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THE INTOLERANCE OF REASON

For a long time now Kant's essay on *The Conflict of the Faculties* has been an object of both celebration and criticism. Here Kant provides a defence of the political autonomy of the philosophy faculty — or, more broadly construed, the humanities faculty — that has proved very durable. The philosophy faculty, Kant argues, must remain free of government interference "with regard to its teaching," because its object is the pursuit of truth which is in turn identified with the free exercise of reason. This defence has provided the stuff of countless ceremonial speeches and the target for innumerable critiques.

In his essay on "The Idea of the University" Jürgen Habermas, for example, appears to depart from Kant by sketching an ironic dislocation between the idea and its material conditions of existence — the former promising to unify the faculties in a univocal principle of reason, the latter threatening to splinter them into the shards of "procedural reason" demanded by the social utilisation of knowledge. For his part, Jacques Derrida, in his "Mochlos" essay, locates Kant's problem in a series of "aporia," or ineluctable contradictions. Apparently these make it impossible to segregate reason and governance, freedom and discipline and, finally, the "inside" and the "outside" of the university. Under this kind of fracturing and blurring, argues Derrida, the Kantian idea of the university becomes unrepresentable.

There is a sense though in which such critique is more Kantian than it knows. Habermas might well seek to relocate the relation between the idea and its material conditions inside the dialectic of history, but this dialectic is meant to solve the problem originally posed by Kant: its goal is to synthesise the faculties into a simulacrum of unified reason. Similarly, for all its bravura deconstruction of the university into its constitutive contradictions, Derrida's analysis is filled with a Kantian longing. After all, what is the unrepresentable idea of the university other than an improvisation on Kant's theme of the "noumenon," forever beyond the reach of human representation yet forever tempting us to represent it?

We can suggest then that the cyclical celebrations and critiques of Kant's defence of the philosophy faculty remain within the problem-space first opened by that Prussian philosopher. If we wish to chart this space from the outside it will be necessary to moor it more firmly in the circumstances of its emergence. In doing so we will discover that Kantian reason is less the free pursuit of truth than a regimen that imposes a certain "relation to truth" as a discipline.

Kant wrote his defence in response to an attempt by the Prussian government to censor his major work of philosophical theology, *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone.* In order to evade the Prussian censor, Kant, taking advantage of the still porous borders of the territorial state, secured a licence to publish from the University of Jena, which saw the *Religion* appear in 1793. By June of 1794 Kant had written his response to these events, in the form of the central essay of the *Conflict* — "The Conflict of the Philosophy Faculty with the Theology Faculty." But in October he received a cabinet order, signed by the Justice Minister Wöllner, requiring him to cease the "misuse" of his philosophy "to distort and disparage many of the cardinal and basic teachings of the Holy Scriptures and of Christianity." In the event, the full text of the *Conflict* was not published until 1799, when Kant viewed the times as more favourable.

The usual view of this saga is as predictable as it is triumphalist. Kant is typically seen as waging an heroic defence of reason against Lutheran orthodoxy and Prussian reaction, the latter bent on "stamping out the enlightenment" following the death of Frederick the Great. This is the view found in many philosophical discussions of the *Conflict* and echoed in many self-congratulatory discourses on the "critical" role of the humanities. Considered historically, however, Kant's conduct and discourse amount to something less than an exemplary defence of freedom and reason. To see why we must first take a glance at a development that was decisive for the conflictual circumstances in which Kant found himself: the "modernisation" of the Prussian university, for which the establishment of the University of Halle was the prototype.

The conflicts in which Kant found himself embroiled in Königsberg at the end of the eighteenth century first emerged at the University of Halle at the century's beginning. On the one hand, Halle was the product of Prussian state-building. The court bureaucracy wanted a university that would train administrators, pastors and teachers whose primary loyalty would be to the emergent territorial state, rather than to trans-territorial Lutheranism, or to the medieval form of the university as an autonomous urban corporation. This dictated building a new kind of university, directly responsible to a state ministry, and dedicated to the mundane common weal, rather than to the glory of God or the defence of the true faith. These were the "statist" terms in which Halle was founded in 1694; in which the teaching of law was given priority over theology; and in which Christian Thomasius — a noted "Staatsdenker" — was appointed to head the faculty of law.

On the other hand, the city of Halle had been a hive of Pietist activity since the 1670s. Distinguishing itself from Lutheran orthodoxy via a critique of sacramentalism, and characterised by the pursuit of a "true inner religion,"

Pietism had assumed spiritual and social dominance under the leadership of Philip Spener and A.H. Francke. This "social movement" was also characterised by an intense public ethical activism which was responsible for producing the infrastructure of a welfare society in Halle — orphanages, schools, workhouses, factories, trading companies — before the state had entered the field.

