

Overcoming the Illusions of Piety through Rational and Phenomenological Religiosity

Alexander Gungov (University of Sofia)

Abstract: In his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant describes and criticizes two illusions of piety: the illusion of superstition and the illusion of self-deception. According to him, both illusions essentially hinder the pious life prescribed by historical religions, dooming piety in its true form as impossible there. For Kant, true religiosity coincides with authentic morality, realized by free will with a view to practical reason. The illusory nature of religious experience can also be discussed from the perspective of Husserl's phenomenology. There, illusory nature would arise if religious dogma and rituality were perceived as religious experience. The founder of phenomenology argues that authentic religious experience is possible, possessing all the attributes required by the concept of "experience." In addition to distinguishing between apparent and genuine religiosity, both authors agree that within the latter, they accept the possibility of "becoming like God."

Keywords: superstition, illusion, self-deception, religious experience, *eidos*

The illusory application of theoretical reason in Kant is well known, when to the ideas of reason are attributed a constitutive application, leading to the well-known dialectical antinomies. The revision of constitutive application and its replacement with a regulative one avoids the illusory status of two realities commonly understood as belonging to religion—the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. The idea of the existence of God, considered in its aspect of "perfection", represents the "ideal of reason", with which rational theoretical cognition complies, but which is very easily "objectified", "hypostatized", and "personified."¹ This is how the personal God arises, which, as an object

¹ Kant, I., *Religion within the Limits of Reason Itself*, transl. from German by Valentin Kanavrov (Sofia: Open Society Foundation Press, 1997), 187-188 [in Bulgarian].

of cognition, is an illusory misunderstanding, precisely because of the attribution of a constitutive function to the ideal of reason. Regardless of this, in practical application, “the existence of God” is not only permissible but even imperative, although not as a theoretical entity with the corresponding implications, but only as a postulate of practical reason. Similarly, the immortality of the soul also acquires the status of a postulate of practical reason, with both postulates thereby acquiring philosophical legitimacy and beginning to play a primary role in Kant’s moral philosophy.² Therefore, it is even justified to argue that “Kant’s philosophy is semantically and logically possible only with the presupposition of the existence of God, because He is equally necessary as a “transcendental ideal” and “regulatory principle.””³ As for the place of God and the immortality of the soul in “historical religion”, Kant considers them to be entirely acceptable components, which are essentially a reflection of the postulates of practical reason, just as historical religion itself is a reflection or, more precisely, a misunderstanding of the only true moral religion.

It is precisely within the bosom of historical religion that the illusions of piety arise, which Kant describes, explains, and shows how they should be overcome so that historical religion, although a pale reflection of true moral religion, can still contribute to the genuine good way of life, which is the moral life. These illusions boil down to two main types: illusions of superstition and illusions of self-deception. The first type is due to the misconception that only by performing church rituals, without good moral actions, can one obtain the favor of the supreme being, leading to the forgiveness of sins, as well as grace and salvation. In the second type of illusion, the believer imagines, completely unfoundedly, that it is possible to influence supernatural beings by natural means, without taking into account that the former cannot influence the latter at all.⁴ Unlike Kant, Edmund Husserl does not use the term “illusions of piety”, but by drawing a distinction between religiosity based on phenomenologically understood experience and religiosity following

² Kanavrov, V., “How is the Religious a Priori Possible?” Stefanov, I., editor, *Humanism, Culture, Religion* (Sofia: Lik, 1997), 83-85 [in Bulgarian].

³ Angelov, Tsv., “The Ethical Philosophy of Immanuel Kant as a Transcendental Correlation of Morality, Reason and Faith,” *Ethical Studies*, year VII, issue 7, no. 2, December 2022, 112.

⁴ Kant, I., *Religion within the limits of reason itself*, 151.

religious dogmas and traditional prescriptions, the founder of contemporary phenomenology also distinguishes between “real” and “apparent” religiosity.⁵

The general issue of religious illusion is interpreted by the two philosophers from different philosophical premises and in different ways. For Kant, the sensory-categorical character of natural reality is paramount, which is why the ideas of reason—the existence of God and the immortality of the soul—as well as objects derived from them, such as grace, miracles, and religious mysteries, could not be perceived and therefore cannot be related to experience.⁶ Furthermore, the aforementioned ideas and their consequences do not obey the network of categories of understanding—first and foremost the category of causality—and therefore cannot have any place in the natural world and are thus transcendent in the full sense of the word. Husserl also accepts the transcendence of God, but, approaching it through phenomenological methodology, he takes the position that the transcendence of God is not complete otherworldliness. For Husserl, the transcendence of God must be subjected to phenomenological reduction, similar to the reduction of the transcendence of the world to consciousness.⁷ But it is precisely after reduction that God can and does become a full-fledged element of phenomenological experience, which is why it now makes sense to discuss the evidence and completeness of religious experience⁸—characteristics that are not illusory or, at least, are not illusory as a rule. Any illusory aspect in phenomenology on this issue would arise from uncritically mixing the dogmatic-traditionalist conception of God with a phenomenological understanding of religious experience.

