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The Impact of David Hume's Thoughts about Race for His Stance on Slavery and His Concept of Religion

ANDRE C. WILLIS

Abstract: Reconsidering David Hume's thoughts about race using the methods of both Black critical thought and critical approaches in the study of religion can shed new light on the grounds of his response to slavery and his way of conceiving religion. This paper argues that Anglo-colonialist processes of racialization subjugated others based on both their physical and theistic "types." Viewing Hume's stance on slavery and his complicated writings on religion through the lens of these colonialist modes of racialization reveals that Hume's commitment to the fixed hierarchy of races, his "rejection" of slavery, and his 'history' of religions serviced his belief in black inferiority and supported Anglo-colonialist domination.

In March 2010, Professor Tom Devine, widely acknowledged as the leading academic historian of Scotland, presented a plenary lecture for the Royal Society of Edinburgh's yearly symposium, "Connections between Scotland and Slavery." Publicly advertised as a reply to the question "Did Slavery Make Scotland Great?" Devine's talk was eagerly anticipated by the group of international scholars gathered at the University of Edinburgh. His answer, however, may have been more controversial than the audience anticipated. Devine said that the economic transformation of eighteenth-century Scotland was a direct result of capital produced

by slave labor, disproportionately financed and largely managed by Scots. The notion that Scotland's extraordinary profits from the slave trade were integral for its success as a nation supplements the conventional understanding that Scotland simply profited from its "important role in British colonial expansion."¹ Devine ended his remarks with a poignant apology for not having adequately focused on this troubling feature of Scottish history in any of the twenty-eight books he had written over his forty year academic career.²

Devine's personal regret invites consideration of the afterlife of the Scottish participation in race-based slavery. The Transatlantic Slave Trade was more than a mere commercial enterprise that produced excessive capital for the Scots and then disappeared. It was a brutal system of race-based colonial domination that was built on a nexus of supportive concepts, metaphors, and ideas. This unique form of Anglo-colonialism racialized others based on facial features, skin pigments, hair texture, nose shape, and body types *as well as* styles of worship, types of deities, and forms of religious belief.

There is much to be said about the residue of transatlantic slavery, particularly in light of its justification of the "scientific" hierarchies of race prevalent in the eighteenth century, which found expression—sometimes directly and other times indirectly—in the contributions of many Scottish Enlightenment writers.³ Given that race-based slavery was a popular topic in Hume's setting and that racial systems of classification were being discussed in his intellectual circles, it would be anachronistic to think that race was not near to Hume's thoughts. We know that he directly mentioned racial types in some of his writings, that he was aware of the lively debates about the merits and liabilities of race-based slavery, and that he actively engaged in the purchase and sale of a slave plantation (and likely invested in it).⁴ It follows that his ideas about race then, particularly his statement that black people were inferior to whites (articulated in the notorious footnote of 1753 that was added on to the essay "Of National Characters" [1748]), likely had significant bearing on the stance he took on slavery, a position on which the secondary literature does not wholly agree. Further, given the "othering" project of Anglo-colonialism, it makes sense that Hume's ideas about race shaped and were shaped by his conception of religion, which relied on depictions of the rituals of uncivilized blacks (and others) as "pagan" in order to situate the beliefs and practices of white Christians as "religious." Of course, Hume was not unique in this regard; many writers used differences in both physical traits and sacred practices to create "others." Considering Hume's thoughts on race, slavery, and religion together, and in light of Anglo-colonial processes of racialization, can broaden our understanding of Hume's relation to the discourse and politics of human difference in his day.

With these considerations in mind, this essay is divided into three sections. In section one, I discuss Hume's approach to race as partially influenced by the

quest to find the *truth-to-nature* as dictated by the natural sciences during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Following from this, in the second section, I emphasize how Hume's stated views regarding blacks—that they were “naturally inferior” and originally distinct from whites—shed light on the grounds of his “condemnation” of slavery. In part three, I highlight the connections between Hume's ideas of religion and his thoughts about race, to reveal the ways in which religion is racialized and races are tagged with certain “religious” features in his writings.

As a prefatory matter, I want to clarify three assumptions of my approach. First, I am mindful that Hume's overall science of human nature is complicated and that it contains passages that can be used to both support and challenge parts of my thesis regarding the logics of race, slavery, and religion that I discuss below. Thus, I am not interested in authorizing a single way of reading Hume's distinctive writings, which evolved during his career and are intricate in ways that I cannot take up in this essay. Rather, my interpretive approach considers Hume's thoughts about race in general and black people in particular to illuminate the extent to which these ideas played a role in steering the direction of his writings about slavery and religion.

Second, I believe that the use, circulation, and appropriation of the colonial logics of race can be brought into sharper view in light of the theoretical insights of African American Critical Thought (for example, Eddie Glaude, Sylvester Johnson), and that recent critical-historical methods in the study of religion can shed new perspectives on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ways of conceiving religion (for example, Talal Asad, Tomoko Masuzawa). I rely on these resources as I consider the processes of racialization that shaped Enlightenment ways of conceiving “religion.” De-colonial thinkers and post-structuralist writers have argued that the concept “religion” both shaped and was shaped by hierarchical notions of race, and that “race” and “religion” evolved as categories within a larger colonial quest to indicate who was to be subjugated.⁵ African American critical thought, which keeps track of colonialist processes of racialization as they structure the black encounter with the West, illuminates the subtle ways that hierarchical thinking about race permeated Hume's analysis, despite his so-called “rejection” of slavery and his commitment to show “universal” principles of human nature. While these new theoretical resources can be brought to bear on some of Hume's writings, they may be viewed as distorting Hume's positions, which are complicated and sometimes contradictory. Of course, sound interpretation must be based on solid evidence, not solely theoretical interpretations. Yet, since Hume gives no direct or final word on the links between race, religion, and slavery (he did not address the complex interrelatedness of these topics), I marshal certain claims from his work both to help us consider the nuanced ways that race factors into his thoughts

about religion, and harness certain theoretical tools to expand the interpretative vistas available to us.

Third, I aim to avoid positioning Hume as merely a thinker who worked from, and contributed to, retrograde views of non-whites. The either/or binaries and the conclusions easily drawn from that kind of analysis—racist/non-racist, white supremacist/non-white supremacist—often neither expand our understanding of Hume, nor clarify the context in which he worked. My objective, thus, is to consider his writings in light of contemporary theoretical insights in religious studies and race theory, and thereby expose his work to new interpretive framings that can both inform the scholarly conversation on these issues and, hopefully, reduce some of the divisions that lie in the wake of these colonialist modes of thinking.