For a time the Pietists and the statists — personified in Francke and Thomasius — could make common cause against Lutheran orthodoxy. The emblem of this strange alliance was the so-called public-private division; that is, the segregation of private religious worship from the exercise of civil authority. Forged in the furnace of religious civil war, this policy was the means of keeping the warring confessions apart by secularising the governmental sphere and instituting toleration in the private sphere. It should be clear though that the Pietists and the statists policed this boundary from opposite sides: the former as the means of preserving the "invisible church" of Pietism against the public power of orthodox Lutheranism; the latter as the means of removing the religious confessions from the political domain altogether. The instability of the initial alliance became apparent as soon as the Pietists themselves achieved social dominance in Halle, in the last decades of the seventeenth century. For then they forgot about the public-private division and set about using the instruments of civil power to enforce the "true inner religion."

One of the first results of this development was a bitter conflict between the University's faculties of theology, law and philosophy, beginning at the turn of the century and lasting until the 1740s and beyond. As the meeting point for a religion bent on using the state as an instrument of spiritual discipline, a state bent on subordinating religion to civil governance, and a hyper-rationalist philosophy faculty for whom both state and religion were little more than expressions of "pure ideas," the University of Halle provided the ideal theatre for tripartite internecine warfare. Initially it was the Pietists who played this vicious game with greatest ferocity and success. The (temporary) silencing of Thomasius in 1713 and the exiling of the rationalist philosopher Christian Wolff in 1723, secured by Francke through supporters in the court bureaucracy, make today's "culture wars" seem quite tame.

We are now in a position to review the standard view of Kant's place in this set of circumstances. It should already be clear that Kant's censuring, following the controversy stirred by the publication of his *Religion*, was very far from being a last minute attempt to turn the tide of enlightenment. On the contrary, it was only the latest in a long line of such struggles, by no means uniformly favourable to orthodoxy, stretching back over the entire century. Far from being an heroic stand against the forces of reaction, Kant's was only a minor skirmish in the vast and complex battle in which the statists, Pietists and rationalists

had been engaged. This battle, which had first broken out at Halle, had been carried to Königsberg partly by students of the initial antagonists, but more importantly by the inherent cultural and political volatility of the modernised Prussian university.

Further, it is by no means self-evident that Kant's censuring was an anti-enlightenment gesture driven by a state-backed orthodoxy. Here two factors must be kept in mind. First, the work of Kant's that initially attracted the censor's attention — the *Religion* — is by no means an irenic work of pure philosophy removed from religious controversy. On the contrary, it is a work that denigrates Catholicism as a primitive sacramentalism, denies that Judaism is a religion at all, and proclaims the obsolescence of both religions in relation to the imminent appearance of a "pure rational faith" from the historical bosom of Protestantism. (Here Kant's debts to both Pietism and Deism are evident). Second, it must be remembered that at this time the public-private division — interpreted as freedom of private devotion coupled with a strict policing of public polemics — was itself viewed as a cornerstone of "enlightenment." Wöllner's (nowadays notorious) Edict on Religion had recently restated this policy with the pronouncement that: "A subject of the Prussian state is declared free to hold what religious views he likes, so long as he quietly performs his duties as a good citizen of the state and so long as he keeps any peculiar opinion to himself and carefully guards himself from spreading it or persuading others, making them uncertain in their faith or leading them astray." This was the means of enforcing toleration and removing the warring confessions from the political sphere. Are we right in suggesting then that the policy threshold transgressed by the publication of Kant's *Religion* was not one set by orthodox theology, but was in fact the state's own threshold for keeping religious conflict out of the civil domain?

In light of this we can suggest that Kant's censuring was symptomatic not of a struggle between enlightenment and religious orthodoxy but of a conflict between two different kinds of enlightenment. Compare, in this regard, Kant's defence with Thomasius's quite different argument for depriving theology faculties of the right to legally decide theological disputes. Thomasius too has been described as a hero of the enlightenment — and, indeed, in a sense he was — but not of the same enlightenment that Kant championed. For Thomasius's argument is that the attempt to impose a legally-binding theological decision in the civil sphere, by claiming access to universal truth, can only court the disaster of religious civil war — given, that is, the existence of confessional disagreement over what is to count as "universal truth." The government's duty is thus not to establish civil society on the basis of universal truth. Rather, it is to ensure that no group claiming access to such truth is permitted to jeopardise social peace by imposing it in the civil sphere. This is

also the thrust of Wöllner's Edict which can be treated as "enlightened" in the same sense as Thomasius's doctrine.

