

## **RELIGIOUS PASSIONS, CONSTRUCTIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE**

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It's a great honour to contribute to your seminar series on *Les émotions: savoirs et sciences*. The kind of science I'll discuss today is David Hume's conception of a science of man, first outlined in the great philosophical work that he published at the age of 28, *A Treatise of Human Nature*.<sup>1</sup> In the Introduction to the *Treatise*, Hume argues that we cannot have a full understanding of mathematics, natural philosophy or natural religion unless we understand the processes of human judgment on which they rely.

It is impossible to tell what changes and improvements we might make in these sciences, were we thoroughly acquainted with the extent and force of human understanding, and could explain the nature of the ideas we employ, and the operations we perform in our reasonings. And these improvements are the more to be hoped for in natural religion, as it is not content with instructing us in the nature of superior power, but carries its views further, to their disposition towards us, and our duties towards them (THN xv).

To construct such a science of man, Hume goes on, we must 'march directly up to the capital..., to human nature itself; which being once masters of...we may extend our conquests over all those sciences which more intimately concern human life' (THN, xvi).

Hume devotes much of the *Treatise* to what we would call psychology, concentrating particularly on the passions, and setting out the principles by which they arise and operate. But it was only much later in his life that he turned systematically to natural religion, and began to consider whether his analysis of the passions and other features of human understanding did in fact alter and improve our understanding of this particular science. The *Natural History of Religion* was not published until 1757, by which time Hume had become celebrated as the author of a six volume *History of England*, written and published in the 1740s. And his more philosophical *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* only appeared after his death in 1776. Today I shall concentrate on just one of the arguments that Hume develops in the *Natural History of Religion*. The argument, I shall claim, is meant to change and improve our grasp of natural religion, by challenging a widely accepted position about the relation between superstition and true religion. In doing so, moreover, it defends a view about how we should go about assessing forms of religious life, that is consonant with the aspirations of the science of man as Hume conceives it.

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<sup>1</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), ed. L.A. Selby Bigge; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition with revised text and notes by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978). Abbreviated henceforth as THN.

Permeating the world of Hume and his contemporaries was the widespread conviction that popular religion, organised around a belief in a unique and benevolent deity, can and should be a force for good. This position is represented by Cleanthes in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*,<sup>2</sup> and is emphatically the view to be found among a number of the moralists with whom Hume polemically engaged. Consider, for example, the radical whigs, Trenchard and Gordon, who explain in their *Cato's Letters* of 1722 that the aim of true or everyday religion is to inspire men with generous and beneficent affections. 'No man', they insist, 'can love God if he loves not his neighbour;...nor can we otherwise show our love of God than by kind, humane and affectionate actions towards his creatures.' Types of worship that do not conform to this pattern are 'the dry or mad freaks of an enthusiast and ought to be called by another name.'<sup>3</sup>

True religion of this kind is habitually situated within a triadic classification, and is seen as occupying a middle ground between two other forms of religious life: on the one hand superstition, which answers to the dry and mad freaks of enthusiasm; on the other hand a philosophically-grounded religious practice that mainly lies beyond the reach of ordinary people. Ideally, understanding and worship of God should be informed by philosophical reasoning, but in practice this is often too much to ask. Fortunately, however, the existence of true religion allows people who are not philosophers to satisfy the demands of piety.

Considerable efforts are consequently devoted to marking out the boundaries between these three types of religion. In his *Natural History of Religion* of 1757, however, Hume sets out to undermine this project by blending true religion with superstition, thus reducing three categories to two. In place of the triadic view that most of his contemporaries accept, he offers us a choice between superstition and philosophical religion. In doing so, he takes sides in a debate about the nature of superstition. The classical view, most influentially formulated by Plutarch, had been that superstition is fundamentally a torturing fear of the gods, which—in Philemon Holland's 1603 translation of the *Moralia*—'lights on gentle and tender spirits like moist and soft soil and imprints in the heart of man a certain fearfulness, which doth abate his courage and humble him down to the very ground'.<sup>4</sup> Hume, by contrast, interprets superstition in principally epistemological terms, as a matter of holding religious beliefs that fail to satisfy our best philosophical standards of justification. This seemingly insignificant shift, I shall argue, has turned out to be of considerable philosophical significance. It serves to underpin an epistemological approach to religious issues with which we are nowadays entirely familiar, and to undercut a complementary psychological approach that is now relatively peripheral to philosophical debate. By seeing off the triadic conception of religion, Hume aims to put the truth of religious claims centre stage and to banish their binding function to the wings.

