

Theodicy and Honesty

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ENG Abstract: This study examines Immanuel Kant's 1791 essay on theodicy as a legal proceeding before the "court of reason," where divine justice is assessed through rational inquiry rather than doctrinal authority. It explores the political context of the essay, Kant's interpretation of nature, and the role of the Book of Job as a model of sincere religious faith. The study also considers the duties of theologians and clergy and reflects on the essay's continuing relevance for issues related to religion, morality, and the problem of evil.

Keywords: Immanuel Kant; Theodicy; Reason; Book of Job; Religious sincerity; Theology and clergy.

Summary: 1. Theodicy as a legal proceeding before the court of reason 2. The political background of Kant's 1791 essay. 3. Theodicy as an interpretation of nature (doctrinal or authoritative). 4. The book of Job. 5. Religious conviction and sincerity. 6. The official obligations of theologians and clergy. 7. The meaning of the 1791 theodicy essay for us. Bibliography.

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In the September 1791 issue of Johann Erich Biester's journal *Berlin Monthly*, Kant published a curious essay titled "On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy" (MpVT 8: 253-271). The present anthology was motivated, I believe, by the thought that the topic of theodicy might be timely in light of the recent (and ongoing) Covid-19 pandemic, and perhaps also the political upheavals that have accompanied it. But it is not clear how these events might make it timely to reflect on Kant's 1791 essay. I've heard it suggested that the Covid-19 pandemic gives us occasion to question God's beneficence and this, in turn, might draw attention to Kant's 1791 essay on theodicy. But that suggestion misunderstands the essay and Kant's aims in writing it.

The Berlin Monthly is the same journal in which Kant was soon to publish another essay on a topic related to religion, namely the essay on the radical propensity to evil in human nature that was eventually to become the First Part of *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1794). We know, in fact, that Kant originally intended to present his thoughts on religion in a series of essays in Biester's journal, but was forced to change his plan when the Berlin censors rejected the essay that was to become the Second Part of the *Religion*. Kant then combined the four parts of the *Religion* into a single book and appealed to the theological faculty at the University of Königsberg to decide whether that book fell under the purview of a theological or a philosophical faculty. When he got the ruling he desired—that his book was philosophical rather than theological—he proceeded to publish it under the auspices of the philosophical faculty at the University of Jena in the Duchy of Saxe-Weimar, thus eluding the authority of the Prussian censors. The Berlin authorities were outraged by what they saw as Kant's devious circumvention of their authority, which led to the notorious letter of reproof written to Kant by culture minister J. C. Wöllner in the name of King Friedrich Wilhelm II.

1. Theodicy as a legal proceeding before the court of reason

Was the 1791 essay on theodicy intended as part of Kant's writings on religion which eventually led to the *Religion* of 1793-1794? There is no sign that it was, except the loose thematic continuity of the topic. The essay is curious in another way. It is a rather blunt critique of a set of arguments purporting to defend God's goodness against a set of objections arising from the evils present in the world. But Kant's point is not to support indictments of God's goodness based on evil in the world. To think so would get Kant's position entirely wrong. A parallel set of reflections—objections against God's holiness, benevolence and justice—had been given a few years earlier in Kant's *Lectures On the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, V-Phil-Th/Pölitiz 28:1071-1082, and there Kant seems to be defending divine holiness, benevolence, and justice against the objections. So did Kant change his mind about theodicy between 1783 (when we suppose these lectures were given) and 1790, when he wrote the essay for Biester's journal? I don't think so. Closer inspection of the two discussions reveals some important differences between them. The failed attempts at theodicy considered in the 1791 essay focus on God's agency in relation to evils in the world, whereas the discussion in the lectures

focuses attention on *human* agency: the ways we humans might be responsible for the evils from which we suffer, or the ways our reflections on these evils might contribute to our efforts at moral improvement or even contribute to our own happiness.

