Hume and Smith on Natural Religion

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Abstract
The prominence of David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* in contemporary philosophy of religion has led it to overshadow his other short work, *The Natural History of Religion*, and thus obscure the fact that the social psychology of religion was in many ways of greater interest and more widely debated among the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment than philosophical theology. This paper examines and compares the social psychology of religion advanced by Hume and Adam Smith. It argues that Hume's account of the psychological sources and social significance of religion is less satisfactory than Smith's.

1.

Whereas the Enlightenment in France is generally associated with secularizing free thinkers, many of the leading figures in the Scottish enlightenment were Christian clergy. There has been a fairly widespread supposition, however, that their religious affiliation, if not largely conventional, was at any rate powerfully tempered by their preference for 'rational religion' over the anti-rational dogmatism of their orthodox Presbyterian opponents. This combination of reason and religion, or so the same view holds, was inherently unstable, and ironically laid a foundation for the rise of secular learning and the marginalization of religion that marks the history of the modern academy. This resulted, eventually, in the near demise of the Christianity that the 'enlightened' clergy meant to defend.

In his recent book, *The Moral Culture of the Scottish Enlightenment*,[1] Thomas Ahnert demonstrates convincingly that this widely held view is almost entirely false, while the truth, very nearly, is precisely the opposite. Ahnert shows that both the heterodox Presbyterians in the first half of the 18th century (of whom Francis Hutcheson was a leading light), and the 'Moderates' of the second half (led by the historian William Robertson), were in fact deeply skeptical about the power of reason to promote Christian faith. Indeed, they inclined to the view that doctrinal truth and

[1] Thomas Ahnert, *The Moral Culture of the Scottish Enlightenment 1690–1805* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014).

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falsehood was a distraction from 'true religion'. It was the orthodox Presbyterians, rather, who thought that natural reason afforded a rational basis for Protestant Christianity, and held that the demonstration of intellectual superiority was essential to any successful advocacy of the Gospel. By contrast, the heterodox looked to conduct, not doctrine, as the heart of religion. Furthermore, while the orthodox held that natural theology was a necessary precursor to revealed truth, the heterodox based their faith directly on biblical revelation.

By placing the emphasis on moral conduct and natural virtues, heterodox voices like Simson, Hutcheson, and others, were not only effectively siding with Episcopalian minded thinkers of the previous century such as Henry Scougal and George Garden, they were also questioning the importance and even relevance of the Westminster Confession, to which, ardent Calvinists claimed, it was essential for both the clergy and their teachers to subscribe. The reaction they prompted, including accusations of heresy came precisely from those who thought that reason could demonstrate their errors.

If Ahnert is right, it casts a different light on the interesting matter of David Hume's attitude to religion.[2] It has long puzzled interpreters that, despite the weakness of the arguments for God's existence that the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* seem to demonstrate, the final section nevertheless opens with an affirmation of the obviousness of the world's divine origins. 'A purpose, an intention, a design strikes everywhere the most careless, the most stupid thinker', Hume says through the skeptical voice of Philo (often thought to be his own), 'and no man can be so hardened in absurd systems as at all times to reject it' (118). On the surface this looks like an extraordinary *volte face*, but if Ahnert is right, it may not be so puzzling. Hume's clerical friends could find much to disagree with him about, but they seem to have been of one mind with him on the very limited possibilities of natural theology. Unlike the more orthodox Presbyterians, they held, no less than Hume, that unaided reason could accomplish very little when it came to knowledge of God. Consequently, they were hardly likely to be shocked

[2] James A Harris defends the common view of Hume's relation to the religion of his time in 'Hume's Use of the Rhetoric of Calvinism', *Impressions of Hume* ed. Marina Frasca-Spada and P. J. E. Kail (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005). In his magisterial study *Hume: an Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), Harris modifies his view a little, but observes in a footnote that if Ahnert is right, a major revision is required.

by his (posthumously published) demonstration that this was indeed so, and they would have endorsed his contention that the strongest conclusion the argument from design could sustain was theologically thin, namely that 'the Author of Nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man'. There is nothing here about the wisdom, benevolence or perfection of God, and it is only this theologically thin contention that Hume says must strike even the most stupid thinker.