Part I: Hume and Race

The racial logics that undergirded Hume's writings were shaped, in part, by the standards of modern science and natural history, particularly their emphases on observation and codification. From the perspective of the newly developing natural sciences, race was a naturally occurring and easily visible set of features that distinguished human persons. Hume's addition of the 1753 footnote in "Of National Characters" (1748) that stated "the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds)" suggests that he may have inherited his ideas about race from texts like Linnaeus's *Systema naturae* (1735). In its second edition (1738), this work presented a fixed typology of four racial kinds where each was associated with general characteristics: black Africans were capricious; yellow Asians were opinionated; white Europeans were law-seekers; and red Americans were guided by customs.⁶

In the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century natural sciences, the observation and judgment of nature was linked to the larger need to present objects in their idealized form so that they might reveal the larger order of things. This meant that the Enlightenment natural scientist was to wade through examples of objects and artifacts (in this case "peoples")—comparing and contrasting them—not to discover their *truth-to-experience* or describe an objective encounter with the object, but to uncover their *truth-to-nature*, that is, to share their expert and ingenious judgement on the position of the object in the overall scheme of nature. Thus Linnaeus—and other early modern naturalists—were not celebrated for neutrality in observation; rather, they were venerated for the brilliance of their interpretations and the ease by which their logic of codification flowed. The creativity of Linnaeus's systematization, with its quasi-literary inventiveness, sheds light on why this illustrious Swede—considered the prince of botanists—was praised by French (Rousseau), German (Goethe) and Swedish (Strindberg) *literati*, among others, and has been honored and revered since the eighteenth century. His system

represented the particular form of genius and expert judgment that was required for the complicated task of observation. Its aim was not to provide a detached view of the varieties of nature's imperfections as they were experienced, it was to present the object under scrutiny in its idealized form. The pure object—described in its perfection—revealed a teleology and exposed nature's purpose. My point is that the personal biases and opinions of the observer were thus *essential* for distilling the object's essence.

Lorraine Daston's and Peter Galison's text *Objectivity* convincingly tracks the history of scientific observation to show that this particular eighteenth-century mode of scientific knowing—*truth-to-nature*—preceded the quest for objectivity of the nineteenth century. They argue that discovering an object's *truth-to-nature* meant one had to rely on the distinctive experiences and particular talents of the investigator to effectively synthesize, actively identify, and productively distinguish the genuine article from its varieties and distinguish its accidental features from its essential ones. Citing Goethe's 1798 quest for pure phenomena as indicative of this approach, Daston and Galison claim: "To depict it [pure phenomena], the human mind must fix the empirically variable, *exclude* the accidental, *eliminate* the impure, *unravel* the tangle, *discover* the unknown (emphases mine)."⁷ Both Linnaeus's classic and celebrated system of fixed and separate races that described Africans as "crafty, indolent, negligent," and Europeans as "gentle, acute, inventive," and, say, Blumenbach's system that refused to assign negative traits to blacks or support racial hierarchy, brilliantly reflected the *truth-to-nature* approach.⁸ For, "the standard Linnaeus and other Enlightenment savants upheld was *truth-to-nature*, rather than *objectivity*."⁹

The *truth-to-nature* approach, a means of image creation, sanctioned the eighteenth-century use of the term race to make a variety of designations: methodological (Buffon), zoological (Voltaire), distinctions in lineage (Maupertuis), cultural differences (Kames), and variances in national character.¹⁰ The central interest, however, of eighteenth-century European colonialism was to situate black/brown, red and yellow bodies effectively against white ones; for, the imperial quest thrived on the logics of subjugation that identified "uncivilized" and "barbaric" others. African derived peoples were the most visibly different; thus, they generated the most attention, spawned the greatest controversy, and gave rise to the most vitriolic commentary.¹¹ As Justin E. H. Smith reminds us, this was largely due to the need to craft a sound intellectual justification for the colonial exploitation of African labor in the "New World." Smith notes that racial taxonomies gave "ad hoc theoretical support of an economic order" that was intent on disparaging some peoples "no matter what the evidence about human origins seemed to reveal."¹² In short, colonial domination depended on racialized others. Thus, the work of thinkers like Linnaeus, which exploited visible human differences and created separation between races, was popularized over and against the efforts of thinkers

like Blumenbach, who interpreted the observable diversity of humans as a (largely insignificant) feature of a broad and more fundamental human unity.

Hume's own stance on the issue of race—which, as I will show below, can be thought of as linked to the work of Linnaeus and therefore derived from a creative interpretation of nature (*truth-to-nature*), not an objective description of an encounter with different groups (*truth-to-experience*)—is generally taken from a controversial footnote that he added to his essay “Of National Characters” in 1753, and further edited for a later publication (1777):

I am apt to suspect the negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient GERMANS, the present TARTARS, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction between these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are NEGROE slaves dispersed all over EUROPE, of whom none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; though low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In JAMAICA, indeed, they talk of one negro as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.¹³

Scholars generally concur that this is a racist statement. They disagree on whether the “original distinction” reflects Hume's commitment to polygenesis, debate if it comports with his wider philosophical positions, and dispute Hume's reasons for editing it.¹⁴

Whatever we are to make of these related (and important) concerns, we can reasonably assert two points about Hume's notion of race based on this infamous footnote. The first is that at its core, the footnote assumed human beings to be naturally constituted by distinctive racial types most easily identifiable by skin color and region. Hume took the extant racial categories—which began as descriptors of lineages of groups of European bloodlines and became, in the hands of natural historians and scientists, categories about clusters of traits, and their links to skin color—to be both correct and useful for thinking about human differences. Hume, well known for his strategic “studied impartiality” and his targeting of “political extremism and dogmatism of any kind,” was a bit more dogmatic when it came to race.¹⁵ He accepted popular ways of thinking about human differences and

built on the racial categories delineated by “scientific” study of observable human differences (what some might think of as the “religion” or “belief system” of the natural sciences), without any criticism. In short, he crafted a narrative about human difference.¹⁶

The second uncontroversial point confirmed by this footnote is that Hume believed black people to be “originally distinct” from, and “naturally inferior” to, whites. Seeming to abandon his empiricist commitments (including the tenet that the empirical method could deliver only probable conclusions), Hume is firm and unambiguous in the footnote: black people do not have the capacity to express the entire range of human ideas and emotions. And, given his explicit use of the phrases “naturally inferior” and “original distinction,” it is fair to say that he thinks this group is not able to change their status. That is, for Hume, the natural inferiority of blacks is fixed and unchanging; they simply will be without “symptoms of ingenuity” and will lack “civilization,” “arts,” and “sciences” forever. Even at their highest development, their intellect will not extend beyond that of a “parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.”

