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Immanuel Kant's demythologization of Christian theories of atonement in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*

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Introduction

Immanuel Kant has greatly influenced modern philosophy, theology, and biblical studies. One of his most influential works is his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. While Kant never actually uses the terms 'Jesus' and 'Christ' in this work, and Kant's project is much larger than simply reforming Christianity, he does clearly refer to Jesus numerous times throughout his work and interacts, generally in a veiled way, with Christian theology. This article deals with Kant's veiled interaction with Christian theories of the atonement. In his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant demythologizes three of the predominant Christian theories of the atonement by moving the work of atonement from Christ to each individual, leaving no significant role for Christ.

After a brief overview of these three major Christian theories of the atonement, Kant's demythologization of these theories is discussed. A critique of Kant's demythologization then follows.

Pre-Kantian Christian theories of the atonement

Three major theories of the atonement that arose prior to Kant's time are the ransom theory, the satisfaction-substitution theory, and the moral example and influence theory.[1] Each will be examined briefly in turn.

The ransom theory of the atonement

The ransom theory was the most common theory of atonement for the first mil-

1 This taxonomy is not intended to be exhaustive. It only includes those theories with which Kant interacts. It excludes other significant theories, among which Irenaeus' recapitulation theory may be mentioned. In Irenaeus' view, Jesus came as the second Adam. Christ's entire life – including his birth, youth, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension – is involved in reconciling humanity to God. Christ's obedience reverses the effects of humanity's disobedience, thus creating a new humanity that gains immortality.

lennium of the church's history. In this theory, humanity was in need of liberation, and a ransom needed to be paid to free humanity. In the most common version of the theory, humanity was in bondage to the devil. The devil had established legal rights over humanity in the fall, and Christ's death paid a ransom to the devil to redeem humanity. Through his death and resurrection, Christ gained victory over the devil, breaking the devil's power and regaining legal rights over humanity.

While Augustine's understanding of the atonement was by no means limited to the ransom theory, he may serve as an example of an adherent of this theory. Augustine writes:

> by [the devil's] receiving the exterior authority to strike down the Lord's flesh, the interior authority by which he held us captive was itself struck down... He made an example of the principalities and powers, confidently triumphing over them in himself (Col. 2:15). By his death he purged, abolished, and destroyed whatever there was of guilt, for which the principalities and powers had a right to hold us bound to payment of the penalty... So by a death of the flesh the devil lost man, who had yielded to his seduction, and whom he had thus as it were acquired full property rights over... Yet in being slain in his innocence by the wicked one, who was acting against us as it were with just rights, he won the case against him with the justest of all rights, and thus led captive the captivity.[2]

The satisfaction-substitution theory of atonement

Anselm of Canterbury developed the satisfaction theory of atonement in his work *Cur Deus Homo.* Anselm argues that humanity's sins are offences against God's honour. The nature of the offended party determines the magnitude of an offence, so humanity's debt to God is immense. God's justice requires that God uphold his perfect honour, so God demands satisfaction. Anselm seeks to understand how this satisfaction can be made without the punishment of sinners. Humanity does not have the resources to make satisfaction for its sin, but God does. Yet, the guilt belongs to humanity and must be paid by a human. Thus, humanity's predicament requires that a God-man make satisfaction to God for humanity's sin.

The satisfaction theory became the dominant Christian theory of the atonement from the time of Anselm through the late medieval period until the time of the Protestant Reformation. The Reformers generally built on Anselm's theory. The Reformers viewed believers' sin as imputed to Christ and Christ's righteousness as imputed to believers. John Calvin may serve as an example of an adherent of this theory. Calvin uses the Anselmian language of satisfaction as he writes of the imputation of humanity's sin to Christ: 'if the effect of his shed blood is,

2 Augustine *De Trinitate* (trans. with an introduction by Edmund Hill, O.P. as *The Trinity*, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, ed. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A, Part I, vol. 5 [Hyde Park, N.Y.: New York City Press, 1991]) IV.17.

that our sins are not imputed to us, it follows, that by that price the justice of God was satisfied.'[3] However, Calvin also goes well beyond Anselm by speaking of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer: 'the righteousness found in Christ alone [is] accepted as if it were ours.'[4]

The moral example and influence theory of atonement

Some treat the moral example and moral influence theories of atonement as separate, but they are sufficiently interrelated to treat as one in this context. The central idea of this theory is that Jesus' life and death serve as a great moral example for humanity; humanity should follow his example. The moral influence theory includes the notion that Christ's death is a great demonstration of God's love for humanity; this demonstration of God's love should influence humanity.