Yet more intriguing in this respect, however, is Hume's conclusion to his essay on miracles. Once again, despite the skeptical attack he mounts, Hume seems to conclude the essay with an appeal to the revelatory power of miracles. '[T]he Christian religion' he says, 'cannot be believed by any reasonable person without [a miracle because] mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity' (226). James Harris remarks that '[t]his final twist in Hume's argument was one that his contemporaries would find especially offensive',[3] but a similar remark could have been made by the 'enlightened' clergy, without, of course, any suggestion of religious skepticism. They too believed that mere reason could accomplish very little in matters of religion, and would inevitably lead to foolish, but dangerous, theological divisions. Moreover, commenting on this passage, Alvin Plantinga says that from a Calvinist point of view, 'Hume (sarcasm aside) is partly right; belief in the main lines of the gospel is produced in Christians by a special work of the Holy Spirit, not by the belief-producing faculties with which we were originally created'.[4]

Did Hume, like the Calvinists, really regard belief in miracles as a necessary supplement to natural reason? 'Hume's attitude to religion', Annette Baier tells us, 'is a mix of realism, irony, despair, and moral satire'.[5] This is indisputable. The elements of irony and satire, however, make it very hard to know just what he really thought about the cogency of 'the theistic hypothesis'. They also raise questions about his references to 'true religion', a concept that makes an appearance in the *Dialogues* when Philo contrasts his 'veneration for true religion' with his 'abhorrence of vulgar superstitions'. In the essay 'Of Superstition and Enthusiasm' Hume employs the same concept to defend the contention that superstition and

[3] *Hume: an Intellectual Biography*, 230.

[4] Alvin Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids Michigan and Cambridge UK: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 68.

[5] Annette C Baier *Death and Character: Further reflections on Hume*, Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 2008), 96.

enthusiasm are 'the corruptions of true religion'.[6] If Hume is a religious sceptic, what can he mean by *true* religion? Baier interprets the expression ironically, but in a recent study Andre Willis has argued that Hume means to articulate 'a positive and constructive vision' and that while 'Hume did not have a set of secret religious beliefs or intentions', he nevertheless 'clearly wanted a true religion, not a deeper secularism or a more virtuous atheism'.[7]

Willis correctly identifies within Hume's writings an interest in religion that is not directly connected with philosophical theology. On this point it is worth recalling that Hume wrote *two* books on religion. The *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, published in 1779 three years after his death, is by far the best known of these, and has generally been taken to be the principal source for his religious skepticism. Twenty years previously, however, Hume had published a short (now relatively unknown) *Natural History of Religion* (1757) which at the outset, explicitly distinguishes a different kind of inquiry from the one in which the *Dialogues* are engaged. 'As every enquiry, which regards religion, is of the utmost importance', Hume writes, 'there are two questions in particular, which challenge our attention, to wit, that concerning its foundation in reason, and that concerning its origin in human nature.' The *Dialogues* are directed at the first question; the *Natural History* at the second.[8]

The rationality of theological propositions is the subject matter of the *Dialogues*. The source of religious belief and practice in the structuring principles of human nature is the subject matter of the *Natural History*. This division of the subject was not Hume's invention. It can be found at work in the writings of many philosophers both in and before the Scottish Enlightenment period. The division is easily obscured by the fact that the same expression – 'natural religion' – is used in two distinguishable ways. In some contexts the contrast is with 'revealed religion'. In this sense 'natural religion' refers to religious beliefs that are inferred from, or based upon, the empirical evidence of the natural world, rather than founded on Scripture as revelation. The arguments that the *Dialogues* explore are 'natural religion' in this sense, though they would nowadays be more informatively referred to as 'natural theology'. In other contexts 'natural

