

The Influence of Kant on Christian Theology: A Debate About Human Dignity and Christian Personalism

A Response to
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Introduction

Christian theology is a synthesis of revelation and reason. It seeks to combine the revealed Word of God with knowledge derived from unassisted human reason, especially from philosophy and science. Since its inception two thousand years ago, Christian theology has gone through several distinct phases by allying itself with different schools of philosophy.

In the early church, theologians equated reason with Greek philosophy, specifically with Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy. Hence, the theology of the early church fathers (Athanasius, Saint Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa) could be called “Platonic Christianity.” It predominated until about the twelfth century when the works of Aristotle were rediscovered in the West and incorporated into Christian theology. The influence of Aristotle’s works led to a new school of theology known as medieval Scholasticism that could be characterized as “Aristotelian Christianity.” Its leading figures (Albert the Great, Saint Thomas Aquinas, as well as the later Neoscholastics) predominated until about the seventeenth century when the Protestant Reformation and modern currents of philosophy led many theologians to look for alternatives to Scholasticism. The search has continued with various attempts to combine Christian revelation with the philosophies of Descartes, Locke, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Husserl, Scheler, Whitehead, Bergson, and Heidegger. While recognizing that modern Christian theology has many strands, I argue in my book *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy* and in an edited volume, *In Defense of Human Dignity*,

that the most influential modern philosopher on Christian theology is Immanuel Kant.¹ I therefore claim that the best description of modern theology is “Kantian Christianity.”

Generalizations, of course, are simplifications and are always in danger of becoming oversimplifications, as Professor Jeffrey forcefully reminds us. They are still useful, however, in giving us a general orientation. We gain insight into how Christianity has changed by seeing it divided into three great periods: (1) the Platonic Christianity of the church fathers, (2) the Aristotelian Christianity of the Middle Ages, and (3) the Kantian Christianity of the modern era. This division does not mean that Platonic and Aristotelian Christianity (Augustinianism and Thomism) do not persist into the twenty-first century. It does mean that they have been modified by incorporating new elements, mainly, I claim, from Kantian philosophy. Whether or not this claim is sound is the point that Professor Jeffrey and I are debating in order to shed light on the current state of Christian theology and its implications for politics and ethics.

Christian Personalism and Kantian Ethics

Let me begin by stating as precisely as possible the disagreement between Professor Jeffrey and me. We both acknowledge that there is something new about Christian theology in the modern age and that the label most commonly used for the new school is “Christian personalism.” This label refers to the “human person,” which modern theologians present as a new way of talking about man or human nature—a new Christian anthropology—that builds upon and expands older notions.

Traditional Christian anthropology viewed man as a type of substance—a created being with a specific nature that is spiritual, rational, and social. In this view, man has a spiritual nature made in the image of God with an eternal destiny, a rational nature with intellect and free will as well as an inherited propensity to sin, and a social nature directed to family and political life that achieves its perfection in charity or love. While retaining many of these features, Christian personalism adds new dimensions to Christian anthropology—a greater awareness of man as a “subject” or possessor of subjective consciousness; a new emphasis on self-determination in action; a greater appreciation of personal identity, the irreplaceable uniqueness of everyone, and the interiority of spiritual life. Above all, personalism brings a new and heightened awareness of human dignity and human rights. Formulating these new features into

a grand moral principle, Christian personalists refer to “the dignity of the human person” as the new standard for Christian ethics and natural law. From the dignity of the human person, a new political orientation also follows—an affirmation of the rights of the human person as a basis for supporting modern liberal democracy. Both Professor Jeffrey and I agree that Christian personalism as such has become the dominant school among theologians and church leaders over the last century.

To give a sense of its widespread appeal, I would list the following figures as Christian personalists: (among Catholics), Jacques Maritain; Gabriel Marcel; Emmanuel Mounier; Heinrich Rommen; John Courtney Murray; Popes John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul II; Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger; Karl Rahner; John Finnis; Michael Novak; and W. Norris Clarke; (among Protestants), Walter Rauschenbusch; Reinhold Niebuhr; Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Martin Luther King Jr.; Archbishop Desmond Tutu; and Glenn Tinder; (among Eastern Orthodox), Nicolai Berdyaev and Alexander Schmemmann. Beyond individual figures, personalism is especially influential in the Catholic Church. It can be found in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which says, “the human person ... ought to be the principle, the subject, and the end of all social institutions” and “public authorities are bound to respect the fundamental and inalienable rights of the human person.”² These statements give some sense of the significance of Christian personalism, a fact that Professor Jeffrey and I both recognize.