Peter Abelard may serve as an example of an adherent of this theory. In commenting on Romans 3:26, Abelard writes:

> Thus our redemption is that loftiest love inspired in us by the passion of Christ, which not only frees us from the slavery of sin, but also gives us the true freedom of the sons of God, that we may be wholly filled not with fear, but with love of Him who has displayed such grace to us... He testifies, therefore, that He came to extend among men this true liberty of love.[5]

Abelard is often thought to have promoted the moral theory of atonement to the exclusion of other theories of atonement, an idea that has been popular since Bernard of Clairvaux accused Abelard of such. However, this view has rightly been challenged in recent years.[6] This theory of the atonement did not serve as an exhaustive explanation of the atonement until the German Enlightenment. Various German Enlightenment thinkers, including G. S. Steinbart, I. G. Töllner, G. F. Seiler, C. C. Flatt, and K. G. Bretschneider, adopted this theory exclusively. Steinbart, for example, argued against the satisfaction theory by saying that sin is not an offence against God, and Christ did not bear humanity's sins. Indeed, the idea of Christ's bearing sins would be a disincentive toward morality, Steinbart's real goal. Furthermore, against the ransom theory, Christ's death can free humanity from ignorance and misunderstanding about God but not from

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3 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990) II.17.4.

4 Calvin, *Institutes* II.17.5.

5 Peter Abelard, *Expositio in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos*. In *Patriologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latina*, vol. 178 (Paris: Garnier, 1885), column 836. As translated by L. W. Grensted (*A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement* [London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1920], 104).

6 Alister E. McGrath, 'The moral theory of the atonement: an historical and theological critique', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 38 (1985), 207-209; R. E. Weingart, *The Logic of Divine Love: A Critical Analysis of the Soteriology of Peter Abailard* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970); Thomas Williams, 'Sin, grace, and redemption' in *The Cambridge Companion to Abelard*, ed. Jeffrey E. Brower and Kevin Guilfoy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 258-78.

sin or demonic powers. The significance of Christ's death lies only in its moral effect upon humanity. Humanity gains salvation solely by imitating Christ's example.[7] While this theory of atonement has not claimed as many adherents over the course of the church's history as the former two theories, it clearly held much sway in Kant's day in Germany. Kant interacts with this third, moral theory no less than with the ransom and satisfaction-substitution theories.

Kant's demythologization of Christian theories of atonement

Kant demythologizes the moral example and influence, satisfaction-substitution, and ransom theories of atonement, in that order. Each will be considered in turn.

Kant's demythologization of the moral theory of atonement

In the first part of section one of book two of *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant argues that in order for one to please God, one must be completely morally perfect. Humans must elevate themselves to this state, and a human in this state can be called the Son of God and an archetype, or moral example, for humanity. Referring to Jesus, Kant argues that one can speak of this archetype's coming down from heaven. A human can become acceptable to God – saved – through being conscious of a moral disposition in which he would behave in accordance with the example of this Son of God, doing good even in the midst of temptations.[8] To this point, despite some ambiguity regarding whether this archetype really did come down from heaven, Kant sounds as though he is promoting the moral example and influence theory of atonement.

Kant reiterates that one should seek to attain this perfection, and despite the apparent difficulties, one must be able to attain it precisely because one ought to do so. For Kant, ought implies ability. In probing how one attains this perfection as a result of Jesus' moral example and influence, Kant demythologizes the moral example and influence theory of atonement by means of a two step process: Kant first strips Jesus of his uniqueness, and then Kant strips Jesus of his roles as moral example and influencer, assigning these roles instead to the individual's reason.

