

## To tell the truth on Kant and Christianity

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# To Tell the Truth on Kant and Christianity—*Or*: Will the Real Affirmative Interpreter *Please Stand Up!*

In the 25 years since I initially submitted “Can a Christian Be a Kantian?”<sup>1</sup> to *Faith and Philosophy*, much water has passed under the proverbial bridge. My plan to demonstrate that Kant’s philosophy attempts to reform rather than destroy Christianity, and my recommendation that Christian philosophers should therefore treat more seriously the possibility of employing Kantian strategies in service to the community of thoughtful Christians, eventually extended well beyond the specific applications sketched in that proto-manifesto; but my implementation of that project is now nearing a point of completion.<sup>2</sup> I therefore thank the editor for offering me, in the wake of the symposium papers published in the previous issue of this journal,<sup>3</sup> this opportunity to take stock of what has transpired over the past quarter century.

A key question arising out of *FP29* is how to assess what constitutes a “religiously and theologically affirmative” interpretation of Kant.<sup>4</sup> Let us begin, therefore, with an overview of how this terminology entered into the realm of Kant-scholarship. Its “pre-history” dates back to the mid-1980s when, toward the end of my doctoral research at Oxford, I first began to apply a “perspectival” method of interpreting Kant’s Critical philosophy to *RBBR*. In the earliest drafts of the relevant chapter of my dissertation, I claimed to be adopting a “positive approach” to interpreting Kant on religion. John Macquarrie (then supervising both me and my classmate, Pamela Sue Anderson, one of the other *FP29* critics of *IDKR*), advised me to use “affirmative” to describe my intent to portray a *genuinely religious* Kant, thus avoiding possible associations with positivism—wise advice, indeed. Not until the mid-1990s, when CLF studied in Hong Kong for a year, under my guidance, did I (at his prompting) begin musing about whether a new *movement* in Kant-interpretation might be emerging, focused on this same goal.<sup>5</sup> The idea of pitting “traditional” against “affirmative” interpreters was entirely Chris’; however, I bought

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<sup>1</sup> I first presented the paper with this title during the mid-1980s, at a meeting in Oxford of John Wenham’s “Fellowship of Research Students in Theology”—a group some used to call, half-jokingly, “FORSIT”. A revised version was eventually published as “Immanuel Kant: A Christian Philosopher?”, *Faith and Philosophy* 6:1 (January 1989), pp.65-75; hereafter *FP6*.

<sup>2</sup> Following the publication of a complete commentary (currently half finished) on the full text of Kant’s *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, tr. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009)—hereafter *RBBR*—I plan to focus my future research on other areas.

<sup>3</sup> See *Faith and Philosophy* 29.2 (April 2012), pp.144-228; hereafter *FP29* (for the entire set of papers); I shall refer to three papers by their author’s *italicized* initials: Stephen R. Palmquist (*SRP*), Chris L. Firestone (*CLF*), and Nathan Jacobs (*NJ*). When I refer to any of these persons, rather than to his paper, these initials will appear without italics.

<sup>4</sup> Chris L. Firestone and Nathan Jacobs, *In Defense of Kant’s Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), p.233; hereafter *IDKR*.

<sup>5</sup> Significantly, there is no hint of an “affirmative” vs. “traditional” distinction in *FP6*, nor in the article that proved to be even more influential in promoting this new approach: “Does Kant Reduce Religion To Morality?”, *Kant-Studien* 83:2 (1992), pp.129-48. CLF’s suggestion, however, began to look temptingly plausible when, during the year when he worked with me in Hong Kong, John Hare’s *The Moral Gap* appeared.

into it, eventually editing with him a set of essays<sup>6</sup> that portrayed just such a new “movement” (*KNPR* 21) as being already in the process of taking shape.

In his part of *KNPR*’s “Editors’ Introduction” CLF expresses the hope that, encouraged by our book, “the theologically affirmative interpretations” will “be united and thus capitalize on their collective resurgence” (14). If he hoped his joint effort with NJ, two years later, would continue to enhance the façade of unity that *KNPR* initially presented, then he must be profoundly disappointed by the disharmony expressed in *FP29*. Nevertheless, it may be instructive to consider why that follow-up work sparked such discord. SRP’s part of *KNPR*’s Introduction admits that

