



The rationality of religion according to Kant: from the critique of pure reason to religion within reason itself

By

Wojciech Slomski



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Abstract

This article presents an analysis of the concept of the rationality of religion in Immanuel Kant's philosophy, covering the three main stages of his critical thought: *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, and *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. In the first stage, Kant establishes the limits of theoretical cognition, which preclude metaphysical proofs of God's existence. In the second, he formulates the principle of the primacy of practical reason, by virtue of which faith becomes a necessary moral postulate. In the third, he presents moral religion as a form of communal pursuit of the good and a reinterpretation of traditional religion in the light of the autonomy of reason. The article refers to the latest Polish and foreign literature, including numerous analyses by Marcin Sieńkowski concerning the objective and subjective aspects of moral faith. The conclusion of the paper is that Kant proposes a model of rational religion that is not based on theoretical cognition, but on the practical necessity resulting from moral action.

Keywords: Kant; rationality of religion; practical reason; moral faith; moral religion; postulates of practical reason; summum bonum; moral autonomy

Introduction

The problem of the rationality of religion in Immanuel Kant's philosophy remains one of the key issues in contemporary philosophy of religion, as it touches upon the tension between the autonomy of reason and the claims of faith. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant defined the limits of cognition, stating that theoretical reason is not capable of constitutive cognition of metaphysical objects such as God or the soul, because they are "Grenzbegriffe" – boundary concepts of reason (Kant 2001: B 311). At the same time, however, in his later *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, he argued that practical reason requires the postulation of the existence of a supreme good and a moral legislator, which raises the question of in what sense religious faith can be considered rational (*Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*, 1793).

Previous studies on Kant's philosophy of religion emphasise the ambivalent nature of his position: on the one hand, Kant limits theoretical reason, and on the other, he gives faith a place in the structure of practical rationality. In Polish literature, this problem has been examined from many angles, including by Kupś, who points out that Kant combines faith with morality in a way that is radically different from the theological tradition (Kupś 2008: 55–60), and by Paź, who presents Kantian religion as a development of the Enlightenment ideal, where the autonomy of reason is the

ultimate criterion of religious truth (Paź 2007: 152–158). In English-language literature, this issue is developed in particular by Palmquist (1992; 2015), Pasternack (2014) and Michalson (1999), who interpret Kantian religion as an attempt to reconcile morality with the necessity of transcendent meaning, while maintaining the critical limitations of reason.

A special place in recent Polish research is occupied by the analyses of Marcin Sieńkowski, who attempted to systematically distinguish between the objective and subjective aspects of faith in Kant's system. In his article *The Objective Aspect of Faith According to Immanuel Kant* (Sieńkowski 2018: 430–432), the author points out that moral faith in Kant is indirectly objective: it refers to a real object (God), but its rationality does not result from theoretical proof, but from the practical necessity of action. Sieńkowski's analysis (2018: 434–436) shows that this objectivity is "mediated by a moral function" because God in the critical system is not an object of cognition, but a postulate conditioning the meaning of moral effort. At the same time, the author emphasises that Kant does not completely eliminate the objective aspect of faith, but redefines it (Sieńkowski 2018: 437–438), which is important for the reconstruction of Kantian rationality of religion (Sieńkowski 2018: 439).

In parallel, in a more recent article devoted to the subjective dimension of faith, Sieńkowski argues that, in Kant's view, the act of faith is primarily a personal acceptance of a practical principle – "the consent of reason to a moral idea" (Sieńkowski 2019: 720–723). This subjectivity is not relativistic subjectivism, but emphasises the autonomous responsibility of the moral subject (Sieńkowski 2019: 725). In , the author points out that for Kant, faith is a process of internal moral self-knowledge in which the individual recognises their duty towards practical law (Sieńkowski 2019: 728). These analyses are supplemented in the monograph *Wiara a racjonalność [Faith and Rationality]*, where Sieńkowski points out that Kant's understanding of faith combines rational and existential elements, and its rationality consists in the "practical motivational power of reason" (Sieńkowski 2020: 115–118). In another passage, he emphasises that moral faith is "an affirmation of the meaning of ethical action in relation to the structure of the world" (Sieńkowski 2020: 120) and, at the same time, constitutes a form of "reason's trust in its own normative power" (Sieńkowski 2020: 127).