Kant's stripping of Jesus' uniqueness begins with Jesus' birth and continues through Jesus' ascension. While Kant merely questions the usefulness of a supernatural birth at this point in his work, he explicitly rejects the idea of the virgin

7 McGrath, 'The moral theory of the atonement', 210-12. Cf. Robert S. Franks, *The Work of Christ: A Historical Study of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1962), 505-17, originally *A History of the Doctrine of the Work of Christ* (1918).

8 Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. with an Introduction and Notes by Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson, Harper Torchbooks/The Cloister Library (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 45-55.

birth in a later context.[9] Next, Kant strips miracles from Jesus' résumé.[10] Then, Kant strips Jesus of his divine nature. He argues that if Jesus were supernaturally born and divine, he would actually be a useless moral example for humanity as a result of his impeccability. The idea of a divine person coming to earth and suffering death for his enemies may indeed influence humanity toward love, admiration, and gratitude, but this language is merely analogical. It is simply a way of representing God's love. God could not really give a part of himself. While Stephen Palmquist argues that Kant is not committing himself on the issue of Jesus' divinity,[11] Kant certainly clarifies his initial ambiguity when he argues that to take the story of a divine person's coming to earth as literal, ontological truth would make one guilty of anthropomorphism and bring about 'most injurious consequences.'[12] Karl Barth is correct in noting that if Kant thinks 'the Word' exists, he certainly did not become flesh.[13] Similarly, elsewhere in his work Kant strips Jesus' resurrection and ascension of any historical value and strips any ontological meaning from the doctrine of the Trinity.[14] Kant strips Christology of its historical and ontological roots in order that Jesus might no longer be unique. Only Jesus' virtuous life is left to serve as humanity's example. Kant's need to undermine Jesus' uniqueness becomes clear with Kant's second step toward demythologizing the moral theory of atonement.

Kant's second and more important step in his demythologization of the moral example and influence theory of atonement is his replacing Jesus' function as archetype with that of the archetype stemming from the individual's reason. Kant states that 'according to the [moral] law, each man ought really to furnish an example of this idea [of conformity to the moral law] in his own person; to this end does the archetype reside always in the reason... no example in outer experience is adequate to it'.[15] Thus, while one might be tempted to look to Christ as the archetype, Kant argues instead that this archetype must ultimately be found within the individual's reason. Similarly, while one may find a demonstration of God's love in the story of Jesus, one must ultimately find the idea that God loves humanity in the individual's reason.[16] Kant's demythologization of the moral example and influence theory of atonement is now complete: the individual's reason replaces Jesus as the source of moral example and influence.

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9 Kant, *Religion*, 74-75.

10 Kant, *Religion*, 55-56.

11 Stephen R. Palmquist, *Kant's Critical Religion*, Kant's System of Perspectives, vol. 2 (Burlington: Ashgate, 2000), 213.

12 Kant, *Religion*, 56-58, quotation on p.58.

13 Karl Barth, *Protestant Thought: From Rousseau to Ritschl*, trans. Brian Cozens, trans. revised by H. H. Hartwell et al. (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1959), 172.

14 Kant, *Religion*, 119-20, 136-38.

15 Kant, *Religion*, 56.

16 Kant elsewhere explicitly says that the idea of God's love is attainable through reason alone (*Religion*, 110).

Kant's demythologization of the satisfaction-substitution theory of atonement

Kant's demythologization of the satisfaction-substitution theory of atonement emerges in the context of his dealing with a problem for his moral system. Kant advocates the adoption of 'the good principle' as one's own principle, but even if one does so, one has no way of ridding oneself of the moral debt arising from the earlier evil, which Kant calls humanity's radical evil. Kant argues that this debt is not transmissible; an innocent person could not carry it even if he wanted to do so. Here, by using the language of debt and its transmission, Kant is interacting with the satisfaction theory of atonement. This idea of the debt's inability to be transferred to another person places Kant at odds with Anselm and all who follow Anselm's model. Kant continues by arguing that this moral evil, coming from endless violations of the moral law, carries infinite guilt. Here, Kant is parroting Anselm. However, against Anselm, Kant states that the extent of this guilt arises not because of the infinitude of God but rather because the moral evil is in one's disposition, which involves universal basic principles, not particular transgressions. Nonetheless, Kant again parrots Anselm by arguing that one would have to expect endless punishment and exclusion from the kingdom of God as a result of this infinite guilt.[17]

Kant gives a twofold solution to this difficulty. First, he notes that God knows the heart and renders judgment on the basis of one's general disposition, not on the basis of the conformity of one's actions to that disposition.[18] Allen Wood thinks this solution falls short because it has nothing to do with the question at hand.[19] At this stage in Kant's argument, Wood appears correct. However, Kant returns to this line of reasoning after giving the second part of his solution to this difficulty. The first part of Kant's solution only makes sense in light of the second part, so its significance will be discussed later in this article.

