



**Religion a Threat to Morality: An Attempt to Throw Some
New Light on Hume's Philosophy of Religion**

Gerhard Streminger

Hume Studies Volume XV Number 2 (November 1989) 277-294.

Your use of the HUME STUDIES archive indicates your acceptance of HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.humesociety.org/hs/about/terms.html>

HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the HUME STUDIES archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Each copy of any part of a HUME STUDIES transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

For more information on HUME STUDIES contact humestudies-info@humesociety.org or visit:

<http://www.humestudies.org>

Religion a Threat to Morality: An Attempt to Throw Some New Light on Hume's Philosophy of Religion*

Gerhard Streminger

At the beginning of his *Natural History of Religion* Hume writes that *two questions in particular ... challenge our attention, to wit, that concerning its foundation in reason, and that concerning its origin in human nature.*¹ The first challenge is taken up by Hume in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, and the second in his *Natural History of Religion*.

In this paper I will try to show that there is a third fundamental problem discussed by Hume with regard to religion, namely its relationship to and influence on morality. Although he never wrote on this topic in as systematic a way as on the above-mentioned *two questions in particular*, I am convinced that his thoughts about it were not just casual. The passages in Hume relevant to this third central question about religion are to be found in "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm," in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*; in section 11 of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*; in Appendix 4 and "A Dialogue," in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*; in the *History of England*; in Part XII of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*²; and, in particular, in the *Natural History of Religion*. Why Hume never wrote about the relationship between religion and morality in a more systematic way is not entirely clear. He may have decided not to provoke the orthodox any further than he already had. That Hume changed the title of section 11 of his first *Enquiry* from the original "Of the Practical Consequences of Natural Religion" to the rather non-committal "Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State" may support this conjecture.

Before going into more detail as to Hume's view on the relationship between religion and morality, I want to make a few remarks about Hume's opinion of religion in general. Hume made a distinction between one 'true' and two forms of 'false' religion. His most explicit description of true religion is to be found in a preface to the second volume of his *History of England*:

*The proper Office of Religion, Hume wrote in terms which have a Quakerish flavour, is to reform Men's Lives, to purify their Hearts, to inforce all moral Duties, & to secure Obedience to the Laws & civil Magistrate. While it pursues these useful Purposes, its Operations, tho' infinitely valuable, are secret & silent; and seldom come under the Cognizance of History... The Idea of an Infinite Mind, the Author of the Universe seems ... to require a Worship absolutely pure, simple, unadorned; without Rites, Institutions, Ceremonies; even without Temples, Priests, or verbal Prayer & Supplication.*³

This preface, however, was not printed in the words quoted above. Instead it was reduced by Hume to a footnote at the end of the second volume of his *History of England* in a shortened and toned-down version. Even this footnote was removed in later editions of the *History of England*. But in the *Dialogues* Hume repeated his idea of the effect of true religion on morality almost verbatim:

*The proper office of religion is to regulate the heart of men, humanize their conduct, infuse the spirit of temperance, order, and obedience; and as its operation is silent, and only enforces the motives of mortality and justice, it is in danger of being overlooked, and confounded with these other motives.*⁴

This form of religion, however, although without any *pernicious consequences with regard to society* (D 223), is extremely rare. Religion, *as it has commonly been found in the world* (D 223), is a threat to morality. The *corruptions of true religion*, namely *superstition* and *enthusiasm*,⁵ are the popular forms of religious worship. Whenever Hume talks about religion without qualifications, he has this false religion in mind.

Coming back to my original thesis, Hume, I think, sees three main negative influences of false religion: (1) The clergy has an interest in setting bounds to human knowledge; (2) The God of false religion is no moral authority; (3) False religion corrupts the natural moral sentiments and promotes an 'artificial, affected' life.

I. False Religion and Human Knowledge

To see the force of Hume's argument concerning the threat of false religion to morality, one has to take into account some general assumptions of Hume's philosophy, in particular, of his ethics. In the "Letter to a Physician," written in 1734, Hume gives a clear account of the origin of his philosophy. As a very serious and earnest young man, he went through long periods of depression. After his health was *already*

ruin'd, he realized that Christian and Stoic ethics do harm to human nature. Their moral codes are *entirely Hypothetical* and depend *more upon Invention than Experience*. *Every one consulted his Fancy in erecting Schemes of Virtue & of Happiness, without regarding Human Nature, upon which every moral Conclusion must depend*. This therefore I resolved to make my principal Study, & the Source from which I would derive every Truth in Criticism as well as Morality.⁶ Taking seriously his own depressing experience in struggling to fulfil Christian and Stoic morality, Hume drew the conclusion that the knowledge of human nature is necessary in ethics. Before setting up rules, we must know what we are able to do, what our nature is! Some of the passages in the "Letter to a Physician" reappear in the Introduction to the *Treatise of Human Nature*, published five years later. *The science of man*, Hume summarizes, is *the only solid foundation for the other sciences [Logic, Morals, Criticism, and Politics]*.⁷

