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RELIGION IN THE AGE OF REASON:  
A PHILOSOPHICAL STUDY OF THE RELIGIOUS VIEWS  
OF DAVID HUME

by

Arthur L. Johnson

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska  
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Department of Philosophy

Under the Supervision of Professor Robert H. Hurlbutt III

Lincoln, Nebraska

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RELIGION IN THE AGE OF REASON: A

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
INTRODUCTION.....	1
I. THE HISTORIC CONTEXT.....	5
II. SOME PRELIMINARY ISSUES.....	20
III. REVELATION AS A SOURCE OF RELIGIOUS TRUTH...	35
IV. REASON AS A SOURCE OF RELIGIOUS TRUTH.....	97
V. ETHICS AND RELIGION.....	127
VI. HUME'S RELIGIOUS SCEPTICISM.....	189
VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS.....	240
FOOTNOTES.....	246

## INTRODUCTION

No scholar of Western philosophy is without some knowledge of David Hume. His name, whether correctly or not, is regularly linked with those of John Locke and George Berkeley as an example of the British empiricists, and his views on epistemology are familiar to every college undergraduate student in philosophy.

But while his position on the problems of knowledge is well known, those on religion are not as frequently discussed. It is not my purpose to suggest that this is to judge their relative worth incorrectly. Certainly Hume's epistemology is central to all he wrote. This, however, does not justify neglect of the religious writings. While they have not been totally neglected, I believe they deserve greater attention than they have received, for several reasons.

No one can justifiably accuse Hume of being a dull, unexciting writer. The Treatise of Human Nature, Hume's first work, is perhaps his poorest so far as literary quality is concerned. The Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals is, in many respects, a model of literary style. But of all

his works, the Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion ranks as the masterpiece. Rarely has dialogue form been utilized to such advantage.

It was his views on religion, as developed in his earlier writings, that brought him to the attention of his contemporaries, often to his disadvantage. His statements in the Treatise, for example, cost him an appointment to the chair of Ethics and Pneumatical Philosophy at Edinburgh University.<sup>1</sup> Later his candidacy for the chair of Logic at Glasgow University was rejected, apparently also because of his religious position.<sup>2</sup>

His writings on religion have continued to stir up interest. The chapter on miracles in the Enquiry is among his best known pieces, and his Dialogues are discussed to some degree or other by most who write about him. This interest is not totally due to either Hume's style--which is often at its best here--or to their content in general. They retain our interest partly because of the richness of ideas, the wealth of possible interpretation for which one can make a case, and the difficulty scholars have encountered in determining Hume's own position. While no one disagrees about his anti-religious attitude, there is less agreement about the precise nature of that attitude, or exactly what it is that Hume is doing.

I have no delusions about doing much to solve these difficulties, nor am I convinced that they can, finally, be solved. I shall be pleased if just a little is added to what we already understand about Hume's position. Two

areas in which something useful may be done are those concerning the relation between Hume's religious and his ethical views and those that have to do with the concept of "enthusiasm." While this paper is by no means limited to these and deals with his religious position as a whole, it seems to me that Hume's position here has been less well understood than in other respects.

As a whole, however, our examination of Hume's writings on religious issues will center around his response to the pressures brought to bear upon him by his society--the attempts to force conformity in matters of religion. I will argue that the nature of Hume's response to these pressures was significant in determining the form his writings on the subject took.

One matter is of such importance in understanding Hume and in understanding what we will say about his approach that it should be given some attention early in our examination. I refer to the fact that Hume is responding to claims that the religious views of his contemporaries were based on reason. What was meant by "reason," was, however, not clear.

There is a general acceptance of "reason" as the source of truth and knowledge, but upon study it is found that this term covers a multitude of not altogether similar and sometimes quite dissimilar notions. The only agreed-upon meaning of it is negative--it is opposed to revelation, faith, to mysticism of any sort, or at least of the sort traditionally identified with religion. But even here certain intuitionist themes, such as that of Locke concerning knowledge of natural law, appear little different from revelation in the epistemolo-

gical sense at least. The difference in attitude, of course, is considerable, for the upshot is to reject traditional religious ideas concerning knowledge of the divine. 'Reason' means self-evident innate ideas; it means self-evident truths such as the principle of causation; it means intuitions of laws of nature; it means deduction and demonstration; it means a variety of inductive procedures, including argument by analogy; it means logical consistency, or agreement with common sense; it means consistency with scientific knowledge of nature; it means general consent; it means observable; it means reducible to sense-data; and in the Cambridge Platonists it means human goodness. It therefore appears that when one finds an eighteenth-century thinker appealing to the verdict of 'reason,' including its numerous synonyms such as light of nature, natural reason, etc., it is not always clear just what he is referring to. The only clear use, it seems to me, lies in the inductive and deductive, experimental and mathematical techniques of the scientists. Whenever it is used with respect to other subjects, such as religion and theology and philosophy, it becomes very murky indeed.<sup>3</sup>