[6] David Hume, 'Of Superstition and Enthusiasm', *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary* (Oxford University Press, 1963), Essay, page 75

[7] Andre Willis, *Toward a Humean True Religion* (University Park PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 188–9

[8] David Hume, *Natural History of Religion*, ed. J C A Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1993), (hereafter *NHR*), 135

religion' refers to the innate religious sensibilities and proclivities of human beings, those psychological propensities that underlie adherence to any religion, and explain human participation in its practices. Natural religion in this second sense might better be referred to as 'natural religiosity'. For present purposes, however, I shall use the expression 'natural theology' to refer to the subject matter of the *Dialogues*, and 'natural religion' to refer to the subject matter of the *Natural History*.

Though the concluding section of the *Dialogues* may make it uncertain as to what, precisely, Hume thought about 'the theistic hypothesis', no one reading the *Natural History*, the essay 'Of miracles', or the essay 'Of superstition and enthusiasm', could fail to detect the scorn and derision that he heaps on Catholic and Protestant alike, branding all truly popular religion 'superstition', dismissing widespread practices of worship as 'frivolous observances', and denying that theological beliefs are ever widely held because of their rationality. 'One may safely affirm', he roundly declares, 'that all popular theology, especially the scholastic, has a kind of appetite for absurdity and contradiction',[9] and in a letter written not long before his death, he looked forward to a world in which 'all the Churches shall be converted into Riding Schools, Manufactories, Tennis Courts or Playhouses'.[10] Baier is broadly correct then, in describing Hume's attitude to religion as 'a mix of realism, irony, despair, and moral satire'. Still, it is nonetheless valuable to bear in mind the distinction between 'natural theology' as a 'scientific' inquiry, and 'natural religion' as a set of human dispositions and practices. 'The first ideas of religion', Hume writes, 'arose *not* from a contemplation of nature, but from a concern with regard to the events of life, and from the incessant hopes and fears, which actuate the human mind'.[11] In other words, natural theology is an academic discipline like science, and consequently, like science, is a specialized intellectual activity in which relatively few people engage (or, indeed, are capable of engaging). By contrast, in every culture large numbers of ordinary people engage in religious practices. Such practices arise not from intellectual endeavor, but the practical challenges with which the human condition presents human beings. Theology is theoretical, and seeks to explain the world. Religion is practical, and

[9] *NHR*, 166

[10] David Hume to Andrew Stuart of Torrance, reprinted in *Philosophy and Religion in Enlightenment Britain* ed. Ruth Savage (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 257

[11] *NHR*, 139

engages the world with a view to survival and success. The world practically conceived is shaped by factors about which we are largely ignorant and powerless – the weather, the seasons, economic cycles, sources of disease. It is marked by dangers of which we are naturally fearful – injury, illness, famine and so on. While theology seeks satisfactory explanations for the observed phenomena of nature (including its evils), religion seeks ways of coping with them. Accordingly, the 'theistic hypothesis' aspires to scientific adequacy, while 'true' religion seeks effective means to accommodate and ameliorate, ignorance and fear.

2.

In its own day the *Natural History of Religion* commanded philosophical attention because it was recognized as a further contribution to an already well-established inquiry, and Hume wrote it in the knowledge of several much larger scale works, both English and French. Moreover, the subject of 'true religion' can be found in the writings of many of Hume's better known Scottish contemporaries. In both the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith investigates the source and function of religion in a fashion very similar to Hume's. So does Lord Kames (Henry Home) in the third volume of his *Sketches of the History of Man* (3rd edition, 1788), as well as in his *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* (3rd edition 1779). Thomas Reid, too, touches here and there on the topic in his (unpublished) lectures on natural theology, when he connects the importance of religion with the satisfaction of basic needs, and the pursuit of the moral life.