Another striking difference is that in the lectures, Kant approaches the three objections not like the theodist, such as Leibniz, who (he says) “sought to do away with them entirely,” but instead sees them as occasions for “testing our powers on them” (V-Phil-Th/Pöhlitz 28:1076). That suggests that it is human reason rather than God that should be put on trial. It does not defend God, but criticizes the presumptuousness of the human discontent that even raises the issue. In this way it parallels Kant’s treatment of human discontent with the world which is discussed in his 1786 *Conjectural Beginning of Human History* (MAM 8:120-123). In the 1791 essay, by contrast, God is the accused, and the theodist is an advocate (a defense attorney) defending the Deity in a case brought before the tribunal of human reason. Kant begins the essay by noting that the task pretentiously described as “defending God’s cause” might in fact turn out to be no more than defending the presumptions of a human reason that fails to acknowledge its own limitations (MpVT 8:255). The theodist is therefore prevented by his own choice from seeking to dismiss the case “through a decree of the incompetence of the tribunal (*exceptio fori*)” (MpVT 8:255). A perceptive reader of Kant’s essay might well suspect that precisely such a dismissal would be Kant’s own way of dealing with the charges brought against divine wisdom when these are conceived as a quasi-criminal indictment brought against God. In the spirit of a critique of reason, Kant would see the issue not as whether God can be proven guilty or innocent of the charges brought against him in the court of reason, but whether human reason is not overstepping its proper authority in presuming to consider this case. In the lectures, a close look at Kant’s resolution of the objections against God’s holiness, benevolence, and justice reveals that the aim is not so much to offer a defense of God against the objections as it is to look at them as displaying our human limitations, weaknesses, and moral flaws, and how we humans might combat the evils for which we are responsible.

In the trial set up in the 1791 essay, the various arguments for the defense are, one by one, quickly dismissed by Kant, and even treated with a certain contempt. They are either transparently sophistical or appeal with obvious illegitimacy to our human ignorance and incapacity as if these examples of *ignoratio elenchi* could be relevant to the legal proceeding. Although the title of the essay, and its introduction of the theme of theodicy, might seem to make these defenses the focus of discussion, to do that would be to make the center of attention in the essay a set of arguments that are not really taken seriously. This confirms the essay’s title, portraying the supposed defense of God as a failure, but also suggesting that the entire legal proceeding is a farce, a miscarriage of justice, perhaps even a kind of kangaroo court. This ought to make us wonder what Kant’s real aim could have been in writing so apparently pointless an essay. But I think the political and religious context gives us a strong clue as to the essay’s real purpose, and it is this that I intend to follow up. Moreover, the real point Kant is making does have quite direct relevance at least to our current situation in the United States.

2. The political background of Kant’s 1791 essay

In 1740, the death of King Friedrich Wilhelm I of Prussia brought to power his son, Friedrich II (Frederick the Great). The new king was, like his father, a military despot. There is much in his reign that might be criticized. But in matters of religion, Frederick was a supporter of Enlightenment. He welcomed back to the University of Halle Christian Wolff, whom his father had exiled at the behest of Pietists in his court. Under Frederick’s 46-year reign, there flourished in Prussia a wide variety of theological approaches both in academia and in the clergy of the established Lutheran church. Kant’s academic career began under the reign of Frederick, and his relative liberalism in academic and religious matters gave Kant a generally favorable attitude toward Frederick—in sharp contrast, for example, to the negative attitude of Kant’s brilliant but eccentric and religiously inclined friend Hamann.

The death of Frederick in 1786 brought to the throne his nephew Friedrich Wilhelm II, who earned the nickname *Der dicke Luderjahn* (“the fat good-for-nothing”) owing to his many sensual indulgences and indiscretions with numerous mistresses. (*Luderjahn* has since been adopted as the name of a dark brew associated with a Potsdam brewery, ironically celebrating the depravity and debauchery of the deplorables who drink it.) Early in the new king’s reign, things went relatively well for Kant, who in 1789 even became the best paid academic in the Prussian university system. In religious matters, however, Friedrich Wilhelm II was not merely conservative but a religious fanatic, devoted to the Rosicrucian society and influenced by the *Klerikat* movement of the Königsberg figure J. A. Starck. In place of Baron Zedlitz (to whom Kant had dedicated the *Critique of Pure Reason*), Friedrich Wilhelm appointed as culture minister Johann Christoph Wöllner, whom Frederick the Great had described as a “deceitful, scheming parson.”

It should be noted that some of the effects of Wöllner’s new regime in religious matters were liberalizing. Under the banner of increased encouragement of religion, he promoted toleration of Jews and of some Protestant Christian sects such as the Herrnhuter. But this toleration was accompanied by harsh actions against those in the established Lutheran church who dared to deviate from orthodoxy. In 1788, Wöllner issued a new censorship edict covering both clergy and academics whose stated aim was to oppose the “unbridled liberty” of those who spread unorthodox teachings from both pulpits and academic lecterns “under the much-abused name of ‘enlightenment.’” Preachers and academics who deviated from the creed of the Lutheran church were to be peremptorily dismissed. Doubtful clergymen were assigned to preach sermons on texts likely to test them (for example, miracle stories) and their sermons were attended and reported on by state informants.