Many scholars have provided insights into the particulars of Hume's racism. Similarly, eighteenth century researchers have broadened our perspective on the methods of early modern naturalism that supported the Linnaean hierarchy of characteristics. These accounts are nicely supplemented by newer disciplines that take race as their point of departure. The latter foreground how the concept of race came to be in the modern west, shed light on the effects of its evolution, discuss its logical coherence, and highlight its shortcomings. To approach Hume's footnote using the insights of African American Critical Thought, for example—as I do here—is to emphasize that Hume's decision to depict the “negroe” as “originally distinct” and “naturally inferior” was more than an innocent attempt at scientific analysis, and not simply a harmless effort to establish a sense of otherness. Rather, from this disciplinary vista, the footnote reflects the racial perspective affirmed and elevated by a particular form of Anglo-colonialism. Of course, the complexity of the ways ideas can function both politically and philosophically at the same time cannot be worked out here. Yet, the distinctive insight of this section is not simply that Hume's ideas were racist because the *truth-to-nature* method confirmed that he should impose his biases on observable objects (that is, that Hume had no pretension to objectivity). Rather, it is that Hume's racist ideas were employed and popularized within Anglo/Euro-colonialist ideologies because they provided rational support for the subjugation of black and brown peoples. Discourses of colonial modernity normalized racial hierarchies and regularized anti-black bias in order to confer badges of civilization and rationality on whites, and Hume's thoughts about race were used in these discourses.

To illustrate the deleterious effects of colonialist approaches to race is to grapple with the complexity of race and its eighteenth-century intricacies. Thinkers

like Sylvester Johnson, Cornel West and Paul Taylor, have, among other things, demonstrated the difficulty in coming to consensus about the meaning of race, traced the history of racial-types in the west, and demonstrated the links between defining racial kinds and justifying particular forms of colonial power.¹⁷ They argue that races are not “naturally occurring entities like rocks,” and emphasize its social formation, how racial-types were shaped by European political and economic investments, and the demeaning racial logic baked-in to the very structure of the discourses of colonial modernity.¹⁸ They also describe the shift from the classical distinction between human beings (the civilized and the barbaric), to the modern one (racial categories white and black), and they are interested in thinking about how the racial logics of colonialism—creative acts of the white imagination that situated blackness as a defect—connected with other discourses, for example, discussions of slavery or treatments of religion. From this perspective, Hume’s notion that blacks were naturally inferior to whites reinforced the brutal, modern form of slavery and the trading of black bodies.

Part II: Hume’s “Condemnation” of Slavery

Considering eighteenth-century positions for or against slavery is a particularly thorny issue. This is because from our historical vantage point, it seems counter intuitive that in addition to the conventional positions (racists supporting slavery, and non-racists opposing it), some eighteenth-century Scottish thinkers held racist views about black people, yet opposed slavery (e.g., Henry Home, Lord Kames), while others supported slavery and did not hold racist views about black people (for instance, Archibald Dalzel).¹⁹

Examining what it means to take a strong stand against slavery—that is, to “oppose” it—in eighteenth-century Scotland, is also fraught with complexities. This is due to the fact that some Scottish thinkers “opposed” slavery via strong verbal condemnation of the entire wicked system of colonial subjugation (trading, plantation life, transportation, and so on), while others “opposed” it by merely noting that certain aspects of it were distasteful. Further, some thinkers “opposed” slavery and called for its immediate abolition, while others “opposed” slavery and called for its gradual abolition. Finally, some thinkers “opposed” slavery on the grounds that it restricted the freedom of black people and was therefore unjust, while others “opposed” slavery on the grounds that it diminished the character of white people and impeded the moral development of Anglo civilization.

We must proceed, therefore, with caution: simple claims that eighteenth-century writers “opposed” slavery are neither as straightforward about that person’s actual position on slavery, nor as telling about their thoughts about race as we might expect. Given this, it is useful to consider the broader intellectual investments, historical background, and immediate sources that informed the variety of

writings that take up slavery in the Scottish Enlightenment, to better understand the nuances of Hume's particular position and to most thoughtfully assess how his concept of race—particularly what he thought of black people—factored into that position.

The attitudes of Scottish Enlightenment writers regarding modern slavery have been well discussed in the secondary literature. The general consensus is that Gershom Carmichael (1672–1729), Adam Ferguson (1723–1816), Francis Hutcheson (1694–1747), William Robertson (1721–1793), John Millar (1735–1801), James Beattie (1735–1803), and James Ramsay (1733–1789) “opposed” slavery in one way or another. As noted above, the content and tone of their opposition to slavery ranged greatly, as did their respective degrees of anti-black racism.

Ramsay, for example, was an Anglican vicar and medical doctor who witnessed first-hand the brutality of the slave system, personally engaged many blacks, and experienced the viciousness of plantation life during his nineteen years of living in St. Kitts. These experiences, which he compellingly detailed in his influential *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* (1784), inspired him to affirm black humanity, challenge the colonialist notion that might-makes-right, and make a Protestant-based argument for the equality of all human beings.²⁰ Influenced by the arguments of his friend James Beattie's 1770 *Essay on the Immutability of Truth in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism*, Ramsay's text added rich, detailed stories of plantation life and made powerful arguments about the ills of slavery and Anglo-colonialism. His book became a crucial document for abolitionist work in Scotland, England, and beyond.

In contrast, Millar never witnessed chattel slavery first hand, and it is not exactly clear how many black people he directly encountered over the course of his life. His important work, known from its 1779 edition as *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (1771), was a study of hierarchical relations and social authority that mostly focused on the evolution of the position of women throughout history. In the final chapter of that text, Millar, in the scholarly tone of the Regius Chair of Civil Law at University of Glasgow that he held, both addressed the modern master-slave relationship and provided a variety of arguments against slavery. The logic he deployed against slavery built on Adam Smith's (who, for the most part, was interested in slavery's economic aspects), yet came much closer to a liberal language of human rights.²¹

I briefly mention the contributions of these two figures to the Scottish Enlightenment discourse on slavery and race in order to demonstrate both the disparities between and overlapping elements of their respective “oppositions” to slavery. Millar's argument implied that societies were better when they operated from liberal sentiments that situated black people as members of the human family who deserved the right to be free. In contrast to Ramsay's passionate plea for black humanity, Millar wrote nothing of whether he thought that black

people possessed the same range of human emotions and capabilities as those in “civilized” nations. In fact, his four stage model of societal development can be read as justifying imperialism and suggesting that black people were not capable of civilizing themselves. While this claim is somewhat speculative, it is meant to raise the question as to whether Millar considered blacks to lack the intellectual, social, and emotional capacities possessed by the “civilized.” What we do know is that Millar believed society would be improved if slavery were to be abolished, and he expressed hope that it would gradually disappear.²² Ramsay, on the other hand, pressed for immediate abolition and challenged racial hierarchies. The point is that, while we can agree that both Millar and Ramsay opposed slavery, the details of their oppositional stances to it may reveal important differences in both what they thought about black people and the project of Anglo-colonialism.

