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Spinoza and Hume on Religion as a Natural Phenomenon

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Abstract: Spinoza and Hume are two naturalist philosophers who were among the first modern thinkers to study religion as a natural phenomenon. There undoubtedly are similarities in their accounts of the origin of religion in imagination and passion (emotion). But those who see Hume as a crypto-Spinozist are nevertheless confronted with serious differences between the two philosophers with respect to their understanding of religion and its various forms. These differences concern fundamental issues like the meaning and acceptability of the notion of God and its function in different spheres, the possibility of a kind of philosophical religiosity, and the possible advantage of religion, at least in some of its forms, to individual and social life. The militant "Spinozism" of Hume belongs to a world perhaps (in part) made possible by Spinoza, but nevertheless alien to him.

1. Some General Considerations[1]

At first sight, no two philosophies look more distant and more different than Spinoza's and Hume's. Yet, both Spinoza *and* Hume scholars have claimed that at a deeper level, there is real philosophical kinship between the two.[2] Others vigorously deny any resemblance.[3] The question whether Hume was familiar with Spinoza's own writings, rather than with the Spinoza presented by Pierre Bayle, has also led to some controversy. A recent book by Paul Russell, *The Riddle of Hume's* Treatise*: Scepticism, Naturalism and Irreligion*,[4] reinterprets Hume's *Treatise* as a

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work presenting an irreligious, neo-Lucretian philosophy very much in line with Spinoza's anti-theological stance. Russell even sets forth several reasons, including circumstantial arguments, to prove that Hume did read Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. One possible test for the thesis that Hume is a crypto-Spinozist involves a study of their respective views on religion.

In the almost one hundred years between Spinoza and Hume, the cultural and philosophical changes were enormous. Early modern thought at the time of Spinoza was characterized by full confidence in the power of the natural light of reason. And reason was not yet split up into two separate domains, science and philosophy. Physics and metaphysics formed a unity called philosophy. Spinoza fits perfectly within this context.[5] The new mechanistic view of nature brought him to reject the traditional philosophical and theological view of man, world, and God, a view characterized by both anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism. Since this traditional view, with its affirmation of God as lawgiver and of man as a rational, free-willing being, was the very presupposition of ethics, religion, and politics, a rejection of this view required a completely new understanding of the problem of individual and social wellbeing in these domains. Already from the titles of his major works, *Ethics*, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, and *Tractatus Politicus*,[6] it is clear what Spinoza wanted to accomplish: to radically rethink ethics, religion, and politics in line with the new philosophico-scientific way of thinking. But, according to Spinoza, this could not be done except on the basis of a radically new understanding of God. This is evident from the way *each* of the mentioned works begins with, or is centred upon God, the one substance, *natura naturans*, source of everything.[7] In the same way in which geometrical figures and their relations can and must be understood as modifications of geometrical space, in the same way in which physical bodies and their relations are to be understood as modes of one extended substance, so also things in general and their causal interrelations, as well as the totality of all things, should be understood as finite or infinite modes of substance as *causa sui*. God and man have to be reinterpreted in an ontological framework in which all things are modes of a monistic substance, and in which there is room only for efficient, not for final, causation. According to the formula *causa sive ratio*, efficient causation is completely intelligible, that is, perfectly in tune with the thoroughly intelligible relationship between substance and its infinite nature(s), on the one hand, and the nature and properties of finite things, on the other. Once a scientific onto-theology (E I, "De Deo") and anthropology (E II, which one could call Spinoza's "De Homine") are in place, a new ethics, religion, and politics can be developed in tune with the scientific view of God, nature, and man.

However, a strictly theoretical insight into God and man does not by itself yield *any* idea of good and bad. Therefore, the new "philosophical" ethics, religion, and politics presuppose not only a rational understanding of man as a part of

nature and mode of divine substance but also insight in the fact that *ratio*, too, is a peculiar figure of *conatus*, intrinsically related to active affects and strivings and engaged in a power struggle with passive affects. The rational individual, too, is characterized by a desire for and an idea of the good life in relation to others and to God, albeit informed by rational insight concerning itself, its affects and their effects (Preface to E IV). As is demonstrated in *Ethics* IV, the new, rational ethics consists in a way of life characterized by a certain affective relationship to oneself (*animositas*) and towards other human beings (*generositas*, characteristic of a new form of *pietas*).[8] *Ethics* V demonstrates that the new religion is characterized by a certain affective relationship to God-Nature (*amor intellectualis Dei*, characteristic of a new form of *religio*).[9] Since human life is impossible outside human society, the philosopher has to develop a rational insight in the workings of human society and, on this basis, devise precepts or blueprints determining the conditions for communal welfare and for the possible flourishing of a philosophical life in the state.

As the poet John Donne famously expressed it, the new mechanical philosophy puts everything in doubt, including the whole traditional fabric of ethics, religion, and politics.[10] If man is just a part of nature, if there is no personal God, then there is no revelation, no giving of the Ten Commandments, no transmission of authority to kings and other earthly powers. The reaction of Spinoza is twofold: not only is it necessary to construct a completely new philosophical ethics, religion, and politics in line with the new view of nature and man, but it also becomes possible and necessary to develop a completely new kind of study, the study of ordinary ethics, religion, and politics as natural phenomena.[11] In Spinoza this study takes the form of an explanation of these domains in terms of specific combinations of collectively determined imaginations and affects.