Knowledge of human nature is necessary in setting up rules and moral systems; knowledge is also essential in the process of moral evaluation. Hume makes this latter point particularly clear in the second *Enquiry*. In Appendix 1, "Concerning Moral Sentiments," he determines the role of reason in *all decisions of praise or censure*.⁸ His starting point is the situation of conflict. Supposedly, a person considers the problem of whether he/she had better, in a particular case of emergency, assist a brother or a benefactor. Hume gives no answer to this problem, but he indicates the direction in which an answer to a problem like this is to be found: *We must consider these separate relations, with all the circumstances and situations of the persons, in order to determine the superior duty and obligation* (E 289). This idea, that moral judgement has to consider everything, reappears in the Appendix:

*In moral deliberations we must be acquainted beforehand with all the objects, and all their relations to each other; and from a comparison of the whole, fix our choice or approbation. No new fact to be ascertained; no new relation to be discovered. All the circumstances of the case are supposed to be laid before us, ere we can fix any sentence of blame or approbation.*⁹ (E 290)

I do not want to discuss here the problem of whether, or to what extent, it may be possible to take literally everything into account. For the following discussion it is necessary only to keep in mind that, according to Hume, a possibly comprehensive knowledge about human nature and the world is essential in at least two areas of moral thought: in setting up moral rules, and in the process of moral evaluation. Against this background, the meaning of some passages in the *Natural*

History becomes apparent: Hume argues that the clergy has a genuine interest in setting bounds to human knowledge. He comes to this conclusion by way of the following steps:

1. Human beings experience the contrariety of life: *The sun destroys what is fostered by the moisture of dews and rains. War may be favourable to a nation, whom the inclemency of the seasons afflicts with famine. Sickness and pestilence may depopulate a kingdom, amidst the most profuse plenty ... In short, the conduct of events ... is ... full of variety and uncertainty* (NHR 4:314). Human beings *hang in perpetual suspense between life and death, health and sickness, plenty and want* (NHR 4:316).

2. In order to deal with this situation, human beings, unless they are enlightened, treat the hidden, unknown causes of these events as persons, and try to influence them in the same way as is common among themselves. We represent them *to be sensible, intelligent beings, like mankind; actuated by love and hatred, and flexible by gifts and entreaties, by prayers and sacrifices* (NHR 4:335).

3. Although *any of the human affections may lead us into the notion of invisible, intelligent power* [hope, fear, but also gratitude] ... *men are much oftener thrown on their knees by melancholy than by the agreeable passions. Prosperity is easily received as our due, and few questions are asked concerning its cause or author. It begets cheerfulness and activity and alacrity and a lively enjoyment of every social and sensual pleasure: And during this state of mind, men have little leisure or inclination to think of the unknown invisible regions. On the other hand, every disastrous accident alarms us, and sets us on enquiries concerning the principles whence it arose* (NHR 4:318-19). Human intentions are usually carried *beyond the present course of things ... by the anxious concern for happiness, the dread of future misery, the terror of death, the thirst of revenge, the appetite for food and other necessaries* (NHR 4:315-16).

4. The clergy — at least a large part of it — is aware of the fact that the fear of the unknown is the origin of religion. In order to keep their flock religious, *no topic is more usual with all popular devines than to display the advantages of affliction, in bringing men to a due sense of religion; by subduing their confidence and sensuality, which, in times of prosperity, make them forgetful of a divine providence* (NHR 4:319). In the *Dialogues* the philosopher repeats this argument: *It is allowed, that men never have recourse to devotion so readily as when dejected with grief or depressed with sickness. Is not this a proof, that the religious spirit is not so nearly allied to joy as to sorrow?* (D 225). Accordingly, *we find the tremendous images to predominate in all religions ... terror is the primary principle of religion, it is the passion*

which always predominates in it, and admits but of short intervals of pleasure (D 225-6).