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<sup>2</sup> 'The proper office of religion is to regulate the hearts of men, humanize their conduct, infuse the spirit of temperance, order and obedience; its operation is silent and only enforces the motives of morality and obedience...', *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part XII.

<sup>3</sup> *Cato's Letters*, ed. Ronald Hamowy (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1995), 4 vols in 2, vol. 1, pp. 462-3.

<sup>4</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia*, trans. Philemon Holland (London, 1603) p. 260.

Before we can see how the *Natural History of Religion* subverts the triadic classification, we need to grasp the classification itself. Of all the writers who laid it out in the earliest phase of the European Enlightenment, and whose work forms the backdrop to the age of Hume, none did so with greater conceptual boldness than Spinoza, whose arguments, as Jonathan Israel has shown us, became widely disseminated in the early eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> In the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, and the *Ethics*, Spinoza distinguishes three forms of religion: superstition and true religion, both of which are the fruits of the everyday kind of thinking that Spinoza calls imagining; and philosophical religion, which arises from philosophical reasoning.<sup>6</sup> Starting with superstition, and adhering closely to the classical view exemplified by Plutarch, Spinoza identifies five defining features of superstitious beliefs and practices. First and most fundamental, they are the outcome of fear. Living as we do in a world over which we have relatively little control, we are prone to great anxiety about what is going to happen to us, and in order to allay it, form ideas of deities powerful enough to protect us. Secondly, while this strategy may bring temporary relief, the fears it was designed to quell habitually return, directed this time at the deities who were supposed to overcome it. (Have I succeeded in placated them? Are they powerful enough to protect me?) The feelings of confidence that the gods initially sustain are therefore unstable and, alternating with anxiety, make superstitious people inconstant. Thirdly, when fear gets the upper hand, as it is prone to do, superstitious people suffer from terror and melancholy that reduce them, in extreme cases, to abject misery and can make them mad. Fourthly, superstitious people try to strengthen their confidence by getting other people to share their beliefs; but since these are diverse and changeable, superstitious communities are prone to conflict. Finally, but by no means least important, the affective investments that are central to superstition block our capacities to reflect critically on our beliefs and actions, and impeded our capacity to think.

Superstition is therefore a degraded and degrading kind of religion. It lies at the lower point of a scale, balanced at the other end by an exalted form of religious life that, according to Spinoza, comes with philosophical understanding. As philosophers extend their knowledge, they come to see that their greatest good lies in enhancing their rational understanding of nature, and recognize that this is simultaneously a process of coming to know God. Pursuing true understanding, and becoming affectively as well as cognitively committed to that goal, is thus the rational way to love God, and is an expression of genuine piety. Moreover, as philosophers gain a better understanding of how it is best for human beings to live, they become increasingly motivated to promote ways of life that enable people to live together in what Spinoza describes as honourable friendship. True knowledge

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); *Enlightenment Contested. Philosophy, Modernity and the Emancipation of Man, 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, in *Opera*, ed. Carl Gebhardt, (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1924), vol. 3. On superstition see particularly the Preface; on true religion see chapters 13 and 14. The theme of philosophy as a form of piety is most developed in the *Ethics*. See especially IVP37s1; IVP73; IV Appendix xv; VP4s1; VP41.

and love of God creates the strongest social bonds of which human beings are capable.

Between the poles of philosophical religion and superstition lies true religion—a second form of imaginatively grounded religious life, this time organised around the doctrines revealed to the biblical prophets. According to Spinoza, the teaching of scripture is in essence the injunction to obey the law of God by loving one's neighbours. Living a truly religious life is simply a matter of living co-operatively with others, and is measured by one's actions. Yet there are nevertheless a few beliefs or tenets that people have to hold in order to achieve this goal. For example, if the law of God is to command one's undivided commitment, one must conceive God as unique rather than as one object of devotion among others. Monotheism rather than polytheism is the order of the day. Equally, if an idea of God is to encourage steady devotion, God must be conceived as just. An unjust God would be a natural object of fear, resentment or anger, and would stimulate the very anxieties on which superstition feeds. Again, one must believe that God will not abandon one every time one acts disobediently by treating one's neighbours badly, and that he will forgive those who repent. Since individuals imagine God in a multitude of ways and are moved by many different considerations, true religion will leave its tenets open to a host of interpretations. Rather than trying to impose uniformity, it will allow people to develop whatever beliefs and forms of worship best enable them to co-operate with one another, and will not enquire too closely into what these are. Nevertheless, if our ideas of God are to motivate us to live in a loving fashion, there are certain conditions that we must meet.