The study of ordinary ethics is to be found in *Ethics* III (and this kind of morality is criticized in *Ethics* IV). The third book of the *Ethics* is not just the scientific theory of passive and active affects required to construct a new, rational ethics. It is also and at the same time a genealogy, anticipating Hume, of *common sense ethics* understood as intrinsically related to passive affects.[12] It demonstrates how humans spontaneously form the notions of good and bad on the basis of the affects of pleasure and pain and how their private notions of good and bad develop into *communal* standards of praise and blame because of the workings of such mechanisms as the *imitatio affectuum*, the desire for recognition, and so on. As this common sense ethics is based on inadequate ideas about oneself and others (and God), there is no guarantee of human flourishing on this basis: what are called virtues are in fact often vices; if there is human flourishing, it is the result of trial and error or of lucky circumstances or both.

In the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and the *Tractatus Politicus*, Spinoza attempts to construct a genealogy of ordinary religion and politics. These domains,

too, are based on the mechanisms of imagination and affect. What is remarkable is that although ordinary ethics, religion, and politics are always the product of imagination and passive affects, the student of human nature and human society nonetheless discovers that some forms of ethics, religion, and politics are more conducive to human flourishing than others. This is clearly the case in politics, but it is also the case in the ethico-religious sphere.[13] This brings Spinoza to investigate which communal combinations of imagination and affect produce better results and why.

As we will see, religion as a natural phenomenon can take different forms in Spinoza: forms which are constituted by combinations of collective imaginings and affects. But, as Spinoza explicitly demonstrates in the Appendix to E IV and in E V, *religio* can also take the exceptional form of a religiosity that is a product of the *conatus* of some rational individuals capable of adequately thinking the idea of an impersonal God-Nature and of developing intuitive knowledge.

Let us turn now to Hume, but not only to the Hume of *A Treatise of Human Nature*.[14] Here there is no longer a need for any reference to God in the defense of scientific thinking (as there was for Descartes) or in the rejection of tradition and the establishment of a rational way of life (as was the case for Spinoza). What interests Hume, according to the subtitle and introduction of the *Treatise*, is the study, in Newtonian fashion, of the principles of human nature as a basis for the understanding of everything, since "everything" is preconditioned either as an object of human understanding or as a feature of human emotionality.[15] For the first time, modern rationality is itself scrutinized with respect to the rational foundation of its fundamental principles and ideas—and found lacking. As Hume demonstrates in his *Treatise* Book 1, neither the fundamental principle of causation, nor the principle of sufficient reason, nor the fundamental ideas of self and world (and God) seem to be rationally justifiable. All the attempts of ancient and modern philosophy to provide such a justification are found to fail. Causal inferences have nothing to do with intelligible connections; they are but mechanical processes of the imagination. Pure reason is discovered to be a sub-function or a kind of outgrowth of the imagination, the workings of which are discovered and verified empirically. Left to itself, pure reason entirely subverts itself. Fortunately, it can hardly have consequences in real life; it cannot really subvert life and its practices. It is obvious that human nature does not allow this. Does this mean the end of philosophy? No, provided that philosophy is done "in a careless manner," in the service of common life. As the first *Enquiry* will put it, "philosophical decisions are [and should be] nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected" (EHU 12.25; SBN 162).[16] Reason can only operate "properly" within the context of a common practice. Even science is such a practice, geared towards a certain delicate pleasure in the scientist and towards benefits for society at large.

The most striking difference (apart from methodology) between Spinoza (along with other early modern philosophers) and Hume is that for Hume the idea of God, in whatever form, no longer does any serious work in philosophy or science or morals. The ultimate basis of philosophical explanation is not the idea of God, but the idea (of the principles) of human nature. Nevertheless, like Spinoza, Hume rejects the traditional philosophical-theological idea of God and provides a naturalistic explanation of ordinary religion. In his *Dialogues on Natural Religion*, Hume argues that the notion of a transcendent God turns out to be so incomprehensible and incoherent that a rationally justified belief in his existence seems totally impossible.[17] For Hume, as for Spinoza, the only option remaining to explain this idea is by providing a genealogy of religious beliefs and practices, explaining their origins in terms of the passions and the imagination, which is precisely what Hume does in his *Natural History of Religion*.[18]

There are other fundamental similarities between the two philosophers. For Hume, as for Spinoza, neither (common) ethics nor politics is the product of reason. Desire for what is good or aversion to the bad requires emotions, more precisely, master passions involving ideas of one's own self and of other selves, both of which are constructs of the imagination. Politics is likewise based on a complicated progress of sentiments, not even having the practical rationality Hobbes supposed it to have in the social contract. Hume thinks that ethics and politics are, in principle, separable from religion.[19] But are they separable in fact? Hume sees religion as a way of life which in its "artificiality" invariably perverts common morality and the natural virtues. For Spinoza, too, these collective domains are hard, if not impossible, to separate, but as we will see below, he thinks their combinations can take forms which are not necessarily detrimental to human life.

2. The Genealogy and Critique of Religion

2.1. Different Forms of Religion (Spinoza)[20]

Since the traditional philosophical-theological idea of God has no rational justification, religion can and must be understood genealogically; in other words, the study of religion as a natural (social) phenomenon becomes possible and necessary. In the Appendix to *Ethics* I and the Preface to the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Spinoza begins to develop a kind of genealogy of ordinary religion. Like Hume later, he traces this origin to ignorance in combination with two fundamental emotions, fear and hope. Combined with anthropomorphic projection, these emotions lead to the invention of invisible agents whom people hope will interfere for them (and for their own group, rather than for other groups) and whom they try to please through ceremonies and sacrifices. Spinoza calls this complex of ignorance, emotion, projection, and ritual practices "superstition." As Susan James has rightly pointed out, for Spinoza, superstition does not simply consist in having false ideas,

but in having them in combination with certain affects, particularly ambition and conceit, thinking of oneself as special, better than the others, as the chosen ones.[21] In E IV P44 Sch, Spinoza describes ambition as well as lust and greed as species of madness. Like Hume, he mentions two factors which turn superstition into a very dangerous force, politically speaking: first, the establishment of a class of priests, or intermediaries between gods and men, leading to a disastrous combination of religion and political faction; second, particularly in certain forms of Christianity, the combining of religion and philosophy, leading invariably, and paradoxically, to dogmatism and to the negation of freedom of thought (and science).