This investigation into 'true religion' was not confined to Scotland. In the same period, in a somewhat different spirit, Immanuel Kant wrote an investigation into *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793). This work is the outcome, importantly, of an explicit *rejection* of the kind of arguments Hume appeared to demolish in the *Dialogues*. If, as Kant held, the concepts involved in the exercise of human reason and the pursuit of understanding are structuring concepts of the human mind, then they cannot comprehend a Being of the kind God has traditionally been held to be. Such a view leads, inevitably, to a negative estimation of the traditional arguments of natural theology, and implies that there is nothing of any real value to be learned from what Kant calls 'physicotheology'. If God is necessarily beyond the compass of 'pure' or theoretical reason, theological 'theorizing' is inescapably idle. Accordingly, some other form

of reflection must be employed to determine what is to count as rational in religious belief and practice, and the second *Critique* – of 'practical' reason – sets the stage for this alternative.

Since, famously, Kant was wakened from his 'dogmatic slumbers' by Hume, their philosophical orientations are in certain respects importantly at odds. Yet on the matter of 'true religion' (an expression Kant uses) there is a remarkable commonality of method and conception. The purpose of the essays that comprise *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason,* Kant tells us, is 'to make apparent the relation of religion to a human nature partly laden with good dispositions and partly with evil ones'.[12] The very same sentence might be used to describe the aim of Hume's *Natural History*. Though the conception of human nature Kant employs is a rational construct, whereas Hume's is (intended to be) an empirical generalization, human nature is key to discerning the character of 'true religion', which Kant, like Hume, contrasts with 'revealed faith'.

The *Natural History*, like the *Dialogues*, is a normative inquiry, concerned with what is good and bad about religion. 'True' religion, in other words is both a descriptive and an evaluative conception. Hume's main purpose lies in determining where superstition ends and true religion begins (if anywhere). For Kames too, distinguishing true religion from superstition is crucially important to discerning the progress in all aspects of human development to which he is committed. And in the same spirit, Adam Smith speaks of 'pure and rational religion, free from every mixture of absurdity, imposture or fanaticism such as wise men in all ages of the world [have] wished to see established'.[13] All three were engaged in the 'science of human nature', and aimed to base their evaluative conclusions on empirical observation. In short, the concept of 'true' religion is different from 'theological truth', but it is still evaluative.

3.

> That *the corruption of the best things produces the worst*, is grown into a maxim, and is commonly proved, among other instances,

[12] Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* ed. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 39

[13] Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, (Oxford: Glasgow Edition, Oxford University Press, 1976), II/II V i.g.8 (hereafter *WN*)

> by the pernicious effects of *superstition* and *enthusiasm*, the corruptions of true religion.[14]

The tone of Hume's remarks in the essay that follows this assertion does raise a doubt as to whether he really believed that anything properly called 'religion' could be included among 'the best things'. In the light of the following passage from the *Natural History* it seems he could not.

> Examine the religious principles, which have, in fact, prevailed in the world. You will scarcely be persuaded, that they are anything but sick men's dreams: Or perhaps will regard them more as the playsome whimsies of monkies in human shape, than the serious, positive, dogmatical asservations of a being, who dignifies himself with the name of rational.[15]

Yet, just a few sentences later he remarks: 'Look out for a people, entirely destitute of religion: If you find them at all, be assured, that they are but a few degrees removed from the brutes'. How is the paradoxical character of these remarks to be resolved?

The answer lies in this, I think. Hume holds the spring of religion to be emotion, chiefly the emotions of hope and fear. Such emotions feed upon ignorance. On the one hand, fear in combination with ignorance makes human beings susceptible to superstition, and thus prey to the manipulations of priests, soothsayers and the like. On the other hand, hope combined with ignorance (or at least irrationality), fills people with messianic visions, that are advanced with the 'enthusiasm' of the prophet and sustained by the dogmas of theologians. Superstition is characteristic of ritualistic religions like Roman Catholicism. Enthusiasm is the mark of evangelical Protestantism. The two forms have deleterious social effects. Superstition renders people passive, gives power to a class of self-serving and unscrupulous priests, and sustains rigid political hierarchy. Enthusiasm encourages political radicalism, gives rise to fanaticism, and brings the danger of social instability and ultimately civil war. Hope and fear cannot be eliminated from human nature, but the exercise of reason can temper them. Science and philosophy, Hume contends, have the practical function of undermining false hopes and groundless fears by informing us of the true nature of the world. In this way, reason also serves to ameliorate their social