I summarize this point: According to Hume, comprehensive knowledge (of human nature and the world) is essential in setting up norms and in moral judgement, but in order to keep people religious, it is in the interest of the clergy to limit human knowledge, that is, to let them forget the positive side of common life. What is even worse: Since the conditions under which people are unhappy are the very conditions that give rise to religion and in which it thrives, the clergy has an interest to keep people unhappy. Limited knowledge and *subdu[ed] confidence and sensuality* are, however, untrustworthy guides to morality. The consequences of clerical interests are, therefore, dangerous to society. Hume's critique is even more disturbing in that he holds many clergymen to be hypocrites. In his essay "Of National Characters" Hume writes:

Though all mankind have a strong propensity to religion at certain times and in certain dispositions; yet are there few or none, who have it to that degree, and with that constancy, which is requisite to support the character of this profession. It must, therefore, happen, that clergymen ... will find it necessary, on particular occasions, to feign more devotion than they are, at that time, possessed of, and to maintain the appearance of fervor and seriousness, even when jaded with the exercises of their religion, or when they have their minds engaged in the common occupations of life. They must not, like the rest of the world, give scope to their natural movements and sentiments: They must set a guard over their looks and words and actions: And in order to support the veneration paid them by the multitude, they must not only keep a remarkable reserve, but must promote the spirit of superstition, by a continued grimace and hypocrisy. (Works 3:245-6 n. 3)¹⁰

In the second *Enquiry* Hume gives a brilliant summary of his argument that religion tends to set bounds to human knowledge and does harm to human emotions:

In later, philosophy of all kinds, especially ethics, have been more closely united with theology than ever they were observed to be among the heathens; and as this latter science admits of no terms of composition, but bends every branch of knowledge to its own purpose, without much regard to the phenomena of nature, or to the unbiassed sentiments of the mind, hence

reasoning, and even language, have been warped from their natural course. (E 322)

II. The God of False Religion is No Moral Authority

In popular religion God is considered to be the source of moral commands without whose grace or assistance human beings are unable to fulfil his will. Hume contradicts this. According to him, the God of common religion is no moral authority. Hume argues as follows:

1. Polytheism is the primary religion of mankind. Human beings personify the unknown causes of events. Painful events are taken as being caused by malevolent spirits or gods, whereas pleasurable ones are seen as being caused by benevolent spirits.

2. Polytheism is usually overtaken by monotheism. Hume gives two reasons for this: The one is that a particular God among the many is marked out by the people as a national tutelary God (like Jahwe for the Jews).¹¹ The second source of monotheism is the projection of social relationships into the pantheon. One God is represented *as the prince or supreme magistrate of the rest, who, though of the same nature, rules them with an authority, like that which an earthly sovereign exercises over his subjects and vassals* (NHR 4:330).

3. If one God is marked out as the highest, a new psychological mechanism sets in: *his votaries will endeavor, by every art, to insinuate themselves into his favour; and supposing him to be pleased, like themselves, with praise and flattery, there is no eulogy or exaggeration, which will be spared in their addresses to him. In proportion as men's fears or distresses become more urgent, they still invent new strains of adulation; and even he who outdoes his predecessors in swelling up the titles of his divinity, is sure to be outdone by his successors in newer and more pompous epithets of praise. Thus they proceed; till at last they arrive at infinity itself, beyond which there is no farther progress* (NHR 4:330).

4. Upon closer consideration, the one God in popular religion combines the projections of different human responses to the contrariety of life. Our fears suggest the existence of a malevolent, revengeful God. We transfer, *as is too usual, human passions and infirmities to the deity, represent him as jealous and revengeful, capricious and partial, and, in short, a wicked and foolish man, in every respect but his superior power and authority* (NHR 4:317). On the other hand, our hopes and inclination to flatter cast over the one God all possible positive properties. *Here therefore is a kind of contradiction between the different principles of human nature, which enter into religion. Our natural terrors present the notion of a devilish and malicious deity: Our propensity to adulation leads us to acknowledge an excellent and divine* (NHR 4:353). The God of the orthodox is not only the creator of all

things, and the God of mercy, but also the God who countenances the everlasting torments of hell.

5. Theologians and philosophers realised that a God that embodies discordant elements is no moral authority since moral authorities behave, at least, consistently. They, therefore, tried to purify the popular image of God: (a) by deducing the existence of an all-benevolent God from the world as it is. Hume discusses this attempt in Parts X and XI of his *Dialogues*. The result is a negative one: *EPICURUS'S old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?* (D 198); (b) by enlarging and emphasizing God's positive properties. According to Hume, however, this attempt fails, since the extension of God's power and the extension of God's benevolence conflict with each other. The reason is that human fear increases with the extension of God's power and knowledge, because no secrecy is to be kept out of his reach. An omnipotent and omniscient God is not an all-benevolent one, but rather a new source of fear. *Thus it may safely be affirmed, that popular religions are really, in the conception of their more vulgar votaries, a species of dæmonism; and the higher the deity is exalted in power and knowledge, the lower of course is he depressed in goodness and benevolence; whatever epithets of praise may be bestowed on him by his amazed adorers* (NHR 4:354). Human beings have tried to overcome their fears by feigning a saviour God; but this God turned out to be a demon. According to Humean standards, such a creature is no moral authority.