Unlike Hume, Spinoza seems to think that religion is universal among human beings. In ignorant people, whose life "is driven about in many ways by external causes" (E III P59 Sch), superstition seems inevitable. The rational individual will not be without religion, either, but will potentially develop a true, philosophical religion, on the basis of the true idea of God, one that is implanted in everyone's mind (E II P47 Sch) but that requires a process of transcending *imaginatio* in order to become fully conscious and to thus form the basis of a new way of moral and religious life, the life of the free, rational individual, and ultimately, the life of wisdom.

In the *Ethics* Spinoza seems to simply equate ordinary religion and superstition. However, even here the picture is not completely negative. When examining the passive affects from the point of view of *ratio* in part 4 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza remarks that attitudes like humility and repentance (which Hume will later derogatorily call "monkish" virtues), although obstructive for the pursuit of a rational way of life, are nevertheless better than nothing in the sphere of politics (E IV P50 Sch, P54 Sch). People who are neither rational nor characterized by such emotions are "less than human" and dangerous to human society. People having these attitudes can more easily be brought to adopt a rational way of life. Thus, Spinoza seems to be somewhat more amenable to traditional Christian virtues than Hume.

In the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, where Spinoza studies the relation between religion (or theology, as he sometimes calls it) and politics, an altogether more nuanced picture is presented.[22] In the subtitle of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Spinoza proposes the thesis he wants to demonstrate in this book: that freedom of thought and speech can go together with piety and peace. He claims that this is not only possible, but that these freedoms are even required for real piety and peace. But harmony between freedom of thought and speech, on the one hand, and politics and religion, on the other, can only be realized with respect to a certain form of religion, namely, non-superstitious religion or piety. Spinoza defines piety as obedience to God, demonstrating itself in good works of charity and justice. Piety is thus not opposed to free thought, and, for Spinoza, it is also compatible with the separation between church and state. It is precisely this form of religion that, according to Spinoza, is advocated in the Bible (both the Old and

New Testaments). If Spinoza is really speaking his mind here and not putting up a smoke screen of some kind (as is claimed by Leo Strauss and followers),[23] he seems to accept, on the basis of the testimony of Scripture, and perhaps on the basis of his own observations of the life of certain Christian sects around him, that (Christian) religion can take the form of a non-superstitious, beneficial sort of practice and that this was in fact its original form. The possibility of non-superstitious religion or piety is all the more important in view of the fact that a rational sort of life cannot be reached by many, perhaps even most, people. If there were only two kinds of individuals, the rational and the superstitious, we would have to despair of the possibility of salvation for the overwhelming majority of mankind (TTP XV.236). It would mean, furthermore, that religion and politics would be ineluctably and forever engaged in a deadly struggle.

What is remarkable is that Spinoza, champion of rational thought and fierce critic of traditional Christian philosophy and theology, seems to accept a third possibility in between the rational and the superstitious way of life. This third possibility implies that some forms of religion or of "obedience" are not destructive but, on the contrary, are potentially advantageous to the individual and to the state. Even though based on false ideas, piety involves a moral practice that is not really different from the moral life of rational people (TTP XV.232).

But how does Spinoza know that this salutary kind of religion exists at all? He himself agrees that reason on its own would never lead us to think that some form of salvation could follow from obedience, that is, from a way of life not governed by rational insights and desires. Spinoza's answer seems to be that he cannot deny the facts. The prophets preaching salvation through obedience do not have "mathematical" certainty concerning their preaching, but they have "moral" certainty. This means that they are not only strongly convinced because their visions and the miracles they perform "confirm" their message(s), but they also have what is called the internal "testimony of the Holy Spirit," which, says Spinoza, is nothing but "the peace of mind that results from good actions," or from a life lived in accordance with the prophetic message itself (TTP XV.235). This moral certainty should be sufficient, even to the external observer. It seems undeniable to Spinoza that certain forms of obedience to God lead to a life of peace and quiet. He writes,

> It would be folly to refuse to accept, merely on the grounds that it cannot be proved with mathematical certainty, that which is abundantly confirmed by the testimony of the prophets, that which is the source of so much comfort to those less gifted with intelligence, and of considerable advantage to the state, and which we [even we philosophers!] can believe without incurring any peril or hurt. (TTP XV.234)

It looks as if Spinoza's rationalistic framework allows him the freedom to accept the enormous diversity of the life forms created in human history, including life forms which can be described as piety and which, from a rational point of view, one would not have expected to possibly lead to a form of salvation. Human reason can be confronted with facts which it knows are explicable in principle (by an Infinite Intellect) but not by the human intellect.