Among the teachings under attack were those of biblical scholars of the “neologist” movement of J. S. Semler, H.S. Reimarus, and others who applied critical historical methods to the study of the Bible, often with skeptical consequences regarding the literal truth and historical accuracy of scripture, and advocating deliberately non-literal ways of interpreting the Bible. Neologists in Prussian academia who were targeted included J. A. Nösselt in Halle and Kant’s Königsberg colleague J. G. Hasse. Hasse was forced to choose between losing his professorship and recanting his teachings. When he did the latter, it destroyed his academic reputation. Kant’s fame by this time was such that he was unlikely to be treated so harshly. But in the end, after the publication of the *Religion*, Kant became the most famous victim of Wöllner’s repressions.

Kant’s own views about how scripture and religious doctrine should be read are relevant here, since they were very much in line with the liberal enlightenment ways of thinking that Wöllner was trying to extinguish. Kant was fundamentally opposed to literalism in matters of religious doctrines. “All our cognition of God is merely symbolic” (KU 5:353). In Kant’s view, understanding claims about God without appreciating their symbolic import leads to “anthropomorphism,” “idolatry,” and a spirit of slavish groveling that Kant finds all too common in popular religious culture (KpV 5:131, 136, KU 5:353, RGV 6:142, 168, V-Phil-Th/Pölitiz 28:1046). The true religious power of scripture depends on its being understood symbolically and interpreted in practical (that is, moral) terms. This is a basic proposition repeated often in the *Religion* (RGV 6:110n, 111, 136, 171, 176). It was clear from the start, therefore, that Kant was on a collision course with the policies favored by Friedrich Wilhelm II and his ministers.

Kant’s method of publishing *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, eluding the Prussian censorship through its acceptance by the philosophical faculty of the university of Jena in the Grand Duchy of Saxe-Weimar, so enraged the Prussian censorship that in October 1794 Kant was forbidden by Wöllner in the King’s name to teach or write anything further on religious subjects. Kant’s fame was such that he might very well have been able to ignore or defy this royal command with impunity, as some of his friends urged him to do. Kant, however, had already decided on his course of action. As early as 1791 Kant had learned from his student Kiesewetter, a royal tutor in Berlin, what action was being contemplated against him, and he had already decided to obey the royal prohibition on his teaching and writing about religion. In response to Wöllner, he presented a strongly worded defense of his actions, denying the accusation that his project had been not to appraise or disparage the Christian religion, but on the contrary only to appraise and judge the philosophical project of a religion within the boundaries of mere reason. Nevertheless, while declaring himself wholly innocent of the charges brought against him, Kant agreed to obey Friedrich Wilhelm’s royal command “as your majesty’s most obedient subject” (SF 7:10).

Kant’s reasons for choosing to obey were both principled and prudential. In his essay on theory and practice (1793), Kant argued that the subject of a legitimate ruler must obey even unjust commands, so long as this obedience does not violate the subject’s own moral conscience or “inner morality” (TP 8:297-306; cf. MS 6:371). Though he judged Frederick Wilhelm’s command to be unjust, Kant therefore held himself to be bound to obey it. But Kant also wrote the following to his publisher Biester when he submitted to him the 1794 essay *The End of All Things*: “Life is short, especially what is left to one who has already lived seventy years; what is to be found is a corner of the earth in which to bring it to an end free of cares” (Br 10:10-11).

This was not to be the end of the matter, however. In July 1797, Friedrich Wilhelm II died. And Wöllner, whose policies had earned him enemies everywhere, was soon to be replaced, and he died in poverty. Even before that he had fallen into disfavor with the ungrateful, capricious king he had tried so hard to serve. With Wöllner out of the way, Kant now interpreted the obligation of his promise of obedience to have expired along with the royal promises, and so he once again did write on matters of religion in the *Conflict of the Faculties* (1798), offering a rigorous and spirited defense of his own conduct in publishing the *Religion*, as well as defending his distinction between a properly philosophical treatment of religion within the boundaries of mere reason and a revealed or biblical theology over which alone the Prussian state could have the authority to regulate what might be written or taught (SF 7: 29-48).