[14] David Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 75 emphasis original.
[15] *NHR*, 184

effects. Religion, then, does indeed set men off from the brutes, but in its 'true' or best form, it is philosophical in character (a *species* of philosophy, he explicitly says in the first *Enquiry*).[16]

Yet if this is true, Hume appears to have undermined the very distinction with which his *Natural History* opens. True religion, it seems, *can* be rooted in reason, at least in the sense that the hopes and fears which underlie all religions can be altered, and rendered relatively harmless by rational thought. How can this be, though? Reason, by Hume's account in the *Treatise*, is 'inert',[17] and in any case, the human capacity for reason is limited and fragile. In the case of religion especially, it is easily overwhelmed by the 'appetite for absurdity and contradiction' which (he says) is regularly exhibited by 'popular theology'. What real prospect is there, then, that 'philosophy' – only ever of interest to a few – will succeed in mitigating the deep seated drives to 'superstition' and 'enthusiasm' which, Hume claims, are built in to our nature?

In the *History of England* Hume expressly commends a specific form of religion, namely the Anglican Church created by the Elizabethan Settlement. If this is what he means by 'true religion', however, then it is to be found, not in 'a species of philosophy', but in a form of religious ritual that is a 'happy medium' between the superstition of 'Romish worship' on the one hand, and the enthusiasm of Protestantism on the other, a style of worship, he says, in which 'ceremonies, become venerable from age and preceding use, were retained' and in which 'the genius of ancient superstition' was mitigated by being rendered 'more compatible with the peace and interests of society'. Anglicanism, on this score is not to be commended for its philosophical content, but for its church practices, a liturgical middle way 'such as wise men have always sought'.[18] Despite Willis's contention, Hume, we must conclude, wavers as much on the nature, and even the possibility, of 'true religion', as he does on the truth of theism. Though he certainly employs the term 'true religion', he does not seem to have a very clear conception of what it is.

[16] On this see Don Garrett, 'What's True about Hume's 'True Religion', *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 10.2 (2012)

[17] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978) Book II, Part III, sect.3

[18] David Hume, *The History of England in 6 Volumes* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983) Vol. 4, 119–20

4.

A more satisfactory account, I shall argue, can be found in Adam Smith. Smith writes about 'religion' in both the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations*, and though he is operating with a very similar framework to Hume, his treatment of natural religion can be separated entirely from issues in philosophical theology. Smith implicitly appeals to a providentialist conception of the world, but unlike most of his philosophical contemporaries, he never explicitly engages in natural theology. Furthermore, while like Hume, he believes that 'science' and 'philosophy' can mitigate the excesses of superstition and enthusiasm, he also thinks that the dimensions of life with which religion is primarily concerned are 'of too much importance to the happiness of mankind, for nature to leave it dependent upon the slowness and uncertainty of philosophical researches'.[19]

Smith's principal interest is the same as Hume's in the *Natural History*. He wants to identify the source of religion in human nature, and thereby determine its proper place in the development of social life. Superstition and enthusiasm are marked features of religion as we know it, but they are defective forms in which the religious inclinations of human beings show themselves. 'True' religion, by contrast, can play a beneficial role in the lives of individuals and the wellbeing of societies. That is why 'pure and rational religion, free from every mixture of absurdity, imposture or fanaticism [is] such as wise men in all ages of the world [have] wished to see established'.[20]

By Smith's account, the benefits of true religion are to be seen first and foremost in the psychological and moral lives of individuals. Human beings have moral sentiments 'implanted' in their nature as deeply as the appetite for food or sex. *Contra* the Stoics, they cannot help caring more about their own happiness than that of others, and *contra* the 'whining and melancholy moralists' they do not need to feel guilty about this. At the same time, human beings are not the rampant egoists of Hobbes and Mandeville. The good opinion of others matters to them, and they have a rational faculty that enables them to make an impartial assessment of their own conduct. Still, in the ordinary course of life, the average human being cannot be expected to deliberate with 'exact justness' about

[19] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Oxford: Glasgow Edition, Oxford University Press, 1976) III.5.4, hereafter *TMS*.
[20] *WN* II/II.V.i.g

the best way of 'acting upon all occasions with the most delicate and accurate propriety'.