Our disagreement arises over how to understand the origins of Christian personalism and how to judge its effects. I claim that Christian personalism cannot be understood without acknowledging the influence of Kant on its central principles. Let me be clear about what I am claiming here, because, at one point, Professor Jeffrey misstates my position. I distinguish Kant’s metaphysics and epistemology from Kant’s ethics and politics. In addition, I claim that Christian personalism is a combination of Thomistic metaphysics and Kantian ethics—a combination of the metaphysical realism of Thomas’ philosophy of being (which affirms the reality of man as a rational being in the created order and the reality of objects of knowledge) and Kant’s ethical idealism (its moral imperative of respecting people as ends-in-themselves and its political philosophy of freedom and human rights). Professor Jeffrey is therefore unfair in citing certain European personalists who reject the epistemology and metaphysics of Kant; I acknowledge this point. I clearly state that most personalists embrace Thomistic metaphysical realism and try to combine it with a new ethical orientation that reflects Kantian liberalism (of course, there are “transcendental Thomists,” such as Bernard Lonergan and Karl Rahner, who

seek to incorporate Kant's epistemology as well as Kant's ethics into a Christian framework).

My precise claim, therefore, is that most Christian personalists have preserved Thomistic metaphysics while adopting Kantian liberalism in their ethics and politics. In particular, they have been profoundly influenced by Kant's distinction between "persons" and "things" in the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* and Kant's command to treat persons as ends, never merely as means for profit, pleasure, or exploitation (Kant's famous second formulation of the categorical imperative). I would even say that "the human person" in Christian personalism is primarily Kant's moral personality rather than Scholasticism's metaphysical notion of the person, either as substance or relation.

I further claim that the political views of Christian personalists are mainly a reflection of Kant's views, especially as found in the *Metaphysical Element of Justice* (where Kant says "the one and only legitimate constitution is a pure republic," meaning a representative democracy that protects human rights) and in *Perpetual Peace* (where Kant says we have a moral duty to work for world peace under international organizations such as a League of Nations). Christian personalists reflect Kantian liberalism in their the views that liberal democracy or republicanism is the only legitimate political regime because it alone accords with the rights and dignity of people, that social justice requires social structures based on the equality of people, and that working for world peace under the League of Nations or United Nations is a moral, even a religious, duty. I also make the judgment that Christian personalism is flawed for the same reasons that Kantian liberalism is flawed: Its categorical character lacks the prudential wisdom of traditional Christianity, and it needs to be reconsidered in the light of a sober, "politics of prudence" that aims at approximating the temporal common good in the conditions of the fallen world.

Professor Jeffrey, by contrast, is an ardent defender of Christian personalism and asserts that "personalism originates not in Kantianism, but in a metaphysics of being"—meaning, personalism emerges through developments within Thomism alone. In making this claim, Professor Jeffrey suffers from the same delusion as other Christian personalists, such as Jacques Maritain and John Finnis, who also believe that the rights and dignity of the human person can be derived simply by a development of Thomism. The problem is that none of them offers a convincing account of how the political principles of Christian personalism—human rights, liberal democracy, and support for the United Nations—flow from developments of Thomistic metaphysics.