If the meaning of 'reason' is not clear in the works of others, it is in Hume's. By, in effect, insisting that when one says correctly he is using reason he must mean that he is either using the deductive methods of the logician and mathematician or the inductive methods of the natural scientist, Hume had ruled out any other criteria of knowledge. In doing this he had historical precedent: this had been the general approach since the West had begun to face the crise pyrrhonienne which grew out of the theological disputes of the Reformation.<sup>4</sup> But it remained for Hume to apply rigidly and consistently what others had said for a long time. He was, perhaps, the first to have the courage to apply to religion what others applied only to secular matters.

## I. THE HISTORIC CONTEXT

The aspect perhaps best known to people familiar with the literature of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries concerned the relation between the new scientific developments of the period and traditional religious concepts. I do not mean that it was often phrased in this manner. Rather, this is the period which may be characterized--although perhaps quite poorly--as concerned with Nature and Reason. In fact, we still refer to it as "the Age of Reason," implying that it was a period of time in which people based decisions and beliefs upon the dictates of logic rather than upon faith or emotion. That this is not as accurate a picture of eighteenth century thought as some had believed has been more clearly recognized since Carl L. Becker's work.

On the other hand, Basil Willey, in The Eighteenth Century Background, speaks of "Nature" as "a controlling idea in Western thought ever since antiquity," but one that was "universally active . . . from the Renaissance to the end of the eighteenth century."<sup>1</sup> Anyone reading the literature of the period will recognize its importance. This is the period of "natural science" and "natural religion." It is the period which saw the flowering (and dying) of the hope that the methods and insights gained by

men like Newton could be used to finally dispel the religious fears of previous centuries. The mood of the period was often optimistic. The "final solution" was near. The key that was to unlock all mysteries had been found--all that remained was for men to learn to apply it carefully and rigidly.

But just what was that key? It is easy to see this period as giving a simple answer when we view it from the distance of a century-and-a-half, but on closer examination it is clear that different people gave differing answers. Nevertheless, there were common elements. Generally the answer concentrated on some new method emphasizing human effort as opposed to "God-initiated" action and on "nature," or the physical world and man, rather than some transcendent Reality.

But again, it may be tempting for us to see this as a total rejection of religion and religious concepts. However, this clearly was not what was happening. What was happening was less a rejection of religion per se than of authority as a proper way of gaining knowledge of religious truths. And this rejection was occasioned less by the conviction that the religious concepts of the past were false than by a basic shift in attention--that shift from concern with God to concern with man--that shift which we conveniently describe as "the growth of Humanism."

Nor was this change in attitude and attention limited to the relatively few who were directly involved in natural

science. The writings of this period show that everyone felt compelled to appeal to nature rather than authority:

Look into the wilderness of forgotten books and pamphlets dealing with religion and morality: interminable arguments, clashing opinions, different and seemingly irreconcilable conclusions you will find, and yet strangely enough controversialists of every party unite in calling upon nature as the sovereign arbiter of all their quarrels.

. . . whatever question you seek to answer, nature is the test, the standard: the ideas, the customs, the institutions of men, if ever they are to attain perfection, must obviously be in accord with those laws which 'nature reveals at all times, to all men.'<sup>2</sup>

This very shift of attention raised a host of problems of its own, especially for the philosopher and theologians. What, for example, was the relationship between man and nature? Was man an integral part of nature, or was he superior in some sense to the natural order? And just what was the status of nature--was it somehow as it ought to be, or was it less-than-perfect as theologians had taught? On the answers to these and a host of related questions depended the answers to numerous other religious and ethical questions; for if nature, the product of God's creative power, was perfect and if man was a vital part of that nature, how could he be said to be inherently evil, as some theologians taught?<sup>3</sup>