The special status of religion in Kant, and to some extent the illusions of piety, are also predetermined by the denial of intellectual intuition as a theoretical-cognitive ability foreign to the finite intellect. It is noteworthy that intellectual intuition is not completely excluded in Kant’s system, since it is nevertheless admitted as inherent in a hypothetical infinite intellect, whose thinking and contemplation would coincide, and this two-way action would obviously give rise to a reality that is simultaneously a process of thinking and contemplation. In finite cog-

⁵ Bello, A.A., *Husserl Sul problema di Dio* (Roma: Edizioni Studium, 1985).

⁶ Kant, I., *Religion within the limits of reason itself*, 121–129.

⁷ Bello, A.A., *Husserl Sul problema di Dio*, 63.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 28–29, 121.

nition (such as ours), intuition is sensory, and thinking is discursive. The combination of sensible intuition and discursive thinking gives rise to experience and reveals to us the realm of nature.

It is worth noting that, unlike the previous tradition, Kant endows intellectual intuition with a special contemplative “capacity for generation” that is lacking in his predecessors from Descartes to Leibniz, including Spinoza, where intellectual contemplation is said to grasp an already formed reality. The active intuition inherent in Kant’s hypothetical archetypal infinite intellect, somewhat unexpectedly, almost coincides with Giambattista Vico’s principle *verum factum convertuntur*—“The true and the made are convertible.” For Vico, this is an expression of the principle of truth, through which he criticizes the Cartesian principle of self-consciousness, which possesses only “certainty” but is hopelessly deprived of truth. Truth invariably presupposes knowledge of how the object of cognition can or should be made: the truth about a given watch is accessible to the watchmaker because he knows how to make a watch; the truth of mathematics is accessible to the mathematician because mathematics is nothing but the product of mathematicians. From this, however, it can be assumed that the truth of nature cannot be accessible to the nature lover or naturalist, simply because the creator of nature is God—and this is precisely what Vico asserts.

Unlike Friedrich Schelling, for whom intellectual intuition is a prerequisite for cognition of divine reality, neither does Kant consider it a similar requirement, whereby its absence automatically prevents such cognition, nor does Vico claim that the principle of *verum factum* is a necessary condition for the cognition of God. For Kant, however, the lack of intellectual intuition excludes the “reserve option” for cognition, since the idea of God cannot be perceived by the senses and, therefore, God cannot be known in the same way that natural objects are known. For Vico, however, cognition that transcends the human world in the narrow sense of the word is possible. This refers to knowledge of the role of divine providence in history through the application of the *verum factum* principle in combination with metaphysical knowledge acquired in a manner close to Cartesian (despite Vico’s constant criticism of Descartes) intellectual intuition. But the course of history in Vico’s understanding is a manifestation of divine providence in the human world, which is undoubtedly an overcoming of the absolute transcendence of God attributed to Him by Kant with regard to pure reason.

Husserl also does not impose any condition for special intuitive cognition belonging to the consciousness constituting the experience of divine reality. However, as a true Cartesian, Husserl accepts the coincidence of truth and certainty as a fundamental requirement of phenomenology. Therefore, the German phenomenologist fully shares the possibility that religious experience possesses the intuitive fullness of religious consciousness, accompanied by true evidence. It is precisely fulfilled intention, as opposed to empty intention, which is only a signification and not the object as it is in its entirety, that determines for the Freiburg philosopher the main difference between genuine religiosity and traditionalist-dogmatic religiosity, which relies on empty (but not automatically “untrue”) significations.⁹ The latter is more of a formal adherence to ritual rules for the sake of the rules themselves and could be seen as similar to Kant’s “ritual religiosity”, imbued with illusory superstition, but without receiving similar evaluative characteristics from Husserl.

Intellectual intuition within phenomenology is by no means some kind of exceptional cognition of the supernatural; it is simply cognition of another type of transcendence, different from the transcendence of the world. This is cognition in the sphere of religious experience, which should be constituted according to the same principles as any other sensory or intellectual experience. Afterwards, categorical cognition is constituted above it, and finally it would be possible to reach eidetic intuition. But neither primary religious experience, nor categorical cognition, nor eidetic intuition claim to be knowledge of God Himself, or even real steps towards ascending to God Himself; they are only genuine, i.e., true, phenomenological experiences of the constitution of God in consciousness.¹⁰ It must be acknowledged that Husserl admits the existence of illusory evidence, but at the same time he offers ways and guarantees for overcoming illusions, relying on the original teleology of the transcendental Ego.

