



Book Review: M. Andreas Weber, *David Hume und Edward Gibbon, Religionssoziologie in der Aufklärung*

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M. Andreas Weber. *David Hume und Edward Gibbon, Religionssoziologie in der Aufklärung*. Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Anton Hain, 1990. Pp. xii + 164.

This book on David Hume and Edward Gibbon is intended to be a contribution to the discussion of the origins of a "sociology of religion" in the eighteenth century. It seems to be written mainly for an audience more interested in sociological than in philosophical questions. While large portions of the book are concerned with a discussion of Hume's "naturalism" and its consequences for his philosophy of religion (Weber, 1-80), little of genuine novelty is to be found in them. Weber does not break any new ground, but simply summarizes the results of more recent Hume scholarship. It is interesting, however, to see the key concepts of Hume's philosophy of religion in a sociological rather than a philosophical context, if only because it shows again how modern a thinker Hume really was.

The second part of the book (Weber, 80-151) concerns Hume's influence on Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Weber has no difficulty in arguing that Gibbon's account of the role of religion in general and of the rise of Christianity in particular was deeply influenced by Hume's various writings on religion, and especially by his "Of Miracles," "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm," and his *Natural History of Religion* because Gibbon himself not only often alludes to Hume, but at times explicitly refers his readers to the latter's works. Thus, he called attention to the *Natural History of Religion*, for instance, as the "best commentary" on polytheism (Weber, 113). Weber can thus convincingly argue that many aspects of Gibbon's historical narrative and discussion presuppose and expand Humean ideas, and that these ideas are not merely of marginal importance, but are decisive for understanding Gibbon. If it needed showing that Gibbon was deeply influenced by Hume in his views on religion, then Weber's book is entirely successful. However, I am not sure that this needed further argument. It is well known that, to use the words of Nicholas Phillipson, Hume had "a profound influence on historians like William Robertson, Edward Gibbon and Sir Walter Scott," and that especially his reflections on superstition and enthusiasm were "the starting point for nearly all subsequent secular thinkers about the history of religion" (Hume [London, 1989], 71). It might have been better, if Weber had spent more time and effort on the analysis and discussion of the significance of this Humean influence.

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