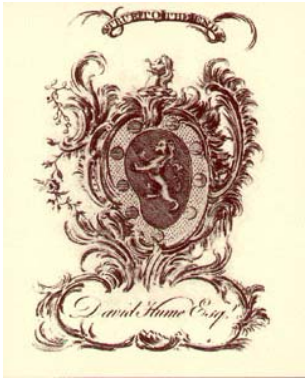

Streminger: "Religion a Threat to Morality"
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The question posed by Gerhard Streminger is, "What did Hume think of the effect of religion on morality?" Professor Streminger makes an important contribution to our understanding of Hume's views. Streminger demonstrates that, in addition to his critique of the rational basis of religion, and his perhaps less well-known critique of the origins of religion in what we may call the dark side of human nature, Hume strongly objected to religion on moral grounds. Religion is a threat to morality, Hume thinks. There is no doubt that this is Hume's view; in fact, as I shall show, Hume's opposition to religion is even more far-reaching than Streminger acknowledges.

Though Hume did not write systematically on the subject, Streminger has ingeniously brought some order to Hume's views by arranging them under three heads. I shall, in turn, continue this clarification by summarizing Streminger's report of Hume's criticisms into sixteen propositions, as follows:

1. Because "fear of the unknown is the origin of religion," clergy have an incentive to limit knowledge.

2. Religious devotion arises from sorrow and terror (*terror is the primary principle of religion* [D 225-6]), so clergy have an interest in increasing human misery.

3. Clergy are necessarily hypocrites, who sometimes feign more devotion than they possess, and guard against the natural, cheerful sentiments.

4. The God of common religion is no moral authority because, among His other faults, He is malevolent, vengeful and wicked.

5. Due to His omnipotence and omniscience, He is an object of fear, from whom nothing can be hidden.

6. This dominating God evokes flattery and adulation.

7. Because He is the product of human prejudices, God embodies discordant elements.

8. He unjustly inflicts excessive punishments and contradicts our natural human generosity.

9. False religion leads to an unnatural life and threatens our natural moral sentiments, in that superstitious terror evokes the monkish virtues of mortification and humility.

10. Monotheism especially leads to intolerance,

11. and to the suppression of the love of knowledge and liberty.

12. In order to produce amazement and wonder, and to give value to service to the deity by provoking opposition and ridicule, religion deliberately promulgates absurdities.

13. The product of this is an obstinate, dogmatic spirit, guided by the rule that the greater the absurdity, the more zealous the advocacy.

14. Absurdities are also promulgated to assure that religious acts are done, not for morality, which, since it is natural and rational cannot be done for God, nor be an object of favour in God's eyes, but for God's sake alone.

15. The consequence of this is that superstition, rites and ceremonies, and not morality, are made the essence of religious observance.

16. By encouraging attention to eternal salvation, religion is likely to extinguish the benevolent affections, rendering its devotees untrustworthy.

These are the criticisms. They are rather an odd catalogue of horrors, reflecting, no doubt, Hume's deep dislike of conventional religion as well as his unsystematic treatment of the subject. But what exactly are they criticisms of? Streminger thinks that Hume's target is "common religion," "established churches," religion "found in the world," "corruption," "popular," "vulgar" beliefs and practices, etc. Hume's target is thus not religion itself, but a certain degenerate or false form of it, not "true" but "false" religion. Thus for Hume there is a form of religion, "true religion," which escapes the criticisms, Streminger seems to suggest. But this is a distortion of Hume's views, based on a misreading of Hume's text. There is no evidence that for Hume there is any form of religion which can be identified as "true religion."

What is supposed to be the distinction between true and false religion? Streminger quotes Hume on the "proper office of religion," which is to inculcate good moral order. He quotes a passage, ultimately excised from the *History of England*, but appearing in the *Dialogues*:

> *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.*[1]

Streminger calls this passage "Hume's most explicit description of true religion" and claims that it states his "idea of the effect of true religion on morality." However, this passage is not about true religion at all. Worse, in the *Dialogues* it is not stated by Hume, but by Cleanthes.

The passage occurs in Dialogue XII, where Cleanthes is defending the view that *Religion, however corrupted, is still better than no religion at all* (D 219). Why? Because it is *a security to morals* (D 219). When Philo objects that history shows that religion always gives rise to miseries, Cleanthes replies that this occurs because religion departs from its *proper office*, and so becomes *a cover to faction and ambition* (D 220). To this defence of religion, Philo responds by listing some of the evils Streminger enumerates. Here, Philo is explicit that he is attacking vulgar superstition, that is, false religion, which he must therefore assume is what Cleanthes has defended and to which Cleanthes has made the *proper office* attribution. Unless Philo has misunderstood Cleanthes' point (an implausible hypothesis), it is not the claim of Cleanthes, much less of Hume, that it is true religion which has the office described. On the contrary, it is false religion.

Evidence that Philo accepts a form of religion called "true" is found in Dialogue XII, where the term "true religion" occurs twice; once Philo says he venerates it (D 219), and later he says it does not have the pernicious consequences attributable to *religion, as it has commonly been found in the world* (D 223). He also refers once to the *philosophical and rational kind* (D 220) of religion. However, in all these passages, it is not clear that Philo means anything by "true religion" other than philosophy itself, and morality: philosophy being whatever reason can tell us about the question of the origin of the universe, and morality being the set of principles ultimately founded on "inclination" and "the natural motives of justice and benevolence." If that is the case, Philo's —read Hume's—attack on false religion is in fact an attack on religion, since there is no other kind. There are not four things: philosophy, morality, true religion, and false religion; but only three. It appears that anything which we might commonly understand as religion is on Philo's view *false religion*, and wholly bad, though Philo — read Hume? — disguises this conclusion by occasionally calling the good things — philosophy and morality — by the name "true religion."