Kant's second part of the solution is more complex. He begins by arguing that it would be inappropriate for God to punish the person with a good disposition, a disposition pleasing to God, for the moral guilt arising from his previous bad disposition. Yet, the very fact that this person has adopted the good principle implies that God did not inflict punishment on this person before conversion.[20] 'Yet', again echoing Anselm's language, 'satisfaction must be rendered to Supreme Justice,' so 'we must think of' the punishment as taking place during the moment of conversion.[21]

Next, Kant argues that in the moment of conversion, the person takes on the idea of suffering ills for the rest of his life 'in the disposition of the Son of God,

17 Kant, *Religion*, 65-66.
18 Kant, *Religion*, 67.
19 Allen W. Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), 234-35.
20 Of course, this is not a conversion to the Christian faith but rather a conversion to Kant's good principle.
21 Kant, *Religion*, 67.

that is, merely for the sake of the good, though really they are due as punishments to another, namely to the old man'.[22] The regenerated human is sensibly, empirically the same human but is intelligibly, morally a different human. This new human is personified as the Son of God, and

> this Son of God, Himself... bears as vicarious substitute the guilt of sin for him, and indeed for all who believe (practically) in Him; as savior He renders satisfaction to supreme justice by His sufferings and death; and as advocate He makes it possible for men to hope to appear before their judge as justified. Only it must be remembered that (in this mode of representation) the suffering which the new man, in becoming dead to the old, must accept throughout life is pictured as a death endured once for all by the representative of mankind.[23]

Here Kant uses an astonishing variety of atonement language, especially satisfaction-substitution language, but he relocates the role of making satisfaction from Jesus, as represented in the Scriptures and in traditional Christian theology, onto the individual. The suffering of these ills by the new person, which is not punishment for anything done by the new person, is the moral surplus applied to the earlier debt.[24] In Kant's demythologized version of the satisfaction-substitution theory of atonement, one serves as one's own vicarious substitute. The guilt of one's old self is imputed to one's new moral self, and one's new moral self offers satisfaction for this guilt. Wood claims that Kant was 'far from rejecting the doctrine of vicarious atonement',[25] but Philip Quinn's assessment corrects Wood's: 'Kant's doctrine of atonement is a doctrine of vicarious satisfaction... only in the somewhat attenuated sense in which one part of a person, as it were, bears the entire burden of the person's sins.'[26] Only the individual plays a role in the process for Kant; there is no atoning role for Jesus.

At this point, Kant reiterates the first half of his solution, namely that God extends grace by regarding one as morally good even though only one's disposition is good, not one's actions.[27] Of course, Kant is invoking here his distinction between the sensible world and the intelligible world, but this does not exhaust his purposes. Having seen how Kant has demythologized the idea of the imputation of humanity's sin to Christ, now Kant's purpose for this additional element of the solution becomes clear: Kant is demythologizing the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer. In the Reformers' view, Christ's righteousness is imputed to the believer despite the fact that the believer's actions do not always conform to that righteous standard, even after regeneration. Kant demy-

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22 Kant, *Religion*, 68.
23 Kant, *Religion*, 69.
24 Kant, *Religion*, 70.
25 Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion*, 237.
26 Philip L. Quinn, 'Christian Atonement and Kantian Justification', *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1986), 452.
27 Kant, *Religion*, 70.

thologizes this by arguing that it is the righteousness of one's own good disposition that is imputed to the new person.[28] Again, Kant has taken Jesus' role in the atonement and transferred it to each individual.