the editors themselves have disagreed, sometimes strongly, over such fundamental issues as what ‘counts’ as an ‘affirmative interpretation.’ What we decided, in the end, is that any scholar who interprets Kant as *affirming* theology and/or religion *and* interprets that affirmation as a position *worthy of being affirmed* by theologians and/or religious believers belongs to the group or *trend* we are presenting here.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to agreeing on the exact wording of this definition (see note 7), CLF and SRP also agreed (in 2006) that “all philosophers should affirm the value of a good argument” (*KNPR* 28), so “affirmative” was not a reference *merely* to the cogency of Kant’s arguments. Yet, according to *CLF* and *NJ*, this is precisely what “affirmative interpretation” now means!<sup>8</sup> This radical change of a key definition prompts the query: Does this alleged “affirmative” movement in Kant-interpretation even *exist*? If *FP29* is used as a basis for judgment, as we shall see, an “affirmative” approach can be pretty much anything, upheld by just about anyone. That label, while not quite stillborn, therefore appears to have suffered a case of infant mortality.

Interpretive charity requires a willingness to take differences (including objections) at face value and respond to them on the assumption that they may be instructive.<sup>9</sup> With this in

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<sup>6</sup> *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); hereafter *KNPR*.

<sup>7</sup> *KNPR* 27-8. Perhaps significantly, 11 of the 18 times when a form of the word “affirm” appears in CLF’s part of *KNPR*’s Introduction, the word “theology/theological(ly)” appears immediately before or after it; by contrast, this occurs only 4 of the 75 times when SRP’s part of that Introduction uses a form of “affirm”. (One of those four is the sentence quoted here, which was carefully scrutinized and amended by CLF, to insure we could agree on a single definition.) Comparing our actual usage in that text, however, reveals that (at least in 2006) SRP treated “affirmative” as a broad-based label describing anyone who thinks Kant’s ideas on God and religion convey constructive truths *that are worthy of assent*, whereas CLF treated it more narrowly, as referring to specifically *theological* ideas worth believing.

<sup>8</sup> In none of its 93 uses of cognates of “affirm” (see note 7) does *KNPR*’s Introduction even *hint* that this approach might relate solely to “the cogency of [Kant’s] arguments” (*FP29* 197) or to “the validity of Kant’s argument” apart from any consideration as to “whether the argument is sound”; yet *CLF* and *NJ* make these surprise announcements, respectively, regarding “the task of *IDKR*” (*FP29* 210).

<sup>9</sup> *Lack* of charity in philosophical discussion is often expressed covertly, through the use of an approach I call “logic-chopping”—a tendency that is responsible for causing many capable students to be turned off to philosophy. *NJ* illustrates that logic-chopping is as prevalent among (philosophically-minded) theologians as it is among (some types of) philosophers. The evasive logical dance *NJ* performs around the many legitimate points raised by *FP29*’s *IDKR* critics is nowhere better illustrated than in the “long melancholy litany” (cf. *RBBR* 33) of alleged “Errors of Fact” and other “fallacious claims” that *NJ* attributes to *SRP* (see *FP29* 217-9, especially note 12). What *NJ* takes as “fact” is in each case a (mis)interpretation, whereby the alleged fallacy or “factual” error is

mind, I am resisting the initial temptation to use this follow-up essay to expose, point-by-point, the way *CLF* and *NJ* responded to most objections raised by their critics with various evasive tactics that seemed calculated not to deepen our understanding of the real issues at stake, so much as to discredit their opponents, using the same kind of unhelpful labeling that characterized much of *IDKR*.<sup>10</sup> Since replying in a similar manner would be unlikely to produce meaningful insight, much less agreement, I shall limit this response to four key issues, where more is at stake than just the mundane issue of who misquoted whom, and to what end.

First, *CLF* claims that my position on Kant's two "experiments" in *RBBR* is *rightly* ignored, not only in *IDKR*, but also in *CLF* and *NJ*, because such a position "did not...exist" in 2008 (*FP29* 209). The charitable reader need only glance through *SRP* to see the utter emptiness of such rhetoric.<sup>11</sup> But the chief problem with this (non-)response is that it by-passes the "golden opportunity" mentioned in *SRP* (see *FP29* 176) to delve deeper into the issue of how one's interpretive assumptions regarding the location of the two experiments can have a profound effect on whether Kant's position is compatible with Christianity—a *crucial* matter for most *Faith and Philosophy* readers.