The aforementioned cognitive and ontological principles of Kant’s theoretical philosophy serve as a completely consistent basis for a specific interpretation of historical religions with their illusions, as well as for the critical overcoming of this type of religiosity and liberation from semblances inherent in them through authentic moral religion. These foundations consistently lead to the interpretation of the god worshipped in historical religions as completely transcendent. With regard to such a

⁹ Ibid., 28-29, 121.

¹⁰ Ibid., 123.

god, not only is the incarnation of the Son and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church community rejected, but also the possibility of any—even indirect—type of communication with divine reality. Kant finds the only orientation towards such a god through the art of *topoi*, using the *topos* “of the perfect and the less perfect”, resembling Aristotle’s *topos* “of the great and the small”: this *topos* roughly states that “what is inherent in the perfect being as the highest goal—the moral life—should also be inherent as the highest goal in the less perfect one.”

Another consequence of Kant’s theoretical position is that miracles are impossible in the strictly deterministic order of nature, and the acceptance of mysteries is meaningless because that which cannot be cognized is obviously outside the order of nature and cannot in turn influence the natural world in any way. A single mystery is possible in the moral world—the origin of freedom—but it is permissible there because morality differs from nature both in its reality and in the manner in which it is cognized. By the same logic of the “completely transcendent”, divine grace is also discussed, which, due to its complete transcendence, could neither be prayed for nor experienced. The religious community, as a natural community, is also blocked from the transcendent supernatural and is subject to natural laws, but it still has the privilege of transitioning into a moral community with supersensory but, of course, not supernatural, dimensions.

The violation of the insurmountable boundaries between this world and the world beyond, between the natural and the supernatural, leads within the framework of critical transcendentalism to the two aforementioned illusions of piety: that of self-deception and that of superstition. The illusion of self-deception can be seen as the primary illusion, leading to delusions in the religious sphere, taking the form of “methodical madness”, while the illusion of superstition can be seen as its consequence, preventing the realization of true moral religiosity and its corresponding practice. Self-deception manifests itself in two forms: fetishism—belief in the possibility of supernatural realities being influenced by natural means, e.g., begging for grace, as well as the practice of magic; this type of illusory belief is complemented by another illusion, directed in the opposite direction—belief in the possibility of the supernatural influencing the natural, such as when one relies on grace to bring about healing. Superstition, on the other hand, resides in the delusion that observing certain rituals and professing certain dogmatic beliefs as

such, rather than through leading a good, i.e., moral life, will lead to the favor of the supreme being—God.¹¹

Both illusions give rise to a false piety, expressed in superstitious worship of God, which hinders true moral piety. The latter would be justified as genuine worship of God, if such worship were necessary at all. From this perspective, it would be self-deception to believe that prayer, for example, could be a means of divine grace, influence the forgiveness of sins, have any bearing on the salvation of the souls of the dead, or strengthen the health of the infirm. From the point of view of true moral religion, prayer can be a meaningful activity only if it serves to revive and maintain a godly moral way of life through images of the imagination, regulated by the postulates of pure reason and limited by the categories of the understanding. Similarly, it would be wrong to expect grace from church attendance—its proper function would be to provide a sensory representation of the community of believers, through which they encourage one another to lead a moral life. The same applies to baptism, which could only metaphorically be considered an automatic forgiveness of sins accumulated up to that point, or a condition for the forgiveness of future sins. Baptism is nothing more than an initiation into a community of morally pious people, within which moral religion is practiced. Finally, the Eucharist, as the fullness of communion with God, must be rethought in terms of an attitude of brotherly love that helps fulfill moral duty.¹²

The illusory worship of God leads to moral distortions, the most serious of which are piety, philistinism, and priestliness. Piety preached by historical religion cannot be considered true piety because it is contempt for oneself, through which one seeks favor. Hypocritical philistinism, representing a slavish state of mind, also contradicts the idea of a higher moral essence, which God undoubtedly is. By priestliness, Kant means “mediation in communication with God, leading to the loss of the believer’s free will and a willingness to blindly follow the priest’s instructions.” All three illusory distortions are overcome from the standpoint of moral virtue. Confidence in one’s own dignity, based on reason, takes the place of humiliating piety. Reconciliation based on the principle of non-contradiction—what has already been done cannot be undone—is a truly moral approach that should replace philistine repen-

¹¹ Kant, I., *Religion within the Limits of Reason Itself*, 153–155.