Thus, Kant's demythologization of the satisfaction-substitution theory of atonement is complete. One's old sin and guilt is imputed to one's new moral self, and the righteousness of one's good disposition is imputed to oneself. Kant has stripped Jesus of any atoning role precisely by giving his role to each individual.

Kant's demythologization of the ransom theory of atonement

The title of book two is 'Concerning the Conflict of the Good with the Evil Principle for Sovereignty over Man'. Section one deals with the legal claim of the good principle over humanity as well as humanity's regeneration and justification. Section two deals with the legal claim of the bad principle over humanity and the conflict between the two principles. One can already see the language of the ransom theory emerging in the concept of a conflict between good and evil legal claims over humanity. Kant makes this link clearer in section two than in section one as he demythologizes the ransom theory of atonement.

Kant begins section two by noting that the Bible 'sets forth this intelligible moral relationship [between the two principles] in the form of a narrative, in which two principles in man... are represented as persons outside him; who not only pit their strength against each other but also seek (the one as man's accuser, the other as his advocate) to establish their claims legally as though before a supreme judge.'[29] This passage is full of the language of the ransom theory, and it is clear that Kant intends to demythologize the ransom theory by moving the conflict from being between Jesus and the devil ('persons outside him') to being entirely within the individual ('in man').

Kant goes on to describe the Scripture's narrative. First, Adam and Eve were originally under God alone, but they gave themselves over to the serpent. All humanity has given consent. Thus, the serpent has a legal claim to sovereignty over humans. This echoes the ransom theory. Kant continues by saying that Judaism did little to resist the bad principle, but then 'a person' – an obvious reference to Jesus – came with an original innocence that meant the bad principle had no

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28 Cf. John E. Hare, who also recognizes that Kant is 'translating,' or demythologizing, the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer: 'Kant...is aware that atonement...plays the role in traditional Christianity of accounting for how human beings, corrupt by nature, can become well-pleasing to God.... But Kant's *own* final translation of these doctrines does not allow them to play this role. His own account within the pure religion of reason assumes that we can by our own devices reach an upright disposition' (*The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God's Assistance*, Oxford Studies in Theological Ethics (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 65). Similarly, Gordon Michalson argues that this 'amounts to a Kantian adaptation of the Lutheran *simul justus et peccator*' (*Fallen Freedom: Kant on radical evil and moral regeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 117).

29 Kant, *Religion*, 73.

sovereignty over him. He promoted moral religion and the overthrow of ceremonialism and priestly authority. In his death, there was a physical victory for the bad principle, but there was moral victory for the good principle. Again, Kant is echoing the ransom theory.[30]

Kant demythologizes this narrative. He says that 'once this vivid mode of representation... is divested of its mystical veil... Its meaning is this: that there exists absolutely no salvation for man apart from the sincerest adoption of genuinely moral principles into his disposition.'[31] Kant replaces Jesus' conquering of the devil with each individual's conquering of the bad principle by means of the good principle in an entirely internal conflict. Jesus plays no role in Kant's demythologized version of the ransom theory of atonement. Again, Kant has replaced Jesus' role with that of each individual.

Critique

From Kant's demythologization of the various theories of atonement, it is clear that Kant does not believe in a historical atonement. He states this more explicitly later in the book, arguing that the idea of accepting the truth of a historical event 'as the supreme condition of a universal faith alone leading to salvation, is the most absurd course of action that can be conceived of.'[32] Why does Kant have such an aversion to a historical atonement? A number of reasons likely coalesce, but two significant reasons will be discussed here: Kant's view of the relationship between history and meaning, and Kant's emphasis on the moral autonomy of the individual.

Kant's low view of meaning in history is typical among eighteenth-century German Enlightenment thinkers. As famously expressed by Gotthold Lessing, 'accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason.' For Kant, a historical event cannot contain significant meaning. Two reasons for Kant's refusal to find meaning in historical events will be considered.

