

Lawrence R. Pasternak

Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Kant on *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*.

New York: Routledge 2013.

272 pages

\$115.00 (hardcover ISBN 9780415507844);

\$27.95 (paperback ISBN 9780415507868)

Lawrence Pasternak's book joins a growing array of works on Kant's philosophy of religion, and adds to the controversies surrounding this topic. Pasternak positions himself at a distance from two main types of scholarship. On the one side is what he labels "a reductive reading, where the text is treated as primarily an extension of Kant's moral anthropology" (p.1). On the other side are those who characterize the *Religion* as riven with "wobbles" and as a "failure" because of its apparent efforts to weld Enlightenment rationalism with Christian faith. Unlike these thinkers, Pasternak proposes that the text is "a frank and internally consistent treatise on philosophical theology" (11). However, he also distances himself from those who assert that Kant "had to mask his true Christian commitments" (12) and "who want to bolster Kant's Christian credentials, pressing for even more than *Religion* explicitly suggests" (15). As he observes, it is hardly plausible that Kant, writing during a time of political and religious conservatism accompanied by the censoring of Enlightenment views, would think it necessary to *downplay* his Christian beliefs (16). Oddly, after making this point, Pasternak nevertheless proclaims that "Kant is not being forthright, and perhaps not honest with himself either" in stating that his work is "outside the purview of the theological faculty" (16). This comment heralds a pattern of selective interpretation disregarding or misrepresenting features of the text incompatible with a theological agenda.

Pasternak's interpretive program is presented in an opening chapter entitled "Faith, Knowledge and the Highest Good." Without textual support, he states that Kant's approach has "considerable similarities to Martin Luther's own," offering only that "Kant was brought up in a Lutheran Pietist household" (18). Pasternak proposes that "just as Luther claims that 'Reason is the greatest enemy that faith has' ... Kant too regards religious belief as requiring a basis outside theoretical reason." He concludes that "Religion is not, for either Luther or Kant, an intellectual enterprise, but a matter of the heart" (18). The glaring problem here is that for Kant the non-theoretical basis for religion is *also rational*, i.e., it is practical reason devoted to ethical ends within a unified model of reason. The "heart" is Kant's metaphor for our inner ethical disposition, and has nothing to do with prioritizing non-rational feelings and faith commitments.

The ideas central to Pasternak's interpretation are "conviction," which hardly appears in *Religion* and which is a critically qualified and nuanced concept in Kant's work, and the Highest Good. Concerning the latter, he states "it is generally agreed that at least in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant did see HGi [the Highest Good as ideal] as taking place in the afterlife" (31-32), offering no textual support for this presumed "general understanding" of a complex and contested

matter. Crucially, Pasternak confuses Kant's explication of an ideal of reason (which as such is not fully realizable in the world) with an "extramundane" claim. Indeed, Kant usually characterizes the HG very specifically as something to be realized "in the world," indicating that it is an ideal condition of ethical co-existence toward which we aspire. This fact would lead us to the view that "it is humanity rather than God who is to be held responsible for its realization" (34). Since this "secular" focus is incompatible with Pasternak's theological interpretation, he responds that since Kant "does use 'in the world' in contexts that clearly include the afterlife [sic], it is appropriate to understand it in this sense" (34), citing Kant's discussion of a "transcendental sense" at A419/B447. Here "transcendental," which refers to ideas of reason not derived from sense experience, is misrepresented as indicating an other-worldly set of concerns. I should also note that Kant begins *Religion* by stressing how religious ideas take on rational meaning as extrapolations of the moral law toward its fulfilment or end. Hence, it is surprising that Pasternak offers little background discussion of the moral law and its formulation in the categorical imperative, including especially the third formulation as the Realm of Ends.