3. Theodicy as an interpretation of nature (doctrinal or authoritative)

This later history, however, still lay eight years in the future when Kant wrote his 1791 essay on theodicy. But by 1790 Kant had obviously formed his views on Wöllner’s religious edicts, and it seems clear that it was the chief purpose of this essay to give expression to them. The topic of the essay, therefore, is not really theodicy at all, at least in the sense of the term with which the essay began: that is, a trial of God before the court of human reason. Kant rejects the entire issue of theodicy in that sense, both because he dismisses as sophistical the arguments offered for the defense and because he questions the competence of human reason to serve as judge in such an imagined trial. Theodicy in this sense is in this essay only a pretext for discussing his real topic, which is that of sincerity or honesty in the public expression of one’s convictions.

Immediately after dismissing the failed attempts to defend God in a supposed trial before the court of human reason, Kant then turns to a new sense of the term “theodicy,” which he finds more acceptable: “All theodicy should truly be an interpretation of nature, insofar as God announces his will through it” (MpVT 8:264). He then distinguishes two species of such interpretation: *doctrinal* or *authentic*. The former is “a rational inference from utterances of which the lawgiver has made use,” while the latter is “made by the lawgiver himself.” Kant then apparently dismisses “doctrinal” interpretation of nature on the ground that “as a divine interpretation of his will’s purposes... the world is often a closed book for us, and every time we look to extract from it God’s *final aim* (which is always moral).” *Doctrinal* theodicy, therefore, can conclude only that God’s purposes are moral. And as for *authentic* theodicy, the only possible one would have to be based on our own

practical reason (MpVT 8:264). We should note that this agrees completely with the way we have seen that Kant handled these issues in his lectures, when they considered objections based on the evil in the world. There, as we have already observed, Kant's aim was not to defend God's goodness, after the manner of the arguments he has dismissed with contempt in the 1791 essay, but instead to look at the evils in the world as occasions for testing the limits of our rational powers and opportunities for combating the evils around us that can be imputed to our own human imperfections.

4. The book of Job

At this point, however, Kant introduces yet another possible way in which we might introduce an *authentic* interpretation of the world as an expression of the divine will. This we could do if we are willing to entertain the possibility that Jewish and Christian holy scriptures are revelations of God's will. "Now I find such an authentic interpretation expressed allegorically in an ancient holy book"—namely, the book of Job (MpVT 8:264). Kant then focuses on the dialogue between Job and his friends, when they consider, and dispute about, the trials and sufferings to which Job has been subjected. Job's friends, Kant says, declare themselves for "the system that explains all evils in the world from God's *justice*," and therefore conclude a priori that Job must be guilty of sins for which he is being punished, even though they can name none of these. Job, on the contrary, declares that his conscience has nothing with which to reproach him, and thus "declares himself for the system of *unconditional divine decision*. 'He has decided,' Job says. 'He does as he wills' (Job 23:13)" (MpVT 8:265).

To Kant, the lesson to be drawn from this dialogue, and even from the book of Job as a whole, lies in a simple contrast: Job is honest in his beliefs and sincere in his declarations, whereas his friends are not: "Job speaks as he thinks, and with the courage he, as well as every human being in his position, can well afford; his friends, on the contrary, speak as if they were being listened to by the mighty one, over whose cause they are passing judgment, and as if gaining his favor through their judgment were closer to their heart than the truth" (MpVT 8:265). The moral Kant draws from the book of Job is therefore simple: "Only sincerity of heart and...honesty in openly admitting one's doubts; repugnance to pretending conviction where one feels none, especially before God (where this trick is pointless enough)—these are the attributes which, in the person of Job, have decided the preeminence of the honest man over the religious flatterer in the divine verdict" (MpVT 8:267).

This was not the first time Kant had appealed to the book of Job in the same spirit. When approached by J. C. Lavater, he had replied in a letter of 1775:

You ask for my opinion of your discussion of faith and prayer. Do you realize whom you are asking? A man who believes that, in the final moment only the purest candor concerning our most hidden inner convictions can stand the test and who, like Job, takes it to be a sin to flatter God and make inner confessions, perhaps forced out by fear, that fail to agree with what we freely think. (Br 10:176)

5. Religious conviction and sincerity

The application of these thoughts to the situation of Prussian clergy and academics living under Wöllner's edicts is all too clear. Neologists in the theological faculty of universities, and liberal-minded clergy preaching in Lutheran pulpits, were being compelled to conceal their own sincerely held convictions and profess a set of doctrines they had come to regard as only a set of outdated superstitions. When they spoke in church or in the universities, they were being put in a position rather like Job's friends, being overheard not by God but by state informants and threatened with deprivation of their professions if they did not conform their public pronouncements to a set of doctrines they could not bring themselves honestly to believe.