Professor Jeffrey suggests that personalism arises from a new interpretation of Thomistic being as a dynamic type of “relation” rather than as a static type of “substance.” He cites approvingly W. Norris Clarke’s dynamic interpretation of Thomistic being, which claims (in Clarke’s words) to be a “creative completion” of Thomas that articulates “a metaphysics of the person as intrinsically self-communicative, relational, and interpersonal, whose natural self-expression ... would be love.”³ Jacques Maritain, too, thought that personalism was merely a creative development of the person as a Scholastic substance, traditionally used to describe the Trinity (the three persons in one God), and applied by Maritain to man as a rational and spiritual being possessing human rights. John Finnis in his recent book, *Aquinas*, strives to find in Thomistic natural law a notion of “practical reasonableness” that contains (embryonically) the human-rights principles of modern liberalism (see chap. 5, “Towards Human Rights”).⁴

Unfortunately, all these creative endeavors are wishful thinking and miss the main point. Christian personalism is not primarily a metaphysical doctrine about man as a certain kind of being. If it were, it would be a fairly dry and technical innovation that says little more than the traditional teaching about man as a rational and social being with a capacity for love. The real power of Christian personalism lies in its ethical and political teaching about human dignity and human rights—about man as a moral agent, possessing traditional attributes of spirituality, rationality, and sociality as well as claiming new respect for personal identity as a matter of right (and including a host of economic and political rights). Yet, the notion that human dignity implies human rights is not in Thomas; and it cannot be developed from Thomism because Thomism holds that man’s rational and social nature requires subordinating personality to virtue, the common good, and a hierarchy of perfection—and points toward constitutional monarchy rather than to liberal democracy as the best regime. In order to arrive at the ethical and political views of Christian personalism, one must add or smuggle in Kantian ethics.

Professor Jeffrey actually smuggles Kantian ethics into his own Christian personalism when he cries with moral outrage against my criticisms. He suggests that my preference for prudence over personalism will lead to atrocities against the rights and dignity of people—that I might be on a slippery slope to genocide, slavery, and the degradation of women because I am not a Christian personalist, as if it were I rather than Saint Paul who admonishes, “Wives, obey your husbands, it is your duty to the Lord” (Eph. 5:22). Professor Jeffrey even appeals to Kant’s second formulation of the categorical imperative when he asserts that “the ethical import [of personalism] ... emphasizes that we

should never use persons merely as means.” Like many Christian personalists, Professor Jeffrey is in denial about his own inner Kantianism. Why not just admit it and then debate the merits of the move?

Direct and Indirect Evidence

In addition to Professor Jeffrey’s admissions, there is considerable evidence to support the view that Christian personalism is a combination of Thomistic metaphysics and Kantian ethics. Some of the evidence is direct, namely, explicit references to Kantian ethics. Other evidence is indirect, namely, the use of Kantian moral categories (person versus thing and end-in-itself and absolute worth and autonomy and consent) in the place of Thomistic moral terms (*virtue, common good, natural law, character formation, and hierarchy of being*). Let me begin with some of the direct evidence.

The clearest case is Pope John Paul II, who presents his brand of Catholic personalism as a combination of Thomism and phenomenology, with the latter derived from Scheler and Kant. In *The Acting Person*, written in the 1970s by Karol Wojtyla, the future pope says, “the present study owes everything to the systems of metaphysics, of anthropology, and of Aristotelian-Thomistic ethics, on the one hand, and to phenomenology, above all, in Scheler’s interpretation, and through Scheler’s critique also to Kant, on the other hand.”⁵ The pope also acknowledges his debt to Kant explicitly in his later work, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (1994). He says,

The personalistic principle ... is an attempt to translate the commandment of love into the language of philosophical ethics.... Love for a person excludes the possibility of treating him as an object of pleasure. This is a principle of Kantian ethics and constitutes his so-called second imperative... Nevertheless, Kant did not fully interpret the commandment of love.⁶

The Kantian element in personalism is treating people as ends in themselves, never merely as means (the famous second formula of the categorical imperative again). This formula does not exhaust Christian love, the pope says, because it is mainly a negative command and needs to be completed by affirming the person as a person through self-giving love or charity.

The pope also refers explicitly to Kant’s ethical command of respecting people as ends rather than as objects of pleasure in *Love and Responsibility* (1960). He argues that sex without love and without the intention of procreation is utilitarian and contrary to the “personalistic norm” that teaches that

“anyone who treats a person as the means to an end does violence to the very essence of the other, to what constitutes its natural right.” In crediting Kant with formulating the norm, the pope also says that the gospel command of love is not exhausted by Kantian ethics.⁷ Similarly, in expressing his support for liberal democracy and in grounding human rights in the dignity of man as creature made in the image of God, the pope makes it clear that rights must serve the true ends of man given by divine and natural law—a recognition that the pope’s Kantianism is subservient to his Thomism because freedom must serve the objective hierarchy of being created by God.