¹² Ibid., 168–170.

tance, and spiritual (moral) guidance is the only acceptable form of mediation between the believer and God.¹³

The moral disposition of the believer, which is a necessary and sufficient condition for true moral religion and its practice, is characterized by a special kind of practical cognition. Unlike theoretical cognition, which is achieved through the interaction of the categories of understanding and sensory perceptions mediated by the schemata of the faculty of judgment, the categories of the will cognize without perceptions and at the same time create the reality of the will's goal-setting. This is how real infinite practical intellect manifests itself and is realized, surpassing theoretical infinite intellect, which can only be assumed as hypothetical (Kant 1974, p. 107).¹⁴ In this way, the activity of practical intellect based on free will confers a sacred status on moral actions.¹⁵

By allowing for a meaningful phenomenological approach to the idea of God, as well as to divine reality, Husserl offers a particularly intersubjective derivation of God, which includes central phenomenological concepts such as the transcendental Ego, *eidōs*, transcendental community, and teleology. In this way, we are actually presented with a variation on the teleological proof of God's existence. This phenomenological derivation of God begins with the *eidōs* of the transcendental Ego, which immediately and necessarily presupposes the *eidōs* of transcendental community. Furthermore, the *eidōs* of the transcendental Ego includes within itself the existence of the Ego itself. Bearing in mind that its leading and unchanging characteristic is primordial teleology, this characteristic is inseparable from the teleology of transcendental community, as well as from the teleology of the world. Hence, it follows that the intersubjective teleology of the world points to the existence of God as its source.¹⁶ Such a teleological demonstration is also supported by the conceivability of God from the position of intersubjective empathy, manifested in the view of the simultaneous constitution of the world from an infinite number of positions.¹⁷

¹³ Ibid., 170–174.

¹⁴ Kant, I., *Critique of Practical Reason*, transl. from German Tseko Torbov (Sofia: BAN Press, 1974), 107 [in Bulgarian].

¹⁵ Kant, I., *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, transl. from German Valentina Topuzova (Sofia: Science and Art Press, 1974), 100 [in Bulgarian].

¹⁶ Bello, A.A., 1985. *Husserl Sul problema di Dio*, 98–101.

¹⁷ Ibid., 70.

Husserl directs his reflections on God in a direction that is even closer to Kant's moral religion. This is the possibility of achieving divine status in the life of the intersubjective community. He draws attention to the peculiarity that the individual will contains the idea of infinite perfection. Within the framework of the intersubjective will, this ideal is reformulated as a striving for infinite perfection of the community itself. The quintessence of this striving is the expression of the will for a true self, for a true community, for true humanity, i.e., for life in eternal and infinite truth.¹⁸

In the actions of the will, both in Kant's practical philosophy and in Husserl's intersubjective phenomenology, there is a tendency to liken God according to the concept of deification or *theosis*, but without expecting assistance through grace or *kenosis* in this process. In both these cases, reliance is placed solely on the infinite potential of the self, either in the bosom of practical reason or in the bosom of the intersubjective community. For Kant, the possibility and guarantee of becoming like God comes from the infinite activity of human free will, following the ideal of divine free will, the latter being valued as sacred because of its inability to desire evil.¹⁹ It is important to emphasize that likening God is the realization of the moral essence of practical reason, not the application of religious principles. Therefore, it seems to me that the assertion regarding the necessity of "(religion) intentionally defining the ultimate intelligible and transnaturalistic goal of morality, with a view to the very rule of morality, namely autonomy and freedom, possible only in a transnaturalistic plan, resp. in an intelligible context"²⁰ is far from Kant's philosophy of religion, where morality takes the place of religion. In this line of thought, it is acceptable to consider that "the categorical imperative contains the possibility of viewing moral obligations as commandments of God,"²¹ but it should be emphasized and kept in mind that this is not about a god to whom we submit or a god to whom we try to ascend, but only about a god into whom we transform ourselves by

¹⁸ Ibid., 92-93, 96

¹⁹ Kant, I., *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 100.

²⁰ Angelov, Tsv., "The Religion of Reason and the Transcendental Ideal in Immanuel Kant's Philosophy," *Ethical Studies*, year VI, issue 6, no. 2, December 2021, 190.

²¹ Angelov, Tsv., "Ethico-Theological Dimensions of Kant's Practical Philosophy," *Harmony in Difference: Proceedings* (Sofia: Za Bukvite Academic Publishing House, 2023), 176.

realizing our moral essence and impulse. Husserl observes a similar striving for complete cognitive truth and infinite moral perfection on the part of the intersubjective community, which is nevertheless a milder version of Kant's almost explicit declaration of *theosis* without *kenosis* and without the need for grace. This more restrained version of *theosis* is mainly due to phenomenology's clear thesis that the infinite, the eternal, and the perfect are final idealizations which cannot be grasped in intuitive completeness and in their corresponding true evidence.