Kant's position here anticipates what he says about the use of catechisms and creeds in religion. About the catechism Kant was forced to memorize as a student at the Collegium Fredericianum, he would later write: "In childhood we knew it by heart to the last detail and believed we understood it, but the older and more reflective we become, the less we understand of it, and hence we would deserve to be sent back to school, if only we could find there someone (other than ourselves) who understood it any better" (Ak 8:323).¹ The Fourth Part of the *Religion* ends with a denunciation of the ecclesiastical institution of creeds and the requirement that they be recited as a condition of membership in a religious community (RGV 6:185-190). The effect of being told (or telling ourselves) what we must believe is never to alter or to strengthen our sincere beliefs. At first it constrains the outer profession the outward expression of what we profess to believe, but later on it can warp and corrupt all our innermost thoughts and corrode, debase and rot our intellect itself. When we recite a creed, we dare not consider the grounds for believing it, for fear of finding them false or insufficient. We dare not even ask ourselves the meaning of what we profess to believe, because we might discover that we cannot honestly accept it. Our best (even our only) means of avoiding the dreaded crime of unbelief is simply to repeat the verbal formulas without even thinking about what they mean, even if this entails that we can't truly believe anything—least of all the creed we must so ardently profess to believe. Kant's essay therefore ends with a Concluding Remark whose subject is "sincerity" (*Aufrichtigkeit*) (MpVT 8:267-271). And this has all along been Kant's sole aim in writing the 1791 essay.

But if we are not cautious, sincerity is a concept itself easily corrupted or even easily ridiculed. If you make yourself the sole and infallible judge of what you sincerely think, feel, or believe, then you can make yourself immune to all criticism no matter what you do. You can be sincere about anything whatsoever and it

¹ This passage is from "Etwas über den Einfluß des Mondes auf die Witterung" (1794), pp. 315-324.

becomes quite easy to combine sincerity with the most patent and contemptible dishonesty. Sartre identifies the champion of sincerity with the one who requires you to be all and only what your past actions have made of you (in this same champion's verdict, from which there can be no appeal). So understood, sincerity represents a flight from your freedom and has precisely the same structure as bad faith (Sartre, 1943, pp. 106-112).

Kant is careful, however, about what he means by sincerity. It represents not merely a relation between what you say and what you are, but a more complicated relation: between what you declare or confess (to yourself or to another) and what you are immediately aware of confessing before your own conscience. Kant thinks any confession or declaration of the latter sort can be false (for we can always be mistaken in what we believe). But when I compare what I am immediately aware of thinking with what I declare or confess (whether to myself or to another) the question always arises whether before my own conscience I am being *truthful* or *lying* (again, whether to another or to myself). The judgment of conscience, Kant holds, is like a court of last instance—not in regard to the *truth* of what I think (whether its content is true or false), but to the *truthfulness* of my declaration (as regards its formal conscientiousness) (MpVT 8:268; cf. R 6:185-190).

What Kant means by “sincerity” is this truthfulness before the judgment of my own conscience. When I profess a belief outwardly to others without this truthfulness before my own conscience, then I *lie*—in a moral sense: that is, I violate a duty to myself (MS 6:429-431). And I lie equally if I declare to myself that I believe something while before my conscience I am aware of doubting what I declare myself to believe. Kant thinks my conscience can approve a “doubting faith” (*Zweifelglaube*) (KU 5:472), if that is what I truly hold. But then I must sincerely avow this (whether to myself or others) for what it is. When an authority, such as a church, in requiring assent to a creed or catechism, or the Prussian state, in what it makes a citizen, a clergyman or an academic teach, compels an individual to make declarations that are in this sense not sincere, then it forces the person to *lie* in a moral sense. Kant clearly thinks that there is something wrong when an authority compels as part of a person's professional life that they should lie. The main purpose of Kant's 1791 essay on theodicy is to make this point, and to protest against the royal edict Wöllner and his subordinates were forcing on academics, clergy, and the citizens of Prussia.