That Spinoza of all people recognizes a third possibility between superstition and the rational life is perhaps less surprising if we concentrate for a moment on the fact that *imaginatio* for him is never pure *negatio*, and the passions never pure passivity. Within the domain of the imagination and passions, different forms of passivity can be distinguished, for example, by the presence of passive affects of the kind *hilaritas* rather than *melancholia*.[24] This clearly happens in the domain of politics; why should it not happen in the domain of religion? Politics is always the domain of thinking and affection of a community of individuals who are more or less in concord (*concordia*) with one another and which presupposes some sort of collective "mindedness" that cannot be characterized as adequate thinking.[25] Nevertheless, some forms of political life are clearly preferable to others. Some, like the empire of the Turks at the gates of Europe, are rather a human desert (*solitudo*, TP V.5); others, like the United Provinces and particularly Amsterdam, are hotbeds for peace, culture, and commerce. These differences are not due to differences in the nature of the individuals—human beings are always and everywhere the same—nor are they due to the guidance of state affairs by philosophers. These differences have to do with the presence and persistence of certain constellations of stories, customs, and political institutions, and the collective emotions connected with them. What is important, politically speaking, is not to eliminate greed, ambition, and so on, which is impossible. What counts is that ambition and greed are framed in such a way as to strengthen the goal of the state, namely, security and peace. Within such a state, the necessary conditions are also established for the appearance of rational individuals and their way of life.

Spinoza himself does not, after all, seem to exclude the possibility of an explanation of the link between obedience (at least the pious version of it) and salvation. He maintains "absolutely that this fundamental dogma of theology [namely, that obedience saves] cannot be investigated by the natural light of reason or at least that nobody has been successful in proving it" (TTP XV.233). Earlier in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, he explicitly said that Christ is "a man who can perceive by pure intuition that which is not contained in the basic principles of our cognition and cannot be deduced therefrom" (TTP I.64). Unlike Moses, Christ saw "that the end for which [religious people] were striving would be a consequence necessarily entailed by the general obedience of the people" (TTP IV.107). For the rational person, by contrast, blessedness is not the separate, agreeable effect of a rational life of virtue; it is virtue itself (E V P40). Likewise, succeeding in

leading a life of quiet trust in God and of loving kindness for neighbours cannot but constitute blessedness as an internal reward. Of course, understanding the necessary link between pious obedience and salvation is not the same as grasping the conditions which produce this kind of obedience. Perhaps the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* as a whole can be seen as an attempt to answer this problem as well.

2.2. Different Forms of (Vulgar) Religion (Hume)

Hume's views on religion are mainly expressed in two separate but complementary books: his *Dialogues on Natural Religion* and his *Natural History of Religion*.[26] The first investigates the rational justification of arguments for God's existence and the conceivability of the idea of God. The results are devastating, and the way out suggested at the end of the *Dialogues* is for the believer to turn to revelation. However, the study of the origin and forms of so-called "revealed" religion and of its effects on human life in the *Natural History of Religion* leads Hume to describe vulgar religion as "sick men's dreams," the "playsome whimsies of monkeys in human shape" (NHR 15.6, 86). The way out suggested in this work is by entering "the calm, though obscure, regions of philosophy" (NHR 15.13, 87).

What Hume means by a "natural history" of religion is not a kind of historical survey, but a conjectural explanation of how the principles of human nature give rise to religion in its different forms and developments, which include polytheism and monotheism, superstition, and enthusiasm.[27] Spinoza himself never distinguished between superstition and enthusiasm. For Hume, as for Spinoza, the origin is emotion and imagination. The fundamental emotion for all forms of religion is fear, even terror: elsewhere, Hume says, "terror is the primary principle of religion" (DNR 12, 290). But this fear is combined with wishful thinking and imaginative projection of friendly and unfriendly powers into objects or supposed agents. These imaginings are full of contradictions, but since they cannot be given up, they force believers into self-deception, plunging them ever deeper into irrationality and terror (NHR 12, 13). Add to this the influence of emotional infection in combination with the formation of factions and sometimes (as in enthusiasm) also excessive zeal, and it will be clear that religion, particularly in its monotheistic form(s), is an extremely dangerous socio-political force. Especially when allied with a dogmatic philosophy, it subverts common sense and leads to the formation of "artificial" lives that are incompatible with common morality.[28] Particularly when directed and usurped by priests, this force must be curbed and checked by the political authorities. Like Spinoza, Hume advocates a complete submission of churches and sects to the political authorities.

Even though Hume denies that religion is the product of an original instinct in the human soul, nevertheless the tendency towards superstition and false religion

seems a general attendant of human nature (NHR 15.5, 86). At the end of the *Natural History of Religion*, Hume says that it is almost impossible to envisage a human society without religion: "Look out for a people, entirely destitute of religion: If you find them at all, be assured, that they are but few degrees removed from brutes" (NHR 15.10, 86). Although both common morality and religion are products of emotion and imagination, morality and its virtues are seen by Hume as constituting a basically sound and humane sphere, separable from the lunacies of religion. Yet, Hume's irenic view of common morality seems to clash with his pessimism about religion and its pervasive influence upon the vulgar. It is as if human nature, for Hume, is on the one hand, a benign force, on the other, a machine of perversions.[29]

Hume's attitude towards religion is extremely negative. The only exceptions are (ancient) polytheism and what he calls "true religion," the kind of vaguely deistic, politically harmless religion entertained by cultivated people impressed by Newtonian physico-theology.[30] Pagan mythological religion does find mercy in Hume's eyes. It has no fixed dogmas and principles, only stories and rituals. It is (sometimes?) a poetical religion, "light, easy, and familiar," and not wholly incompatible with common morality (NHR 12.18, 73). Vulgar monotheistic religion, on the contrary, is considered invariably a form of psycho-pathology (as Freud will also think), infecting and corrupting common morality.[31] It is particularly "modern religion," with its systematic and "scholastic" monotheism, that is dangerous. This must have something to do with the centrality here of the notion of a transcendent God, which is not only completely incomprehensible and absurd but also very dangerous. For this notion is particularly prone to be combined with terror and self-deception, leading to disastrous consequences both for the believer and for society.[32] Only in his *History of England* does Hume seem to allow for a couple of exceptions.[33]

In the abstract, one might expect that a rationalist like Spinoza would completely reject religion as based on false ideas and passions, and that an empirically minded student of human nature such as Hume would be more nuanced in his judgment of religious phenomena. Yet it is Spinoza who accepts that religion can sometimes take a gentle, salutary form, piety. Hume seems unwilling to envisage the possibility of any positive combination of religious fictions, collective emotion, and religious practice.

