

# Natural Theology and Natural Religion in the Scottish Enlightenment

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## I

David Hume wrote two books on religion. His *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, published in 1779 three years after his death, is the best known of these by far. Twenty years previously, however, Hume had published (the now relatively unknown) *Natural History of Religion* (1757) as one of four short 'Dissertations'. The two books have similar titles, but they are importantly different, and Hume himself specifies the difference at the start of his *Natural History*.

As every enquiry, which regards religion, is of the utmost importance, there are two questions in particular, which challenge our attention, to wit, that concerning its foundation in reason, and that concerning its origin in human nature. Happily, the first question, which is the most important, admits of the most obvious, at least the clearest solution. The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of Theism and Religion. But the other question, concerning the origin of religion in human nature, is exposed to some more difficulty. The belief of invisible, intelligent power has been very generally diffused over the human race, in all places and in all ages; ... What those principles [of human nature] are, which give rise to the original belief, and what those accidents and causes are, which

direct its operation, is the subject of our present enquiry<sup>1)</sup>.

In retrospect, Hume's claim that religion's foundation in reason is 'obvious' seems a little disingenuous since the principal effect of the *Dialogues* is to reveal just how problematic the traditional arguments for God's existence are. It is known that Hume worked on these *Dialogues* over a very long period, so it is possible that he changed his mind about just how 'obvious' the truth of philosophical theism is. On the other hand, it has long been noted that, despite the many intellectual difficulties uncovered in Parts I-XI of the *Dialogues*, in Part XII there seems to be something of a *volte-face*. Philo, who raises most to the difficulties, and who is often taken to be Hume's own voice, nevertheless asserts that when we look around the world 'a purpose, an intention, a design strikes everywhere the most careless, the most stupid thinker, and no man can be so hardened in absurd systems, as at all times to reject it'<sup>2)</sup>. This and other passages (in the first *Enquiry* and elsewhere) have prompted an enduring debate about whether Hume himself did or did not think 'the theistic hypothesis' to be true, and if so, what exactly he took that hypothesis to be. The question is ultimately irresolvable, not least because we cannot assume that *any* of the voices in the *Dialogues* is to be identified as Hume's.

This issue is one about Hume's view of *theology*, and of the doctrine of theism. But there is also a different, less widely discussed issue. This is his view of *religion*. The two are not the same. Theology is the subject matter of the *Dialogues*. Religion is the subject matter of the *Natural History*. It is a division that can be found in Hume's writings more generally. The plausibility (or implausibility) of theological beliefs is the focus, not only of the *Dialogues*, but also of Sections X and XI of the first *Enquiry* entitled respectively, 'Of Miracles' and 'Of a particular Providence and a Future

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1) David Hume, *Natural History of Religion*, ed. J C A Gaskin, Oxford World Classics, 1993, (hereafter *NHR*) p.135

2) David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* ed. J C A Gaskin, Oxford World Classics 1993, (hereafter *Dialogues*) p.116

State', while the subject of religion – its source in human nature and its function in society – is the focus not only of the *Natural History*, but of the essay 'Of Superstition and Enthusiasm', as well as parts of Hume's *History of England*.

This division of subject – philosophical theology as opposed to philosophy of religion – has tended to be obscured by the fact that most writers of the Scottish Enlightenment period, Hume included, used 'natural religion' in two distinguishable ways. In some contexts the contrast is with 'revealed religion'. In this sense 'natural religion' refers to religious beliefs that are inferred from, or based upon, the empirical evidence of the natural world, rather than founded on Scripture as revelation. The arguments that the *Dialogues* explore are 'natural religion' in this sense, but they might better be referred to as 'natural theology', a more familiar term nowadays.

In other contexts, however, 'natural religion' refers to the innate religious sensibilities and proclivities of human beings that underlie their adherence to any religion, and their participation in its practices. Natural religion in this sense, is what it might better be referred to as 'natural religiosity'. But for present purposes it is simplest to distinguish 'natural theology' from 'natural religion'.