Contemporary English-language interpretations — especially Pasternack (2014), Hunter (2005), Wood (1991) and Rossi and Wreen (1991) — emphasise that the essence of Kantian religion is an attempt to redefine the relationship between morality and transcendence. According to Wood (1991: 2–5) Kant retains an element of deism that harmonises with his concept of a moral lawgiver, while Hunter (2005: 10–15) shows the importance of the context of Prussian religious policy for the way in which Kant formulated the boundaries of religious rationality. Insole (2016) and Michalson (1999) go further, interpreting Kantian religion as a theological project rooted in the moral experience of the subject.

The aim of this article is to show how Kant's concept of the rationality of religion develops from *the Critique of Pure Reason*, through *the Critique of Practical Reason*, to *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. This analysis will be based strictly on sources and the latest Polish and foreign research, with particular use of the findings of Sieńkowski (2018; 2019; 2020), as well as key positions from world literature. The aim is to reconstruct a uniform concept of moral faith which, although it cannot claim theoretical knowledge, has its own autonomous rationality derived from the function of practical reason.

The limits of cognition and the possibility of faith: Kant's critical revolution

The starting point for Kant's reflection on the rationality of religion is a radical reformulation of the relationship between theoretical reason and the possibility of metaphysical cognition. In *the Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant performs a diagnostic analysis of cognitive abilities, demonstrating that speculative reason has no access to noumenal reality and that its structure leads to antinomy when it attempts to transcend the limits of experience (Kant 2001: A vii–A x). He refers to the metaphysical concepts of God, the soul and the world as a whole as "Grenzbegriffe", or boundary concepts, whose

function is to regulate the activity of reason, but not to provide constitutive knowledge (Kant 2001: B 311). For this reason, classical natural theology – based on ontological, cosmological or physico-theological evidence – proves incapable of meeting the rigours of critical epistemology.

Kant understands this radical change as a "Copernican revolution" in philosophy: reason must limit itself in order to function rationally. As Tomaszewska notes, the critique of speculative reason is not a negation of metaphysics *sensu stricto*, but its reconstruction within a new model of rationality (Tomaszewska 2020: 14–16). Kupś argues similarly, pointing out that Kant replaces traditional metaphysics with "rational metaphysics," whose task is not to know God, but to organise the moral meaning of the world (Kupś 2008: 55–57).

This raises a fundamental question: if theoretical reason cannot prove the existence of God, can religious faith be rational? The classic answer, based on conviction (*Überzeugung*) as justification by evidence, is excluded in the critical system. Kant therefore introduces a key distinction between knowledge (*Wissen*), opinion (*Meinen*) and faith (*Glaube*) – the latter having the structure of a normative acceptance of an idea rather than a speculative decision (Kant 2012: 114–118).

Sieńkowski's analyses of the relationship between the objective and subjective aspects of faith are particularly valuable here. In his 2018 article, the author points out that even in the critical period, Kant retains a certain objectivity of faith – although it is "mediated by a moral function" (Sieńkowski 2018: 432). Faith refers to a real object (God), but not as an object of cognition, but as a postulate of practical reason (Sieńkowski 2018: 434). In another passage, Sieńkowski emphasises that Kant's distinction between *Glaube* and *Wissen* leads to a redefinition of religious rationality, according to which the rationality of faith does not consist in theoretical justification, but in its practical function (Sieńkowski 2018: 436). He further notes that for Kant, the objectivity of faith is not an epistemic guarantee, but a "moral orientation of the will" (Sieńkowski 2018: 438), which makes it possible to maintain rational consistency within critical limitations. Ultimately, as he points out, "the possibility of faith is a consequence of the limitation of knowledge" (Sieńkowski 2018: 439).