This conclusion needs some qualifications, at least if one attributes to Hume the theism of Dialogue XII, in whose first part, one will recall, Philo takes the view that the dispute between sceptic and theist is wholly verbal, since both agree on the creation of the world by a Divine Being (*the existence of a DEITY is plainly ascertained by reason* [D 217]) and disagree only on whether to call it a "mind" or not. This cautious and limited theism is for Philo the philosophical part of true religion. But what is its relation to the other part, morality? Certainly we should say that for Philo-Hume, sceptical theism supports morality by cleansing the mind of zeal and fervour, thus encouraging open-mindedness and tolerance; and this in contrast with Cleanthes, for whom it is false

religion which supports morality by imposing on its believers powerful, though misguided, hopes and fears.

Beyond this, there is evidently a spiritual element in Philo's religion: he professes that no one *pays more profound adoration to the divine Being* (D 214) than himself. Perhaps it is this spirituality which accounts for the title "true religion." Though the first, theistic, part of Dialogue XII suggests that "true religion" is so-called because it is founded on true propositions, perhaps one could make the case that "true religion" is called "true" because it is the name of the sentiments of the truly religious person, who has no doctrine. It is not clear what is the extent of the term "superstition" in Hume's usage; certainly standard theological conundrums and the catalogue of natural impossibilities he regards as superstitious, but perhaps he would so classify any theological doctrine whatever. If so, the term "Infinite Mind" might best be taken as an invocation of an attitude rather than as a meaningful designator. It may well be Philo's view that *the philosophical and rational kind* (D 220) of religion simply is, not the moral emotions, but the rather different emotions of awe, wonder, adoration, reverence and the like induced by reflecting on the ultimate incomprehensibility of the universe.

Such religion would support morality, for Hume would indeed hold that the truly religious attitude would be proof against the intolerance and enthusiasm he found so appalling among the conventionally religious. Nonetheless, with respect to other parts of morality, Hume might suppose the contrary, for might he not note that reverential contemplation of the Infinite Mind could give rise to attitudes not especially commendable, for example, to an inward-focused self-centredness and indifference towards others? If so, religion of the philosophical and spiritualizing kind might actually weaken the natural moral sentiments of justice and benevolence.

To this point, I have argued that Hume is criticizing religion, and not merely some degenerate, if common, form of it. But just what is it about religion that he is attacking? And is his criticism based on conceptual grounds, that is, on the nature of religion itself, or on inevitable weaknesses of human nature, or is it largely historical? If Hume's account is essentially about the origins of popular religion, it loses much of its apparent generality as a critique. How do we know that religion will not outgrow these origins? Perhaps we are to attribute the moral defects from which popular religion suffers to some inevitable weaknesses in human nature. But why inevitable? One could say that the very growth of knowledge which Hume so fervently accused religion of opposing, has weakened the grip of terror on the popular mind, and with it the opportunity for crafty priests to prey on superstitious incredulity. Perhaps this liberation process will continue. Since Hume's

critique is directed at organized religion — churches, rites, doctrines — one would like to know whether Hume holds that any organization of worship and conscience is doomed to moral disaster. What evidence might he have for such a claim, if indeed Hume is tempted to make it? One might ask whether there is not contrary evidence that churches, perhaps prompted by Hume-like critiques, can purify themselves from their defects, and help overcome, or at least mitigate, the weaknesses in human nature from which these defects spring?

Only if the critique is based on conceptual points can it attain impressive generality, but conceptual points seem to play a small or negligible role in Hume's writings on religion. Perhaps it is a conceptual point that belief in the all-powerful God must induce fear, flattery and the monkish virtues: if you don't cultivate these virtues, you simply don't believe in the Omni-present, no matter what you may think you believe. What we would like from Hume is some conceptual analysis of religion designed to show that anything which we might plausibly call by that name is likely to suffer from the defects he finds in historical religions. We would also like a clearer account of just what it is about religion which, in Hume's view, constitutes the "threat to morality." There is a legitimate question as to just what aspect of religion is Hume's real target. Is it superstitious incredulity? The organization of worship? Priests? Doctrine? Monotheism? Or perhaps the unhappy misalliance of superstition, meaningless ritual, crafty and dishonest clergy, and dogmatically held doctrine, which, it can be argued, has characterized much of Judeo-Christian history? Clearly, any final assessment of Hume's views about religion's relation to morality must be more precise than Streminger's on points such as these.

Finally, with respect to the justness of Hume's criticisms, one wants to ask most fundamentally how good a grasp of religion Hume actually possessed. Religion was not an institution for which Hume had much use. He failed to foresee its ability to make peace with the growth of scientific knowledge, exaggerated its reliance on superstition, fear and terror, tendentiously accused it of trading in ignorance and conniving at the suppression of liberty, and underestimated its ability to purify itself on the moral failings he attributed to it. He missed the significance of its communal function as a source of social unity, and seems only dimly to have grasped its spiritual message. To say this is not to deny that Hume's critique is caustic, brilliant, savage and, for its time, daring. Perhaps the human race would have been better off if religion had never existed; and perhaps we will be better off when its slow death agony finally comes to an end. (I should say parenthetically that I am no longer convinced as I once was, that this is indeed what is occurring.) Yet religion can be an uplifting, moderating, humanizing

force. In failing to acknowledge this, Hume's critique, it seems to me, falls short of a balanced or fair accounting.

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1. 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.