First, one of Kant's marks of the church, in its pure form, is that of universality.[33] Historical events cannot pass this test of universality because those unaware of these historical events cannot accept them merely by means of their reason, which is universal for Kant. Thus, a historical atonement cannot be at the foundation of a pure religious faith, which must be accessible to all.[34] Furthermore, if historical events cannot pass this test of universality, then an interpretation of historical events – as found in the Scriptures – certainly cannot pass this test of universality either. Kant finds it unfortunate that all Christians must identify themselves as Jews whose Messiah has come, clinging to a story and a religion

30 Kant, *Religion*, 74-78.
31 Kant, *Religion*, 78.
32 Kant, *Religion*, 169. Cf. also p. 110.
33 Kant, *Religion*, 93.
34 Cf. Hare, *The Moral Gap*, 66-67.

from without rather than clinging solely to the moral teaching that is the essence of pure religious faith of a religion from within.[35] Given this premise, Kant believes that Christianity should transform itself from an ecclesiastical faith with its belief in a historical atonement into a pure religious faith, a moral religion without a historical basis.[36]

Kant's objection to a historical atonement on the basis of its lack of universality may be mitigated by factors Kant fails to consider. In the Christian faith, God's sovereignty ensures that he is able to make knowledge of himself and of Jesus' historical atonement as broadly available as his purposes dictate. Furthermore, Kant assumes that in order for a historical atonement to lie at the foundation of the church, everyone whom that historical atonement affects must be knowledgeable concerning that historical atonement. While this is typically the case today, it is not necessarily always the case. This historical atonement can be effective for those who are unaware of it. For example, Abraham had no knowledge of Jesus' historical atonement, but Jesus' historical atonement is effective for him nonetheless.

Second, Kant's refusal to allow historical events to convey meaning stems from his epistemology. Historiography requires observation of the world. For Kant, when a subject observes objects, the subject observes appearances of these objects. The subject's active mind then imposes upon these appearances its own *a priori* concepts such as space and time. The imposition of these *a priori* concepts allows the active mind to formulate the notion of cause-and-effect. The mind can then formulate natural laws governing these causes and effects. The traditional empiricist faces the problem of how one can know that the patterns displayed by past observations will continue in the future. For Kant, however, the fact that the subject's active mind generates these natural laws means that future observations cannot contradict these natural laws. Thus, determinism reigns, and the subject has achieved knowledge. All of this analysis by the subject, however, rests on the appearances of things, not things-in-themselves. For Kant, a huge chasm exists between the appearances of things and things-in-themselves. One can indeed have knowledge of the realm of appearances of things – the phenomenal world, but this knowledge does not transfer to the realm of things-in-themselves – the noumenal world. Metaphysics, including the doctrine of God, belongs to the noumenal world. An adherence to a historical atonement crosses Kant's impassable epistemological chasm between the phenomenal world and the noumenal world.

However, space and time are not merely constructs of the mind, and there is no impassable chasm between the appearance of a thing and a thing-in-itself. This does not mean that one cannot be deceived by the appearance of a thing. One's initial knowledge of that thing is provisional. However, if there are some occasions in which this provisional understanding requires revision, there are many other occasions in which this provisional understanding is correct and

35 Kant, *Religion*, 151-55.
36 Kant, *Religion*, 112.

true knowledge has been gained. What, then, is the task of the historian who is observing historical events? It is the historian's task to contribute to knowledge by discerning the inherent meaning of events and then by creatively representing those events so as to highlight their meaning. This knowledge does not pertain solely to the past; it is significant for the present and the future, even if it frequently must be placed within a larger system of thought before its significance for the present and future can be understood.[37] In general, this knowledge is provisional; it does not yield the assurance that Kant may desire. Nonetheless, it is valuable despite the potential for error. If this meaning and knowledge stemming from history is typically provisional, there is an additional factor to be considered in the case of Jesus' historical atonement: the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit testifies to the Christian concerning the truth of the Scriptures, which give an interpretation of historical events, including Jesus' historical atonement.[38] Indeed, the Scriptures teach not only that the cross has meaning but also that this historical atonement fits into God's outworking of his purposes throughout history, beginning in the garden and culminating in the consummation of God's kingdom in the new heavens and the new earth.