Second, *CLF* and *NJ* both admit that *IDKR* virtually ignores the detailed, holistic interpretation of *RBBR* presented in Part Three of *KCR*. Instead of facing that challenge by actually responding to *KCR* (especially its position on the location of the two experiments—one of *IDKR*'s main themes), they give the excuse that *KCR* is allegedly devoted to the task of confirming my position on the nature and detailed outworking of Kant's architectonic plan; they think this focus on a supposed architectonic undergirding *inevitably*

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generated by *NJ*, usually based either on a partial reading of what is actually written in *SRP*, or on a convenient neglect of material that had to be cut from the longer version of *SRP* in order to meet the required word limit. Although his use of neat logical terms and strategies may seem rhetorically effective, not a single charge turns out to be genuine. For detailed evidence of *NJ*'s abuse of logic, see the url given in note 10, below.

<sup>10</sup> I have prepared a point-by-point response to many of the outrageous claims made by *CLF* and *NJ* in their *FP29* responses to *SRP*. I omit such responses here, in hopes of not raising the vitriol roused by *FP29* to yet higher levels. In some cases, unveiling the deception of *NJ*'s claims requires reference to the full (uncut) version of *SRP*—a document that was the basis for the responses *CLF* and *NJ* presented at the 2009 AAR conference where the symposium took place. That full text (also cited in *FP29* 180n) is available at: [hkbu.academia.edu/StephenPalmquist/Papers/1387435/Cross-Examination\\_of\\_IDKR\\_at\\_AAR](http://hkbu.academia.edu/StephenPalmquist/Papers/1387435/Cross-Examination_of_IDKR_at_AAR). Readers interested in the minute argumentative details that *CLF* and *NJ* ignored should consult that webpage. Alternatively, in most cases the reader may discover such abuses independently, merely by locating the portion(s) of *SRP* that *NJ* refers to, reading them in context, then observing how the alleged "errors" all arose out of *NJ*'s habit of drawing inferences from only *part* of what *SRP* actually wrote. Such a strategy amounts to blowing smoke in the eyes of the reader, and is typically a sign that one's interlocutor is running from the truth rather than facing it. In this case, the strategy is an attempt to obscure what I shall again argue below, that *IDKR*'s take on the location of Kant's second experiment (i.e., his assessment of Christianity) is mistaken, and that this mistake gives rise to a view of Kant that makes his position incompatible with Christianity. Had either *IDKR* author taken up the challenge to *respond* to my view of the second experiment (see note 12), the readers of *FP29* might have been treated to a genuine advance in understanding both *RBBR* and how Christianity continues to need reformation.

<sup>11</sup> This evasive strategy will backfire if it prompts readers of *FP29* to do what *CLF* and *NJ* apparently did not do: actually *read* Part Three of *Kant's Critical Religion* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); hereafter *KCR*. Those who do so should compare the details of its arguments on the exact locations of the two experiments in *RBBR* with those advanced by *IDKR*; they can then decide for themselves which book offers more persuasive textual evidence, as well as witnessing the immense difference this makes to the question of whether or not Kant's position is compatible with Christianity.

*distorts* Kant's intentions. My approach to interpreting Kant is, indeed, openly and unashamedly architectonic. The hermeneutic justification for this is that Kant's approach to his own philosophy was openly and unashamedly architectonic. Attempting to interpret Kant with *no* attention to his architectonic presuppositions is therefore a hermeneutically irresponsible (and ultimately futile) aim, likely to obscure his intended meaning—a tendency of *IDKR* that each of the *FP29* critics identifies. The challenge facing any Kant-scholar who recognizes the need for a good interpretation to be architectonically-tuned is that Kant himself was incredibly vague as to what his own architectonic plan actually *is*. This is why I devoted the entirety of my *earlier* (1993) book, *Kant's System of Perspectives*, to the task of determining the best and clearest way of describing the architectonic substructure of Kant's *Denkungsart*, based on a careful analysis of his texts. That prior attempt to understand Kant's architectonic could legitimately be regarded as not directly relevant to *IDKR*'s concerns, since it said very little about *RBBR*. But *confirming* my understanding of Kant's architectonic plan was not the focus of *KCR*'s task; rather, its focus (at least in Part Three) shared that of *IDKR*: both sought to understand *RBBR* as a coherent argument that makes theologically-relevant claims, worthy of serious consideration. Ignoring *KCR*'s core argument in a work grounded on a comprehensive coverage of the literature was therefore a lacuna the authors should at least acknowledge.