Some commentators have suggested that Hume's almost total rejection of religion is to be explained in terms of his aversion for the kind of religion he was brought up in, Scottish Evangelical Calvinism.[34] Is there a more reasonable explanation? Perhaps Hume's rejection is related to his view that monotheistic belief always forms a closed system, impervious to any critical stance from outside and characterized by a kind of "motivated irrationality" disregarding the "ordinary" affections of human life.[35] The tenacity and the disastrous consequences of

monotheistic religion even (especially) in modern times may have driven Hume to formulate a radical critique of it, in the hope of shifting, at least somewhat, the balance of its influence. At the same time, he knows it is very doubtful that philosophy and true religion, which are rather elitist affairs, could ever overcome the dark forces of popular religion. Therefore, the philosopher should support a policy of progress through commerce, the advancement of learning, and a refinement of manners, thus strengthening as far as possible common morality and the natural virtues. But Hume's pessimism is sometimes pervasive. He believes that people's prejudices are so ineradicable that common morality will always be under pressure from superstition (NHR 14).

As we will now demonstrate, Hume's aversion to religion does not prevent him from having a quite sophisticated view of religion as a natural phenomenon. Unlike Spinoza, he anticipates a contemporary view of religion as essentially characterized by symbol and ritual.

3. Religious Belief (Dogma), Stories, Ceremonies, and Practices[36]

3.1. Spinoza

For Spinoza, just as the distinction between superstition and piety has nothing to do with the absence or presence of adequate thinking, so also it has nothing to do with the presence or absence of dogmas, ceremonies, and stories. Piety, like superstition, is based on beliefs or dogmas that are not rational and that are connected with a set of religious stories. As we would put it today, piety can be characterized as a Big Narrative.[37] Piety, even in its purified Christian form, like superstition, is characterized by ceremonies. If piety is a way of life inevitably involving ritual, narrative, and dogma, what makes it different from superstition? For Spinoza, it is a way of life in which, for some reason, these elements are combined not with the manic-depressive cycles of fear and hope, ambition and melancholy, but with emotions of trust and loving kindness and with practices of charity and justice. Or, to put it the way Susan James describes it, "The difference between the two types of practice lies in the passions they arouse and the functions they are able to serve. Unlike superstitions, devotional practices arouse *devotio*, a form of love combined with wonder, which easily changes into love [simpliciter] as its objects become familiar."[38] These practices and emotions require a peculiar form of social and family relations, a peculiar form of education, and so forth. Piety also involves an attachment to dogmas and ceremonies that is "without hesitation" yet is, at the same time, not fanatical; in other words, it somehow involves the awareness that what counts is neither the letter of the religious dogma nor the strict observance of ritual as such, but purity of the heart. Therefore, the pious believer will have no problem conforming his or her religious practices to the laws

of the state when religious teachings or practices and the laws of the state come into conflict.[39]

Piety cannot exist without at least a few central dogmas, which Spinoza himself enumerates in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* XIV. These central dogmas concern the minimal belief conditions of pious obedience, including, for example, the affirmation of a "supremely just and merciful [Supreme Being], *the exemplar of true life*," who will save the obedient and who forgives repentant sinners. In other words, the dogmas are not at all speculative; they are "practical truths." That is the reason why Spinoza himself says—and this is quite remarkable—that they do not and cannot conflict with philosophical truths, for example, the truth about determinism leading to the negation of miracles (TTP VI.132–34). Of course, the creed will normally contain other dogmas, differing according to the different (historical or cultural) forms of religion. As to stories and ceremonies, although piety is de facto always characterized by them, blessedness does not really depend on them. In order to be a pious believer, it is not important to know all these stories, and if political circumstance forbids observance of ceremony, this constitutes no real problem with respect to piety. What is essential is the inner moral attitude, obedience, expressing itself in the moral "works" of charity and justice, as allowed by the laws of the state.

One can wonder if it is really conceivable that the morality of the believers is so weakly related to the religious dogmas, stories, and ceremonies.[40] For the believers themselves, dogmas, stories, and ceremonies seem inextricably interwoven: just as they cannot separate their faith from certain dogmas and from the belief in (some) stories (about Christ, for example), so also they cannot separate their morality from certain ceremonies and symbols (the sacrament of the Eucharist or the cross as a symbol of forgiveness, for example). All this seems to be part of *one* form of *life*. Thus, Spinoza cannot possibly mean that stories and ceremonies are not de facto part of the moral way of life. What he seems to mean is that in piety the relation between these elements and faith is (and should be) different from what it is in superstition. In superstition, dogmas form a fixed system, and adherence to them is more important than practice. In superstition, rituals are obsessively observed; everything must make way for them.

Piety is not so much the result of the belief in dogmas; on the contrary, the dogmas are "practical truths," deeply embedded in piety as a moral way of life. If the letter of the dogma becomes dominant, this is a sign of superstition. In the same way that rituals are part of piety as a moral way of life, they are part of its outward expression. But if the expressions as such become the central preoccupation, this is a sign of superstition. What is important about piety is neither the adequacy of the ideas nor the efficacy of the rituals. What counts is their being embedded in, or giving flesh to, the moral way of life. External criticism that points out the inadequacy of the ideas or the ineffectiveness of the rituals

is thus a misunderstanding, just as it would be a misunderstanding to criticize politicians and their ideas and plans as strictly speaking irrational. Philosophical criticism of the belief in miracles by the prophets and other pious people is in a way beside the point, because they do not take miracles to be against the order of nature; they simply do not have a philosophical view on this one way or the other. Miracles are simply taken by them as surprising events inciting their imagination and instilling piety (TTP VI.133). These are remarkable insights for a rationalist.