The subjective dimension of faith, analysed by Sieńkowski in his later work, completes this picture. Faith is an internal act in which moral reason accepts the ideal of good as a principle of action (Sieńkowski 2019: 720). The author explains that faith is not subjectivism, but a form of autonomous self-determination in relation to moral law (Sieńkowski 2019: 725). In another passage, he points out that in an act of faith, the subject recognises their own responsibility towards the moral order of the world (Sieńkowski 2019: 728). This subjective dimension is a prerequisite for rational religion, which must be moral and practical in nature, not speculative.

In his monograph *Faith and Rationality*, Sieńkowski continues this line of interpretation, defining faith as "the practical trust of reason in itself" (Sieńkowski 2020: 115). He

emphasises that its rationality stems from the motivational power of moral law (Sieńkowski 2020: 118), rather than from epistemic certainty. Ultimately, for Kant, faith is “an affirmation of the ethical meaning of the world” (Sieńkowski 2020: 120) and a recognition that “practical reason has primacy over theoretical reason” (Sieńkowski 2020: 127).

English-language interpretations confirm this reconstruction. Palmquist (1992: 130–134) points out that the critical revolution consists in shifting religion to the practical sphere, and Michalson (1999: 25–32) emphasises that for Kant, religion is a way of interpreting moral experience, not a metaphysical description of reality. Wood (1991: 3–6) notes that the idea of God as a moral lawgiver is a consequence not of proof but of the needs of practical reason, while Insole (2016: 45–52) interprets Kant's project as an attempt to create a transcendently justified moral theology. Hunter (2005: 10–15) adds a historical dimension, pointing out that the critique of metaphysics also had political significance in the context of Prussian control over religious thought.

In light of the above, it can be seen that the possibility of faith in Kant only becomes understandable against the background of the limitations of theoretical reason. Kant does not eliminate religion, but points to its proper place in the structure of human rationality: moral faith is possible because speculative knowledge is impossible. Consequently, the rationality of religion does not consist in the theoretical confirmation of God's existence, but in recognising Him as a postulate enabling the moral order of the world.

Practical faith and its rationality in the *Critique of Practical Reason*

Kant's resolution of the question of the rationality of faith is essentially only made in *the Critique of Practical Reason*, in which the philosopher shifts the focus from the limitations of theoretical cognition to the autonomy of moral action. It is in his second critical work that Kant formulates the principle of the “primacy of practical reason,” which enables a new conception of religion as a moral rather than a speculative structure. In this context, faith takes on a practical character (*praktischer Glaube*), i.e., one that is not based on theoretical evidence but on the necessity of the moral meaning of the world.

In *the Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant emphasises that practical reason takes precedence over theoretical reason, because it introduces real normativity into the world and enables action in accordance with moral law (Kant 2012: 5–9). For this reason, the ideas of God and immortality are not objects of knowledge, but necessary assumptions (*Postulate der praktischen Vernunft*) that allow us to think of morality as a meaningful and complete system. As Kupś points out, postulates are not theoretical statements about reality, but elements of a practical structure without which moral law could not be fully effective (Kupś 2016: 77–79).

Pasternack interprets this move as an attempt to show that morality requires a metaphysical complement, but one that preserves the critical framework of rationality (Pasternack

2014). Similarly, Palmquist notes that Kant treats postulates as “rational assumptions of the moral subject” that cannot be proven but are practically necessary (Palmquist 2015: 122–126).

Practical faith (*praktischer Glaube*) differs fundamentally from theoretical faith (*theoretischer Glaube*) in that it does not refer to facts, but to norms and goals of moral action. Kant explains that belief in the existence of God is logically unnecessary but morally necessary: it is a condition for the possibility of combining virtue and happiness (*summum bonum*), the realisation of which requires the existence of a supreme moral legislator (Kant 2012: 111–117).