The occasional positive assertions that Hume makes about the evidence of 'design' in nature (as in Part XII of the *Dialogues*) makes it uncertain as to what, precisely, Hume thought about 'the theistic hypothesis'. It is evident, though, from many of his writings, that he was generally hostile to religion. No one reading the *Natural History*, the essay 'Of miracles' and other sections of the first Enquiry, or the essay 'Of superstition and enthusiasm', could fail to detect the scorn and derision that it he heaps on Catholic and Protestant alike, branding all truly popular religion 'superstition', dismissing widespread practices of worship as 'frivolous observances', and denying that theological beliefs are ever widely held because of their rationality. 'One may safely affirm', he roundly declares, 'that all popular theology, especially the scholastic, has a kind of appetite

for absurdity and contradiction<sup>3)</sup>, and in a letter written not long before his death, he looked forward to a world in which ‘all the Churches shall be converted into Riding Schools, Manufactories, Tennis Courts or Playhouses’<sup>4)</sup>.

Yet, despite all his strictures, Hume, no less than his devout American contemporary Jonathan Edwards, can be found employing the expression ‘true religion’. Moreover, it seems to play a crucial role in his essay ‘Of Superstition and Enthusiasm’ where superstition and enthusiasm are declared to be ‘the corruptions of true religion’<sup>5)</sup>. But if Hume is a theological sceptic, what can he mean by *true* religion?

In the end, it may be no easier to answer this question than to determine Hume’s final view about theism. However, in its consideration it is essential that we bear in mind the distinction between ‘natural theology’ as a ‘scientific’ inquiry, and ‘natural religion’ as a set of human dispositions and practices. ‘The first ideas of religion’, Hume writes, ‘arose not from a contemplation of nature, but from a concern with regard to the events of life, and from the incessant hopes and fears, which actuate the human mind’<sup>6)</sup>. In other words, natural theology, which is about the origins of nature, the laws by which it operates, and its future course, is an intellectual discipline like science. Indeed the terms theology, philosophy and science were not sharply distinguished in Hume’s day, all of them being taken to refer to intellectual inquiry in general. Like science, then, theology is a specialized activity in which relatively few people engage, or, indeed, are capable of engaging. By contrast, large numbers of people, without evident intellectual gifts or interest engage in religious practices. This is because these are rooted in our common humanity. They reflect a

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3) *NHR*, p.166

4) David Hume to Andrew Stuart of Torrance, reprinted in *Philosophy and Religion in Enlightenment Britain* ed. Ruth Savage, Oxford University Press, 2012, p.257

5) David Hume, *Essays, moral, political and literary*, Oxford University press, 1963, Essay X p.75

6) *NHR* p.139

condition necessarily shared by all human beings, namely, the need to wrest a living from a world that is variously resistant to human effort and uncertain in its outcomes. Theology, like science, is theoretical, explaining the world; religion is practical, adapting, and adapting to, the world for practical purposes. This 'practical' world is shaped by factors about which we are largely ignorant – the weather, the seasons, economic cycles, sources of disease – and it is full of risks of which we are naturally fearful – injury, illness, famine and so on. This is why, Hume thinks, the roots of religion are to be found in ignorance and fear rather than rational belief and inquiry. While theology seeks satisfactory explanations for the observed phenomena of nature, religion seeks ways of coping with the human condition. 'True' religion, accordingly, will be whatever form of religious practice most adequately accommodates, or ameliorates, this practically potent mix of ignorance and fear.

## II

Hume's conception of 'true religion' has become obscured in part because of the remarkable success of the *Dialogues*, especially among philosophers. Over time the *Dialogues* have dramatically changed philosophy's approach to religion. In the two hundred years since their publication, philosophy of religion has become almost exclusively an exercise in philosophical theology, principally concerned with religion's 'foundation in reason', to use Hume's own language. By contrast, its 'origin in human nature' has generally ceased to be of interest to philosophers, and come to be regarded as a topic more suited to empirical anthropology.

In its own day, however, the *Natural History of Religion* commanded philosophical attention because it was recognized as a further contribution to an already well-established inquiry. According to the editor of the Clarendon edition, Hume's 'natural history of religion was not remarkably innovative by the time Hume commenced his dissertation on the subject'<sup>7)</sup>,

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7) See Tom L Beauchamp, 'The Intellectual Background', *Clarendon Edition of the*

but written in the knowledge of several much larger scale works, both English and French. Most of these are now almost entirely forgotten, but more important for present purposes, is its relation to works that have not been forgotten, including some by major figures in European philosophy, notably Spinoza, Kant, Schleiermacher, Mill and Nietzsche.

Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670) preceded the *Natural History* by ninety years. Though it employs different terminology, it has a similar fundamental concern – to distinguish 'faith', properly so called, from 'philosophy'. 'The aim of philosophy', Spinoza writes, 'is, quite simply, truth, while the aim of faith, as we have abundantly shown, is nothing other than obedience and piety'<sup>8)</sup>. Spinoza was writing in a different context and at a different time, of course, but, a connection can be traced between his thoughts on this topic and the Scottish intellectual milieu within which Hume was educated. Just seven years after Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* appeared, Henry Scougall, Professor of Divinity at King's College, Aberdeen published *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (1677). Scougall died at the early age of twenty-eight, but after his death his personal library was found to contain a copy of Spinoza's *Treatise*. Scougall's own short book, which for nearly two hundred years was regarded as a classic of its kind<sup>9)</sup>, addresses similar themes, but it employs terminology much closer to Hume's than Spinoza's. Influenced also by the Cambridge Platonists, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* opens with a chapter entitled 'Of the nature of true religion', and its first two sections are headed 'Mistakes about religion' and 'What religion is'<sup>10)</sup>. On the other

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*Works of David Hume: A Dissertation on the Passions and The Natural History of Religion*, (Clarendon Press Oxford 2007) p.219

- 8) Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* ed. Jonathan Israel, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p.519
- 9) See Isabel Rivers, 'Scougall's *The Life of God in the soul of man*: the fortunes of a book, 1676-1830' in *Philosophy and Religion in Enlightenment Britain* ed. Ruth Savage, Oxford University Press, 2012
- 10) See further, G D Henderson, 'Henry Scougall' in *The Burning Bush: Studies in Scottish Church History*, Edinburgh, St Andrew Press, 1957

hand Scougall is closer to Spinoza than Hume in this; whereas Hume's main interest is in debunking 'false' religion, Scougall's aim is to advance 'true' religion.

Though it is impossible to say whether Hume knew anything of Scougall, Scougall's book was widely read, and the subject of 'true religion' can be found in the writings of many of Hume's Scottish contemporaries. In both the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith investigates the source and function of religion in a fashion very similar to Hume. So does Lord Kames (Henry Home) in the third volume of his *Sketches of the History of Man* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1788), as well as in his *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition 1779). Thomas Reid, too, touches here and there on the topic in his (unpublished) lectures on natural theology, when he connects the importance of religion with the satisfaction of basic needs, and the pursuit of the moral life.

This investigation into 'true religion' was not confined to Scotland. In the same period, in a somewhat different spirit, Immanuel Kant wrote an investigation into *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793). This work is the outcome, importantly, of an explicit rejection of the kind of arguments Hume seemed to demolish in the *Dialogues*. The concepts involved in the exercise of human reason and the pursuit of understanding are structuring concepts of the human mind. Consequently, and necessarily they cannot comprehend a Being of the kind God has traditionally been held to be. Kant's view leads, inevitably, to a negative estimation of the traditional arguments of natural theology, and implies that there is nothing of any real value to be learned from what Kant calls 'physicotheology'. If God is necessarily beyond the compass of 'pure' or theoretical reason, theological 'theorizing' is inescapably idle. Accordingly, some other form of reflection must be employed to determine what is to count as rational in religious belief and practice, and the second *Critique* – of 'practical' reason – sets the stage for this alternative.

Since, famously, Kant was wakened from his 'dogmatic slumbers' by Hume, their philosophical orientations are in certain respects importantly

at odds. Yet on the matter of religion there is a remarkable commonality of method and conception. The purpose of the four essays that comprise *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant tells us, is 'to make apparent the relation of religion to a human nature partly laden with good dispositions and partly with evil ones'<sup>11</sup>). The very same sentence might be used to describe the aim of Hume's *Natural History*. Though the conception of human nature Kant employs is a rational construct, while Hume's is (intended to be) an empirical generalization, human nature's relevance nevertheless lies in enabling Kant's readers to discern the character of 'true religion', an expression that he expressly uses, and which he contrasts (as Hume also does) with 'revealed faith'<sup>12</sup>). Kant finds true religion, not in the customary practices of the Church, but in an elevated conception of the moral life that is quite at odds with Hume's blend of hedonistic utilitarianism.

At the end of the same decade in which Kant's four essays were written, another very important work in philosophy of religion appeared – Schleiermacher's *On Religion*. First published in 1799, these five 'Speeches to the Cultured Despisers of Religion' show Schleiermacher to be both informed about and engaged with many of the philosophical issues that exercised Spinoza, Hume and especially Kant. Schleiermacher uses the language of 'healthy' and 'diseased' religion rather than 'true' and 'false', but the theme is the same. Moreover, some of the attitudes he attributes to the 'cultured despisers', and that he wishes to counter, effectively anticipate Nietzsche's philosophical attack on religion ninety years later in *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ*. Nietzsche also, in a very critical spirit, is concerned to identify 'true' religion, in order to denounce rather than to praise it, of course.

