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TRIANGULATING GOD: A KANTIAN REJOINDER TO PEROVICH

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After describing the basic structure of Kant's System of Perspectives, I respond to Anthony Perovich's claim that my interpretation misconstrues Kant's true intentions concerning religion. Perovich assumes that "perspectives" require unsystematic "openness," accommodating numerous conflicting ways of interpreting religious phenomena. Yet Kant has in mind a fixed relationship between three specific perspectives (or "standpoints"): the practical, theoretical and judicial. The first and third can be used to construct a theology even though the theoretical standpoint alone cannot. Perovich's suggested *revision* of Kant along these lines therefore turns out to reflect a position which a perspectival interpretation shows to be Kant's own.

"I recommend...that the Kantian, who believes that reason alone leads to practical analogues of so many Christian beliefs, employ these practical teachings along with the intuitions of the mystics as two points from which to 'triangulate' Christian doctrine."[1] Anthony Perovich has recently offered these words as the key to a properly Christian response to Kant's philosophy of the Christian religion. They appear in the conclusion of his recent *Faith and Philosophy* article, written in reply to an earlier article[2] in which I argued that the basic principles of Kant's Critical philosophy and of Kant's own application of it to religion and theology are thoroughly consistent with a Christian way of thinking, acting and being. Perovich begins his reply with a fairly accurate summary of my "perspectival" method of interpreting Kant (pp. 95-96). Unfortunately, when he describes my proposal as to how a perspectival interpretation of Kant can show the Christian philosopher a whole new way of responding to the Critical philosophy (pp. 96-99), Perovich fails to portray my position quite so astutely; as a result, he is easily able to unveil problems which appear to be "fatal" (p. 99) to my interpretation, supposedly rendering it "demonstrably wrong as an interpretation of Kant's views" (p. 96). In this rejoinder I shall respond to such accusations by clarifying this aspect of my perspectival interpretation; in so doing, I will argue that the solution Perovich himself suggests as a "revision" of Kant (pp. 99f) is in fact Kant's *own* position.

The general perspectival approach to interpreting Kant, which Perovich concedes "is undoubtedly correct" (p. 96), operates on three levels: (1) the

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Perspective of Kant's three *Critiques*, taken together, can be distinguished from that of some of his other systematic writings, such as those applying the Critical propaedeutic to metaphysics proper;[3] (2) the *standpoint* of each *Critique* can be distinguished from that of the other two; and (3) within each *Critique*, four distinct *perspectives* can be discerned. The first level includes the Perspectives (note the capital "P") of Experience, Logic, Transcendental (or Critical) philosophy and Metaphysics. The second level includes the theoretical, the practical and the judicial standpoints (corresponding, respectively, to Kant's three *Critiques*). And the third level includes the empirical, logical, transcendental and hypothetical perspectives.[4] Perovich's comments all focus on the issue of the relation between the three *standpoints* in Kant's System, so I will limit my present comments in the same way, even though the full profundity of Kant's religious philosophy cannot be appreciated without seeing in it the role of the other two levels of perspectives as well.

Perovich's biggest mistake is to assume that a perspectival interpretation implies that Kant was recommending an attitude of "openness and flexibility" which would be "accommodating" to a wide variety of perspectives which might come to a person's mind, so that "religious phenomena" would "admit of multiple interpretations" (p. 97). My view, on the contrary, is that, to call these "perspectives" does *not* mean they are arranged arbitrarily, or related in such a way that one is just as good as another, or can be replaced by another at will. Rather, Kant sees them as having a definite, "architectonic" order, determined by reason itself. Their perspectival character simply means that what is true or certain in one case might not be true or certain in another, so that one must be careful to discern the *proper* perspective before answering any philosophical question. And religion, like everything else to which Kant applies his Critical acumen, *does* have its proper perspective.

Before explaining just what that proper perspective *is* for Kant, I must say a word about the development of my own interpretation. The article Perovich is criticizing was first written in 1985, when my own application of a perspectival interpretation of Kant to his views on theology and religion was still in its infancy. At that time I was by no means claiming to have *demonstrated* that the views expressed in that article were accurate as interpretations of Kant. Rather, I saw the article as a kind of "manifesto": a public declaration of my *intention* to demonstrate the validity of a new way of interpreting the religious implications of Kant's philosophy. Although the full-fledged demonstration is not yet complete even today, many of its key points have already appeared in print.[5] So I am now in a far better position to state clearly and precisely just what it is that a perspectival interpretation implies for the Kantian Christian.

