-based ethos which derives from the biblical traditions includes moral norms. In the Old Testament, the Torah is understood as a gift: God dignifies God's people by giving them rules for a "good life." The wonderful Psalm 19 draws a parallel between cosmic and social order. Just as God protects the cosmos from chaos by stabilizing the regular processes of nature, so God preserves the social order by providing the rules of Torah. This understanding of the God-given law, however, does not apply only to the Old Testament. In Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, for example, the law is not only confirmed but rather intensified. Thus, the anti-Jewish cliché of Judaism as a religion of (only) law and Christianity as a religion of (only) love is wrong in both directions. Law is a form of love. And the long and successful career of the Decalogue in Christian (at least Lutheran) religious education indicates that Christianity itself has not followed this antinomian cliché.

But it takes only a superficial survey of the biblical traditions to confirm the intuition that they do not support a rigid moralism so much as give a broader picture of moral orientation. Let me highlight only a few aspects. First, the Torah itself not only entails norms and commandments but also introduces cultic institutions to deal with failure and trespasses by symbolic actions of reestablishing order. Moreover, it presents narratives which display, to say the least, moral ambiguity, even in the lives of the ancestral heroes. And it tells the history of the Israelites as a history of confidence and doubts, altruism and hate, human failure and God's new beginning. It is not a "heroic" narrative, and this has moral implications. Second, there has always been a strong consciousness of the crucial rele-

¹³ In Protestant churches, this change of authorization processes has already taken place. The Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) e. g. does not publish binding moral teaching but rather *Denkschriften* (memoranda), which are deliberately intended to be (only) contributions to the public discourse rather than final and binding solutions.

vance of mercy and forgiveness for a Christian ethos. If God again and again starts anew with God's people, even though they do not "deserve" it, Christians are called to start anew with their neighbors "seven times seventy times" (Matt. 18:22). Third, Jesus did not limit himself to the "perfect" but rather turned toward people who were excluded economically, ethnically, culturally, religiously, and morally (Zacchaeus, for instance, in Luke 19:1–10).

These narratives, which qualify rigid moralism, are deeply embedded in Christian cultures. To care for the excluded has always been a characteristic of Christian *diakonia*. The churches in our current day, therefore, do not practice an *opus alienum*, or a work that is foreign to their mission, when they raise their voice for refugees. Moreover, to engage in reconciliation (among individuals, peoples, and nations) is an important element of the Christian ethos.

Antimoralism, therefore, is not amoralism. Rather, antimoralism has a moral function. It is even a (more reflected, more elaborated, more realistic) form of moralism itself. It raises sensitivity to the possible disastrous consequences of a rigid moralism. Moreover, it conveys the deep conviction that forgiveness does not indicate weakness but rather is a basic requirement of social life. It is rooted in the idea of a God who does not stay in splendid isolation but incarnates himself in order to liberate and renew his lost people.

What does this mean for moral formation?

Schleiermacher was right to accuse Enlightenment theology of functionalizing religion for morality. Religion is not simply an instrument or medium to generate, implement, and enforce "values" or norms. It is a way of dealing with reality in its own right. As such, however, it introduces, as it were, "second-order values"—that is, values to deal with values and, moreover, to critically deal even with values or norms that religion itself has introduced.¹⁴ A classic example of this self-critical religious discourse is Jesus's discussion on the function of the Sabbath (Mark 2:23–28). Here, religion reflects upon itself. Jesus does not contest the legitimacy of the Torah rules, but he emphasizes their God-given function as a tool for a good life which enables persons to qualify the application of the rules in a concrete situation (as, in this case, hunger). Of course, this happens within an ethical horizon and has ethical implications—but is far from simple moral indoctrination.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are also second-order values. They show ways of continuing life in and after situations of distortion, violation, and humiliation, when the rules and routines of common, first-order morality have lost applicability because they no longer can warrant peace and stable order in society (when,

¹⁴ This is, by the way, the function of the theological doctrine of "Law and Gospel."

for example, the enforcement of laws cannot interrupt the sequence of violence and revenge violence¹⁵).

It is important to see that forgiveness and reconciliation cannot be enforced. Nobody can be forced to forgive. Thus, forgiveness and reconciliation are not moral norms in the sense of a simple order-obedience scheme. People can be encouraged but not commanded to forgive. Therefore, I would argue that religion can help to establish a supportive environment to encourage an ethos of forgiveness and reconciliation by providing respective narratives and authentic examples. This can have an enormous impact on moral formation.

How, then, can Christian individuals, communities, and churches contribute to the implementation of such a culture of second-order values?

First, their liturgical life communicates narratives and semantics and gives symbolic representations of God's ethos of reconciliation. Thus, simply by doing properly their core business—preaching the gospel, celebrating the sacraments—churches help to provide semantics of moral reflexivity and sensitivity.

Second, the lives of Christians and Christian communities can display encouraging examples of a culture of reconciliation. Not incidentally, critics of Christianity are very sensitive to the contradictions between doctrine and practice in the lives of Christians because these discrepancies endanger the authenticity and credibility of the gospel itself. Conversely, authentic experiences of reconciliation can have inspiring and encouraging effects on others.

Third, the work of *diakonia* is not a *donum superadditum* but an essential element of the Christian witness, because it realizes the inclusion of the excluded, which is the core message of the Gospel.

Fourth, churches can contribute to moral formation by committing themselves to public engagement and advocacy, to public theology.

One final remark: a culture of forgiveness is at risk of becoming (or at least appearing to be) an easy excuse for and even justification of injustice. The religious impulse to forgive, then, seems to make any action to take earthly responsibility redundant. In this spirit, for instance, Catholic officials after World War II helped some Nazi criminals escape to South America. But this is, to say the least, a misunderstanding. What I have called a culture of second-order values is not a way of eliminating first-order values but a way of analyzing, understanding, and implementing them. Thus, it was out of deep wisdom that South Africa, after the end of apartheid, started a process of justice *and* reconciliation which aimed at avoiding reconciliation at the expense of justice. Nevertheless, the history of that

¹⁵ It should be noted, nevertheless, that establishing a law system itself was a crucial step in the history of overcoming the fatal automatism of (private) revenge and antirevenge. The revenge cycle is classically displayed in a basic narrative of Western culture, Aeschylus's *Oresteia*.

process shows how difficult it can be to balance values, yet how necessary it is to try.