

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

A Response to
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The debate before us is an attempt to understand and to evaluate the principles of Christian personalism, focusing on two key issues: (1) the origins of Christian personalism, especially the question of whether personalism has been influenced by Kant or is largely a product of developments within Thomism; and (2) the wisdom of adopting Christian personalism—whether the “personalist” approach has improved Christianity or whether it has fatal flaws requiring major revisions. In the debate so far, we have emphasized the first issue and only touched upon the second issue. In my final remarks, I would like to add a clarification about the origins of personalism and then highlight its problems—explaining why I am not a “personalist” but an “impersonalist,” as Simone Weil might have said in her trenchant criticisms of personalism.¹

Regarding the influence of Kant on Christian personalism, I would like to reply to Professor Jeffreys’ charge that I have invented a “Kantian straw man” or made “absurd allegations about repressed Kantian presuppositions.” He is correct in noting that I believe most Christian theologians today are “in denial” (a psychological term that I use somewhat humorously) about their debt to Kant: They may think they are merely developing Thomism or adding a little phenomenology, but they are actually picking up and smuggling in a great deal of Kantian and neo-Kantian liberalism from the surrounding culture. While Pope John Paul II explicitly acknowledges his debt to Kant, others such as Martin Luther King Jr., Jacques Maritain, John Finnis, and Professor Jeffreys himself are reluctant to admit Kant’s influence. Yet, in his writings, Professor Jeffreys contradicts himself on this issue, sometimes denying the Kantian

influence and at other times admitting it by saying, “Thomistic personalists can selectively use Kant’s ethical ideas without worrying about Kantianism’s alleged dangers.” The latter statement clearly indicates that Professor Jeffreys incorporates Kantian ethics while believing he can control its negative effects. This is an important admission because it means Professor Jeffreys views Christian personalism (or “Thomistic personalism,” as he prefers to call his position) as a synthesis of Thomas Aquinas’s metaphysical realism, Max Scheler’s phenomenology, and the ethical idealism of Kant. Concerning the last element, Professor Jeffreys acknowledges that he embraces the Kantian ethical principle of treating people as ends, never merely as means and respecting the inherent dignity of “persons” rather than using them instrumentally as “things.”

By acknowledging this principle, Professor Jeffreys takes a step in the right direction; but he needs to concede a much larger point as well. Christian personalism not only affirms the dignity of the human person, but it also links human dignity to a specific political agenda—namely, universal human rights, liberal democracy, and support for the United Nations. In embracing this political agenda, personalists have adopted the main features of Kantian liberalism, whether they admit it or not. Surprisingly, many distinguished scholars, such as Jacques Maritain and John Finnis, do not admit it and foster the illusion that their political views are merely developments of Thomism or neo-Scholasticism. They apparently have forgotten the political teaching of Thomas Aquinas, which is monarchist and hierarchical, as well as the fact that Christian theology over the last two hundred years has undergone a radical reversal in its attitudes toward liberalism, democracy, religious liberty, women’s rights, war and peace, and international organizations.

It is widely believed that such changes have occurred by developing earlier traditions of Thomism, Augustinianism, Calvinism, or Lutheranism and that continuity has been preserved with traditional Christian notions of freedom, justice, and natural law, but these claims are not really true. We need to remember that Saint Thomas Aquinas thought the best form of government was constitutional monarchy rather than liberal democracy. Additionally, the task of government was to inculcate virtue through character formation and a corporate common good rather than limiting itself to establishing conditions for individual development (as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* now defines the common good).² Similarly, John Calvin and the American Puritans thought the best government was a theocracy ruled by the visible saints—a spiritual aristocracy—rather than a liberal democracy, and they rejected religious liberty as a matter of principle in a Christian polity. Nor should it be forgotten

that, for at least eighteen centuries, Christian churches and theologians have promoted kingship, theocracy, and hierarchical institutions as well as a confessional Christian state (with some distinction between church and state). Only in the last two hundred years have they abandoned these views and accepted democracy and human rights as the regime most compatible with Christianity.

How did this change occur? Many factors are responsible, but, as I indicate in chapter 3 of *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy*, the influence of Kant has been decisive because most Christians changed their views by embracing the following logic: (1) Christian ethics teaches universal love or charity; (2) Christian charity means, not only compassion or mercy but also respect for the dignity of the person as a creature of God with reason, free will, and self-determination; (3) respect for human dignity requires support for universal human rights, liberal democracy, and the United Nations. The adoption of this logic means that Christian politics were changed by Kantian liberalism, not primarily by Thomistic natural law or medieval canon law (the thesis of Brian Tierney) or neo-Scholasticism or even secularized Protestantism. My inference is that Christian personalists such as Jacques Maritain and Professor Jeffrey are de facto Kantian liberals in their ethical and political views even if they deny it or fail to recognize the real sources of their views.