> The course clay of which the bulk of mankind are formed, cannot be wrought up to such perfection. There is scarce any man, however, who by discipline, education and example, may not be so impressed with a regard to the general rules, as to act upon almost every occasion with tolerable decency, and through the whole of his life to avoid any considerable degree of blame.[21]

Moral rules work to the general good because they are the commands and laws of a Deity 'who will finally reward the obedient and punish the transgressors of their duty'. This final outcome, Smith observes, may sometimes be very hard to discern, and thus hard to believe in. Life does not always go well for us, a fact about the human condition that easily weakens our moral resolve to abide by moral rules. Indeed, it may sometimes appear decidedly advantageous to ignore them. If morally good conduct is to prevail, then, what is needed is a 'sacred regard to general rules', and this where religion comes into its own because (*contra* Hume) no 'species of philosophy' could be expected to be of much help.

> Religion, even in its rudest form, gave a sanction to the rules of morality long before the age of artificial reasoning and philosophy. That the terrors of religion should thus enforce the natural sense of duty, was of too much importance to the happiness of mankind, for nature to leave it dependent upon the slowness and uncertainty of philosophical researches.[22]

Here then, we find a difference between Smith and Hume, but while this passage may seem to endorse a conventional connection between religious belief and moral conduct, there is a qualification to be entered. Colin Heydt has noted in a recent paper that Smith, in contrast to his contemporaries, does not include 'piety' among the virtues, and does not include any 'duties to God' in his conception of 'practical ethics'.[23] Heydt uses this fact to argue that, despite appearances, Smith makes morality wholly independent of natural religion. His account of conscience and appeal to natural rights are quite

[21] *TMS* V.1
[22] *TMS* III.V.2
[23] Colin Heydt, 'The Problem of Natural Religion in Smith's Moral Thought', *Journal of the History of Ideas* (forthcoming)

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sufficient. Yet even if we accept Heydt's contention, there remains some role in Smith for 'true religion'.

Natural religion, as Hume contends, is rooted in emotion. By Smith's account, some of these emotions are distinctively religious. They include 'the natural pangs of an affrighted conscience' which is marked out as special because it is an emotion 'from which no principles of *irreligion* can entirely deliver [us]'.[24] Our religious impulses, however, are not purely negative – a check upon behavior. They also generate confidence and sustain hope in times of adversity. Religion locates the ultimate vindication of the just over the unjust beyond human welfare and belief. It thus enables moral motivation to survive the subversive effects of personal temptation, popular opinion and susceptibility to 'the empire of Fortune'. In all these ways, and especially the last, religion is superior to philosophy.

> To persons in such unfortunate circumstances, that humble philosophy which confines its views to this life, can afford, perhaps, but little consolation… Religion alone… can tell them, that it is of little importance what man may think of their conduct, while the all-seeing Judge of the world approves it. She alone can present to them … a world of more candour, humanity, and justice, than the present; where their innocence is in due time to be declared, and their virtue to be finally rewarded… The same great principle which can alone strike terror into triumphant vice, affords the only effectual consolation to disgraced and insulted innocence.[25]

The rules of morality constitute the basis of both personal happiness and social well-being. Though Smith may seem to believe that lending these rules a 'sacred' character gives them a firmer foundation than 'philosophy' could ever do, if Heydt is right, he really holds that morality is self-sufficient and needs no appeal to God. It may nevertheless be important to combat 'false notions of religion' because it is these that are 'almost the only causes which can occasion any very gross perversion of our natural sentiments'. This is what happens when 'superstition' and 'enthusiasm' prevail over 'true religion', and that is why Smith devotes a lengthy section of *WN* to discussing the proper attitude that political rulers should take to religion.