Here, then, are Spinoza's three types of religious practice; but are they really distinct? First, can Spinoza really distinguish superstition from true religion? On initial inspection, his answer seems to be no. Like superstition, true religion relies in his view on the inadequate ideas that we gain through imagination, and focuses on their affective power rather than their truth. (It is important that one's religious beliefs should motivate one to live co-operatively, but it does not matter whether they are true.) Like superstition, true religion trades on questionable, anthropomorphic images of God. Like superstition, it doesn't require people to reflect deeply on their beliefs, or subject them to the rigorous standards of philosophical reasoning. In these respects, then, superstition and true religion cannot be held apart. However, there is nevertheless a definitive psychological difference between them. Whereas superstition is organised around fear of supernatural agents, true religion uses imagination to foster love of a God who makes co-operation safe and inspires us to pursue it. While superstition appeals to a complex of debilitating passions that disempower us, true religion trades on a love that strengthens us and helps us to resist the ravages of anxiety. Although truly religious love is of course an affect, vulnerable to external influences and our own psychological dispositions, it protects us against inconstancy and melancholy, stands between us and social conflict, and enhances rather than blocks an outlook hospitable to reason.

So the distinction between superstition and true religion can be secured. But what about the distinction between *true* religion and *philosophical* religion? Here Spinoza appeals to their diverse ends. Whereas philosophical religion belongs to a practice of reasoning that strives for truth, and aims to gain a correct

understanding of God or nature, true religion has a practical goal and only aspires to institute a co-operative way of life. As far as it is concerned, there is nothing wrong with having ideas about God that are false, as long as these sustain affects and attitudes that enable one to love one's neighbours. Nor need it matter if people's religious beliefs conflict, as long as their differences don't undermine their ability to treat one another well. The point of true religion is not to give us philosophical knowledge, but to help mould us into morally decent individuals and virtuous citizens.

So there's the triadic classification. Our next step is to see how Hume handles it in his *Natural History*. One notable feature of this text is that it acknowledges a philosophical form of religion based on a rational understanding of God. In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume famously debates this same view, allowing the figure of Philo to bring a panoply of sceptical arguments to bear on it. It's then difficult to know what to think when, in Part XII of the *Dialogues*, Philo changes his tune, affirming that 'a purpose, an intention, a design strikes everywhere the most careless, the most stupid thinker', and remarking that 'the existence of a deity is plainly ascertained by reason.' Many philosophers have refused to take these protestations at face value, and have read the *Dialogues* as evidence of Hume's atheism. But it is worth noting that in the *Natural History*, as well as the last section of the *Dialogues*, Hume lets rational religion stand.<sup>7</sup> The foundation of religion in reason, he tells us, 'admits of the most obvious, at least, the clearest, solution. The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief for a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine theism and religion' (33)—that God is the first principle of mind or thought, that he is supreme governor and administrator, and that the fabric of the world is the fruit of divine contrivance and intention (44). Letting this position stand, the *Natural History* focuses on the relation between superstition and true religion, trading, as we shall see, on the classical conception of superstition that we have already encountered.

According to Hume, the vulgar arrive at their monotheistic beliefs on the basis of a certain train of thinking that is, as he puts it, suitable to their genius and capacity. Religious belief was originally stimulated by fear—specifically fear of the unknown causes of harmful events (38-40). To alleviate their terror, people formed ideas of the causal powers to which they were subject, and since they could only imagine these confusedly, succumbed to what Hume describes as the universal tendency of mankind to conceive all beings as like themselves and to transfer to every object those qualities with which they were familiarly acquainted (40, 58). Natural causes were represented as anthropomorphic deities and given an independent existence (39-41).

As Hume's reference to the vulgar indicates, superstition depends on ignorance. But ignorance alone is not enough to produce it, and a more salient condition of its emergence is anxiety. Since knowledge of the causes of things tends to mitigate our fear of them, superstition is more likely to afflict the vulgar than the educated. But the people most exposed to it are those who combine

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<sup>7</sup> All page references are to David Hume, *A Dissertation on the Passions and The Natural History of Religion*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp, The Clarendon Edition of the Works of David Hume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

ignorance with timidity and who are easily alarmed by unexpected personal disasters, convulsions in nature, disorders, prodigies and miracles. For this reason, Hume comments, women are more prone to superstition than men (43). And the best antidote to it is a steady, manly virtue.