Ramsay and Beattie publically criticized Hume’s writing for both its racism and what they charged as its indirect support of slavery. Yet, against the firm position of Hume’s contemporary interlocutors, some recent thinkers have argued that Hume should be included amongst the eighteenth-century Scottish thinkers that “opposed” modern slavery. They base their claim on a passage from his 1752 essay “Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations,” in which Hume directly referenced modern slavery:

The remains which are found of domestic slavery in the AMERICAN colonies, and among some EUROPEAN nations, would never surely create a desire of rendering it more universal. The little humanity, commonly observed in persons, accustomed, from his infancy, to exercise so great authority over his fellow-creatures, and to trample upon human nature, were sufficient alone to disgust us with that unbounded dominion.²³

Robert Palter maintains that this paragraph about the enslavement of Africans—from Hume’s longest and most important discussion of slavery—conclusively confirms Hume’s strong opposition to slavery. For Palter, this paragraph demonstrates, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Hume believed there was no behavior that was “morally worse than that which tramples on (the slaves’) ‘human nature.’”²⁴ Alison Webster, relying on the same paragraph, concurs with Palter’s position. She writes, “Hume believed that not only was slavery a hindrance to an expanding economy, but that it was an affront to humanity, debasing masters as well as servants.”²⁵ Palter, Webster, Silvia Sebastiani (who asserts that Hume took an unequivocal “critical position against slavery”²⁶) and others hold that Hume was indisputably against slavery because of the harm it did to the development of society, economically and/or morally. Their silence on the anti-black racism articulated in the notorious footnote suggests they believe that Hume was a racist who was against modern slavery. Revealingly, none share what Hume thought

about the crucial issue of the timing of abolition (gradual or immediate). These thinkers tend to compartmentalize what we might call, borrowing from the work of Richard Popkin, Hume's "liberal racism": his "making the best of the European experience the model for everyone."²⁷

Equally compelling arguments exist for *excluding* Hume from the trajectory of thinkers who condemned chattel slavery. Margaret Watkins's recent article, again using the same paragraph from Hume's essay "Of the Populousness," indirectly challenges the Palter and Webster interpretation. Watkins thoughtfully contends that Hume's essay "is not truly abolitionist in character" and claims that it criticizes ancient forms of slavery in order simply to attenuate our predilection to be nostalgic for the past.²⁸ Glen Doris presses this point further: he argues that Hume's concern was for societal development and that "black slavery in the American colonies and some European nations fell beyond the scope of [Hume's] thesis."²⁹ For Doris, Watkins, and others, this crucial paragraph in "Of the Populousness" does not condemn slavery, it simply expresses aversion to it due to the fact that it hindered progress.

The catastrophic Transatlantic Slave Trade was both global in scope as well as quite local for Hume (many of the Edinburgh grads that left Scotland went to the Caribbean to help administer plantations). He was well aware of the viciousness of modern slavery, he participated in it, and he may have generated some personal profit from it. To my knowledge, there is no record of him ever making anything like a direct criticism of this brutal human trade, articulating a challenge to its barbaric plantation system, or even noting its inhuman treatment of black people. Further, in the face of Beattie's direct criticism, which he read and mostly dismissed, Hume neither offered a substantive response, nor ever lifted his pen to defend those who were directly harmed by slavery. Not only does this severely weaken his so-called "opposition," but also it has important consequences: on the framing of African American Critical Thought that I have been referencing in this essay, it leaves Hume vulnerable to the claim that his work supported Anglo-colonialism and validated white supremacy in the modern west. From this perspective, Hume's silence on the racial dynamics driving the colonialist violence of modern slavery was a form of racial politics that allowed whiteness to remain both powerful and invisible.

Claims that Hume "opposed slavery" become more complicated in light of the consideration of the Anglo/Euro-colonial processes of racialization that I have offered here. Thus, scholars may want to refrain from asking whether Hume opposed modern forms of chattel slavery due to the fact that the simple answers invited by this question are at best misleading regarding his stance on race and, at worse, too narrow to disclose much about his perspective about modern slavery. Rather, the topic of slavery as it relates to Hume might be better attended to as another theme through which a complicated *mélange* of his interests were refracted. As such, Hume's reflections on slavery usually occurred as a subtopic

in his considerations on political order, global commerce, international law, and historical development. For Hume, the issue of slavery simply did not provoke a discussion of the fundamental humanity of black and brown peoples; to him, this matter seems to have been either settled or uninteresting.

Part III: Hume's Conception of Religion

Over the past twenty-five years, critical-historical approaches to religion have directed our attention to the ways that “religion” both became a concept in the modern west and was used as a device to support Euro colonialist projects. Critical-historical accounts by Timothy Fitzgerald, Talal Asad, Tomoko Masuzawa, and Daniel Dubuisson, among others, challenge the idea that religion has a singular essence, exposed the covert Judeo-Christian theistic assumptions that shaped the concept “religion,” and demonstrated the inherent power dynamics and racial biases around which the category evolved and was deployed in Euro-colonial discourses.³⁰ These critical interrogations of the idea “religion” reveal that our thinking about religion is neither scientifically objective nor tradition neutral. Further, they disclose the category “religion” as having been falsely promoted as a “trans historical and transcultural phenomena”³¹ and describe eighteenth-century discourse on religion as

concocted largely on the basis of the unwarranted assumption of European hegemony, that is, on the basis of a monolithic universalist notion of history as a singular civilizing process, of which modern Europe was the triumphant vanguard and all other civilizations and non-European societies merely markers of various interim phases already surpassed by the people of European descent.³²

From this vantage point, religion is understood as having been crafted within a thoroughly racialized discourse that distinguished civilized and cultured whites from others (both humans and non-humans, especially orangutans). Differences in practices of reverence and piety, celebrations that had not previously been witnessed, and sacred worship of deities that were unrecognizable were “othered” by colonialist discourse in a similar way that skin color, hair texture, and body shape, or culture and intelligence were “othered.” This is how “race”—that is, the process of racialization—was integral to the construction of religion, and religion vital for the distinction between the races. As Sylvester Johnson contends, “[i]t is paramount to appreciate that racialization was occurring through religious formations of subjectivity and political authority. . . . Because the empires of the Mediterranean world were grounded in religious genealogies—Christian and Islamicate empires—religion became a racial formation. For white Europeans,

Christianity was an essentialist constitution that was 'in the blood' in both a literal and a figurative sense."³³

The theoretical approach that connects early modern accounts of religious formation with the processes of racialization sheds new light on Hume's discussion of belief, popular religion, enthusiasm, superstition, and true religion as well as his use of the terms idolater, barbarian, savage, pagan, and polytheist. It not only reveals that Hume's racial hierarchy (with whites at the top) reflected a religious hierarchy (with the best of white religion at the top), but also supports a point from above: that non-whites were *fixed* at the bottom of Hume's hierarchy, they lacked the capacity to progress, which their pagan practices confirm. The racist footnote explicitly makes this point: even when blacks were moved to Europe and no longer subjected to the harsh equatorial climate, they showed no signs of the ability to progress: "there are NEGROE slaves dispersed all over EUROPE, of whom none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; though low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession."³⁴ Hume believed the black inability to progress reflected the "original distinction" between blacks and whites, a difference that he also coded-in to different socio-religious practices concerning the deities of these groups.