Moreover, *every* (coherent) interpreter adopts *some* architectonic substructure for whatever they are writing—at least, if they wish their readers to understand their intended meaning.<sup>12</sup> Although CLF and NJ deny bringing presuppositions to Kant's text,<sup>13</sup> *IDKR* does have an architectonic of sorts: its courtroom metaphor, together with its explicit use of a “conundrums”-driven approach (cf. *FP29* 170) colors virtually every page. However, this imposes a *foreign* structuring mechanism onto Kant's text—a point noted by several *FP29* critics. This is precisely the sort of interpretive assumption, arising from considerations of what Kant called the “aggregate”,<sup>14</sup> that Kant designed *his* architectonic to oppose. For this reason, CLF and NJ may well have won the battle against the “conundrums”; but in so doing, they have forfeited the war that CLF, at least, had been intent on fighting since I first met him, over 16 years ago. For both *CLF* and *NJ* state clearly and unmistakably that they believe the Kant

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<sup>12</sup> Some writers have revolted against this rational requirement, perhaps best exemplified by the literary movement known as “Language Poetry”, whereby writers intentionally avoid the attempt to convey intentional meaning. This does not disprove my claim that every interpreter presupposes an architectonic plan *in order to make sense*, but confirms it. *IDKR* was not written as poetry, so its writers surely employed some structuring rules.

<sup>13</sup> *CLF* explicitly denies that any “covert interpretive motivations exist in our authorial consciousness” (*FP29* 197); if the emphasis is on “covert”, then this may be true. However, the context suggests that *CLF* thinks he and *NJ* were simply *presenting Kant's arguments as they are*. Anyone versed in hermeneutic theory will easily recognize such a claim to presuppositionless interpretation as a telltale sign that the interpreters' motivations were apparently *covert to themselves*—a far more dangerous stance than any (usually futile) attempt to cover up one's intentions from one's readers. This provides a further rationale for *beginning* one's study (especially of Kant) with an attempt to explicate the underlying architectonic plan.

<sup>14</sup> See *Critique of Pure Reason*, ###. For a discussion of the “aggregate” versus “architectonic” approaches, see my article, “The Unity of Architectonic Reasoning in Kant and *I Ching*”, in *Cultivating Personhood: Kant and Asian Philosophy*, ed. Stephen R. Palmquist (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), pp.811-21.

“defended” in *IDKR* advances positions that *Christians should not affirm*.<sup>15</sup>

This leads directly to my third point: the most surprising feature of *FP29* is not the vitriol (philosophers tend to be quite good at that—perhaps outmatched only by theologians [see note 9]), but the way the participants’ personages kept changing. Di Giovanni, the avowed atheist, labels himself as nevertheless “Christian” (*FP29* 165) and as an *affirmer* of Kant (the alleged Christian atheist). Anderson, the hermeneutically savvy expert in continental thought, is labeled in *CLF* as a Strawsonian hyper-empiricist (*FP29* 202). Michalson, the high-profile “star witness for the prosecution” (*IDKR* 6,82,104), surprises everyone by presenting himself as “making the case *for* Kant, not as the one prosecuting him” (*FP29* 183). And as we have seen, the surprise of all surprises is that a scholar who previously seemed poised to receive the prestigious FAIK Award (for being the “Foremost Affirmative Interpreter of Kant”!) has joined hands with his theologically-trained former student to announce that the Kant they have “defended” is *not*, in their estimation, healthy medicine for Christians to ingest after all (see note 16, above). *IDKR*, they now confess in unison, was an intellectual exercise, a show of muscle-flexing as it were, to demonstrate how skilled the authors are at making sense out of a text full of problems that no previous interpreter had solved—nothing less, nothing more—and certainly *not* an effort to reform the Christian Church along Kantian lines!