Meanwhile, in a decidedly different philosophical idiom (one that Nietzsche despised), we can find essays directly comparable to Hume's

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11) Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* ed. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p.39

12) *Ibid.* p.116

*History* and *Dialogues* in John Stuart Mill's posthumously published *Three Essays on Religion*. Mill's essay on 'Theism' examines the traditional arguments for the existence of God that Hume considers in the *Dialogues* (and to the surprise of his former associates finds some merit in the 'design' argument). In the 'The Utility of Religion', however, he expressly endorses the investigation of 'natural religion' along the lines of Hume's *Natural History*, and thereby echoes Kant's investigation into *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* as well.

Let us then consider what it is in human nature which causes it to require a religion; what wants of the human mind religion supplies, and what qualities it develops (sic). When we have understood this, we shall be better able to judge, how far these wants can be otherwise supplied and those qualities, or qualities equivalent to them, unfolded and brought to perfection by other means.<sup>13)</sup>

While the focus of Hume's *Dialogues* is theology, the focus of his *Natural History* is religion. Yet the second work, no less than the first, can be located within a strand of philosophical inquiry that neither began nor ended with Hume. Moreover, the two works have something in common; the *Natural History*, like the *Dialogues*, is a normative inquiry. It concerned as much with what is right and wrong and good and bad about religion, just as the *Dialogues* are concerned with the truth or falsity of theism. Despite Hume's famous attack on attempts to derive 'ought' from 'is' in his *Treatise of human nature*<sup>14)</sup>, his account of religion crucially depends on drawing *normative* philosophical distinctions between, for instance, 'religion', 'superstition' and 'enthusiasm'. 'True' religion, in other words is both a descriptive and an evaluative conception. Hume's main purpose lies in determining where superstition ends and true religion begins (if anywhere). In pursuing this purpose he is undoubtedly following in

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13) John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*, Longman's Green London, 1874, p.100

14) *Treatise* Book III, Part I, Sect.1

Spinoza's footsteps, because Spinoza also wants to find (so to speak) the inner pulse of religion that will enable him to differentiate it from dogmatic theology, ecclesiastical politics and empty ritual. For Kames too, distinguishing true religion from superstition is crucially important to discerning the progress in all aspects of human development to which he is committed. And in the same spirit, Adam Smith speaks of 'pure and rational religion, free from every mixture of absurdity, imposture or fanaticism such as wise men in all ages of the world [have] wished to see established'<sup>15)</sup>.

Spinoza, Hume, and Kant, for different reasons, set aside questions regarding the truth of metaphysical theism. Smith simply never addresses them. At the same time, all of these philosophers were in their own time regarded by some as undermining religious orthodoxy. This is because, even when they were not engaged directly with question of theological truth and Christian doctrine, they presented the proponents and adherents of religion with critical intellectual challenges. It is important to distinguish philosophical attempts to delineate 'true religion' from exercises in philosophical theology. Nevertheless, they retain normative ambitions that put them in a different category to empirical social sciences, which for the most part strive to avoid normative debates. Anthropology studies religion, certainly, but would never classify one religion over another as 'true'. The philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment also aimed to base their inquiries and conclusions on empirical observation, but they did so in quite a different spirit to that of nineteenth century positivism. Critical evaluation remained a key part of their endeavor. The concept of 'true' religion is different from 'theological truth', but still evaluative.

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15) Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (hereafter WN), Glasgow Edition, Oxford University Press, 1976, II/II.V.i.g.8

## III

That *the corruption of the best things produces the worst*, is grown into a maxim, and is commonly proved, among other instances, by the pernicious effects of *superstition* and *enthusiasm*, the corruptions of true religion.<sup>16)</sup>

The tone of Hume's remarks in the essay that follows this assertion does raise a doubt as to whether he really believed that anything properly called 'religion' could be included among 'the best things'. In the light of the following passage from the *Natural History* it seems he could not.

Examine the religious principles, which have, in fact, prevailed in the world. You will scarcely be persuaded, that they are anything but sick men's dreams: Or perhaps will regard them more as the playsome whimsies of monkies in human shape, than the serious, positive, dogmatical assertions of a being, who dignifies himself with the name of rational.<sup>17)</sup>

Yet, just a few sentences later he remarks: 'Look out for a people, entirely destitute of religion: If you find them at all, be assured, that they are but a few degrees removed from the brutes'. How is the paradoxical character of these remarks to be resolved?