Kant on the other hand argues for limiting the civil power of the theology faculty — at least with regard to philosophical discussion — on the grounds that the philosophy faculty is indeed the vehicle for the pursuit of universal truth, while theology and law reach no higher than social utility. Kant moreover thinks that civil society should and can be based on this philosophical truth, which his *Doctrine of Right* labels the "Law of Freedom," rather than on the merely historical and prudential goal of social peace. To this end Kant sets limits to religious toleration. It is permitted for rulers to tolerate various confessions for the time being, pending the imminent withering away of the sacramental religions and the historical appearance of the "pure rational faith." Ordinary people however must not adopt this stance — that is, the view that all religions are equally true and useful in their place — for such toleration ("indifferentism") would prevent them from pursuing the universally "true rational religion" and convincing others of its truth. Unlike Thomasius, Kant thus sees the state not as the means of securing a harmless contestation between rival universal truths, but as itself the future (democratic) expression of one such truth, that of philosophical reason.

This helps to explain the limits to Kant's defence of the autonomy of the faculties. For Kant only the philosophy faculty should be free of governmental supervision, as it is the only faculty dedicated to the pursuit of "truth" construed as spontaneous individual critical reflection. The faculties of law and theology must submit to such supervision, because their role is to secure the civil and moral governance of the people through the teaching of disciplinary "statutes." This state of affairs is acceptable, Kant argues, owing to the moral incompetence of the people — Kant calls them *"Idioten"* in the *Conflict* — at the present stage of their historical development. Before the people can "throw off their self-incurred tutelage" they must renounce the "earlier" sacramentalisms of Catholicism, Judaism and orthodox Protestantism. For this to happen though they must acquire the ability to undertake a rational reinterpretation of Christian doctrine, transforming their "sensuous" belief in the historical truth of the sacraments and the Bible into a sophisticated allegorical reading of them as symbols of a purely rational "moral law" within man.

What Kant doesn't explain though is how the people are to pass from their historical moral incompetence into the condition of rational self-governance. He makes no reference to mass elementary schooling, for example, which the Pietists had initiated at Halle and which the state was in the process of building into a governmental system.

This is because for Kant the defining condition of the rational pursuit of moral truth is that it is carried out in accordance with "self-chosen laws" and not on the basis of ordained statutes such as those of law and theology. The kind of rational-allegorical reinterpretation of Christianity that Kant calls "pure rational faith" is itself however the product of a sophisticated and arduous intellectual discipline. Kant might well identify this discipline with the "free use of reason," but he was confronted by a population as yet lacking the required intellectual equipment. For Kant, blind to the social and disciplinary conditions of his species of reason, this lack could only appear as a refusal to be free. He thus oscillates between assuming that knowledge of rational principle is always already present in the "ordinary consciousness," and relying on Prussia's formidable "warfare-welfare" state to pick up the slack if the people should choose not to exercise this knowledge. The trouble with this flip-flop is that it treats the state sometimes as an unnecessary and dangerous rival to the rational individual, and sometimes as the corporate embodiment of reason itself. It becomes less surprising to observe then that during the revolutionary 1840s Kantianism could support the most corrosive libertarianism and the most unbridled statism.

We have already noted that Kantianism was not alone in facing the problem of how to create a population capable of public reasonableness in the wake of a period of confessional blood-letting. It was alone however in proposing to solve this problem by universalising the specialised discipline of critical philosophy and its offspring the "pure rational faith." Can we say then that Kant's moral and religious philosophy, through its universalism and its political moralism, participated in the uncompromising and incendiary confessional politics of the early-modern period? And was this why Kant's *Religion* attracted the censor's attention? — as the work of yet another intellectual whose zealous commitment to the "true rational religion" was striking sparks in the tinder-box of religious controversy?

Perhaps it is time to reconsider the obeisance paid to Kant's defence of the autonomy of reason. *Kantian* reason may turn out to be far too deeply embedded in the religious and political conflicts of its time — and far too detached from the real sources of social peace — to wear the mantle of reasonableness. If, as I have suggested, there was no single enlightenment, but a variety of practices of reason and government in contingent relation to each other, then the least we can do is re-open these questions. When we do then neglected figures like Thomasius will step out of the long shadow cast by Kantian philosophy and post-Kantian critical theory. Amongst other things, such figures may tell us that certain intellectual disciplines, long regarded as exemplary of toleration and reason, are themselves the bearers of an uncompromising moralism and an intolerant rationalism.