6. The official obligations of theologians and clergy

It might not seem that Kant himself is consistent in his views about this matter. In his essay *What is Enlightenment?* Kant distinguishes “private” communications, whose content may be regulated by the state, from “public” communication before an open forum, which the state should not constrain in any way. The professional communications carried out by clergy, and even by academics who are part of the theological (as distinct from the philosophical) faculty of a university, would seem to be “private” in this sense, and hence subject to regulation in Kant's view. *What is Enlightenment?* was written before the death of Frederick the Great, when the Prussian state and the established Lutheran church were tolerant of much free thinking that Friedrich Wilhelm II and Wöllner were not. But the state, and the established Lutheran church, according to Kantian doctrine, seems within its right in telling professors of theology as well as parish clergy, what they may and may not teach as part of their professional lives. If the censors under Friedrich Wilhelm II require them to choose between teaching doctrines in which they cannot sincerely believe and relinquishing their academic or clerical vocation, then Kant might seem committed to agreeing with the authorities. Some scholars will no doubt see here a further reason for irony and condescension.

They would, however, be just as wrong as they were before. For if we look carefully at what Kant says in *What is Enlightenment?* we can't help noticing that he accepts no such commitment. He describes the “private” communications of an official of the state or the church, and the restrictions to which they are subject, as follows:

As a scholar he has complete freedom and is even called upon to communicate to the public all his carefully examined and well-intentioned thoughts about what is erroneous in [the church's] creed, and his suggestions for a better arrangement of the religious and ecclesiastical body. And there is nothing in this that could be laid as a burden on his conscience. But as to what he teaches in consequence of his office, he represents as something with respect to which he does not have the power to teach as he thinks best...He will say: Our church teaches this or that; here are the arguments it uses. He then extracts all practical uses for his congregation from precepts to which he would not subscribe with full conviction but which he can undertake to deliver because it is still not altogether impossible that truth is concealed in them, and there is at least nothing contrary to inner religion present in them. For if he had found the latter in them, then he could not in good conscience hold his office; he would have to resign from it. (WA 8:38)

On Kant's account, a clergyman should distinguish between what he says as a representative of the church he serves and what he says when declaring his own personal convictions. The two may or may not coincide, but if they diverge, he tells no lies when he speaks as a representative of his church, as long as he makes no attempt to pretend he is doing anything else. And he may narrow or close the gap between the two by offering interpretations of church doctrine that he accepts as truths of practical value. In Kant's view, it would be entirely possible for such a clergyman to fulfill his duties while at the same time remaining honest both with himself and with his ecclesiastical superiors and his parishioners.

Clearly his situation becomes more difficult if Wöllner or his representatives demand clergy to swear an oath binding him to declare literal adherence to credal formulas and subject them to inquisitions designed to ensure that they “provide no ground for questioning their inner adherence to the creed they are employed to

teach” (quoted in Epstein, p. 144). Enforcement of such demands is obviously what Kant is protesting in the 1791 theodicy essay, and which he would continue to protest in the *Religion* (RGV 6: 185-190) and in *The End of All Things* (EAD 8:336-339). Kant’s point is that this policy inevitably turns people into *liars*. It renders them unable even to be sure to what they were binding themselves by oath, or in the end what they were claiming to believe—even before their own minds and consciences.

7. The meaning of the 1791 theodicy essay for us

It remains for me to ask what Kant’s 1791 essay might have to teach us today, over two centuries later. It may be difficult for many of us to put ourselves in the place of Kant or the academics and clergy on whose professional and personal predicament he is reflecting. We may reject Prussia’s repressive religious policies, and even the idea of an established church, but find it difficult to sympathize with someone living under that regime who, like Kant, used legal devices to evade the religious censorship at least up to a point. Both the *Religion* and *The End of All Things* were published in Saxe-Weimar, beyond Prussian authority, although books and journals published there could legally be sold in Prussia. In the literature on Kant there are sometimes snide references to Kant’s conduct in this matter as “at least technically legal” or even as “guileful” and dishonest. I have to wonder how these scholars honestly think Kant should have behaved. Should he have simply complied submissively with the Prussian censorship without making use of the legal recourse he used to defy and evade it as far as he could? Or should he have resisted in a more dramatic way that would have meant that he would lose his academic position or even die in prison? I can see a case for saying—though I would strongly disagree—that Kant should have chosen some path of heroic martyrdom for the cause of enlightenment: to my mind, that would have been foolish and would not have served the cause of enlightenment. But I see no case at all for saying he should have knuckled under to pious repression and tyranny. That would have been the path only of cowardice and dishonor. If we try to put ourselves in the shoes of Kant and the other academics and clergy he was thinking about, I think our rather presumptuous sense of entitlement to condescend to him should quickly evaporate. We should be ashamed of our temptation to judge or condemn.