The answer lies in this, I think. Hume holds the spring of religion to be emotion, chiefly the emotions of hope and fear. Such emotions feed upon ignorance. On the one hand, fear, combined with ignorance, makes human beings susceptible to superstition, and thus prey to the manipulations of priests, soothsayers and the like. On the other hand, hope, combined with ignorance (or at least irrationality), fills people with messianic visions, that are advanced with the 'enthusiasm' of the prophet and sustained

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16) Hume, *Essays*, p.75, emphasis original

17) *NHR*, p.184

by the dogmas of theologians. Superstition is characteristic of ritualistic religions like Roman Catholicism. Enthusiasm is the mark of evangelical Protestantism. The two forms have deleterious social effects. Superstition renders people passive, gives power to a class of self-serving and unscrupulous priests, and sustains rigid political hierarchy. Enthusiasm encourages political radicalism, gives rise to fanaticism, and brings the danger of social instability and ultimately civil war. Hope and fear cannot be eliminated from human nature, but the exercise of reason can temper them. Science and philosophy, Hume contends, have the practical function of undermining false hopes and groundless fears by informing us of the true nature of the world. In this way, reason also serves to ameliorate their social effects. Religion, then, does indeed set men off from the brutes, but in its 'true' or best form, it is philosophical in character (a *species* of philosophy, he explicitly says in the first *Enquiry*)<sup>18</sup>.

Yet if this is true, Hume appears to have undermined the very distinction with which his *Natural History* opens. True religion, it seems, *can* be rooted in reason, at least in the sense that the hopes and fears which underlie all religions can be altered, and rendered relatively harmless by rational thought. How can this be, though? Reason, by Hume's account in the *Treatise*, is 'inert'<sup>19</sup>, and in any case, the human capacity for reason is limited and fragile. In the case of religion especially, it is easily overwhelmed by the 'appetite for absurdity and contradiction' which (he says) is regularly exhibited by 'popular theology'. What real prospect is there, then, that 'philosophy' – only ever of interest to a few – will succeed in mitigating the deep seated drives to 'superstition' and 'enthusiasm' which, Hume claims, are built in to our nature?

In the *History of England* Hume expressly commends a specific form of religion, namely the Anglican Church created by the Elizabethan Settlement. If this is what he means by 'true religion', however, then it is to

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18) On this see Don Garrett, 'What's True about Hume's 'True Religion', *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 10.2 (2012)

19) *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book II, Part III, sect.3

be found, not in 'a species of philosophy', but in a form of religious ritual that is a 'happy medium' between the superstition of 'Romish worship' on the one hand, and the enthusiasm of Protestantism on the other, style of worship in which 'ceremonies, become venerable from age and preceding use, were retained' and in which 'the genius of ancient superstition' was mitigated by being rendered 'more compatible with the peace and interests of society'. Anglicanism, on this score is not to be commended for its philosophical content, but for its church practices, a liturgical middle way 'such as wise men have always sought'<sup>20)</sup>. Hume, we must conclude, wavers as much on the nature, and even the possibility, of 'true religion', as he does on the truth of theism. Though he employs the term, he does not seem to have a clear conception of what it is.

#### IV

A more satisfactory account can be found in Adam Smith, who writes about 'religion' in both the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations*. Though Smith is operating with a very similar framework to Hume, his treatment of natural religion can be separated entirely from issues in theology, because, though Smith appeals to a providentialist conception of the world, he never engages in natural theology. Furthermore, while, like Hume, he believes that 'science and 'philosophy' can mitigate the excesses of superstition and enthusiasm, he also thinks that the dimensions of life with which religion is primarily concerned are 'of too much importance to the happiness of mankind, for nature to leave it dependent upon the slowness and uncertainty of philosophical researches'<sup>21)</sup>.

Smith's principal interest is the same as Hume's in the *Natural History*.

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20) David Hume, *The History of England in 6 Volumes*, Liberty Fund Indianapolis, 1983 Vol.4, Chp.40

21) Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Glasgow Edition, Oxford University Press, 1976 (hereafter TMS) III.5.4

He wants to identify the source of religion in human nature, and thereby determine its proper place in the development of social life. Superstition and enthusiasm are marked features of religion as we know it, but they are defective forms in which the religious inclinations of human beings show themselves. 'True' religion, by contrast, can play a beneficial role in the lives of individuals and the wellbeing of societies. That is why 'pure and rational religion, free from every mixture of absurdity, imposture or fanaticism [is] such as wise men in all ages of the world [have] wished to see established'<sup>22)</sup>.