It is worth noting that the "original distinction" between whites and blacks also existed between Indians and whites, for "the great superiority of civilized Europeans over barbarous Indians" that Hume described in book 3 of his second *Enquiry* (1751) is explained by the fact that they are a distinct "species of creatures" (from whites).³⁵ Due to the fact that blacks and Indians cannot make any progress, Hume seemed to think of them as more of a *natural* people than a *historic* people. Thus, they were of no use for his history of *religion*. For Hume, blacks and Indians were savages and pagans to whom the descriptors "religion/religious" did not and cannot apply.

Hume publically claimed, however, that his "science of man" (*Treatise*, 1739) was—at least in part—aimed to show the "great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same, in its principles and operations."³⁶ He even acknowledged that what he referred to throughout his corpus as "religion" (by which he seemed to mean the beliefs and practices concerning a deity) was not universal in the strong sense of the term, although it was pervasive throughout human history.³⁷ On Hume's understanding, "belief of invisible, intelligent power has been very generally diffused over the human race, in all places and in all ages; but it has neither perhaps been so universal as to admit of no exceptions, nor has it been, in any degree, uniform in the ideas which it has suggested."³⁸ Conceived in this fashion, belief in God supposedly transcended most distinctions of human culture and eluded the vicissitudes of human history.

There is another side, however, to Hume's thoughts about the ubiquitous presence of religion, which are situated within a legacy of European discourse that rests on two premises. First, it begins with the idea that the "most significant chasm among nations was between those who had knowledge of the one supreme deity and those who did not."³⁹ And second, it works from the standard taxonomy of the time that posits four types of religion in the world: Christians, Jews, Mohammedans, and idolaters. Just as racial categories were "observed" and systematized by white modern scientists who created a racial hierarchy and placed themselves at the top of it, religious distinctions were "noted" by white investigators who crafted a hierarchy of religions and placed themselves at the top of it. All of this work, including Hume's, "took place in the context of colonialism, or under forceful impact of the European epistemic field."⁴⁰

One representative text that Hume may have been aware of was the seven volume, three thousand page *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde* (1723–1737) by Bernard Picart and Jean Frederick Bernard. In its quest for religious universalism, this groundbreaking ethnographic survey—based on images and illustrations, not travel records—probed for the common links between the rituals and ceremonies of peoples across time and space. Its Judeo-Christian assumptions "turned belief in one unique, absolute, and God-given truth into 'religion,'" and "sowed the radical idea that religions could be compared on equal terms," thereby incidentally politicizing and secularizing the study of religion.⁴¹ This text, and others like it, compelled eighteenth-century writers to think of religion as a set of theistic beliefs and practices that could be extracted from everyday life from around the globe and situated as a separate sphere of existence. In this way, religion could be observed like any other domain of human experience, and its plural forms could be easily ordered, sorted, and compared. The best forms of religion would comport with the highest forms of culture; that is, European ones.

Even as eighteenth-century Scottish thinkers were representing sacred beliefs and worship practices as constituting a distinct sphere of life, they were also tethering these beliefs and practices to colonialist hierarchies of power based on skin color, intellectual achievement, and worship style. The generic category "religion" functioned for them as a kind of cultural test: it could be plugged into any time and place as a way to examine the veracity of a particular culture's development. If the culture was civilized, "religion" (a set of Judeo-Christian-like theistic beliefs and practices) might be present; if primitive or uncivilized, that culture was considered to be pagan. Hume distinctively suggested that people of all skin colors could be barbarous and pagan, and he questioned the merits of "civilization." Yet, in his writings, black people—again naturally distinct from whites in Hume's racial thinking—were unique. They were only ever heathens, savages, and pagans who were marked by an "original distinction" that rendered them unable to progress to "attain to any art or civility."⁴²

It is fair to say then that when it came to the idiosyncrasies and complexities of both race and religion, Hume followed the popular trends of natural science and conventional discourse on religion and highlighted types and regularities in his "observations." Ostensibly based on travel journals, newspapers, and other textual materials, Hume's 1757 *Natural History of Religion* condensed a variety of mysterious practices, hard-to-explain beliefs, and diverse peoples of the world to their most easily identifiable kinds and characteristics. His historical narrative of religion described the "natural progress of human thought" as it moved from conceptions of "superior powers" made by the "ignorant multitude" to the conception of a "perfect Being, who bestowed order on the whole from of nature" (NHR 1.5).

Hume's *Natural History of Religion* was ahead of its time in both its suspicion of linear narratives of the evolution of religion, and its criticism of the conventional story of unmitigated historical progress toward greater civilization. Additionally, Hume's radical challenge to the belief that his own historical moment was the apogee of civilization prefigured much of the skeptical historicism that is currently in fashion. Using religion as the site for historical observations, he provocatively suggested that some ancient beliefs, for example, polytheism, created less factionalism (and was therefore more ethical) than contemporary monotheism. In a style that cajoled and nudged the reader, Hume undermined the idea that Protestant Christianity was, by definition, always an improvement on older forms of religious belief and practice. This was the source of his criticism of "vulgar religion," which he thought of as forms of Christian and non-Christian belief that were superstitious, destabilizing, highly emotive, and overly enthusiastic. His natural history compellingly articulated a "flux and reflux" of history and emphasized the contingencies of religious belief, the importance of myths, traditions, narratives, and poetry (and their overlaps with religion), and the foundation of religion in the human passions hope and fear. The intentions of this text are quite clear: historical considerations of religion suggested one should be suspicious of all forms of vulgar and popular religion; thus, religion should remain in its "proper office."⁴³

Hume made it exceedingly clear that his distinctive history of religion neither included, nor applied to certain "savage tribes" (NHR 1.5) and "barbarous and ignorant nations" (NHR 8.4). Just as John Barclay's 1614 *Icon Animorum*, a study of national character and natural history, "dismisses the barbarian world of Africa and the New World as beneath his notice," Hume's *Natural History of Religion* set aside peoples who were "naturally inferior" to whites.⁴⁴ At the very beginning of his *Natural History of Religion*, Hume extricated these peoples from his historical account with this phrase: "the savage tribes of America, Africa, and Asia are all idolaters. Not a single exception to this rule" (NHR 1.4). This claim, in light of Hume's thoughts about race discussed above, seems to mean that black, brown, red and yellow savages, were "originally distinct" from whites—in ways that seem fixed and absolute ("no single exception to this rule")—and therefore outside of

the story of the origins and history of religion. These non-white “savage tribes” simply would not be discussed in the text because their approaches to deity were stagnant and they lacked the capacity to progress on any level. Thus, they remained outside of the colonial economy of time and therefore did not fit within any history.