Much depended on the answers that would be given, and interest ran high, as is shown by the response to major works. No doubt it was for this reason that later Hume was

so surprised and "hurt" by the lack of attention that greeted his Treatise, since it was the expected thing for every work to be subjected to careful scrutiny to see what implications it carried. After all, had not Locke been attacked? But Locke had made no frontal attack on religion. All he had done was to attack "innate ideas." But " . . . what the eighteenth century acclaimed him for having demolished, was the Christian doctrine of total depravity, a black, spreading cloud which for centuries had depressed the human spirit." Yet

this was Locke's great title to glory, that he made it possible for the eighteenth century to believe with a clear conscience what it wanted to believe, namely, that since man and the mind of man were shaped by that nature which God had created, it was possible for men, 'barely by the use of their natural faculties' to bring their ideas and their conduct, and hence the institutions by which they lived, into harmony with the universal natural order.<sup>4</sup>

But Hume's answer was of a far more fundamental nature and its implications far more sweeping. His disappointment is understandable, since the fact that he was generally ignored proves that he was largely misunderstood.

The intellectual ferment of the Seventeenth century to which Locke contributed led to the development of several interesting and optimistic religious positions. One was what came to be known as "natural Theology," which attempted to provide evidence for theological positions by appealing to science.<sup>5</sup>

Another position that developed from the Seventeenth

century concern with the relation between nature, man, and God, and which came to be known as "Natural Religion," is also crucial to our understanding of Hume's position, since it provided something of a "center-of-attention" around which Hume developed many of his religious views. While there is some difference between what is strictly spoken of as "natural religion," on the one hand, and "Deism" on the other, the technical differences are not crucial for our purposes and need not bother us for long.<sup>6</sup> For our purposes, it will be adequate to consider the latter as a subclass of the former. Both agreed, in general, with the fundamentals of natural religion, as formulated by Lord Herbert of Cherbury: "acknowledgment of God's existence, duty towards Him and our neighbor, necessity for repentance, future state of rewards and punishment."<sup>7</sup> These "fundamentals" were to become, to a large extent, the targets for Hume's attack.

Perhaps one reason why some writers on natural religion came to be distinguished from others as "Deists" is that, with increasing frequency, they tended to develop the negative aspects of their thought; that is, to develop the implications of the view that religious concepts must agree with the dictates of reason. This view had been held by Locke and others of his day.<sup>8</sup> At first, however, the implications of such a position were not apparent. Locke, for example, saw no problem in believing in revelation, miracles and the divinity of Christ.<sup>9</sup> However, conflict

between revelation and reason was bound to develop as long as reason was thought to be infallible, as the Cambridge Platonists believed,<sup>10</sup> and Empiricism was seen as the only reasonable way to gain knowledge. It was this aspect of natural theology, and the resultant denial of all supernaturalism<sup>11</sup> that has come down to us as a distinguishing, although somewhat misleading, mark of Deism. With this negative aspect Hume agreed, but not with its base. Perhaps it was his agreement with this anti-supernaturalism that led some people to identify him with the Deists, something which Hume denied.<sup>12</sup> As we shall see, he cannot be called a Deist in anything more than this negative and highly inaccurate, sense.

If, as we have indicated, the development of Deism as an outgrowth of the interaction between traditional religious concepts and the new scientific theories, is one of the best-known features of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth century religious scene, the other feature that is crucial to our study is more subtle and is much less clearly recognized. For lack of a better term, I shall refer to it as "the decline of religion," borrowing a term used in a different but related sense by Henry W. Clark in his History of English Nonconformity.<sup>13</sup> However, even this term is somewhat misleading, since it tends to center attention on an aspect of the phenomenon which is of secondary importance to us. While it is true that it was a period of declining religious devotion and of low moral standards,<sup>14</sup> the aspect

of this period that is of interest to us concerns something that may be viewed either as having a casual relationship to this general decline or as being simply an accompanying aspect.

In any case, what seems to have happened during this period is that the attention of the educated classes, and especially that of the clergy, became so closely centered upon the questions growing out of the interaction between science and religion, that what may be called the "spiritual needs" of the masses were neglected. It is this neglect of the masses to which Friedrich Heer points as essential in explaining the success of Wesleyanism--a movement which began about 1740 and one which Hume must have known, although we find him saying little about it.