The evils of superstition and enthusiasm are best averted not only by education in 'science and philosophy', but also by public entertainments. Public religion, though, has the merit of serving *both*

[24] *TMS* III.II.9, emphasis added
[25] *TMS* II.II.12

these purposes, the first by means of edifying, well-informed sermons, and the second by means of communal ceremonies. Religion's special solemnity serves these purposes better than any combination of schools and playhouses. That is its strength. When religion falls prey to sectarianism, the very same solemnity produces a 'gross perversion of our natural sentiments' and turns them in divisive and destructive directions. Accordingly, Smith thinks, wise rulers will create an 'established' religion and support a professional clergy to lead it. At the same time they will prevent the church to which those clergy belong from being structured in ways that promote *clericalism*, which is to say, the personal and professional aggrandizement that leads to the vices of (what the Protestants called) 'priestcraft'. For Smith, the church establishment that prevailed in the Scotland of his day offers one of the best illustrations of how religion, properly instituted, can serve the best interests of society.

> The equality which the presbyterian form of church government establishes among the clergy [generates] a more learned, decent independent, and respectable set of men … who are obliged to follow that system of morals which the common people respect the most… The presbyterian clergy, accordingly, … have more influence over the minds of the common people than perhaps the clergy of any other established church … It is … in presbyterian countries only that we ever find the common people converted, without persecution…'[26]
>
> The most opulent church in Christendom does not maintain better the uniformity of faith, the fervor of devotion, the spirit of order, regularity, and austere morals in the great body of the people, than this very poorly endowed church of Scotland. All the good effects, both civil and religious, which an established church can be supposed to produce, are produced by it as completely as by any other.[27]

By Smith's account, then, true religion will perform a socially valuable, twofold *function*. First, religious sentiments are part of human nature so that properly directed, they can play a uniquely important role in the life of human beings as moral agents. Conscience is a vehicle of feeling, not a belief. It can never be satisfactorily replaced by 'philosophy'. Second, ecclesiastical forms can channel deep seated religious sentiments in directions that are beneficial to society at

[26] *WN* V.i.g.38
[27] Ibid. V.i.g.41

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large. 'True' religion, accordingly, both helps the individual to live well by supporting moral integrity, and fosters social order by ensuring that religious sentiments do not turn into the corrupted and destructive form of superstition or of enthusiasm.

5.

Smith's account of the character and role of natural religion is framed within a way of thinking very close to Hume's, and there are many points at which the two writers agree. They disagree at least in this, that Smith lends religious emotions a distinctive character that is not to be reduced (as it is by Hume) to particular varieties of the more general emotions of hope and fear. Furthermore, on this basis he builds an account of 'true religion' that more clearly differentiates it from 'superstition' and 'enthusiasm', without converting it into a 'species of philosophy'.

This may be said to be an advance on Hume, but Smith's account of true religion still has an important lacuna in it. Among the sentiments that Smith identifies as components of a truly virtuous life, there are three that he characterizes in notably religious language. Their connection with right and wrong action, it may be argued, is not intelligible if it is cast entirely in terms of conformity to moral rules.

According to Smith there are two standards by which we might judge the adequacy of our own moral conduct. The *second* of these standards is based on human norms. We can judge ourselves to have acted (or failed to have acted) in accordance with what it is reasonable to expect of anyone, if, that is to say, we hold ourselves to the 'degree of excellence' that decent people 'commonly arrive at'. The *first* of the two standards Smith appeals to, however, goes beyond empirically observable norms of human decency. When we apply this standard to our own conduct, we hold our-selves accountable to an 'archetype of perfection'. To judge ourselves by the standard of perfection, is in effect to seek to imitate 'the work of a divine artist, which can never be equalled'. This 'first' standard, Smith tells us, is the one to which the 'wise and virtuous man directs his principal attention'.[28] From this we may conclude that pursuit of perfection, though it exceeds what we can expect of human behavior in general, and even goes beyond the requirements of natural law and the dictates of conscience, ought not to be regarded as foolish

[28] *TMS* VI.III.25

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perfectionism. On the contrary, it is a truly admirable human trait. The religious impulse to imitate 'the work of a divine artist', in other words, elevates moral endeavor from socially decent behavior to human ideal. This is in sharp contrast to Hume, for whom the pursuit of perfection was the chief enemy of human happiness.