There are some crucial distinctions and clarifications, however, which must be made. For although Hume thought “savage tribes of America, African and Asia” were idolaters and explicitly excluded them from his *Natural History of Religion* because they were “naturally inferior,” it appears that like most *philosophes*, he considered Ancient Egyptians to be a Mediterranean people, not a group of Africans or a “savage” tribe. As such, he included Egyptians in his history, referring to them as “mythologists,” “idolaters,” and “dog worshippers” (NHR 9.2). Ancient Egyptian religious beliefs were polytheistic: like the extensive pantheons and complicated belief systems of the Ancient Greeks, Persians, and Romans, Egyptians—a people with a culture included in the genre of classical history—were tolerant of those who held different beliefs and were thus important for Hume’s point about the intense factionalism and division created by vulgar forms of monotheism.⁴⁵

Hume also wrote positively about the Chinese in the *Natural History of Religion*, although they too could easily have been subsumed under his rubric of a “savage tribe” of “Asia.” In an earlier essay, “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences” (1742), he wrote:

In CHINA, there seems to be a pretty considerable stock of politeness and science, which, in the course of so many centuries, might naturally be expected to ripen into something more perfect and finished, than what has yet arisen from them. But CHINA is one vast empire, speaking one language, governed by one law, and sympathizing in the same manners. The authority of any teacher, such as CONFUCIUS, was propagated easily from one corner of the empire to the other. None had courage to resist the torrent of popular opinion. And posterity was not bold enough to dispute what had been universally received by their ancestors. This seems to be one natural reason, why the sciences have made so slow a progress in that mighty empire. (EPM, 122)

In spite of this affirmation of Chinese monarchy and homogeneity (signs of progress), in the *Natural History of Religion*, Hume notes the retrograde religious views of the Chinese. He writes, “The Chinese, when their prayers are not answered, beat their idols” (NHR 4.3). His point here is that the worship of invisible powers of “fairies, goblins, elves” and wizards—that is, more accessible and immanent spiritual forms—is not on par with the worship of the author of nature, a supreme God. Hume writes that the Chinese “acknowledge no being, that corresponds to our idea of a deity” (NHR 4.2). Their idols do not reflect any “first principle of mind

or thought: No supreme government and administration: No divine contrivance or intention in the fabric of the world" (NHR 4.2). Yet the Chinese show up in the history of religions: their beliefs are retrograde, but they are included. Thus, they were not a "savage tribe" of Asia.

The Lapps, another interesting case that requires some sorting out, are also mentioned in the *Natural History of Religion*. Hume had previously connected the Lapps, the northernmost people of Europe, to the "negro" in his first *Enquiry* (1748), where he wrote, "A Laplander or negro has no notion of the relish of wine" (EHU 2.7; SBN 20).⁴⁶ Interestingly, Linnaeus had noted in 1741, in his "Oration concerning the necessity of travelling in one's own country," that "In Lapland, they live without corn, or wine."⁴⁷ Linnaeus had also linked Lapland with both Africa and Asia in a comparison from his diary *Lachesis Laponica, or A tour in Lapland* that described his visit in 1732. He wrote, regarding the harshness of the terrain, "I scarcely knew whether I was in Asia or Africa."⁴⁸ Hume includes the Lapps in his history of natural religion and therefore distinguishes them from the African derived "idolaters" and "savages" he had previously linked them to in his first *Enquiry*. Referencing Jean-Francois Regnard's *Voyage en Laponie* (1731), he wrote: "The deities of the LAPLANDERS are any large stone which they meet with of an extraordinary shape" (NHR 4.3).⁴⁹ Laplanders are neither a separate species from whites or originally distinct from them in the way that African derived peoples and Amerindians are. Hume's point in using them here is simply to give another example of how retrograde beliefs and pagan worship cannot arrive at the idea of invisible, intelligent power. While the "savage tribes of America, Africa and Asia are all idolaters," Laplanders are not. Their particular form of paganism and idolatry, like that of the Chinese, could be deployed in a natural history that ultimately confirmed "Our ancestors in Europe," who, "before the revival of letters, believed, as we do at present, that there was one supreme God, the author of nature" (NHR 4.1).

Hume makes another reference to those who are marked with the original distinction from whites in the *Natural History of Religion*. He writes that "in very barbarous and ignorant nations, such as the AFRICANS and INDIANS, nay even the JAPONESE . . . rude, imperfect ideas of Divinity adhere long" and "the Greeks themselves never got entirely rid of them" (NHR 13.4-5). Note that the Greeks evolved; they partially expunged "imperfect ideas of the Divinity." The distinction between these different sets of idolaters further establishes how Hume's thoughts about religion are immersed in a particular kind of racial discourse. The Ancient Greeks, Jews, Romans, Persians and Egyptians developed traditions, narratives, and myths (as well as temples, heroes, nobility) and evolved into civilizations replete with theatre and poetry (that is, their peoples reflected some degree of culture).⁵⁰ Black and brown peoples, on Hume's account, *cannot* progress. This leaves them ripe for Euro-colonial discourses on subjugation that support the brutal practices of racial slavery.

I want to be careful not to mislead: the *Natural History of Religion* did refer—as I cite above—to some whites as savages, idolaters, and barbarians (Laplanders, Ancient Athenians, Romans, and so on), as did the first three volumes of Hume’s *History of England*. The important difference is that blacks and Amerindians are always degraded and *only* referred to as savages, pagans, and barbarians in Hume’s work. Blacks and Amerindians—not fully human on the standard Hume articulated in his notorious footnote—were capable of only being superstitious, not religious. To be described as “religious” required the concomitant idea that a people could progress, which blacks and Indians could not do. In other words, the concept religion was not only based on Judeo-Christian historical and theological assumptions around evolution and practices, but also derived from conceptions of whiteness, and tied to ideas about who could be (justifiably) enslaved.