One of Kant's basic premises is that the individual is completely autonomous in moral matters. In contrast to the phenomenal world, in which determinism reigns, the noumenal world offers freedom to the individual. While Kant believes that all individuals are subject to the same moral law, he insists that this moral law is not imposed on the individual by any outside person or force. As a result of this extreme individualism, Kant cannot allow Jesus to be the one who sets an individual free, as the ransom theory of atonement claims. Kant cannot allow Jesus to be the one who pays for an individual's guilt, which Kant does not view as transmissible, as the satisfaction-substitution theory of atonement claims. Kant cannot allow Jesus to be the one who ultimately influences an individual's morality, as the moral example and influence theory of atonement claims.

By downplaying the meaning of history and defending the moral autonomy of the individual at all costs, Kant loses two central elements of the Christian faith: the uniqueness of the person of Jesus and the power of the work of Jesus. Kant's demythologized Jesus has no virgin birth, no miraculous power, no atoning death, no victorious resurrection, and no ascension. Furthermore, Jesus has no ontological status along the lines of Chalcedonian orthodoxy, and the doctrine of the Trinity has no ontological meaning. For Kant, the story of Jesus' life

37 This approach to historiography is distinct from two other common, modern approaches. On the one hand, this approach differs from the purportedly objective, scientific approach of Leopold von Ranke and his followers both in that it recognizes the creative element in historiography and in that it recognizes that historical endeavours are generally motivated by the significance they pose for issues faced in the present and the future. On the other hand, this approach differs from postmodern, constructionist historiography in that the historian's creativity is constrained by the meaning that is inherent in the historical events themselves.

38 Cf. Calvin, *Institutes* I.7.

and death is simply a symbolic vehicle through which moral religion was transmitted for a time. Now, the time has come for humanity to dispense with that symbolic vehicle. For traditional Christianity, however, Jesus is the pre-eminent revelation of God and God incarnate – the very object of Christians' worship.

Kant's demythologization of the various theories of atonement removes any power in the work of Christ. The cross and resurrection of Christ are central to Christianity. The apostle Paul says, 'if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain... If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins' (1 Cor. 15:14, 17, NRSV). In the cross, God redeems humans. He liberates them from the powers binding them, makes propitiation for their sin, and compels them by his love to relationship with him. Through Christ, God reconciles humans to himself as adopted members of his family. By demythologizing the ransom theory of atonement, Kant strips Christians of the liberating victory won by Jesus through his death and resurrection. By demythologizing the satisfaction-substitution theory of atonement, Kant strips Christians of the power of God to make propitiation for their sins. By demythologizing the moral example and influence theory of atonement, Kant strips Christians of their ability to behold a perfect example and be compelled toward reconciliation with God in response to what God has done through Jesus. In short, Kant's demythologization of the various theories of atonement causes him to lose the possibility of reconciled relationship between God and humanity. Kant may not consider this to be a catastrophic loss. In his view, no such relationship is possible, anyway: 'we understand nothing of such transcendent relationships of man to the Supreme Being'.[39] However, the good news of the Christian faith is that 'in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself' (2 Cor. 5:19, NRSV). Kant's demythologization causes him to forfeit this good news. Ironically, Kant's failure to allow for relationship between God and humanity prevents him from even being able to promote what Jesus taught was the greatest moral commandment: the love of God. The love of God, as Jesus taught it, requires a relationship between God and humanity. In pursuing a pure moral religion, Kant produces a morality that excludes the most basic tenet of Christian morality.

Conclusion

In his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant demythologizes three major Christian theories of atonement, replacing Jesus' atoning work with each individual's work. Kant's moral religion is powerless to free humans from their innate, radical evil – the evil Kant himself recognized. Kant's system leaves his followers with no means by which to overcome their alienation from God. Humans need the incarnate God to liberate them from the powers that bind them,

39 Kant, *Religion*, 66.

to make propitiation for their sins, and to compel them to love him. In short, humans need Jesus to reconcile them to God.

Abstract

In his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Immanuel Kant interacts in a veiled way with Christian theology. In particular, he demythologizes three main Christian theories of the atonement, namely the ransom theory, the satisfaction-substitution theory, and the moral example and influence theory. In each case, Kant substitutes Jesus' role in the particular atonement theory with that of each individual. Kant's reasons for this demythologization include his failure to find meaning in history and his unwavering commitment to individual moral autonomy. Kant's demythologizing programme sacrifices the uniqueness of the person of Christ and the power of the work of Christ.