I summarize this point: The God of false religion is thought to be the source of commands and of our moral actions. According to Hume, this God is the product of human projections. The imagination, motivated by *weakness, fear, melancholy, together with ignorance is the true source of SUPERSTITION*; the human imagination set in motion by *Hope, pride, presumption ... together with ignorance is the true source of ENTHUSIASM* (*Works* 3:145).¹² The God of false religion is no moral authority: He either embodies discordant elements, due to the different motives in human nature that activate the imagination, or he is a demon, insofar as the extension of the so-called positive properties (knowledge, power, benevolence, presence) turn God into a new source of fear. Nothing can be hidden from this demon's all-seeing eyes. The God of popular religion contradicts our *natural ideas of generosity, lenity, impartiality, and justice* (NHR 4:355). *LUCIAN observes that a young man, who reads the history of the gods in HOMER or HESIOD, and finds their factions, wars, injustice, incest, adultery, and other immoralities so highly celebrated, is much surprised afterwards, when he comes into the world, to observe that punishments are by law inflicted*

on the same actions, which he had been taught to ascribe to superior beings. The contradiction is still perhaps stronger between the representations given us by some later religions (NHR 4:355), that is, christianity. In the essay "Of the Immortality of the Soul," Hume discusses the Christian concept of justice and comes to the conclusion that it contains "a moral scandal"¹³:

Heaven and hell suppose two distinct species of men, the good and the bad. But the greatest part of mankind float betwixt vice and virtue ... Punishment, according to our conception, should bear some proportion to the offence. Why then eternal punishment for the temporary offences of so frail a creature as man? Can any one approve of Alexander's rage, who intended to exterminate a whole nation because they had seized his favourite horse, Bucephalus? (Works 4:402)

III. False Religion and 'Natural' Life

The third point is, probably, the most important one. In order to see the force of Hume's argument, it is necessary again to make some general remarks first.

Although the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* are a fundamental critique of the central doctrine of deism, namely of the design argument, we must not forget that the author shared one important assumption with deistic thinkers: the positive view of human nature. Although Hume thought that nature does not reveal the existence of an omniscient and all-benevolent God, he was as convinced as the deists that the orthodox view of human nature is wrong. Hume shared their belief that Human nature is not depraved; that we are able, without God's grace and assistance, to act morally; and that religion is not necessary to morality. Although he nowhere criticized the doctrine of original sin directly, it is clear from a passage in the first *Enquiry*, that he had no high opinion of the Book upon whose report the doctrine of original sin is founded. Hume writes:

Here then we are first to consider a book, presented to us by a barbarous and ignorant people, written in an age when they were still more barbarous, and in all probability long after the facts which it relates, corroborated by no concurring testimony, and resembling those fabulous accounts, which every nation gives of its origin. Upon reading this book, we find it full of prodigies and miracles. It gives an account of a state of the world and of human nature entirely different from the present: Of our fall from that state: Of the age of man, extended to near a thousand years: Of the destruction of the world by a deluge:

Of the arbitrary choice of one people, as the favourites of heaven; and that people the countrymen of the author: Of their deliverance from bondage by prodigies the most astonishing imaginable: I desire any one to lay his hand upon his heart, and after a serious consideration declare, whether he thinks that the falsehood of such a book, supported by such a testimony, would be more extraordinary and miraculous than all the miracles it relates; which is, however, necessary to make it be received. (E 130)

Thus, Hume did not accept the doctrine of original sin and he did not think that human nature is depraved. In the essay "Of the Dignity and Meanness of Human Nature" and, in particular, in the second *Enquiry*, Hume defends a very positive, almost Hutchesonian view of human nature. He believed that he had proven that there is in human nature *a tendency to increase the happiness ... of mankind*; that there is *a general concern for society*; that we are *compelled by ... instances ... [to] renounce the theory, which accounts for every moral sentiment by the principle of self-love. We must adopt a more public affection, and allow, that the interests of society are not, even on their own account, entirely indifferent to us* (E 218-19). Hume thought that there is a spontaneous sympathy with the unhappy *that the very aspect of happiness, joy, prosperity, gives pleasure; that of pain, suffering, sorrow, communicates uneasiness* (E 220). *All mankind so far resemble the good principle, that, where interest or revenge or envy perverts not our disposition, we are always inclined, from our natural philanthropy, to give the preference to the happiness of society, and consequently to virtue above its opposite* (E 227). The most impressive illustration of Hume's positive view of human nature is, I think, to be found in the *Treatise of Human Nature*. According to orthodox calvinistic thinking, not to help the crew of a ship that had run into danger on the Sabbath was a special sign of piety. Now, Hume writes:

Suppose I saw a ship at a distance, tost by a tempest, and in danger every moment of perishing on a rock or sand-bank ... Suppose the ship to be driven so near me, that I can perceive distinctly the horror, painted on the countenance of the seamen and passengers, hear their lamentable cries, see the dearest friends give their last adieu, or embrace with a resolution to perish in each others arms: No man has so savage a heart as to reap any pleasure from such a spectacle, or withstand the motions of the tenderest compassion and sympathy. (T 594)

No one had *so savage a heart*? The orthodox obviously had, and in the very last sentences on the second *Enquiry* Hume explicitly links the morality of human beings to special conditions: When people *depart from the maxims of common reason, and affect these artificial lives ... no one can answer for what will please or displease them. They are in a different element from the rest of mankind; and the natural principles of their mind play not with the same regularity, as if left to themselves, free from the illusions of religious superstition or philosophical enthusiasm* (E 343). False religion creates an *artificial, affect[ed]* life, a life in which, for example, Sabbath-rules play a dominant role, or in which human flattery is activated without bounds. Another example is this: Since all privacy is lost in view of an omnipotent and omniscient God, believers are not allowed to accept their doubts: *They must then be careful not to form expressly any sentiment of blame and disapprobation. All must be applause, ravishment, extacy* (NHR 4:354). Why false religion has a tendency to create an *artificial* life and therefore is a serious threat to our natural moral sentiments is the subject of probably the most fascinating passages in the *Natural History of Religion*. Here is the gist of Hume's very complex argument:

1. The popular image of God in monotheism is contradictory: The belief in an *infinitely superior deity is joined with superstitious terrors*. The human mind is then sunk *into the lowest submission and abasement* and the *monkish virtues of mortification, penance, humility, and passive suffering* are represented as *the only qualities which are acceptable to him* (NHR 4:339). Not moral, but useless or even baneful behaviour towards society is demanded by the clergy.¹⁴

2. Polytheistic religions have a different impact on morality. Since the powers and functions of their deities are limited, the believers *may even, without profaneness, aspire sometimes to a rivalry and emulation of them. Hence activity, spirit, courage, magnanimity, love of liberty, and all the virtues which aggrandize a people* (NHR 4:339). The heroes in paganism *correspond exactly to the saints in popery and holy dervises in MAHOMETANISM. The place of HERCULES, THESEUS, ROMULUS, is now supplied by DOMINIC, FRANCIS, ANTHONY, and BENEDICT. Instead of the destruction of monsters, the subduing of tyrants, the defence of our native country; whippings and fastings, cowardice and humility, abject submission and slavish obedience, are become the means of obtaining celestial honours among mankind* (NHR 4:339-40). The fact that monotheistic religions often suppress our moral sentiments, whereas polytheistic religions promote them *gave rise to the observation of MACHIAVEL, that the doctrines of the CHRISTIAN religion ... which recommend only passive courage and suffering, had subdued the spirit of mankind, and had fitted them for slavery and subjection* (NHR 4:340).

3. Polytheistic religions are attended by another advantage: They are often far more tolerant. If the powers and functions of the deities are limited, the gods of other sects and nations are admitted to have a share of divinity as well. *The intolerance of almost all religions, which have maintained the unity of God, is as remarkable as the contrary principle of polytheists. The implacable narrow spirit of the JEWS is well known. MAHOMETANISM set out with still more bloody principles; and even to this day, deals out damnation, though not fire and faggot, to all other sects. And if, among CHRISTIANS, the ENGLISH and DUTCH have embraced the principles of toleration, this singularity has proceeded from the steady resolution of the civil magistrate, in opposition to the continued efforts of priests and bigots* (NHR 4:337-8).

In monotheism the worship of other deities is usually regarded as *absurd and impious*; adversaries are represented as *profane*, and the *most furious and implacable of all human passions* are activated (NHR 4:337). One of the results is human sacrifice and religious wars. Certainly, there had been human sacrifice among polytheists as well, but *besides, that the effusion of blood may not be so great in the former case as in the latter; besides this, I say, the human victims, being chosen by lot, or by some exterior signs, affect not, in so considerable a degree, the rest of the society. Whereas virtue, knowledge, love of liberty, are the qualities, which call down the fatal vengeance of inquisitors; and when expelled, leave the society in the most shameful ignorance, corruption and bondage* (NHR 4:338-9).