In my previous *Faith and Philosophy* article I did indeed give the impression that for Kant religion is properly interpreted from the practical stand-

point, but that other standpoints are not ruled out in principle. My argument at that point was weak, if not non-existent—a fact which did not escape Perovich's notice. I would now like to explain more clearly the position I was working towards at that time. For Kant, religion is primarily an *experience* involving a complex combination of actions and thoughts. It is, as such, analogous to the experiences of judging natural objects to be beautiful, sublime or objectively purposeful. The proper standpoint for understanding all such experiences, experiences in which something mysterious and "supersensible" *breaks through* the barrier of the mechanistic world (i.e., the world of "empirical knowledge," as it appears from the theoretical standpoint of the first *Critique*), is the *judicial* standpoint. But a question arises whenever we adopt this standpoint: from which *non*-judicial standpoint can I best explain why this experience is so meaningful to me? Kant's answer to this is always the same, whether he is examining beauty, religion, natural organisms or any other deep human experience. His answer is that the *practical* standpoint always has "primacy" over the theoretical.[6] In other words, the value of any human experience of meaning comes from its participation in practical reason, since the limits of theoretical reason exclude the possibility of grasping transcendent reality from the latter standpoint.

An important point to note here is that Kant's doctrine of the primacy of practical reason does not imply that the practical has primacy over the *judicial* as well as the theoretical standpoint. Rather, it means only that, whenever we *compare* the practical standpoint with the theoretical—such as we must when we wish to trace our judicial experiences back to some deeper, rational source—the practical is the standpoint which must be given the primary place in our interpretation of experience. That Kant actually regarded the judicial standpoint as having primacy over both the theoretical and the practical is evident in many respects, not the least of which is the fact that the *name* he chose for the three main books in his philosophical System, "Critique," is itself an explicitly *judicial* term.[7] Unfortunately, perhaps because of the chronological order of Kant's three *Critiques*, scholars have had an almost irresistible temptation to see Kant's God through the spectacles of his notion that God is, *for theoretical reason*, no more than an idea. What so often goes unnoticed is that Kant wrote his three *Critiques* in the opposite order of their *logical* importance. For Kant's God is most emphatically the God of the *third Critique*, as *informed by* the God of the second.

Kant's book on religion, *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, should be read not as an appendix to Kant's practical philosophy, but as a companion to the *third Critique*, for it follows the latter in adopting the *judicial* standpoint, one of the purposes of which is to construct a bridge over the gap between the theoretical and the practical. This is the main point I was trying to get across when I previously stated that Kant's interest in religion extends

beyond the practical standpoint (see quote on p. 96). Kant's view is not that "any old standpoint" will do just as well, but that there is *one correct way* to understand religion, and that this requires an understanding of the proper relationship between *all three* standpoints as they operate in religion. Religion is first and foremost an experience of something which we recognize as "divine commands,"[8] just as a judgment of beauty is first and foremost an experience of something which we recognize as having "subjective finality."[9] Without such basic experiences, there would be no religion and no judgments of beauty. But the question then arises: how can we best *explain* what these divine commands actually *are*? Kant's answer is twofold: (1) because they are supersensible, we can safely understand them only insofar as they can be regarded as expressions of practical reason, because theoretical reason does not give us access to the supersensible; and (2) the best theoretical explanation must therefore remain a matter of faith, not knowledge, and must be formulated in such a way as to be in the service of what we *do* know (*viz.*, our duty), and not *vice versa*.

Perovich is undoubtedly in the majority of scholarship when he declares that the "open mind" I attribute to Kant on matters of supersensible experience "is quite simply not displayed in the Critical writings" (p. 97). I would agree that, if all we had to work with were the three *Critiques*, Kant's open mind, as expressed in (2), would be virtually impossible to discern. But fortunately, we have much more to go by than just these three books. Many of Kant's other writings, such as his *Religion* and his *Opus Postumum*, to say nothing of the riches available in his letters and published lectures, reveal to us the man behind the *Critiques* in a way that provides us with quite a different view of what Kant was trying to accomplish. With this as a context, even the *Critiques* themselves can be seen to be extraordinarily open-minded (considering the intellectual milieu of Kant's day) with regard to the possibility of the supernatural influencing the natural. This was precisely my point: that we must be careful not to let the *apparent* closedness of the *Critiques* blind us to the *real* openness Kant reveals elsewhere.[10]