A second human sentiment that Smith identifies and commends is this: 'A man of humanity, who accidentally, and without the smallest degree of blameable negligence, has been the cause of the death of another man, feels himself piacular, though not guilty', and though he is not guilty, he will seek means by which 'to atone for what has happened, and to propitiate'.[29] This 'piacular' sentiment does not flow from the requirements of justice. It is the longing for atonement and propitiation by means of sacrifice. These are all distinctively religious concepts, and give us reason to think that the emotions that underlie them are distinctively religious.

Thirdly, there are those 'natural pangs of an 'affrighted conscience' referred to earlier. Smith actually describes them as 'dæmons' that 'haunt the guilty' and may 'drive them to despair and distraction'.[30] The language of 'dæmons' may be figurative, but it serves to underline his important contention that 'no principles of irreligion can entirely deliver' us from these, with the implication that only religion can perform this psychological function.

But what kind of religion can adequately assuage this haunting guilt, accommodate the piacular feelings of those who are innocent of acting unjustly, and underwrite the pursuit of a moral perfection that only God can realize? The first duty that true religion requires of us, Smith says, is 'to fulfil all the obligations of morality'.[31] That is why he commends the model of Scotland's 'moderate' Presbyterianianism, an ecclesiology that favored services of worship centered on learned and eloquent sermons. By means of these, the clergy aimed to edify, encourage, warn and chastise their congregations, and for whom the moral rules to which their consciences naturally subscribed were thereby reinforced. Sacrificial atonement, and the striving after divine perfection, however, appeal to ideals beyond the observance of natural right and the preservation of a clear conscience. In this way, they exceed what 'rational' endorsement of moral rules requires. Similarly, haunting guilt arises, and lingers, precisely to the extent that the *sacred* authority of otherwise merely social rules is acknowledged. The pursuit of perfection, the desire

[29] *TMS* II.III.4
[30] *TMS* III.II.9
[31] *TMS* II.V.13

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to atone, and the pangs of conscience are *exceptional* sentiments, beyond the range of ordinary hopes and fears that get us through everyday life. Such exceptional sentiments are more than a stable social order requires. Accordingly, they cannot be encompassed within the simply 'reasonable'. Since these are *admirable* sentiments, they are not in need of being tempered by some 'species of philosophy'. What then might shape and direct them?

Like Hume, Smith is not merely skeptical, but dismissive of 'the public and private worship of the deity' in many forms. He discounts 'frivolous observances' 'sacrifices' 'ceremonies and 'vain supplications' as having any value in themselves, and roundly condemns 'the futile mortifications of the monastery'.[32] Yet it is by means of just this kind of practice that human beings in almost all cultures have sought to shape and strengthen the special religious sentiments that Smith himself identifies. How is unattainable perfection to be venerated except in worship? How is atonement to be made without propitiating sacrifice? How is guilt to be relieved except by confession? Even if Smith is right to make morality the centerpiece of virtue, the traditional practices of prayer, worship and sacrifice of which he is deeply suspicious, may have a more significant role than he is willing to allow, and may, in fact, be key to determining what 'true religion' really means.[33]

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[32] *ibid*.

[33] Earlier versions of this paper were given as lectures at the International Christian University, Tokyo, Japan, and at the University of Antwerp, Belgium. I am grateful for the opportunity that these invitations gave me to think further about a concept – 'true religion' – that I employed in setting the context for my exploration of *Wittgenstein and Natural Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).