By Smith's account, the benefits of true religion are to be seen first and foremost in the psychological and moral lives of individuals. Human beings have moral sentiments 'implanted' in their nature as deeply as the appetite for food or sex. *Contra* the Stoics, they cannot help caring more about their own happiness than that of others, and *contra* the 'whining and melancholy moralists' they do not need to feel guilty about this. At the same time, human beings are not the rampant egoists of Hobbes and Mandeville. The good opinion of others matters to them, and they have a rational faculty that enables them to make an impartial assessment of their own conduct. Still, in the ordinary course of life, the average human being cannot be expected to deliberate with 'exact justness' about the best way of 'acting upon all occasions with the most delicate and accurate propriety'.

The course of which the bulk of mankind are formed, cannot be wrought up to such perfection. There is scarce any man, however, who by discipline, education and example, may not be so impressed with a regard to the general rules, as to act upon almost every occasion with tolerable decency, and through the whole of his life to avoid any considerable degree of blame<sup>23)</sup>.

Moral rules work to the general good because they are the commands and

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22) *WN* II/II.V.i.g

23) *TMS* V.1

laws of a Deity 'who will finally reward the obedient and punish the transgressors of their duty'. This final outcome, Smith observes, may sometimes be very hard to discern, and thus hard to believe in. Life does not always go well for us, a fact about the human condition that easily weakens our moral resolve to abide by moral rules. Indeed, it may sometimes appear decidedly advantageous to ignore them. If morally good conduct is to prevail, then, what is needed is a 'sacred regard to general rules', and this where religion comes into its own because (*contra* Hume) no 'species of philosophy' could be expected to be of much help.

Religion, even in its rudest form, gave a sanction to the rules of morality long before the age of artificial reasoning and philosophy. That the terrors of religion should thus enforce the natural sense of duty, was of too much importance to the happiness of mankind, for nature to leave it dependent upon the slowness and uncertainty of philosophical researches<sup>24</sup>.

Natural religion, as Hume contends, is rooted in emotion. But by Smith's account, some of these emotions are distinctively religious. They include 'the natural pangs of an affrighted conscience' which is marked out as special because it is an emotion 'from which no principles of *irreligion* can entirely deliver [us]<sup>25</sup>'. Our religious impulses, however, are not purely negative – a check upon behavior. They also generate moral confidence and sustain hope in times of adversity. Religion locates the ultimate vindication of the just over the unjust beyond human welfare and belief. It thus enables moral motivation to survive the subversive effects of personal temptation, popular opinion and susceptibility to 'the empire of Fortune'. In all these ways, and especially the last, religion is superior to philosophy.

To persons in such unfortunate circumstances, that humble

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24) *TMS* III.V.2

25) *TMS* III.II.9, emphasis added

philosophy which confines its views to this life, can afford, perhaps, but little consolation... Religion alone ... can tell them, that it is of little importance what man may think of their conduct, while the all-seeing Judge of the world approves it. She alone can present to them ... a world of more candour, humanity, and justice, than the present; where their innocence is in due time to be declared, and their virtue to be finally rewarded... The same great principle which can alone strike terror into triumphant vice, affords the only effectual consolation to disgraced and insulted innocence<sup>26)</sup>.

The rules of morality constitute the basis of both personal happiness and social well-being, and by giving these rules a 'sacred' character, the natural religious impulses of human beings give them a firmer foundation than 'philosophy' could ever do. What reason and education *can* do, on the other hand, is correct 'false notions of religion'. From the point of view of society this is a very valuable role, because it is these that are 'almost the only causes which can occasion any very gross perversion of our natural sentiments'. This is what happens when 'superstition' and 'enthusiasm' prevail over 'true religion'. That is why Smith devotes a lengthy section of *WN* to discussing the proper attitude that political rulers should take to religion.