But this religious decline has another aspect: the attitude of the educated class to the masses as a whole seems to have been one bordering on contempt and disregard. We find repeated references to "the vulgar,"<sup>15</sup> a term which we may translate as "the common people." But when we do so we lose sight of an important aspect of the term--the unbridged and unbridgeable nature of the distinction to which the term points. The vulgar were subject to all the evils of ignorance; especially to superstition and enthusiasm. They were beyond reach of the real values of life--beyond "salvation." There were no grounds for hope that they could be liberated from the evils of their class. Hume, for example, tells us that he does not believe a time

will ever come when they will not have some religious superstition as great as what he considered the greatest, most ridiculous superstition of his day.<sup>16</sup> But what is true of the vulgar is not necessarily true of the rest of humanity. Even though a great deal of superstition existed in the upper classes, there was hope of eliminating it. Hume's French friends saw that great day as near, even though Hume himself, as we have just noted, seems to have been less confident than they.<sup>17</sup>

This sensitivity to class distinction (if the term "class" is taken in a broad sense) is an aspect that must be recognized if we are to understand the eighteenth century and Hume's religious thought. Hume is writing for the educated, not for the vulgar. He has no intention to urge his views on the vulgar. To do so would be dangerous, he believed,<sup>18</sup> but there is no need to become concerned over that possibility, since they are incapable of understanding or accepting such reasonings. At the same time, the actions and beliefs of the vulgar must be accounted for. As we shall see later, it is this distinction between Hume's own class and the vulgar which leads to some apparent contradictions.

The view, then, that there existed a radical distinction between an educated, respectable elite and the bulk of the people--a distinction which involved more than just a difference of education, and was both qualitative and, in general, unbridgeable--was a subtle but very real aspect of

the intellectual scene of the eighteenth century. Historians of the period point to the political and social parallel of this when they speak of the ancient regime in discussing the developments on the continent. In view of what we know of the development of social and political theory from the medieval period onward it is far less surprising that such an attitude should have existed than that it should have been given so little recognition by scholars.

However, lest we be unfair to the intellectuals of the eighteenth century, we must recognize that at least some of the optimistic attitude which these people expressed involved some hope of bridging the gap between these two broad groups. After all, they were about the job of "enlightening" people. But that job was large, and the vulgar must wait their turn. First, all the educated must be convinced of the "Truth," and this in itself was no small task. Carl Becker, in speaking of Voltaire's part in this, called him a "defender of causes" and "a crusader," and speaks of all these eighteenth century philosophers as "eager bearers of good tidings to mankind."<sup>19</sup> But "mankind" refers to that part of the human race that was able, due to education, leisure, and inclination, to understand and appreciate what was being done.

The struggle, then, was for the minds of the elite in the grip of traditional but false beliefs, and the defenders of tradition were the clergy. Consequently, what developed was a war of words in which the clergy were hard-pressed to

defend religion in rational terms. The result was a neglect of the vulgar which expressed the same disregard for them by the clergy as was being expressed by the philosophers. As we shall see later, much that Hume says about the place of religion turns on this distinction.

We have noted the shift in attitude which gave rise in the seventeenth and eighteenth century to the struggle for the minds of the elite in England and Scotland, and the accompanying view that a major and perhaps unbridgeable gap existed between the elite and the vulgar. It is time now to turn our attention to the more intimate details of Hume's life in order to see what in his personal contact with religion may have influenced him.

There seems to be little, if any, evidence to show that Hume's experiences with religious teachings, practices, or institutions were different from that of other youths of his day. "In religion the Ninewells family" [that is, Hume's family] "were Presbyterians, members of the established Church of Scotland . . ." They presumably attended church regularly (as they were, in fact, required to do by law) and were regarded as religious and God-fearing people. All surviving comment on Katherine Hume indicates that she was sincerely and deeply religious.<sup>20</sup>

Concrete evidence about the religious life of the Hume family seems to be conspicuous by its absence, to judge by Mossner's comment. In view of what we know about Scotland during this period, the lack of comment to be found in

public and church records seems to indicate that the family was not significantly different in this respect from other Presbyterian families of the area.

On the other hand, what very little evidence we have about David Hume's own religious attitudes and experience seems to indicate that he was quite deeply impressed by his contacts with religion.<sup>21</sup> However, in spite of this, Norman Kemp Smith's suggestion that "he may, quite conceivably, have tasted of the experiences of conversion" seems unjustified by the available evidence which we have of Hume himself and of what we know of the Presbyterian doctrine of salvation and views on "conversion." In fact, it would seem much more likely that the religious exercises to which Smith refers and which Boswell reported as having been described to him by Hume, were an attempt by the youthful Hume to determine whether he was one of the "elect." To the immature mind, failing such a test might be traumatic enough to result in a rejection of all religious beliefs and lead to an attempt to establish values on some other foundation. Without concrete evidence, however, neither view can ever be more than a suggestion.