Moreover, the term "open-minded" here does not mean that Kant succumbed to the all-too-common view that "whatever you believe is true *is* true for you"; rather, it means that he recognized his own inability to condemn, from the theoretical standpoint as such, anyone who chooses to interpret their religious experiences in terms of a given set of theoretical dogmas. What he did feel free to condemn was the tendency of many religious people to emphasize a certain theoretical interpretation of their experience more than its practical implications for their moral life. So this whole issue has little, if anything, to do with Kant's recognition of the fact that the human mind is not capable of "intellectual intuition" (whereby an object is created in the very process of thinking it), as Perovich seems to think it does (pp. 97-98,

102). Rather, it has to do with what Kant does and does not claim to be able to *deny* to religious believers (who normally do not make the mistake of believing they can take God's place as Creator).

As an example of Kant's supposedly exclusive (reductionist) emphasis on the practical standpoint in interpreting religion, Perovich refers to *prayer*. He claims that "what Palmquist understands by prayer" is "stated wishes directed toward God" (p. 97). Frankly, I am puzzled to read this, since it does not in fact represent my understanding of prayer, and since I never committed myself on this issue in the article in question. Since I hope to examine thoroughly at a later date the true depth of Kant's philosophy of prayer as an inner disposition of devotedness to obeying the Law God puts in our hearts, I will not defend my interpretation of Kant on this point in any detail here. Instead, I will merely comment that Kant never so much as hints that prayer is "*only*" or "nothing more than" the expression of such wishes (p. 97, Perovich's emphasis). These words, as is so often the habit of Kant's commentators, have been *added* by Perovich and attached to quotations in order to make Kant look like a reductionist. But no such language will be found in Kant's own writings, for he was no reductionist.[11] Instead, the alert reader will always find a cautious form of expression which is based, more than anything else, on a Critical *recognition of ignorance* as to the ultimate nature of such experiences as prayer. What Kant does deny is that the *mere* repetition of words can have any value, practical or otherwise. By contrast, he *affirms* that *real* prayer can and does have value, and that this value goes far deeper than the mere repetition of words. Thus, whereas Kant does indeed believe that verbal prayer is optional, he would by no means agree that *true* prayer "falls away as a result of proper moral development" (p. 97).

Perovich will never be able to find a text in which Kant explicitly *denies* that the believer is allowed to regard verbal prayer as a form of communication with God, because any such dogmatic denial would be repugnant to Kant's lifelong Critical disposition. Likewise, he will be unable to find a text in which Kant states that God is not to be regarded as a Trinity, because Kant believed, as shown in the passage quoted by Perovich himself (p. 98), that there are good *practical* reasons for viewing God in this way.[12] That such denials, and innumerable others like them, can be found in the writings of Kant's *commentators* is unquestionable. Perovich, for example, seems to think that because Kant believes God's Triune nature is "theoretically unfathomable," the theoretical standpoint is entirely useless to the theologian or religious believer. But if we put aside the reductionistic tradition of interpreting Kant's religious views, and approach the text afresh (with a full recognition of the perspectival character of Kant's Critical way of thinking), the belief that Kant's hidden agenda is to do away with all theoretical theology will fall like scales from our mind's eye. Kant has nothing of the sort in mind.

Rather, his intention is to provide the *practical ground* for a proper way of *thinking about* God from a theoretical standpoint, by (1) *denying* that we can *know about* God from the theoretical standpoint, and (2) *affirming* that this standpoint, when directed towards the supersensible, can nevertheless be used to obtain hypotheses for rational belief, the value of which can then be confirmed or denied by practical reason. This interplay of denial and affirmation is the source of the "openness" and "balance" which Perovich proclaims "are quite simply not there" in Kant's position (p. 98).[13]

This means it is quite wrong to say that Kant believes "that numerous Christian doctrines are intelligible from the practical standpoint and *from none other*" (p. 103, note 9), even though Perovich believes Kant is "transparent" in his support of such a position. What is the case is that Kant consistently and openly argues that, when comparing the theoretical and practical standpoints for their relative importance, we must always put the practical *before* the theoretical, as its ground, rather than *vice versa*. Hence, although it is incorrect to say that for Kant "[t]he moral perspective [=standpoint] provides the only legitimate context for interpreting" Christian doctrines (p. 98), it would be correct to say this standpoint must be the rational *ground* for any such interpretation. The difference between true religion and false religion is not that one is practical and the other theoretical, but that one allows the practical to *govern* the theoretical, while the other requires the theoretical to govern the practical. Thus, in discussing the role of theoretical, "statutory laws" in religion, Kant does not categorically deny their validity, but requires that the "priority" be given to practical, moral laws:

> So much depends, when we wish to unite two good things, upon the order in which they are united! True *enlightenment* lies in this very distinction; therein the service of God becomes first and foremost a free and hence a moral service.[14]

This emphasis on the proper *order* in our combination of the practical and theoretical standpoints means that, for Kant, there is always a space left open for theoretical beliefs—beliefs which can never be fully justified by practical reason, but are acceptable because of their ability to strengthen our reliance on the latter (see above, note 13).

Kant's "Critical theology," therefore, operates in precisely the way suggested by Perovich's "revision" of Kant's position: "The Kantian need not abandon his commitment to practical foundations of religion, but he must supplement them if he would also be a Christian" (p. 101). I believe Kant himself supported exactly the same position in his own explanation of a healthy form of religious belief.[15] By using our religious experience and our practical reason as the two "known" points on the map of religion, we can, as it were, "triangulate" in order to find appropriate ways of thinking about the God who forever remains beyond the grasp of our theoretical knowledge.

If my interpretation is correct, then Perovich and Kant are in agreement that "triangulating" God is the best advice to offer to a philosophically-minded Christian. This requires us to see religion not merely as a set of theoretical dogmas to *think* about, nor merely as a set of practical rules to *act* upon, but as a set of *experiences* which show us the way to *be*. This does not mean that religious thoughts and actions are rendered superfluous: on the contrary, they are only in this way seen in their proper perspective. For only *after* we have rooted ourselves in such experiences (i.e., those which many philosophers, unlike Kant, have not been afraid to call "mystical" (see above, note 10)) can we then *interpret* these through the doctrine of the primacy of practical reason, and in so doing, use them to *triangulate* our way to an adequate theoretical (though hypothetical) understanding of the God within us.

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NOTES

1. Anthony N. Perovich, "Kant A Christian? A Reply to Palmquist," *Faith and Philosophy*, volume 9, number 1 (January 1992), pp. 95-104. Subsequent references to this article will appear in the text as bracketed page numbers.

2. Stephen Palmquist, "Immanuel Kant: A Christian Philosopher?", *Faith and Philosophy*, volume 6, number 1 (January 1989), pp. 65-75.

3. Kant distinguishes between metaphysics ("the *inventory* of all our possessions through *pure* reason, systematically arranged") and Critique (reason's own self-examination of its sources and limits) as early as the preface to the first edition of the first *Critique*. See *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929), pp. Axx-xxi. Page numbers refer to the original German versions, with "A" indicating material unique to the first edition. Page numbers for other references to Kant's writings always refer to the Berlin Academy edition of Kant's works, and are followed by the English pagination in brackets.

4. For a more detailed explanation of these levels, see my book, *Kant's System of Perspectives* (Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1993), especially Chapter II.

5. These articles, which unfortunately have not appeared in their logical order, are as follows: "Kant's Critique of Mysticism: (1) The Critical *Dreams*," *Philosophy & Theology*, volume 3, number 4 (Summer 1989), pp. 355-83 (published with several hundred gross editorial and typesetting errors, which render it virtually unintelligible in its uncorrected form); "Kant's Critique of Mysticism: (2) Critical Mysticism," *Philosophy & Theology*, volume 4, number 1 (Fall 1989), pp. 67-94; "Four Perspectives on Moral Judgment: The Rational Principles of Jesus and Kant," *The Heythrop Journal*, volume 32, number 2 (April 1991), pp. 216-32; "Kant's Theistic Solution to the Problem of Transcendental Theology," Rodica Croitoru (editor), *Kant and the Transcendental Problem* (Bucharest: University of Bucharest Faculty of Philosophy, 1991), pp. 148-78; "Kant's 'Appropriation' of Lampe's God," *Harvard Theological Review*, volume 85, number 1 (January 1992), pp. 85-108; "Does Kant Reduce Religion to Morality?," *Kant-Studien*, volume 83, number 2 (1992), pp. 129-48; "Kant's Theocratic Metaphysics," *Analele Universitatii Din Timisoara*, volume 4 (1992), pp. 55-70; "The Kingdowm of God is at Hand!" (Did Kant Really Say That?)," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, volume 11, number 4 (October 1994), pp. 421-37. I am now working on a sequel to my book on Kant's Critical philosophy (see above, note 4), entitled *Kant's Critical Religion*, about half of which will consist of revised versions of the above articles. Originally, I had planned to include this material as Part Four (Chapters X-XII) of *Kant's System of Perspectives* (as stated in notes 26, 32 and 38 of my previous *Faith and Philosophy* article (see above, note 2)), but I have now decided to publish these as two separate monographs.