This should impress us even more when we appreciate the obvious parallel with the present situation of many politicians in the United States. For here is where I think the 1791 theodicy essay has something definite to teach us. Our forty-fifth president (2017-21) was impeached twice. The first time it was for attempting to use appropriations from congress to blackmail a vulnerable foreign leader into creating the bogus appearance of an investigation into illicit dealings with the former president’s principal domestic political rival. Then after that same rival had defeated him in the free and fair election of 2020, he tried various ploys, some legal and some illegal, to overturn the results of the election, based on patently false claims that the election was rigged or fraudulent. Such claims were litigated in dozens of lawsuits and universally shown to be meritless or even frivolous. The defeated former president then incited a violent insurrection against congress as it met to certify the election’s results. For this direct attack on the rule of law he was impeached a second time. The second impeachment resulted in a majority of the senate voting to convict, but neither impeachment resulted in the two-thirds majority needed to remove him from office. Of the seven senators from his party who voted to convict, only one was to face the voters in the next election. And when it came time for congress to certify the election of the new president, eight senators and 139 house members from the defeated former president’s party voted not to do so. Privately, many from the defeated former president’s party have admitted they did not believe the party’s baseless claims that the results of the election were illegitimate. But when asked publicly about it, many are still reluctant to declare our current president, or even our democratic republic itself legitimate. When asked directly whether they think the current president was legitimately elected, most of them respond with a clearly dishonest dodge, saying only: He is the president.” All too few from the party even now will say publicly what everyone knows to be true, for fear of reprisals from the party’s other members and its electoral base. Theirs is the path of shame, disgrace, and dishonor.

Those members of the defeated former president’s party who have dared to defend the obvious in public were either forced to withdraw from politics or else they were defeated in primary challenges. Even after all claims that the election of 2020 was “stolen” had been thoroughly discredited, these claims were then propped up by fantastic conspiracy theories to which members of the party were required to subscribe despite their delusional nature. These theories then became in effect articles of religious faith which any member of that party must confess or else face ostracism and certain electoral defeat. The fact that a demented religious fanaticism was in many places already part of the party’s popular culture only made this aspect of the situation easier for the party to accept. And shameless hate-driven toxic delusion is where that party’s mainstream still is. Disappointment in the elections of 2022 only hardened their resolve to drive the entire nation, as far as possible, over the cliff in order to exact revenge. When one of the two major parties in the United States is afflicted with this collective dementia, it becomes immediately a serious question whether a democratic republic can long survive. And the seizure of power by this despicable political movement in 2024 turns back the historical clock in a way that makes us a nation in steep decline: no longer a free society, no longer the constitutional republic Franklin doubted we could keep -- poorer, sicker, more stupid, more ignorant, more dishonest, more unjust, more violent, more cruel. It remains to be seen how long we are doomed to suffer this fate and whether we can ever emerge from it.

There are, therefore, self-evident and painful parallels between the dishonesty forced on members of our tyrannical ruling party by its members and its political base and the dishonesty forced on academics and clergy in Prussia over religious questions under the reign of Friedrich Wilhelm II. In both cases, people were forced publicly to confess belief in patent falsehoods or else face deprivation of their professions and

livelihoods. In both these cases, naked political power was used to force people to become liars, at least in public, and if possible also liars to themselves. Another plain parallel is this: In both cases, political power was used in a rather desperate attempt to arrest or reverse changes in people's beliefs and practices that were due to cultural changes that political forces by themselves could not control. The result in both cases was repression exercised against a more educated part of a population that was favored by a less educated but politically more powerful part which feared cultural change. In such a situation, it is not hard to understand how those having political authority might be reduced to having to force people to lie in pursuit of their aims.

Thus there is after all something we can learn from Kant's writings that express resistance to the policies of Wöllner under Friedrich Wilhelm II. There are clear parallels between our situation and that of Prussia in the late eighteenth Century. These parallels become ever closer as our country degenerates into a totalitarian dictatorship under a corrupt and demented autocrat and a vile political party whose only remaining principles are mendacity, political cowardice and religious hypocrisy. Our struggle, in fact, can be viewed as merely a continuation of social and political conflicts inherited from Kant's century.

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