The evils of superstition and enthusiasm are best averted not only by education in 'science and philosophy', but also by public entertainments. Public religion, though, has the merit of serving *both* these purposes, the first by means of edifying, well-informed sermons, and the second by means of communal ceremonies. Religion's special solemnity serves these purposes better than any combination of schools and playhouses. That is its strength. When religion falls prey to sectarianism, the very same solemnity produces a 'gross perversion of our natural sentiments' and turns them in divisive and destructive directions. Accordingly, Smith thinks, wise rulers will create an 'established' religion and support a

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26) *TMS* II.II.12

professional clergy to lead it. At the same time they will prevent the church to which those clergy belong from being structured in ways that promote *clericalism*, which is to say, the personal and professional aggrandizement that leads to the vices of (what the Protestants called) 'priestcraft'. For Smith, the church establishment that prevailed in the Scotland of his day offers one of the best illustrations of how religion, properly instituted, can serve the best interests of society.

The equality which the presbyterian form of church government establishes among the clergy [generates] a more learned, decent independent, and respectable set of men ... who are obliged to follow that system of morals which the common people respect the most... The presbyterian clergy, accordingly, ... have more influence over the minds of the common people than perhaps the clergy of any other established church... It is ... in presbyterian countries only that we ever find the common people converted, without persecution...<sup>(27)</sup>.

The most opulent church in Christendom does not maintain better the uniformity of faith, the fervor of devotion, the spirit of order, regularity, and austere morals in the great body of the people, than this very poorly endowed church of Scotland. All the good effects, both civil and religious, which an established church can be supposed to produce, are produced by it as completely as by any other<sup>(28)</sup>.

By Smith's account, then, true religion will perform a socially valuable, twofold *function*. First, religious sentiments are part of human nature so that properly directed, they can play a uniquely important role in the life of human beings as moral agents. Conscience is a vehicle of feeling, not of belief. It can never be satisfactorily replaced by 'philosophy'. Second,

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27) WN V.i.g.38

28) Ibid. V.i.g.41

ecclesiastical forms can channel deep seated religious sentiments in directions that are beneficial to society at large. 'True' religion, accordingly, both helps the individual to live well by supporting moral integrity, and fosters social order by ensuring that religious sentiments do not turn into the corrupted and destructive form of superstition or of enthusiasm.

## V

Smith's account of the character and role of natural religion is framed within a way of thinking very close to Hume's, and there are many points at which the two writers agree. They disagree in this, that Smith lends religious emotions a distinctive character that is not to be reduced (as it is by Hume) to particular varieties of the more general emotions of hope and fear. Furthermore, on this basis he builds an account of 'true religion' that more clearly differentiates it from 'superstition' and 'enthusiasm', without converting it into a 'species of philosophy'. The function of true religion is to give powerful psychological backing to moral rules. It does so by threatening evildoers with hell, and promising heaven to the righteous, despite any earthly appearances to the contrary.

There is one very important limitation to this way of thinking, however. The motivating force of this religious sanction rests entirely on the strength of the individual's conviction. It is enough to *believe* in heaven or hell; the belief need not be *true*. Conversely, the *reality* of heaven and hell cannot motivate the person who believes them to be pious fictions. Furthermore, *any* religious belief, however ill founded, is as good as any other, if it adequately serves the purpose of powerfully inclining those who believe it to act in accordance with the moral rules that social life requires. In turn this carries the further, very odd, implication that 'true religion' can be completely divorced from the truth of any of the beliefs that its adherents profess. Smith, as has been observed, assumes the truth of theological 'providentialism'. But for his account of true religion, this is strictly unnecessary. The only critical question for anything that purports to be 'true religion' is: 'Does it work?'

This indifference to the truth of religious beliefs will strike many people, not simply as a limitation, but a deficiency in Smith's account of true religion. If it is, this re-opens the question of whether the philosophy of 'natural religion' and the propositions of 'natural theology' can ultimately be separated. But even if we continue to suppose that they can, there is further reason to hold that Smith's treatment of true religion has an important lacuna in it. Among the sentiments that Smith identifies as components of a truly virtuous life, there are three that he characterizes in notably religious language. Their connection with right and wrong action, it may be argued, is not intelligible if it is cast entirely in terms of conformity to moral rules.

According to Smith there are two standards by which we might judge the adequacy of our own moral conduct. The *second* of these standards is based on human norms. We can judge ourselves to have acted (or failed to have acted) in accordance with what it is reasonable to expect of anyone, if, that is to say, we hold ourselves to the 'degree of excellence' that decent people 'commonly arrive at'. The *first* of the two standards Smith appeals to, however, goes beyond empirically observable norms of human decency. When we apply this standard to our own conduct, we hold ourselves accountable to an 'archetype of perfection'. To judge ourselves by the standard of perfection, is in effect to seek to imitate 'the work of a divine artist, which can never be equalled'. This 'first' standard, Smith tells us, is the one to which the 'wise and virtuous man directs his principal attention'<sup>29)</sup>. From this we may conclude that pursuit of perfection, though it exceeds what we can expect of human behavior in general, is not to be regarded as a foolish perfectionism, but a truly admirable human trait. The religious impulse to imitate 'the work of a divine artist', in other words, has a key role in moral endeavor.