I have indicated that Pasternak's over-riding interpretive claims are questionable, but there are far more serious problems in his analysis, of which I can discuss only the most extreme examples. This is, after all, supposed to be a "guidebook" to the *Religion*, so one would expect the author to explicate the text thoroughly and accurately. However, the treatment is highly selective, focusing on some sections to the exclusion of others, with the sections discussed often treated in a misleading manner. Pasternak clearly wants the *Religion* to be something more than a "reductive" or "secular" ethical analysis of religious concepts, and he therefore minimizes Kant's consistent emphases on the priority of autonomously cultivated ethics and virtue. As one of the most egregious instances of this, he claims that "in *Religion*, Kant uses 'virtue' polemically, and repeatedly declares that it is *not* through virtue that we become Justified before God" (39). To support this assertion, Pasternak cites 6:47 in which, it is claimed, "Kant describes virtue in terms of one's 'habits' and 'firm resolve' to comply with one's duties." But this, Pasternak continues, "involves 'only a change of mores'." In an endnote to this passage Pasternak similarly refers to "*Religion's* polemic against virtue" (58), and comparable claims about an alleged downplaying of virtue are made on pp. 127, 132-33, 143, 224, 166, 232, and 234. If we look more closely at the initial passage cited, however, the meaning is in fact entirely different from what Pasternak asserts. At 6:46 Kant discusses the ethical task of "the restoration of the original predisposition to the good in us" and describes this as consisting of "respect for the moral law" and "the recovery of the *purity* of the law." Following this clear statement of an ethical program, at 6:47 Kant explicates how, when our complying with moral duty "has become a habit, it is called virtue also in a legal sense, in its *empirical character (virtus phaenomenon)*." It is this phenomenal dimension of virtue, corresponding to our observable actions, that involves habitual cultivation; this does not require, Kant states, "the slightest *change of heart ...only a change of mores*" (6:47). If we continue reading, however, we see that Kant turns to how we "should become not merely *legally* good, but *morally* good (pleasing to God), i.e., virtuous according to the intelligible character (*virtus noumenon*)" (6:47). Astonishingly, Pasternak ignores this crucial differentiation between empirical

and intelligible virtue, which builds on Kant's core distinction between acting *according to* duty and *from* duty. Pasternak wants to disengage virtue from a "change of heart" (presumably making Kant more like Luther), but in fact the inward turn to virtue, in one's inner disposition, *constitutes* the change of heart (contrary to what Pasternak states on p.132). The confusions engendered by this line of interpretation are endless; for example at 138 Pasternak accurately cites Kant's critique of a focus on putative miracles as pointing to "moral unbelief, to a lack of faith in virtue" (6:63), seemingly oblivious to the way this passage also refutes his claims concerning a supposed "polemic against virtue."

This misunderstanding is directly connected with Pasternak's limited discussion of the ethico-civil and juridico-civil societies in Part 3 of *Religion*. Kant opens this section by stating: "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*" (6:94). Quite clearly, the ethical community is ruled by the idea (reader take note) of laws of virtue, i.e., by the moral law generated by practical reason. Pasternak gives some sense of this, noting that the ethical community should not be confused with "the cosmopolitanism of Perpetual Peace, for that still concerns merely external conduct and not matters of an inward nature" (177). Here the need for clarity concerning the previously established distinction between phenomenal and noumenal virtue is most evident.

Pasternak often introduces additions that alter the meaning of a Kantian passage being paraphrased. In one instance, he states that in the ethical community "there is a common commitment to the Highest Good as a 'principle which unites them'" (178, citing 6:97). Yet, in the paragraph from which the citation is taken there is no mention of the highest good; the principle is rather the more fundamental one of the moral law, which is closely aligned with virtue. Turning to section III of Part 3, entitled "The Concept of an Ethical Community is the Concept of a People of God under Ethical Laws," Pasternak tells us that "Kant recognizes that the Highest Good's realization is still beyond what we as humans can achieve. God remains in charge of the distribution of happiness in accordance with moral worth" (179). This comment illustrates a problem that runs throughout the text: a failure to understand Kant's unremitting focus on rational, non-arbitrary *ideas or concepts* of God (see for example 6:5, 6:6, 6:104, 6:139, 6:154, 6:154n, 6:157, 6:183, 6:191, 6:195n, 6:198). In one place, Pasternak seems belatedly to recognize the value of Kant's repeated critiques of theological anthropomorphism as falling outside the purview of rational theological concepts (218); yet he falls into crude anthropomorphic assertions himself by attributing agency and intervention to God. While rightly noting that Kant stresses "our efforts" (179), he nevertheless concludes that in formulating the ethical community at 6:94 "we see in Kant a clear commitment to God having a necessary soteriological role" (256), hence reverting to a pre-Kantian heteronomous perspective. What Kant actually says, however, is that "this duty [to form an ethical community] will need the presupposition of another idea, namely, of a higher moral being" (6:98). There is certainly a place for a constructive practical understanding of the rationally clarified *idea of God* here, but this is very far from the more literal theological assertions Pasternak makes. Hence, at 6:99, Kant carefully distinguishes the ethical community from any traditional

model of “theocracy.” Unfortunately, such fine distinctions are lost in this work, which shows once again why any serious discussion of Kant’s arguments must be based on a close, accurate, and methodical treatment of the texts themselves.

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