4. All institutionalized monotheistic religions are connected with absurdities and contradictions. Hume gives here the example of the catholics, *a very learned sect, who, nevertheless, believe the most absurd and nonsensical: the votaries eat, after having created, their deity* (NHR 4:343). Why is this so?

a) Hume's first explanation is this: *If that theology went not beyond reason and common sense, her doctrines would appear too easy and familiar. Amazement must of necessity be raised: Mystery affected: Darkness and obscurity sought after: And a foundation of merit afforded to the devout votaries, who desire an opportunity of subduing their rebellious reason, by the belief of the most unintelligible sophisms* (NHR 4:341-2). In the first *Enquiry* Hume explains this phenomenon, citing a *strong propensity of mankind to the extraordinary and the marvellous* (E 118): *The passion of surprise and wonder, arising from miracles, being an agreeable emotion, gives a sensible tendency towards the belief of those events, from which it is derived* (E 117). Moreover, there is a *pride and delight in exciting the admiration of others* (E 117).

b) In the *Natural History of Religion* Hume gives a different, I think deeper, explanation of this phenomenon (that people believe the most absurd) by linking it finally to morality. According to Hume, believers

have a tendency to accept the most absurd and nonsensical for two reasons:

The first is that to believe in absurdities, improbabilities and incredibilities opens an opportunity to triumph in one's belief. Since those who believe in absurdities will be confronted with opposition, even abuse; and because of this opposition they can value highly their service to the deity. *Nay, the baser the materials are, of which the divinity is composed, the greater devotion is he likely to excite in the breasts of his deluded votaries. They exult in their shame, and make a merit with their deity, in braving, for his sake, all the ridicule and contumely of his enemies. Ten thousand Crusaders enlist themselves under the holy banners; and even openly triumph in those parts of their religion, which their adversaries regard as the most reproachful* (NHR 4:346). The effect of this mechanism on the moral sentiments is fatal: The believers become obstinate and dogmatical. *Men dare not avow, even to their own hearts, the doubts which they entertain on such subjects: They make a merit of implicit faith; and disguise to themselves their real infidelity, by the strongest asseverations and most positive bigotry* (NHR 4:348). *Is it strange, when mistakes are so common, to find every one positive and dogmatical? And that the zeal often rises in proportion to the error?* (NHR 4:347).

The second reason why the faithful believe in absurdities is that they feel that ordinary morality is just something natural. Hume comes to this conclusion by way of the following steps:

(i) It is a fact that *many of the votaries, perhaps the greatest number, will still seek the divine favour, not by virtue and good morals, which alone can be acceptable to a perfect being, but either by frivolous observances, by intemperate zeal, by rapturous extasies, or by the belief of mysterious and absurd opinions. The least part ... of the Pentateuch, consists in precepts of morality; and we may also be assured, that that part was always the least observed and regarded* (NHR 4:357). Even if a popular religion were found, in which it was expressly declared, that nothing but morality could gain the divine favour; if an order of priests were instituted to inculcate this opinion, in daily sermons, and with all the arts of persuasion; yet so inveterate are the people's prejudices, that, for want of some other superstition, they would make the very attendance on these sermons the essentials of religion, rather than place them in virtue and good morals (NHR 4:357-8).

(ii) This phenomenon, Hume goes on, is very odd for two reasons: (1) Nobody is so stupid, as that, judging by his natural reason, he would not esteem virtue and honesty the most valuable qualities, which any person could possess. Why not ascribe the same sentiment to his deity? (NHR 4:358); and, (2) To practice superstition is very often far more difficult than to practice morality. *It is certain, that the Rhamadan of*

the TURKS, during which the poor wretches, for many days, often in the hottest months of the year, and in some of the hottest climates of the world, remain without eating or drinking from the rising to the setting sun; this Rhamadan, I say, must be more severe than the practice of any moral duty, even to the most vicious and depraved of mankind ... The austerities of some Roman Catholics, appear more disagreeable than meekness and benevolence. In short, all virtue, when men are reconciled to it by ever so little practice, is agreeable: All superstition is for ever odious and burthensome (NHR 4:358).

