# Comment on Reducing Christianity to Ethics
by Wayne P. Pomerleau

*Can Christianity be adequately reduced to ethics? No! Why not?*

Four common characteristics of religion: code, community, creed, and ceremonies (4 c's). Is a moral code sufficient to constitute Christianity, so that the other three can be considered irrelevant or are simply reducible to it? That is our issue for discussion.

Relevant background elements of Kant's theory with which I agree:
      1) his analysis of rational cognition
            1a) the conditions he places on human knowledge
            1b) the limits he puts on human knowledge
            1c) the way he clears space for rational faith
            1d) God, soul, freedom, and immortality as postulates
      2) the idea that morality is independent of religion but can rationally lead to religion
      3) the belief in an ideal "*ethical* commonwealth" or a moral "kingdom of ends" that can have a significant place for God
      4) the conviction that the only true religion does essentially commit its followers to rational morality
      5) the notion that within that "*one* (true) *religion*" several historical faiths have developed
      6) the idea that, among these, those of ethical monotheism (i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) are very noteworthy
      7) the view that a literal acceptance of any scriptural revelation is not necessary for our being persons of good will
      8) the belief that all specific religious doctrines, ceremonies, and collective worship are ancillary to moral conduct
            8a) if they reinforce morality, then they are valuable
            8b) if not, they constitute mere "pseudo-service"
      9) the idea that Kant's own ethical theory is compatible with (if not identical to) the moral teachings of Jesus of Nazareth

So where does this leave us with the 4 c's? Does Kant "dismiss the truth and value" of religious community, the creed of religious doctrine, and the ceremonial rituals of religion, as if to say that the moral code is **all** that matters? I do not think so. In his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, he advocates "the *true service* of the church," as opposed to "pseudo-service" that is based on the illusion that we can ingratiate ourselves with God without good conduct and morally virtuous character. He advocates the "*doctrine of godliness*" that includes "*love* of God" as a moral law-giver and respect for God's moral law. And he even advocates such religious practices as praying, church-going, and sacramental participation to the extent that they bind members of a church together as a mutually supportive moral community. I think Kant is **right** not to "dismiss" these three dimensions of religion but to view them as meaningful and valuable means to its ultimate end, which is moral conduct and virtuous character.

But is a moral code **sufficient** to constitute religion? If so, then the utilitarian ethics might, by itself, qualify. Remember that John Stuart Mill says that he was raised without any religious creed in the ordinary sense but was taught to regard utilitarianism as his "religion." But the **necessary** condition is **not sufficient**.

Here an English analytic philosopher named Richard B. Braithwaite might be helpful. He points out (in *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief*) that the central claim of Christianity is "that God is love (*agape*)" and that its fundamental imperative is that we "follow an agapeistic way of life" by loving one another and loving God. But this is not unique to Christianity and is therefore inadequate to define it as a religious faith. What distinguishes the "agapeistic way of life" of a Christian from that of Judaism or certain forms of Buddhism? Each religious tradition identifies its moral code with its own unique story (or set of stories), the stories of Jesus of Nazareth providing a different paradigm from those of Abraham and Buddha. A religious faith "will, therefore, have a propositional element which is lacking in a purely moral assertion, in that it will refer to a story as well as to an intention" to follow a particular moral code. It is not necessary, Braithwaite adds, for the religious adherent to believe the story to be literally true, so that it can be entertained as having merely symbolic meaning and motivational influence for the believer. Thus the Christian, intending to lead the "agapeistic way of life," can regard Jesus of Nazareth as a role-model, without literally believing that Jesus was divine as well as human, that he rose to live again after being dead for three days, and so forth. Utilitarianism, though a genuine ethic, falls short of being a religion to the extent that it lacks such a central story. The story of Jesus of Nazareth, whether believed in as literally true or not, is essential to the Christian religion (and foreign to Judaism and Buddhism); and some such story or set of stories is essential to any moral code's qualifying as a religious faith.

Thus I would wish to say that I subscribe to the Christian faith insofar as I am committed to its moral code **and** follow Jesus as a moral model, whether or not I believe the stories about him to be literally true, whether or not I regularly interact with a church or some other organized community, and whether or not I subscribe to special ceremonial practices. The **strength** of this view is that it reduces the significance of religious differences and supports religious tolerance. Its **weakness** is that many (or most) orthodox believers will protest that it is too thin an analysis.

Well, this has taken us a bit beyond Kant, while building on his thought. But, in conclusion, I would say that neither Christianity as a particular historical faith nor religion generally should or legitimately can be reduced *merely* to morality, that morality is a necessary condition but not a sufficient one. And I believe this is in line with Kant's remarkable philosophy of religion.