However, Spinoza has no satisfactory account of what many scholars today consider a central feature of religion: its ritual and symbolic character. His thought about religious ceremonies and practices is dominated by the distinction inner/outer, whereby the "right" relation of the inner to the outer requires the capacity not to be obsessed with the outer. (An example would be the attitude towards the sabbath: the sabbath is sacred; yet the sabbath is there for man, not man for the sabbath.) Spinoza seems to equate piety with a kind of purely inner, pietistic attitude of childlike trust in and obedience to God, showing itself externally in practices of charity and justice. Just as he seems to think that the pious believer can take the right attitude towards the letter of dogma and the demands of ritual, so also he seems to think this believer can take the right attitude towards possible restrictions imposed by the sovereign on the outward acts required by his religion. It is doubtful whether the inner-outer relation is the right tool for thinking about the relationship between faith and its expressions.

3.2. Hume on the Combination of Religious Belief, Morality, and Ritual

As we have seen, Hume remains suspicious of all forms of vulgar religion. Even if it were possible, as Spinoza seems to think, to have a popular religion in which the principal message is that only a truly moral life is agreeable to God, this would still be superstition. In the *Natural History of Religion*, we read:

> Nay, if we should suppose, what never happens, that 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 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 14.3, 81)

Superstition, says Hume in the essay "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm," is always expressed in "ceremonies, observances, mortifications, sacrifices, presents or . . .

any practice, however absurd or frivolous which either folly or knavery recommends to a blind and terrified credulity" (E 74).[41] This is not to say that a form of religion that rejects rituals, customs, and symbols, such as enthusiasm, is more acceptable: it, too, leads to negative consequences though of another kind, including "intemperate zeal," and "rapturous ecstasies" (NHR 14.1, 81), which are equally if not even more dangerous for common morality. What is remarkable is that Hume realizes that ordinary daily life, morality included, is full of *profane* rituals and symbols, looking as weird from a detached viewpoint as those of superstition. Nevertheless it is only religious ceremonies, rituals, and symbols that are ridiculed and rejected *in toto*.

Hume's analysis of what is involved in ritual and the use of symbols, both religious and profane, is quite sophisticated.[42] Hume explicitly recognizes that profane rituals like promising strongly resemble religious rituals. At first sight they look equally mysterious: a certain use of words or signs, accompanied by a certain intention, seems—in appropriate circumstances—to produce something completely new, a radical change in the object or person. I am now under an obligation; he is now a priest; this is now my property, "[this] building yesterday was profane; to-day, by the muttering of certain words, it has become holy and sacred" (EPM 3.36; SBN 198).[43]

According to Karl Britton,[44] both profane and sacred rituals also require the invention of symbolic practices by which symbolic objects, like property or holy places, are constituted. These practices and objects may be very useful, as in the case of promises or property, but people value them for themselves and take them seriously in themselves.[45] Human beings, Hume realized, are a truly inventive species (T 3.2.1.19; SBN 484), or as D. T. Siebert has put it, we are "contriver(s) of symbols."[46]

Notwithstanding this similarity between profane and sacred symbols, Hume thinks there are substantial differences, leading him to the rejection of the "sacred mysteries," which he calls "priestly inventions" (T 3.2.5.14; SBN 524). What are these differences? Religious ceremonies or rituals are more rigid, in the sense, for instance, that they absolutely require the intention to be present (unlike in promising). If the priest secretly withdraws his intention, he acts criminally, but still, he "destroys the baptism, or communion, or holy orders" (T 3.2.5.14; SBN 525).[47] This rigidity has everything to do with the second, major difference: rituals "have no public interest in view" (T 3.2.5.14; SBN 524) and thus they are "entirely without foundation" (EPM 3.38; SBN 199). However, Hume himself has to recognize that the rigidity of sacred rituals can be matched by that of profane ones (as in the sphere of justice). But, he says, the last ones are innocent and even necessary, the former pernicious to society (EPM 3.38n; SBN 200n). Whereas the profane symbolic order related to property is "absolutely requisite to the well-being of mankind and existence of society," the supernatural, or sacred, order is "frivolous, useless, and burdensome" (EPM 3.38; SBN 199).

Hume's view seems problematic because symbolic systems, whether of status and property or of religion, are not just independent, natural means to pre-given ends (like survival, flourishing or progress), but rather they constitute spheres or media within or through which people live their lives. If this is so, a purely pragmatic rejection of certain practices, supposing the availability of a neutral point of view, is hard to envisage. Hume may have thought that his naturalistic view of human nature gives him a reflective standpoint from which he can objectively discover the real ends of human life and from which he can objectively criticize (ethico-religious) symbolic systems going against them. But, as Bernard Williams pointed out, "[t]he project of giving to ethical life, in any very determinate form, an objective grounding in considerations about human nature is not . . . very likely to succeed."[48] Of course, Hume's appeal to the well-being of mankind and the existence of society may not be "purely pragmatic"; it may be recognizable from within any symbolic system that is not as rigid and closed and, therefore, as dangerous as the religions Hume subjects to criticism.