Fear is thus the basis of superstition. But as Hume goes on to note, once again echoing the classical view, the beliefs and practices in which it results are inherently unstable. In the face of life's uncertainties, anxiety tends to keep resurfacing, so that superstitious people swing between cheerfulness and misery, revising their conceptions of the deity as their affections change. They consequently display the second defining feature of superstition , namely inconstancy. Even in this condition, however, they are more affected by pain than pleasure. When things go well, Hume observes, echoing a common observation, we tend to take this as our due and don't attribute our good fortune to the gods. It is only when things go badly that we are 'thrown on our knees', and are liable to decline into a state of abject anxiety. 'Every disastrous incident alarms us, apprehensions spring up with regard to futurity: and the mind, sunk into diffidence, terror and melancholy, has recourse to every method of appeasing the secret intelligent powers on whom our fortune is supposed entirely to depend' (42). Here, then, is the melancholy verging on madness that is a third feature of superstition.

Continuing to follow the analysis set out in the classical tradition and reiterated throughout the early modern period, Hume now adds the two final features that we'd expect to find. Superstitious people are unable to form stable agreements about religious matters and tend to quarrel over them. And superstition is epistemologically damaging. As well as 'hardening the heart, obscuring the fancy and souring the temper', Hume tells us, 'it stupefies the understanding'. Superstitious anxiety blocks our capacity to reason, whether informally or formally, and locks us in with our own misery.

So, like his account of philosophical religion, Hume's discussion of superstition fits neatly into the tripartite classification. But when we reach the middle category, true religion, the tenor of the discussion changes. There are, to be sure, moments in his *oeuvre*, for example in the *History of England*, when he allows that monotheistic popular religion can play a role in sustaining moral and political order.<sup>8</sup> But in the *Natural History* this view is given short shrift. If

a popular religion were found, in which it was expressly declared that nothing but morality would gain divine favour; if an order of priests were instituted to inculcate this opinion in daily sermons, and with all the arts of persuasion; yet, so inveterate are the people's prejudices that, for want of some other superstition, they would make the very attendance of those sermons the essentials of religion, rather than place them in virtue and morals.

No minimal, monotheistic creed organised around the injunction to love one's neighbour can resist the human impulse to elevate ceremonies or other *adiophsora* to the status of doctrines, thus embarking on the path to an elaborate and contentious theology. Moreover, Hume adds, 'this observation holds universally' (81-2).

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<sup>8</sup> See for example Annette Baier; Wim Lemmens

What makes Hume so confident that Spinozist true religion is untenable and is bound to become corrupted in this way? In the *Natural History of Religion* we find five lines of reply, each corresponding to one of the key features of superstition. A central advantage of true religion, as the Spinozist conceives of it, is that, unlike superstitious people, the truly religious are supposed to be able to use their love of God to generate a reasonably steady commitment to a co-operative way of life. As long as they can commit to monotheism, and to the idea of a just and forgiving deity, their love of God can in principle hold anxiety at bay. Hume, however, denies that any boundary between fear and love, stability and inconstancy, can be drawn. The psychological forces that make people superstitious and inconstant operate universally; and the defences that true religion raises against them are simply not strong enough to produce the truly religious way of life that the Spinozist envisages.

A first argument for this view focuses on true religion's commitment to monotheism. Historically, so the *Natural History* contends, the idea of a single divine creator arises out of polytheism. Inclined both to revere and fear their many deities, and to vacillate between one affect and the other, communities of superstitious polytheists arose. By degrees, however, the desire for a God who would answer more fully to their confused conceptions of natural causes prompted people, as Hume says, to 'elevate their deities to the utmost bounds of perfection, at last begetting the attributes of unity and infinity, simplicity and spirituality' (58). Monotheism was born; but the idea of God born with it was, in Hume's words, 'somewhat disproportioned to vulgar comprehension.' Because imagination is attuned to the finite and sensible, it finds the conception of a unique and infinite deity hard to grasp and cannot easily represent it, either as the cause of events, or as a fitting object of reverence. Responding to this experience, ordinary people then strive to imagine God in a more emotionally satisfying fashion, by positing anthropomorphic entities who will intercede with a murkily-conceived deity. These 'demi-gods or middle-beings, 'who partake of human nature', enter more vividly into the thinking of ordinary people than the idea of God himself. Before long, people transfer to them the affections that should be reserved for God, and make them objects of devotion. (59). However, as worship of God becomes diluted by the worship of angels, saints and so forth, monotheism slides back into polytheism. 'The heroes of paganism', Hume observes, 'correspond exactly to the saints in popery and the holy dervishes in Mahometanism. The place of Hercules, Theseus, Hector and Romulus, is now supplied by Dominic, Francis, Anthony and Benedict' (63).

This movement from polytheism to monotheism and back again is, Hume claims, just one cycle in a continuing pattern of flux and reflux between the two. One unstable response to fear begets another, which begets the first, and so on. Since the boundary between polytheism and true religion is not secure, true religion is always threatened by superstition. 'So great is the propensity to return to idolatry', Hume concludes, 'that the utmost precaution is not able effectually to prevent it' (59).