Tomaszewska draws attention to this structure, pointing out that practical faith is a “necessity of rational action” and not “the recognition of a metaphysical fact” (Tomaszewska 2020: 21–23). O'Neill, in turn, shows that practical faith is not a form of arbitrary belief, but a justified element of rational moral reflection (O'Neill 1997: 270–272).

Sieńkowski's analyses offer a crucial addition to the Kantian interpretation of faith. The author emphasises that practical faith is deeply subjective in nature, as it arises from an autonomous decision of moral reason. In his 2019 article, Sieńkowski states that the act of faith is a form of “reason's consent to a moral idea” that directs the will towards the realisation of good (Sieńkowski 2019: 720). This subjective dimension is not the opposite of rationality, but its condition: the subject must recognise the necessity of faith on their own in order for it to fulfil its motivating function (Sieńkowski 2019: 725).

Elsewhere, the author adds that faith is “the self-determination of the subject in relation to moral law” and not an epistemic act (Sieńkowski 2019: 728). This interpretation harmonises with Kant's distinction between knowledge and faith and with the principle that practical necessity does not imply theoretical certainty.

In *Faith and Rationality*, Sieńkowski develops this interpretation, emphasising that the rationality of faith consists in “practical trust in the normative power of reason” (Sieńkowski 2020: 115). This is not rationality in the epistemic sense, but in the volitional-normative sense, related to the dynamics of moral action (Sieńkowski 2020: 118). In another passage, the author points out that practical faith is a form of “affirmation of the moral meaning of the world” (Sieńkowski 2020: 120), which perfectly harmonises with Kant's concept of *summum bonum*. Ultimately, he emphasises that faith is a consequence of “the primacy of practical reason over theoretical reason” (Sieńkowski 2020: 127).

In English-language interpretations, a theme emerges that deepens Kant's theory of faith: namely, that moral postulates have a theological function. Wood notes that Kant retains an element of deism—God is not a personal partner in religious dialogue, but a moral lawgiver, necessary for the structure of the highest good (Wood 1991: 2–5). Michalson interprets this position as a form of “moral theology” in which religion is not

knowledge about God, but a moral interpretation of human existence (Michalson 1999: 25–32).

Hunter adds that the primacy of practical reason also had a political and cultural dimension: it allowed Kant to remove religion from the realm of dogmatic theology and give it a rational and universal form (Hunter 2005: 10–15). Insole, on the other hand, emphasises that Kantian practical faith is not a reduction of religion to morality, but an attempt to root religion in the structure of the subject's own reason (Insole 2016: 40–48).

Moral religion in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*: from postulate to ethical structure of community

When Kant moves on to formulate his own concept of religion in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, he fundamentally broadens his earlier analysis of practical faith. The aim of this work is no longer merely to justify the moral necessity of the postulates of practical reason, but to reconstruct religion as a form of moral community life. Religion is therefore not a collection of revealed truths or a dogmatic system, but a structure of ethical self-improvement of the individual and a way of organising the community according to the principles of reason.

In the first part of *Religion...*, Kant defines religion as "the knowledge of all duties as divine commandments" (*Erkenntnis aller Pflichten als göttlicher Gebote*), which, as Palmquist emphasises, is a redefinition of religion in moral rather than theoretical-metaphysical terms (Palmquist 2015: 147–150). In this view, human religiosity stems from moral consciousness rather than revelation, tradition or institutional authority.

One of the central themes of the work is Kant's concept of "radical evil" (*radikale Böse*), understood as the constant tendency of the human will to subordinate moral law to its own inclinations (Kant 1990: 32–35). As Michalson notes, for Kant this concept is a condition for the possibility of religion: only the awareness of moral decline justifies the need for moral transformation and gives meaning to religion as a "striving for the good" (Michalson 1999: 44–48).