4. Conclusion

Spinoza and Hume are two naturalist philosophers who were among the first modern thinkers to study religion as a natural phenomenon. There undoubtedly are similarities in their accounts of the origin of religion in imagination and passion (or emotion) and in their criticisms of the traditional philosophical-theological notion of God. But those who see Hume as a crypto-Spinozist are nevertheless confronted with serious differences. These difficulties do not seem to be the result simply of contingent factors, like the kinds of religion the two philosophers were familiar with. They concern fundamental issues, such as the possibility of a non-contradictory notion of God and its foundational role in different spheres (for example, in a new rational ethics and in a philosophical religion) and the possible advantage of religion, at least in some of its forms, to individual and social life. A "Spinozism" in which all these elements are absent is perhaps a radical enlightenment position, but it is for sure a truncated Spinozism. The strongly anti-religious spirit of this "Spinozism" probably has a complex origin. In the end, it may have to do with the strange combination of optimism and pessimism about human nature that is typical of Hume.

What has happened in between Spinoza and Hume is a kind of Copernican revolution, doing away with the centrality of the idea of God. The only function this idea can still have for Hume is in the context of what later will be called a specific symbolic and ritual framework, which sees religion as a social phenomenon. Even though Spinoza already sees religion as a natural phenomenon, it is Hume, together perhaps with Vico, who forms the beginning of a really sophisticated understanding of religion.[49]

NOTES

1 The first section of this paper is partly based on previous work; see Herman De Dijn, *Spinoza: The Way to Wisdom* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1996), chaps. 9–11, and Herman De Dijn, "Hume's Nonreductionist Philosophical Anthropology," *The Review of Metaphysics* 56 (2003): 587–603.

2 Richard Popkin, "Hume and Spinoza," *Hume Studies* 5 (1979): 65–93; Wim Klever, "Hume contra Spinoza?" *Hume Studies* 16 (1990): 89–106; Wim Klever, "More About Hume's Dept to Spinoza," *Hume Studies* 19 (1993): 55–74; Annette Baier, "David Hume, Spinozist," *Hume Studies* 19 (1993): 209–12. For an extensive comparison, see Gilbert Boss, *La différence des philosophies—Hume et Spinoza*, 2 vols. (Zürich: Grand Midi, 1982).

3 For a reaction to Wim Klever's "Hume contra Spinoza?" see Frank Leavitt, "Hume Against Spinoza and Aristotle," *Hume Studies* 17 (1991): 203–8, with a response by Wim Klever, "A Vindication," *Hume Studies* 17 (1991): 209–12. For vigorous criticism, especially of the views of Klever and Baier (see previous note), see Vance Maxwell, "The Dialectic of Enlightenment: A Critique of Recent Spinoza-Hume Scholarship," *Animus* 7 (2002), http://www.swgc.mun.ca/animus.

4 Paul Russell, *The Riddle of Hume's* Treatise: *Scepticism, Naturalism and Irreligion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

5 Herman De Dijn, *Modernité et tradition* (Leuven/Paris: Peeters/Vrin, 2003), chap. 1.

6 References to Spinoza are to the following texts: Baruch Spinoza, *Ethica More Geometrico Demonstrata*, in *Opera Posthuma*, ed. Carl Gebhardt, vol. 2 (Heidelberg: Carl Winters, 1925), abbreviated as "E" followed by part in Roman numerals, and proposition number and an abbreviation of the geometrical type: (E II P45 Sch = *Ethica* Part II, Propositio 45, Scholium); *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, in Gebhardt, *Opera Posthuma*, vol. 3; *Tractatus Politicus*, in Gebhardt, *Opera Posthuma*, vol. 3, hereafter abbreviated as "TP" and cited by chapter and page number as follows TP I.1; *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, trans. Samuel Shirley, introduction by Brad S. Gregory (Leiden: Brill, 1989), abbreviated as "TTP" and cited by chapter and page number as follows: TTP XV.324 = TTP, chap. 15, page 324.

7 Herman De Dijn, *Spinoza, de doornen en de roos* (Kapellen/Kampen: Pelckmans/Klement, 2009), chap. 8.

8 Herman De Dijn, *De affecten en het ethische leven bij Spinoza* (Mededelingen vanwege het Spinozahuis 101) (Voorschoten: Uitgeverij Het Spinozahuis, 2011), 15–18.

9 See also Herman De Dijn, "Spinoza and Religious Emotions," in *Religious Emotions: Some Philosophical Explorations*, ed. Willem Lemmens and Walter Van Herck (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 105–19.

10 John Donne's poem is mentioned in Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957), 29.

11 De Dijn, *Spinoza, de doornen en de roos*, chap 8.

12 For more about *Ethics* III, see Herman De Dijn, "Spinoza's Theory of the Emotions and its Relation to Therapy," *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy* 5 (2010): 419–21.

13 See also Alexandre Matheron, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* (Paris: Minuit, 1969).

14 For an overall picture of Hume's philosophy, see Herman De Dijn, "Hume's Non-reductionist Philosophical Anthropology," *The Review of Metaphysics* 56 (2003): 587–603.

15 References to the *Treatise* are to David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), hereafter cited in text as "T" followed by Book, part, section, and paragraph numbers; and *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), hereafter cited in text as "SBN" followed by page numbers.

16 References to the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* are to David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* ("EHU"), ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), hereafter cited in text by section and paragraph; and *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed., revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), hereafter "SBN" followed by page numbers.

17 David Hume, *Dialogues on Natural Religion*, in *Writings on Religion*, ed. Anthony Flew (Chicago: Open Court, 2000), hereafter cited in the text as "DNR" followed by section, paragraph, and page numbers.

18 David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, ed. Tom. L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), hereafter cited in text as "NHR" followed by section, paragraph, and page numbers.