(iii) Morality is not a matter of course, but it is a natural behaviour. This Humean (and classical) idea is very nicely summed up by J. C. A. Gaskin: Moral behaviour "is not difficult or disagreeable or in any way contrary to our nature as normal people. It is an 'interested obligation' and we are inclined to observe it by a combination of many factors: our participation in the feelings of others through sympathy or fellow feeling, our concern to be well thought of in society and live at peace with ourselves and others, our aversion to criminal punishment and disgrace, our calculation of our own greatest happiness etc. In brief, happiness for people and usefulness for society, are the criteria for the morality of an action, and action in accordance with these criteria is both in a man's best interest and in harmony with his normal personality. Morality is social, utilitarian and secular. The will of god and the rewards and punishment of an afterlife play no part in Hume's scheme of morals."¹⁶

(iv) Believers feel this. They know that moral behaviour is *nothing*, which they have *properly performed* for the sake of God, or which can *peculiarly recommend* [them] *to the divine favour and protection* (NHR 4:359). They get into conflicts, and the consequence is that they turn to absurdities, rites, ceremonies, etc. — not **although** these are absurd and unnatural, but **because** they are. Since they are absurd the believer has the certainty that they are done for God's sake.

And any practice, recommended to him, which either serves to no purpose in life, or offers the strongest violence to his natural inclinations; that practice he will the more readily embrace, on account of those very circumstances, which should make him absolutely reject it. It seems the more purely religious, because it proceeds from no mixture of any other motive or consideration ... In restoring a loan, or paying a debt, his divinity is nowise beholden to him; because these acts of justice are what he was bound to perform, and what many have performed, were there no god in the universe. But if he fast a day, or give himself a sound whipping; this has a direct reference, in his opinion, to the service of God. No other motive could engage him to such

austerities. By these distinguished marks of devotion, he has now acquired the divine favour; and may expect, in recompence, protection and safety in this world, and eternal happiness in the next. (NHR 4:359)

(v) There is an even more disastrous consequence for human society if the pious actually choose explicitly immoral acts in order to show their belief in God: *Hence the greatest crimes have been found, in many instances, compatible with a superstitious piety and devotion: Hence, it is justly regarded as unsafe to draw any certain inference in favour of a man's morals, from the fervour or strictness of his religious exercises, even though he himself believe them sincere. Nay, it has been observed, that enormities of the blackest dye have been rather apt to produce superstitious terrors, and encrease the religious passion (NHR 4:359-60).* In the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* Hume repeats this point: *And when we have to do with a man, who makes a great profession of religion and devotion; has this any other effect upon several, who pass for prudent, than to put them on their guard, lest they be cheated and deceived by him? ... The steady alone to so important an interest as that of eternal salvation is apt to extinguish the benevolent affections, and beget a narrow, contracted selfishness. And when such a temper is encouraged, it easily eludes all the general precepts of charity and benevolence (D 221-2).* Besides other things, Hume in his *History of England* is eager to show that in history we find a preponderance of bloody warfare and civil strife whenever religion and politics are linked. The love of God does not imply the love of human kind.

I come to the conclusion of this paper by repeating its main idea: Hume makes a distinction between true and false religion. The popular form of religious worship is false. False religion is a threat to morality since the clergy has an interest in setting bounds to human knowledge; since they keep believers miserable; since the God of false religion is no moral authority, for his properties are either contradictory or even immoral; and, in particular, since the believers have to live in conflicts: Because they feel that their moral acts are plainly natural, they have to find something that is done for God's sake: rites, ceremonies, and, sometimes, oppression and annihilation of other people. *After the commission of crimes, there arise remorse and secret horrors, which give no rest to the mind, but make it have recourse to religious rites and ceremonies, as expiations of its offences (NHR 4:360).* To have recourse to religious rites and ceremonies is, of course, in the interests of the established churches.

According to Hume, it is simply untrue, as is maintained again and again, that religion supports morality; the opposite is true: it weakens it. And as religion weakens morality, morality weakens religion:

Whatever disorders the internal frame promotes the interests of superstition: And nothing is more destructive to them than a manly, steady virtue, which either preserves us from disastrous, melancholy accidents, or teaches us to bear them. During such calm sunshine of the mind, these spectres of false divinity never make their appearance (NHR 4:360).

The usual defence of established churches if confronted with their bloody history is that 'the message is good, but human nature is bad.' According to Hume, it is the other way round: There is nothing inherently wrong with human nature — what is wrong is the message. It makes people greedy and activates their lowest instincts. The *Natural History of Religion* ends without reconciliation: *Examine the religious principles, which have, in fact, prevailed in the world. You will scarcely be persuaded, that they are any thing 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 asseverations of a being, who dignifies himself with the name of rational ... Ignorance is the mother of Devotion: A maxim that is proverbial, and confirmed by general experience* (NHR 4:362-3). Already in the *Treatise of Human Nature* Hume has called the errors in philosophy *only ridiculous*, but those in religion *dangerous* (T 272). And on his deathbed he told James Boswell that "the Morality of every Religion was bad" and that "when he heard a man was religious, he concluded he was a rascal, though he had known some instances of very good men being religious."¹⁷

University of Graz, Austria

* Read at the Hume Conference in Marburg, August, 1988.