6. See e.g., Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, translated by Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1956), pp. 119-21 (124-126).

7. See *Kant's System of Perspectives* (*op. cit.*), pp. 355-56.

8. See *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, translated by T. M. Greene and H. H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 153 (142).

9. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, translated by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), pp. 188-92 (28-32).

10. In the pair of articles on Kant's "Critical mysticism" cited above (see above, note 5) I have demonstrated at length Kant's keen interest in mysticism, as well as explaining why most of Kant's *remarks* about mysticism were negative. The fact that Perovich's own "modifications" of Kant's position refer explicitly to mysticism (pp. 101-02) is therefore noteworthy. Provided that mystical experience is clearly distinguished from "intellectual intuition," and provided no claim is made to have thereby reached "empirical *knowledge*" of ultimate reality, I would heartily affirm Perovich's conviction "that nothing essential to Kantianism is sacrificed or rendered inconsequent by the recognition of mysticism as a legitimate cognitive mode" (p. 102).

11. I argue this point in detail in my article, "Does Kant Reduce Religion to Morality?" (*op. cit.*).

12. The text Perovich does quote, from *Critique of Pure Reason* (*op. cit.*), p. B270, does indeed contain some very strong words concerning the illegitimacy of claiming to have a supersensible experience of ghosts, clairvoyance or ESP. Yet Kant is here denying only that such experiences can ever obtain the status of empirical *knowledge*, not that they have no part in "human experience" in general, as Perovich assumes (p. 98). Moreover, Kant says nothing about whether or not Critical philosophy might provide some other way of *thinking about* such experiences. In other words, he is denying only that there will ever be a *science* of such experiences.

Incidentally, Perovich himself refers to Kant's distinction between thinking and knowing, using it to suggest that we can never know anything about the supersensible (p. 101). If "knowledge" means only *theoretical* knowledge, then of course, this represents an accurate interpretation of Kant's position. But we must not forget that Kant not only believed in *practical* knowledge, but regarded it more highly than its theoretical counterpart (something which some Christian philosophers and theologians unfortunately seem reluctant to do). Perovich underestimates just how much of Christian doctrine *can* be justified from the practical standpoint.

13. Perovich claims that "nothing beyond what our commitment to morality necessitates" is justified by the practical standpoint (p. 99). In his *Religion*, however, Kant's actual position is that we are not *required* to think or act in any way other than that which our practical standpoint necessitates, but that we are *justified* in extending religion beyond morality as long as the non-moral (hence, non-necessary) elements serve to encourage the development of our moral standpoint. (I defend this point in detail in "Does Kant Reduce Religion To Morality?" (*op. cit.*), where I argue that morality is a necessary, but *not* a sufficient element in Kant's conception of true religion.) Hence, Perovich's charge that I "pretend...that other perspectives...are legitimate but underemphasized" (p. 100) is unfair; what I claim is that other standpoints are *legitimized* by the practical, and perhaps even *complete* the practical in some important ways, even though they can never be legitimate when used independently of their practical ground.

14. *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (*op. cit.*), pp. 178-79 (166-67).

15. The main difference between Perovich and myself, once the above clarifications of my position have been made, seems therefore to be a difference of opinion over just which reading of Kant it is that "conflicts with Kant's texts on every page" (pp. 98-99). And the only way to settle such a difference is to go into the details of the text itself. Although neither Perovich nor I went into sufficient detail in our *Faith and Philosophy* articles to *demonstrate* the validity of our opinions on this issue, I hope my subsequent efforts in this direction (see above, note 5) have provided at least a partial demonstration of my position—a position which I believe is fully consistent with all four of the "desiderata" which Perovich thinks must "be satisfied by any admissible supplement" to the position he believes Kant holds (p. 101).