Against my position, one could argue that Hume balanced his more racist statements with claims that morally equated ancient, uncivilized peoples with contemporary, civilized ones. For example, his statement that it is “incontestable that about 1,700 years ago all mankind were polytheists” (NHR 1.2), yet “the Gods of all polytheists are no better than the elves or fairies of our [European] ancestors” (NHR 4.2), could be read in this way. Additionally, the claim “Almost all idolaters, of whatever age or country, concur in these general principles and conceptions; and even the particular characters and provinces which they assign to their deities are not extremely different” (NHR 5.10) could also be taken as equalizing and unifying Hume’s hierarchical thinking about race. Yet this would ignore both the notorious footnote in the essay “Of National Characters” and the explicit move that Hume makes at the beginning of the text to explicitly remove the “savage tribes of America, Africa and Asia” from the *Natural History of Religion*. Further, the idea that Hume excluded these “savage tribes” because he knew nothing about them or was simply uninterested in them seems tenable, but it obscures the fact that peoples who cannot progress are not subjects of history for Hume. There is no need to give an historical account of savages who are currently idolaters, have always been idolaters, and will always be idolaters.

Given the citations above, Hume’s general approach to both race and religion, and the Anglo-colonialist investments of his era, I think it is fair to say that race, then, played a role in Hume’s understanding of religion, and religion had some impact on his conception of race. From my perspective, his writings suggest that he was generally convinced that the most effective religion was a moderate form of Protestant Christianity and the “ideal” human being was the white male. At their best, these two types were a pair: the calm, reflective white male could access the most moderate form of Protestant Christianity (the rare “true religion”). The wise and virtuous man and the true religion were constituted by essentials extracted from particular religions and races based on insights gleaned from a genius observer.

Hume relied on the notion that blacks were primitive, irreligious savages who were naturally distinct from whites. This idea was a creation of modern European colonialists who shaped Enlightenment ways of thinking about history. The very invention of the savage, as J. G. A. Pocock describes in his magisterial five volume *Barbarism and Religion*, was a fiction to help “Europeans, who believed they had no prehistory but that of patriarchal shepherd clans” affirm themselves with a story of conquering the seas and mastering the oceans as they encountered barbarous tribes on land.⁵¹ The “primitive” land-bound creatures they encountered fit neatly into their history as both a bridge to a past that longed for Enlightenment and a future ripe for colonialist subjugation within a new global commerce. Hume’s philosophy of history relied on this imagined narrative and its illusions about savages, naturally inferior beings and originally distinct peoples—that is, nonwhites. These notions both inhered in his concept of religion and informed his stance on modern slavery.

Considering Hume’s stance on slavery and his conception of religion in this way resituates Hume’s contribution to these modern questions. Prioritizing his position on race in light of the developing Anglo-colonialist processes of racialization opens up new ways of considering his arguments that render it more complicated to make the claim that Hume opposed slavery or that he was critical of popular religion. For, as I have argued, his so-called opposition to slavery and well known criticisms of religion were impacted by the way he thought about non-whites. The work of philosophers, Hume scholars, and academics that study eighteenth-century thought is enriched by a broader sense of the sources of its imaginative metaphors, organizing concepts, and creative ideas. And it is my sincere hope that Hume’s thoughts will continue to be contextualized and prioritized for these productive ends in future work.

NOTES

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- 1 Aaron Garrett and Ryan Hanley, “Adam Smith: History and Impartiality,” 240.
- 2 Devine has published parts of these remarks in revised form in *Scotland's Global Diaspora* and *Recovering Scotland's Slavery Past*.
- 3 For the a broad discussion of the seventeenth-century roots of racial thinking, see Nicholas Hudson, “From ‘Nation’ to ‘Race’”; Richard H. Popkin, “The Philosophical Basis of Eighteenth-Century Racism,” 245–62; Tzevtan Todorov, *On Human Diversity*; Justin E. H. Smith, *Nature, Human Nature, and Human Difference*.

4 On Hume's singular act of participation in the slave trade, see Hume's letter to Francis Seymour Conway of 1766 in *Further Letters of David Hume*, 65–68. James Harris, *Hume: An Intellectual Biography* mentions this letter in a footnote.

5 Sylvester Johnson thoughtfully argues that religion functioned to denote racial formation, in *African American Religions*. Others who consider colonialism as either necessary or essential for race, and therefore view religion as a racialized form: Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*; Geraldine Heng, "The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages."

6 Peter Loptson's *Freedom, Nature and World*, confirms this point. Loptson writes (in a footnote), "In the 1735 edition of *The System of Nature*, Linnaeus itemizes five alleged varieties of human: American, European, Asian, Negro, and the 'wild man'. It may be plausible to see the 1754 version of Hume's 'racial' footnote's reference to 'species of men (for there are four or five different kinds)'—this is one of the deletions made for the later version—as reflecting or derived from Linnaeus's classification . . . Hume may be following Linnaeus's lead" (145n).

7 Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity*, 59.

8 Charles Linné, *A General System of Nature*.

9 Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 58.

10 For more on truth to nature as image creation see Moira Howes, "Objectivity, Intellectual Virtue, and Community." For different uses of race, see Andrew. S. Curran, *Anatomy of Blackness*; Silvia Sebastiani, *The Scottish Enlightenment*; Emmanuel C. Eze, "Hume, Race and Human Nature."

11 Aaron Garrett makes this point in his chapter "Human Nature."

12 Justin E. H. Smith, *Nature, Human Nature, and Human Difference*, 5.

13 This is the revised (1777) version of the footnote in "Of National Characters," 629 note i. Aaron Garrett gives a rich discussion of this footnote, and the conversation in the secondary literature on it, in "Hume's Original Difference."

14 On polygenesis and Hume, see Naomi Zack, *Philosophy of Science and Race*, and Andrew Valls, "A Lousy Empirical Scientist." Valls prefers to refer to Hume's position in the footnote as "racialism." The topic of polygenesis is most deftly attended to in Aaron Garrett's chapter "Human Nature," 187–99. On the racism of the footnote and its revisions, see: Richard Popkin, "Hume's Racism"; John Immerwahr, "Hume's Revised Racism"; and Aaron Garrett's seminal, "Hume's Revised Racism Revisited."

15 James Harris, *Hume: An Intellectual Biography*, 238.

16 Andre C. Willis, "Hume's Legacy Regarding Race."

17 Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract and Blackness Visible*; David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture*; Paul C. Taylor, *Race: A Philosophical Introduction*; Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance*. Also see Robert Bernasconi, *Race* and R. Bernasconi and T. Lott, *The Idea of Race*.

18 Paul C. Taylor, *Race*, 13.

19 Iain Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery*.

20 James Ramsay, *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of the African Slaves*. For some background on this moment see Andrew McCann, *Cultural Politics in the 1790s*, especially chapter 6.

21 Fred Ablondi, "Millar on Slavery."

22 William Lehmann, *John Millar of Glasgow*, 50. An astute reviewer brought my attention to the work of John Cairns, especially his "John Millar and Slavery," 73–106. Paul Bowles, "John Millar, the Four Stages Theory, and Women's Position in Society," 619–38.