The picture of the youthful Hume that can be pieced together from what little material we have, seems to be of a boy who developed a deep concern for religious matters. We have no indication that his concern was less intense than that of his companions, yet we find quite early references to a change in attitude. As already indicated, Kemp

Smith suggests that the change may have occurred as early as Hume's sixteenth year.

To what are we to attribute this change in attitude and his subsequent religious views? Richard Wollheim suggests two answers to the problem but rejects both:

The precise nature of Hume's concern with religion is not easy to locate. What is perhaps the most obvious explanation--that it sprang directly out of his own religious problems--is unacceptable in view of what we know of Hume's comparative detachment from religion. . . . "

The other obvious explanation of Hume's religious interests--that he felt a strong desire to free mankind from error and superstition--is even less applicable. Such a reformist motive certainly existed with some of the French philosophes and encyclopaedists, . . . but it had no place in Hume's passive, indeed essentially conservative, temperament.<sup>22</sup>

We have already noted that Hume had little hope of freeing mankind "from error and superstition." To that extent, at least, it seems that Wollheim is correct. But to suggest that Hume's "concern with religion" was not directly connected to "his own religious problems" may be at least misleading. If Wollheim is objecting to the view that Hume's writings grew directly from an on-going struggle with personal religious beliefs and doubts, he is certainly correct. Hume at no time exhibits any inclination to believe those doctrines that he was taught in his youth. As Wollheim says, " . . . Hume never again lapsed into orthodoxy."<sup>23</sup> But if we understand Wollheim to say that Hume's religious position was not the outgrowth of the

personal religious struggles of his youth--that he had no "personal" reasons for rejecting the religion of his youth--Wollheim's claim is either unjustified or we have misunderstood him. To suggest such a thing contradicts furthermore, the spirit, although not the letter, of Hume's own explanation of people's belief in religion. As we shall see, Hume attributes such belief to the passions, primarily those of hope and fear. To suggest that, if Hume is correct, his own position may have involved some similar psychological basis does not seem entirely out of keeping with the spirit of his explanation of religious beliefs.

This entire issue needs to be raised because of another problem. It was once fashionable to maintain that the religious issues in Hume's writings were somehow superfluous--that they bore no close relationship to the bulk of his position. This view has recently been challenged, and to a large degree, rejected.<sup>24</sup> However, one occasionally still encounters the view that Hume's religious position developed from his epistemology, thereby leaving the impression that Hume's statements on religion are but the cold-blooded application to religious issues of principles developed in some other context. I shall argue that there are grounds to suggest that the religious issues were an ever-present element for Hume as he developed his theories on these other issues; and that one must, therefore, recognize the influence of his religious views upon the development of his epistemology and ethics as well as the influence

of those views upon his religious position.

In order to avoid confusion we must clearly distinguish several possible kinds of influence. It is a well-recognized fact that Hume was writing from a background and in a context that can only be described as "Christian"--that is, it was a period of time in which religion was considered as basic, influencing all that was done. In turn, whatever was written was read as having, at least potentially, religious significance.<sup>25</sup> Of perhaps equal significance is the fact that "religion" here means specifically the Christian religion and not some vague, generalized attitude. It was a body of relatively well-defined doctrines, behavioral patterns, and institutional loyalties which were seen as essential in a way which is often quite foreign to the modern reader.

If we are to understand Hume, we must keep this background clearly in mind, lest we forget that when he uses the word "religion" he is speaking primarily of Christianity or those positions, like Deism, which developed directly from Christianity. In fact, Kemp Smith says that it was Calvinism, and not the broader Christian position, which " . . . continued . . . to typify for him what he meant by religion, i . . . "<sup>26</sup> but this seems a bit narrow when we take into account the totality of what Hume said about religion.

On the other hand, I do not wish to suggest that some underlying anti-Christian presupposition functioned in some

logical capacity to determine the conclusions at which Hume arrived. However, to ignore the historical context in which an argument is developed is to expose ourselves to the dangers of seeing that argument as directed toward issues with which the author was not even concerned. To read Hume as totally concerned with Epistemology and not with religion is to read him as we might some twentieth century author, not an Enlightenment figure. Yet something of this sort seems the most reasonable way to account for "the subsequent neglect into which his writings on religion have fallen," which Wollheim correctly suggests "is totally unjustified."<sup>27</sup>