This brings me to my final point. In reading *NJ*’s interesting account of what an authentic Christian is (*FP29* 225-8), and his equally perplexing laments over the fact that Kant never goes quite far enough to earn that label, I repeatedly found myself wondering: *where is the incompatibility here?* Using the rhetorical style readers of *IDKR* will be all too familiar with, *NJ* claims that, although many of Kant’s ideas in *RBBR* “look remarkably Christian”, this appearance is actually “deceiving” (*FP29* 225). But when *NJ* defends this claim, we discover it is merely because Kant adopted a *philosophical* stance; Kant never claimed to be doing theology *as such*, yet this is apparently what Kant would have to do in order for his position to be consistent with Christianity, according to *NJ*. To illustrate this, consider *NJ*’s account of the Christian Church, as “an organism that is mystically united with Christ as his body” and “is grounded not in utility, but in the Incarnation” (*FP29* 227). Claiming that Kant’s arguments for the *necessity* of an “invisible church” that manifests itself in human history is a theory “grounded...in utility” is a complete misrepresentation of Kant’s position, ignoring the fact that Kant himself elsewhere refers to his philosophical conception of this invisible body as a “*corpus mysticum*”!<sup>16</sup> The fault here (and in each of *NJ*’s comparisons of Kant’s position with his own position as a Christian theologian) is with *NJ*’s inadequate understanding of Kant’s architectonic, whereby two quite different perspectives can be *equally valid*, even though they make different claims. *NJ* rightly acknowledges the “fundamental difference between the

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<sup>15</sup> *CLF* says (*FP29* 195; cf. 225-8): “Jacobs, in his response to follow, explains in some detail the general incompatibility of Kant’s philosophy with Christianity. I agree with his position, and would direct the attention of interested readers there.”

<sup>16</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason*, A###/B###.

respective starting points between Kant and” traditional Christian theology (*FP29* 227), but fails to recognize that Kant’s whole point was to present a *philosophical standpoint* that can dovetail nicely with the theological (as Kant argues in *RBBR*’s first edition Preface)—not one that merely restates the standpoint of “a confessional Christian” (*FP29* 225). *NJ*’s detailed explanation of why Kant’s position is incompatible with (genuine) Christianity amounts to little more than a biblical theologian’s complaint that Kant is a philosophical theologian.

The whole saga culminating in the publication of *FP29* reminds me of the television game show, “To Tell the Truth” (1956-2002), where a panel tries to guess which of several contestants is the *real* person who possesses a previously announced skill, occupation, etc. After all is said and done, the imposters are revealed when the person who *truly is* what the others have only professed to be is—*politely!*—asked to (“please”) stand up. With that metaphor in mind, let me close these reflections by expanding slightly on *SRP*’s claim that “in trying to make [Kant’s] claims ‘coherent,’ [CLF and NJ] end up portraying *RBBR* in a manner that renders his position unworthy of assent, at least for Christians” (*FP29* 180). Now that the authors of *IDKR* have themselves admitted that this assessment of their interpretation is *correct*, inasmuch as even *they* do not regard their take on Kant as presenting a view of religion that is worthy of being affirmed by Christians, my main point in drawing that conclusion in *SRP* can be restated more precisely: *IDKR* has not demonstrated that *Kant’s position* is inconsistent with basic Christian principles, but only that *if one interprets his second experiment* in the strange way recommended in *IDKR*, as twisted by a foreign architectonic whose purpose—as we only discover in *FP29*—may have been *calculated* to achieve a subversive aim, does Kant’s position appear to be *logically plausible*, yet end up being *all the more dangerous* to Christianity for that very reason.<sup>17</sup>

With the publication of the *FP29* symposium papers, the situation has come full circle. To paraphrase Heraclitus: “what goes around, comes around.” The chief proponent of the claim that there is a newly developing “movement” of “affirmative” Kant interpretation has come out of the closet and confessed that his Kant is *not*, in fact, worthy of affirmation by Christians. Where does that leave the 1989 “manifesto” that appeared in these pages 23 years ago? If it leaves me standing alone, so be it. Fortunately, neither the Gospel nor the core message of *RBBR* is about joining a new movement. Anyone who, after reading *FP29*, persists in thinking that Kant has valid insights that can serve to reform the current state of Christianity, therefore, need not worry—even if all the other contributors to *KNPR* (for example) were to remain seated with CLF and NJ, when the altar call is given in the Kantian Christian church.

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<sup>17</sup> For the latest in my various attempts to counteract this all-too-traditional view of the alleged incompatibility of Kant and Christianity, see “Could Kant’s Jesus Be God?”, *International Philosophical Quarterly* 52.4 (December 2012). *NJ* would surely dismiss the text-based analysis in that paper, given that *IDKR* already “demonstrates” that Kant’s references to the “prototype” in the relevant passage of *RBBR* are not about Jesus, but appeal to “pure cognition” of a Platonic Ideal! Fortunately, Anderson’s response (*FP29* 151f) forcefully explains why that position simply cannot be Kant’s, thus paving the way for a rich account of Kantian Christology—without the non-Christian trappings that *IDKR* reads into Kant’s text.