A second human sentiment that Smith identifies and commends is this: 'A man of humanity, who accidentally, and without the smallest degree of blameable negligence, has been the cause of the death of another man,

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29) TMS VI.III.25

feels himself piacular, though not guilty', and though he is not guilty, he will seek means by which 'to atone for what has happened, and to propitiate'<sup>30)</sup>. This 'piacular' sentiment does not flow from the requirements of justice. It is the longing for atonement and propitiation by means of sacrifice. These are all distinctively religious concepts, and give us reason to think that the emotions that underlie them are distinctively religious. In sharp contrast to Hume, however, they are by Smith's account highly commendable.

Thirdly, there are those 'natural pangs of an 'affrighted conscience' referred to earlier. Smith actually describes them as 'dæmons' that 'haunt the guilty' and may 'drive them to despair and distraction'<sup>31)</sup>. The language of 'dæmons' may be figurative, but it serves to underline his important contention that 'no principles of irreligion can entirely deliver' us from these, with the implication that only religion can perform this psychological function.

But what kind of religion can adequately assuage this haunting guilt, accommodate the piacular feelings of those who are innocent of acting unjustly, and underwrite the pursuit of a moral perfection that only God can realize? The first duty that true religion requires of us, Smith says, is 'to fulfil all the obligations of morality'<sup>32)</sup>. That is why he commends the model of Scotland's 'moderate' Presbyterianianism, an ecclesiology that favored services of worship centered on learned and eloquent sermons. By means of these, the clergy aimed to edify, encourage, warn and chastise their congregations, and for whom the moral rules to which their consciences naturally subscribed were thereby reinforced. Sacrificial atonement, and the striving after divine perfection, however, appeal to ideals beyond the fulfillment of duty. In this way, they exceed what 'rational' endorsement of moral rules requires. Similarly, haunting guilt arises, and lingers, precisely to the extent that the *sacred* authority of

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30) *TMS* II.III.4

31) *TMS* III.II.9

32) *TMS* II.V.13

otherwise merely social rules is acknowledged. The pursuit of perfection, the desire to atone, and the pangs of conscience are *exceptional* sentiments, beyond the range of ordinary hopes and fears that get us through everyday life. Such exceptional sentiments are more than a stable social order requires. Accordingly, they cannot be encompassed within the simply 'reasonable'. Since these are *admirable* sentiments, they are not in need of being tempered by some 'species of philosophy'. What then might shape and direct them?

Like Hume, Smith is not merely skeptical, but dismissive of 'the public and private worship of the deity' in many forms. He discounts 'frivolous observances' 'sacrifices' 'ceremonies and 'vain supplications' as having any value in themselves, and roundly condemns 'the futile mortifications of the monastery'<sup>33)</sup>. Yet it is by means of just this kind of practice that human beings in almost all cultures have sought to shape and strengthen the special religious sentiments that Smith himself identifies. How is unattainable perfection to be venerated except in worship? How is atonement to be made without propitiating sacrifice? How is guilt to be relieved except by confession? Even if Smith is right to make morality the centerpiece of virtue, the traditional practices of prayer, worship and sacrifice of which he is deeply suspicious, may have a more significant role than he is willing to allow, and may, in fact, be key to determining what 'true religion' really means<sup>34)</sup>.

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33) Ibid.

34) This paper draws on material that first appeared in the opening chapter of my *Wittgenstein and Natural Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

**Abstract**

In the period of the Scottish Enlightenment the term 'natural religion' was used to refer to two important different phenomena – theological beliefs based on evidence drawn from the natural world, and the religious impulses that can be found 'implanted' in human nature. This paper takes two works by David Hume as exemplifying this difference. It critically investigates what Hume has to say about natural religion in the second sense, and compares it with the approach of his friend and contemporary Adam Smith. The paper argues that, though in general the two philosophers have much in common, on the matter of the place of religion in human nature, and its social accommodation, they differ significantly, and a case is made for thinking that Smith's account of religion is superior to Hume's.