If this inference is correct, then the crucial question is whether Christian personalists have made a wise move in adopting a new political teaching shaped by Kantian-like moral imperatives for human dignity, human rights, liberal democracy, and the United Nations. This is a difficult question, and much is at stake in the answer because it will determine how much a faithful Christian can feel “at home” in the modern world created by liberal-bourgeois civilization. To his credit, Professor Jeffrey recognizes the considerable risks and dangers associated with the new political teaching, although he believes the risks are worth taking.

In his new book, *Defending Human Dignity: John Paul II and Political Realism* (2004), Professor Jeffrey examines the pope’s Christian personalism and defends it as a coherent synthesis of Thomism and phenomenology (with a minor bow to Kant).³ He argues that the pope’s personalism is capable of supporting many of the positive features of modern liberal democracy while warding off the negative features. The positive features advance the cause of human dignity by promoting democratic participation; responsible freedom; material standards of living worthy of man; social solidarity; opportunities to contribute to the common good and to seek the true “hierarchy of values” including “the whole truth about God and man”; some of the economic benefits of globalization; and growing support for a world organization such as the United

Nations, which can resolve international conflicts. The negative features, which the pope recognizes as well, are the degradation of life by mass consumer culture, a tendency toward secularization and the “culture of death,” indifference toward the weakest and most vulnerable people in a competitive market and globalized economy, the misunderstanding of freedom as personal autonomy, and some of the unhealthy expressions of nationalism. Professor Jeffrey defends the pope’s personalism by showing how it seeks to counter these distortions, mainly by teaching that freedom must serve the true “hierarchy of values.” Professor Jeffrey thinks the pope’s only real weakness is his idealistic view of the United Nations and his naïvete about “humanitarian military interventions”—for which Jeffrey offers a solid dose of political realism derived from his readings of Thucydides, Hans Morgenthau, and Reinhold Niebuhr.

One can certainly admire the pope’s Thomistic personalism and Jeffrey’s spirited defense of it as noble attempts to forge a Christian theology that engages the modern world on its own terms and seeks to shape it according to Christian faith and morals, but here is where serious objections must be raised. The problem with Christian personalism is that, instead of shaping the modern world, it is being shaped by the modern world, with the unfortunate result that Christian churches (including the Catholic Church) are losing all the important moral and cultural battles—over abortion, gay marriage, the “culture of death,” the public role of religion, even the “Christian heritage of Europe” (a phrase recently rejected by the European Union, despite the pope’s appeals). The problem, as I see it, is that Christian personalism ties Christian faith too closely with modern liberal democracy (linking them as a matter of principle based on a common concept of human dignity) while confusing Christian believers with a language of personhood and identity, human rights, and subjective consciousness that are virtually indistinguishable from the mass culture of democracy and self-expression that surrounds them and is increasingly hostile to them. Despite repeated admonitions that freedom must serve the true hierarchy of ends, Christian believers have become confused about their faith, believing that it is mainly something personal—an individual choice—rather than something impersonal—an ultimate, objective truth. They have forgotten Simone Weil’s insight that “perfection is impersonal; our personality is the part of us which belongs to error and sin.”⁴ Under the spell of personalism, Christian believers have dropped their guard in modern democratic culture, believing it is their friend and even believing that it is their duty to embrace it as a matter of respecting other’s rights and dignity.

The fundamental mistake of Christian personalism is in abandoning the traditional Christian doctrine of the two cities—the distinction between the city of God and the earthly city—which teaches that Christianity is not inherently tied to any particular political regime as a matter of divine law or as a moral imperative of human dignity. Instead, political and social structures are judgments of prudence guided by natural law, which in most cases recommends mixed constitutions of hierarchical and democratic elements rather than the mass democracies of today. The two cities reminds Christians that they are citizens of two worlds that will always be in tension with each other, requiring a balancing act between spiritual and temporal duties rather than an assumption of safety and harmony. I conclude, therefore, that Christian personalists would be well advised to look to their Augustinian roots instead of searching for allies among modern philosophers of the human person.

Notes

1. Simone Weil, “Human Personality,” in *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (New York: David McKay Co., 1977), 313–39.
2. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, pars. 1906–9: “By common good is to be understood ‘the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or individuals, to reach their fulfillment....’ In the name of the common good, public authorities are bound to respect the fundamental and inalienable rights of the human person.”
3. In describing Pope John Paul II’s “personalistic norm,” Jeffreys says: “John Paul II’s debt to Kant here is clear, and he acknowledges it.” Derek S. Jeffreys, *Defending Human Dignity: John Paul II and Political Realism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2004), 207 n. 4.
4. Simone Weil, “Human Personality,” 318.