1. David Hume, "The Natural History of Religion," in *The Philosophical Works*, ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose, 4 vols. (1882; Darmstadt, 1964), 4:309. Further references ("NHR") will be given in parentheses within the body of the text.
2. It is interesting, and typical for secondary literature on Hume, that the problem of the relationship between religion and morality is almost entirely neglected. This is true even of the most thorough interpretation of Hume's *Dialogues*: St. Tweyman, *Scepticism and Belief in Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Dordrecht, 1986).
3. This preface is printed in E. C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (1954; Oxford, 1980), 306-7.
4. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis, 1947), 220. Further references ("D") will be given in parentheses within the body of the text.

5. David Hume, *The Philosophical Works*, ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose, 4 vols. (Darmstadt, 1964), 3:144. Further references will be given in parentheses within the body of the text.
6. J. Y. T. Grieg, *The Letters of David Hume*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1931), 14, 16.
7. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1987), xvi. Further references ("T") will be given in parentheses within the body of the text.
8. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1975), 285. Further references ("E") will be given in parentheses within the body of the text.
9. Hume continues: *If any material circumstance be yet unknown or doubtful, we must first employ our inquiry or intellectual faculties to assure us of it; and must suspend for a time all moral decision or sentiment ... In moral decisions, all the circumstances and relations must be previously known; and the mind, from the contemplation of the whole, feels some new impression of affection or disgust, esteem or contempt, approbation or blame* (E 290).
10. Hume continues: *This dissimulation often destroys the candor and ingenuity of their temper, and makes an irreparable breach in their character ... Few men can bear contradiction with patience; but the clergy too often proceed even to a degree of fury on this head: Because all their credit and livelihood depend upon the belief, which their opinions meet with; and they alone pretend to a divine and supernatural authority, or have any colour for representing their antagonists as impious and prophane. The Odium Theologicum, or Theological Hatred, is noted even to a proverb, and means that degree of rancour, which is the most furious and implacable ... Thus many of the vices of human nature are ... inflamed in that possession* (*Works* 3:245-7 n. 3).
11. But then this problem arises: What kind of moral authority is such a God supposed to be who is only or primarily interested in one people? In short, who does not fulfil the 'cosmopolitan ideal of the enlightenment'?
12. In contrast to false religion, true worship is without recourse to the aid of the senses & imagination (Mossner [above, n. 3], 307). As to the role of imagination in Hume's philosophy, see Gerhard Stremminger, "Hume's Theory of Imagination," *Hume Studies* 6.2 (November 1980): 91-118; 7.1 (April 1981): 103.
13. J. C. A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion* (London, 1978), 100. Gaskin recognizes that Hume discussed the problem of the relationship between religion and morality (pp. 148-58). More on

this topic is to be found in J. Buchegger, *David Humes Argumente gegen das Christentum* (Frankfurt, 1987).

14. In the *Enquiry* Hume had already stressed this point: *Celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude, and the whole train of monkish virtues; for what reason are they everywhere rejected by men of sense, but because they serve to no manner of purpose; neither advance a man's fortune in the world, nor render him a more valuable member of society; neither qualify him for the entertainment of company, nor increase his power of self-enjoyment? We observe, on the contrary, that they cross all these desirable ends; stupify the understanding and harden the heart, obscure the fancy and sour the temper. We justly, therefore, transfer them to the opposite column, and place them in the catalogue of vices ... A gloomy, hair-brained enthusiast, after his death may have a place in the calendar; but will scarcely ever be admitted, when alive, into intimacy and society, except by those who are as delirious and dismal as himself* (E 270).
15. Already in the *Treatise* Hume had written that in matters of religion men take a pleasure in being terrify'd, and that no preachers are so popular, as those who excite the most dismal and gloomy passions (T 115).
16. Gaskin (above, n. 13), 152. In the *Natural History* Hume is eager to show that moral behaviour is a source of pleasure: *The duties, which a man performs as a friend or parent, seem merely owing to his benefactor or children; nor can he be wanting to these duties, without breaking through all the ties of matter and morality. A strong inclination may prompt him to the performance: A sentiment of order and moral obligation joins its force to these natural ties: And the whole man, if truly virtuous, is drawn to his duty, without any effort or endeavour. Even with regard to the virtues ... such as public spirit, filial duty, temperance, or integrity; the moral obligation, in our apprehension, removes all pretention to religious merit; and the virtuous conduct is deemed no more than what we owe to society and to ourselves* (NHR 4:358).
17. J. Boswell, "An Account of My Last Interview with David Hume, Esq.," in David Hume, *Dialogues* (above, n. 4), 76.