Although Kant maintains the principle that the existence of God cannot be proven theoretically, in *Religion...* he shows that the idea of God is important not only as a postulate of practical reason, but also as a central point of reference for man's moral self-interpretation. As Wood emphasises, God in Kant is not a being fulfilling traditional theological functions, but a "moral hypothesis" that makes it possible to think of the moral world as orderly and purposeful (Wood 1991: 5–8).

Pasternack adds that this idea is not a decorative element of Kant's system, but has a regulatory function: it directs the will towards the highest good (*summum bonum*) and helps the moral subject to interpret their own experience as part of a larger ethical plan (Pasternack 2014).

The most original element of Kant's philosophy of religion is the concept of the "ethical church" (*ethische Gemeinde*). Kant

argues that human religiosity cannot be limited to individual moral experience, but requires a community in which individuals support each other in the pursuit of moral good (Kant 1993: 78–81). As Rossi interprets it, this is an attempt to define religion as a "community of moral improvement" rather than a dogmatic or cultic system (Rossi & Wreen 1991: 119–120).

Hunter points out that the idea of an ethical church also had a political dimension: it allowed Kant to separate the essence of religion from state-church institutions and pointed to the autonomy of conscience as the basis of moral life (Hunter 2005: 15–18). In this sense, moral religion is not only a theory but also a project of an ethical community of free subjects.

In later sections of *Religion...*, Kant addresses the topic of religious symbolism, distinguishing between moral religion and "historical religion" (*Historische Religion*). Symbols, rituals and traditional messages have value only as aids in achieving a moral goal, not as theoretical truths. As Insole points out, for Kant, religious metaphors and images can serve a positive function if they support the moral aspirations of individuals and are not treated as literal descriptions of noumenal reality (Insole 2016: 75–78).

O'Neill, on the other hand, emphasises that religious symbolism in Kant's system is "transcendentally pragmatic" in nature: it is a tool of practical reason that helps to organise the moral life of the community, but does not claim to be an objective means of cognition (O'Neill 1997: 286–288).

Kant does not deny the value of revealed religion, but subjects it to critical interpretation. For him, revealed religion is a historical and cultural tool through which moral religion can be expressed and transmitted. As Kupś notes, Kant treats religious texts as hermeneutic material that is subject to rational reinterpretation in the light of moral principles (Kupś 2008: 112–115). This model leads to a kind of "demythologisation" of religion, in which morality becomes its content and history merely its form.

Conclusion

An analysis of the rationality of religion in Immanuel Kant's philosophy leads to an unambiguous conclusion: the critical project, although it limits the possibilities of theoretical reason, does not eliminate religion, but gives it a new, profound and consistently justified moral structure. Kant shows that speculative reason is not capable of constitutive knowledge of transcendence, but from a practical point of view, it is necessary to accept the idea of God and immortality as conditions for the meaningfulness of moral life. Faith is therefore not knowledge, but a rational act of practical recognition – a form of normative self-determination in relation to moral law, which demands a metaphysical complement.

In *the Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant establishes the limits of cognition that make room for faith as a practical category. In *the Critique of Practical Reason*, he reformulates the concept of faith so that it is consistent with the principle of the primacy of practical reason. In *Religion within the Limits of*

Reason Alone, he presents moral religion as a communal way of realising the good — a religion that is not based on revelation, but on autonomy, responsibility and the moral self-knowledge of the subject.

The fruit of the entire critical project is the concept of the rationality of religion, which does not depend on epistemic certainty, but on practical necessity. Faith becomes rational not through evidence, but through its function in the structure of moral life. In this sense, Kant's philosophy of religion remains relevant, offering a model of religiosity consistent with the requirements of reason, autonomy and morality — a model that remains one of the most important points of reference in contemporary philosophy of religion.

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