A second example provides indirect evidence of the Kantian element in Christian personalism. I would like to quote from Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963):

An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of Saint Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law.... Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. Segregation, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, substitutes an “I-it” relationship for an “I-thou” relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things.

In this passage, Dr. King gives us another version of Christian personalism that combines Thomistic natural law with the Kantian notion of treating people as persons rather than as things (with the addition of Martin Buber’s Jewish existential personalism that distinguishes I-thou and I-it relationships in exactly the same way that Kant distinguishes persons versus things).

A third case also involves indirect evidence but of a more inferential sort than the second one. As Professor Jeffrey notes, Jacques Maritain denied that he was a Kantian and rejected Kantian metaphysics, but I would argue that Maritain was not entirely honest about the Kantian influence on his natural-law theory (which incorporated the “the rights of man” and embraced liberal democracy) and on his prominent role in drafting the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Maritain is famous for saying that the agreement of many different groups on the language of the declaration’s expressing “faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person” could only have occurred by omitting the grounds of those rights (whether Christian or Kantian or Confucian or whatever).

Yet, in his last book, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, Maritain describes his broad vision of historical progress in the political world in terms that have no sources in Thomism and are identical to Kant's vision of a liberal-bourgeois order progressing toward perpetual peace under international government: "The natural end of the history of the world is the mastery of nature by man and the conquest of human autonomy ... [the goal] is to set the human person and different human groups free from ... subjection to other men, and from that violence by which one man imposes his power on another by treating him as a mere instrument." And "the temporal mission of the Christian ... [is] to make the earthly city more just and less inhuman, to assure everyone the goods basically needed for the life of the body and the spirit, as well as the respect, in each one, of the rights of the human person, to lead peoples to a supra-national political organization capable of guaranteeing peace in the world."⁸ Maritain insists, of course, that this political vision should not be equated with the final end of man, which is supernatural, or with the kingdom of God. What he could have acknowledged is that the temporal world should be driven by aspirations that are identical to Kantian ethical and political idealism.

Conclusion

The most fascinating aspect of this debate is seeing how much Christian theology has changed over the centuries—from the Platonic Christianity of the patristic era, to the Aristotelian Christianity of medieval Scholasticism, to what I am calling the Kantian Christianity of modern personalism—and how little the changes are understood in the modern period. Nearly all Christians today have adopted the inalienable rights and dignity of the human person, liberal democracy, and aspirations for world peace under the United Nations as their ethical and political principles. Yet, only a few honest souls such as Pope John Paul II readily admit that these changes draw heavily from Kantian liberalism while stating that human rights must serve the true hierarchy of ends. Why does not Professor Jeffrey acknowledge these influences and proceed to the next step of the debate: Is the incorporation of Kantian ethics and politics into Christian theology a wise or an unwise move? Do they serve the true hierarchy of ends or do they simply glorify human autonomy?

Notes

1. See Robert P. Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy: God and Politics in the Fallen World* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 148–64; and Kraynak, “‘Made in the Image of God’: The Christian View of Human Dignity and Political Order,” in *In Defense of Human Dignity: Essays for Our Times*, ed. Robert P. Kraynak and Glenn Tinder (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).
2. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, pars. 1881, 1907. Also, “respect for the human person entails respect for the rights that flow from his dignity as a creature” (par. 1930).
3. W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being, God, Person* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 227.
4. John Finnis, *Aquinas: Moral, Political, and Legal Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 132–87.
5. Karol Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, trans. Andrzej Potocki, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), xiv.
6. Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, ed. Vittorio Messori (New York: Knopf, 1994), 200–201.
7. Pope John Paul II, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 27. See also, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, approved by the pope, which defines Christian charity as “respect[ing] others and their rights” (par. 1889).
8. Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself About the Present Time* (New York: Holt, Reinhart, and Winston, 1968), 40–41, 204.