23 David Hume, "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," 383.

24 Robert Palter, "Hume and Prejudice," 8.

25 Alison Webster, "The Contribution of the Scottish Enlightenment to the Abandonment of the Institution of Slavery," 486.

26 Sebastiani, *The Scottish Enlightenment*, 98.

27 Richard H. Popkin, "The Philosophical Basis of Modern Racism," 89.

28 Margaret Watkins, "A Cruel but Ancient Subjugation?" 103.

29 Glen Doris, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Politics of Abolition*, 43.

30 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*; Timothy Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity* and *The Ideology of Religious Studies*; Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion*; Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*. Religion, to these thinkers, is taken to be a category that largely obscures more than it clarifies.

31 Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 28.

32 Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*, 12.

33 Sylvester Johnson, *African American Religions*, 87–88.

34 This is the revised (1777) version of the footnote in "Of National Characters," 629, note i.

35 Hume writes this in EPM 3.1.18 (SBN 190). References to EPM are to Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Beauchamp, cited in the text as "EPM" followed by section and paragraph number, and to Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Principles of Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Selby-Bigge, rev. by Nidditch, cited in the text as "SBN" followed by page numbers.

For a thoughtful discussion of it, see Aaron Garrett and Silvia Sebastiani, "David Hume on Race."

36 EHU 8.1.7 (SBN 83).

37 Hume references the "Topinamboues" in "A Dialogue," the last book in the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, and Tom Beauchamp confirms that this Brazilian tribe "lived without any religion at all" (a citation from Jean de Lery, *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil* [1578]) is the tribe that Hume is referencing here. Beauchamp suggests Hume likely heard of this tribe from Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*. See David Hume, *A Dissertation on the Passions; The Natural History of Religion*, 113.

- 38 David Hume, “The Natural History of Religion,” NHR, *Intro*.
- 39 Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*, 48. Masuzawa provides a lengthy discussion of the systems that categorized religion from Edward Brerewood’s *Enquiries Touching the Diversity of Languages, and Religions through the Chiefe Parts of the World* (1614), to Defoe’s *Dictionary of All Religions, Ancient and Modern, Whether Jewish, Pagan, Christian, or Mahometan* (1704), Thomas Broughton’s *Bibliotheca Historico-Sacra, or An Historical Library of the Principal Matters relating to religion, Ancient and Modern; Pagan, Jewish, Christian, and Mohammedan* (1737). Hume tends to use “idolaters” interchangeably with “heathens,” “pagans,” and “polytheists.”
- 40 Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*, 282.
- 41 Lynn Hunt, Margaret C. Jacob, and Wijnand Mijnhardt, *The Book that Changed Europe*, 1.
- 42 Hume wondered, in a 1752 essay, “Of Commerce,” “What is the reason, why no people, living between the tropics, *could ever yet attain to any art or civility*, or reach even any police in their government, and any military discipline; while few nations in the temperate climates have been altogether deprived of these advantages?” (*Essays*, 267, emphases mine). This is a comparison between the capacities of whites in the “temperate climates,” and black and brown people living near the equator. It claims, in an absolute fashion, that black and brown people cannot develop into a civilized people.
- 43 For more on this, see Andre C. Willis, *Towards a Humean True Religion*.
- 44 Barclay’s work was translated into English in 1631 by Thomas May, and called *The Mirrour of Mindes*. This is mentioned in Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, 453.
- 45 *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Geography*, ed. Smith, 42–49 says much about how Egypt was understood by historians in various historical epochs.
- 46 References to the first *Enquiry* are to Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Beauchamp, hereafter cited in the text as “EHU” followed by section and paragraph number, and to Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Selby-Bigge, rev. by Nidditch, hereafter cited in the text as “SBN” followed by page numbers.
- 47 This oration of Linnaeus was published in Benjamin Stillingfleet’s *Miscellaneous Tracts on Natural History*, 23.
- 48 *Lachesis Lapponica, or a Tour in Lapland*, ed. Smith. I could not find any direct evidence that Hume read Linnaeus’s diary, which was written in Latin and Swedish and went unpublished during Hume’s lifetime.
- 49 Regnard’s text described, in highly pejorative ways, the pagan rituals of the Samii people (the indigenous arctic group Hume referred to as Laplanders), and Hume—as the two quotes show—has a unique disregard for these primitive European aborigines, although he never referred to them as naturally distinct from whites or as a separate species. Linnaeus also referenced “rock giants, as they are called, seem to threaten heaven” in his Oration concerning the necessity of traveling in one’s country,” in Stillingfleet’s *Miscellaneous Tracts on Natural History*, 17. For more on the Laplanders,

see Linda Andersson Burnett, "Selling the Sami." There she describes the complicated image of the Sami people, see especially 172–74.

50 This point runs throughout the *Natural History of Religion*, I pull just some of the references to support this. I start with the Jews, a group he describes as idolatrous. Hume is highly critical of the Jewish people in ways that border on a form of anti-Jewish sentiment. Yet, he acknowledges their legacy, affirms their development, and highlights their traditions. In a section tracking the natural history of the idea of a supreme deity, Hume explains how this "sovereign maker" usurps lesser gods by telling a story about the development of Judaism. He writes, "Thus, the God of ABRAHAM, ISAAC, and JACOB, became the supreme deity or JEHOVAH of the JEWS" (NHR 6.7). Note the developmental narrative linked to Judaism. Hume does not link a developmental narrative to Africans, Asians, and Amerindians (Egyptians were not technically considered Africans by Hume). On another example—again, the text is saturated by this fact—in the same section Hume discusses the Greeks, whom he also identified as idolaters, he notes that "HOMER, in one passage, calls OCEANUS and TETHYS the original parents of all things, conformably to the established mythology and tradition of the GREEKS" (NHR 6.10). This sentence is from a longer paragraph that describes how "religionists, in all ages, have involved themselves in the greatest absurdities and contradictions" (NHR 6.9). My point is that even though Hume identifies the Ancient Greeks as idolaters, he still connects them to a tradition of mythology, which I take as Hume confirming that the Ancient Greeks possessed the seeds to develop into a civilization. Hume refused to suggest the Asian, African, and Amerindian savages and idolaters he identified possessed any of the developmental capacities, mythologies, and traditions that he identified in the idolatrous Ancient Jews, Greeks and Romans. A critical reviewer correctly reminds me that this lack of progress is not specific to religion; for Hume, it covers the incapacity of the negro to develop in poetry, theatre, writing, intelligence, morality, beauty, and culture more generally. It is, however, the religious dimension of Hume's argument on which I focus here as I am tracing Hume's account regarding its "natural history."

51 J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 3.

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