19 See Jennifer A. Herdt, *Religion and Faction in Hume's Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 197 for a fuller discussion of this point.

20 This section is partly based on previous work; see Herman De Dijn, "Spinoza and Revealed Religion," in *Studia Spinozana* 11: *Spinoza's Philosophy of Religion*, ed. H. De Dijn, F. Mignini, and P. van Rooden, (special issue), (1995): 39–52.

21 Susan James, *Spinoza on Superstition: Coming to Terms with Fear* (Mededelingen vanwege het Spinozahuis 88) (Budel: Damon, 2006), 5–6.

22 For further discussion about the difference between the *Ethics* and the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in this respect, see De Dijn, "Spinoza and Revealed Religion."

23 Leo Strauss, "How to Study Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*," in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 142–201; see also J. Thomas Cook, "Did Spinoza Lie to his Landlady?" *Studia Spinozana* 11 (1995): 15–37.

24 About *hilaritas* and *melancholia*, see Spinoza, E III P 11 Sch.

25 See also Herman De Dijn, *Spinoza, de doornen en de roos*, chap. 9

26 On Hume and religion, see the following (among many others): Christopher Bernard, "Hume and the Madness of Religion," in *Hume and Hume's Connexions*, ed. M. A. Steward and John P. Wright (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 224–38; Edward Craig, *Hume on Religion* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1997); William Davie, "Hume on Monkish Virtues," *Hume Studies* 25 (1999): 139–53; J. C. A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1978); Thomas Holden,

Spectres of False Divinity: Hume's Moral Atheism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); John Immerwahr, "Hume's Aesthetic Theism," *Hume Studies* 22 (1996): 325–37; David Fate Norton, "Hume, Atheism, and the Autonomy of Morals," in *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, ed. M. Hester (Winston Salem, NC: Wake Forest University Press, 1986), 97–144; Keith Yandall, "Hume on Religious Belief," in *Hume: A Re-evaluation*, ed. Donald Livingston and James King (New York: Fordham University Press, 1976), 109–25; Keith Yandall, *Hume's "Inexplicable Mystery": His Views on Religion* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

27 About history as conjectural explanation, see Christopher J. Berry, "Rude Religion: the Psychology of Polytheism in the Scottish Enlightenment," in *The Scottish Enlightenment: Essays in Reinterpretation*, ed. Paul Wood (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2000), 315–34; see also Willem Lemmens, "'Beyond the Calm Sunshine of the Mind': Hume on Religion and Morality," *Aufklärung und Kritik* 18 (2011): 214–40, 218.

28 Concerning the notion of "artificial lives," see Hume's *A Dialogue*: ECPM 122; SBN 341–43).

29 About this opposition between religion and common morality, see Lemmens, "Hume on Religion and Morality," 222–23; and Herdt, *Religion and Faction*, 197. For an illuminating discussion as to how the same human nature can lead to the best and the worst in human beings, see Gerald Postema, "'Cemented with Diseased Qualities': Sympathy and Comparison in Hume's Moral Psychology," *Hume Studies* 31 (2005): 249–98.

30 About Hume and true religion, see Donald Livingston, "Hume's Conception of True Religion," in *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 33–73; and also Lemmens, "Hume on Religion and Morality," 232–33.

31 See Terence Penelhum, "Hume's Skepticism and the *Dialogues*," in *David Hume: Critical Assessments*, ed. Stanley Tweyman, vol. 5 (London: Routledge, 1995), 132.

32 In this context Peter Kail speaks of "motivated irrationality"; see his *Projection and Realism in Hume's Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 190–211.

33 David Hume, *The History of England*, 6 vols (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1983). For a discussion of this point, see Herdt, *Religion and Faction*, 214–15.

34 See Herdt, *Religion and Faction*, 217.

35 See Kail, *Projection and Realism*; also Peter Kail, "Hume's Naturalistic Critique of Religion," *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 72 (2010): 491–94.

36 This section is partly based on previous work, especially De Dijn, "Spinoza and Revealed Religion" and De Dijn, "Promise and Ritual: Profane and Sacred Symbols in Hume's Philosophy of Religion," *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 1 (2003): 57–67.

37 See also Moira Gates and Genevieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 1999).

38 James, *Spinoza on Superstition*, 13.

39 For more about the characteristics of piety, see De Dijn, "Spinoza and Revealed Religion."

40 For doubt about this, see Willem Lemmens, "Spinoza on Ceremonial Observance and the Moral Function of Religion," *Bijdragen: International Journal in Philosophy and Theology* 71 (2010): 8–9.

41 David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, Liberty Classics, 1985), abbreviated as "E" followed by page numbers.

42 In the following paragraphs I rely on De Dijn, "Promise and Ritual," 57–67.

43 David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* ("EPM"), ed. Tom. L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), hereafter cited in text by section and paragraph; and *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), hereafter cited in text as "SBN" followed by page numbers.

44 Karl Britton, "Hume on Some Non-Natural Distinctions," in *David Hume: Bicentenary Papers*, ed. G. P. Morice (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1977), 270.

45 Another characteristic of religious practices is the "incarnation" of religious meanings in objects, persons, places, and so on; see also De Dijn, "Promise and Ritual."

46 D. T. Siebert, "Hume on Idolatry and Incarnation," in Tweyman, *David Hume: Critical Assessments*, 486.

47 Hume may be wrong in this supposition, at least with respect to Catholic ritual.

48 Bernard Williams, "The Scientific and the Ethical," in *Objectivity and Cultural Divergence*, ed. S. C. Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 227.

49 On similarity and difference between Spinoza and Vico, see J. Samuel Preus, "Spinoza, Vico, and the Imagination of Religion," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 50 (1989): 71–93.