Anyone convinced by the Spinozist argument with which I began will counter that the imagination is more fecund than Hume allows. Although a *true* idea of an infinite God lies beyond the bounds of imagination, ordinary people can perfectly well sustain a monotheistic religion by representing a just deity in some

comfortably anthropomorphic fashion, and using this image to sustain their faith. When images of God the father, ruler or judge are embedded in religious narratives and practices, they can generate a reasonably stable level of devotion and help to promote the way of life that true religion requires. By bringing God down to earth, as it were, they remove the need for supplementary deities, and avoid the descent into polytheism.

Hume, however, is not convinced. What this position fails to recognise, he claims, is the strength of the psychological dispositions on which the Spinozist's analysis of superstition depends. As he and the Spinozist agree, superstitious people are inconstant because they are torn between hope and fear. True religion is then meant to overcome this inconstancy. There is, however, no reason to think that this strategy will succeed. In order to imagine a benevolent God who guarantees justice, one must imagine him as extremely powerful; and while an image of an extremely powerful God may arouse reverence and love, it is equally liable to arouse fear. As Hume expresses it, 'Where the deity is represented as infinitely superior to mankind, this belief, though altogether just, is apt, when joined by superstitious terrors, to sink the mind into the lowest submission and abasement' (63). There is thus 'a kind of contradiction between the different principles of human nature, which enters into all religion, whether superstitious or not' (77). Here is Hume's summary. 'The feeble apprehensions of men cannot be satisfied with conceiving their deity as a pure spirit and perfect intelligence. And yet their natural terrors keep them from imputing to him the least shadow of limitation and imperfection. They fluctuate between these opposing sentiments. The same infirmity drags them downwards from an omnipotent and spiritual deity to a limited and corporeal one. The same endeavour at elevation still pushes them upwards from the invisible power to an invisible perfect deity, the creator and sovereign of the universe' (59).

There are therefore two ways in which imaginatively-grounded true religion is psychologically unstable, and consequently unable to sustain a co-operative way of life. On the one hand, it is part of a long, alternating cycle of polytheism. On the other hand, the beliefs and practices of individuals will not be stable, and are bound to veer between hope and adulation on one side, and fear and abasement on the other. In both dimensions, true religion suffers from a tendency to degenerate into superstition, and is exposed to the various forms of misery that accompany it.

Expiating on the latter point, Hume dwells on several forms of unhappiness to which true religion gives rise. One of these concerns forms of worship. While the Spinozist envisages a plurality of forms of worship, each of which encourages people to live co-operatively, Hume paints a more agonistic picture. Simply fulfilling one's obligations to one's fellow humans—loving one's neighbours by treating them justly—manifestly fails to answer the need to placate an infinitely powerful God. People 'still look out for some more immediate service of the supreme being, in order to allay those terrors with which they are haunted' (83), and this in turn generates practices that either serve no mundane purpose or 'offer the strongest violence to our natural inclinations' (83). Mortification, penance, humility and passive suffering appear to be the only ways of showing adequate devotion to an infinite deity (63). But these monkish virtues in turn exacerbate superstition and immorality. The need to pacify the deity in

extraordinary ways legitimates criminal actions that violate the standards of a co-operative way of life; and the feelings of remorse that such crimes generate produce further fantasies about what God requires, together with ever more extreme rites and ceremonies (83). In short, the psychological seeds of superstitious forms of worship that true religion carries within itself undermine the very comforts it is supposed to produce.

Nor is true religion a successful antidote to social conflict. According to the Spinozist, true religion consists in living peacefully with others. In addition, its minimal doctrine and extensive pluralism leave little or no room for doctrinal disagreement. A truly religious way of life is, thus, a harmonious one, free from sectarian strife. But once again, Hume is pessimistic. Within monotheistic religions, he argues, religious pluralism struggles against the intuition that, if there is only one God, a single set of doctrines and religious practices must answer to his nature. ‘While one sole object of devotion is acknowledged,...this unity of object seems naturally to require the unity of faith and ceremonies’ (60). Although polytheism can cheerfully allow for a variety of tenets each suited to a particular deity, and countenance a tradition that is irreducible to determinate articles of faith, monotheism tends to fixed dogmas and principles (72). Leaving behind the light and unassuming demands of superstitious forms of religion, it replaces them with dogmas that tend to ‘provoke men’s spleen and indignation’ (73) and produces sectarian strife. ‘For as each sect is positive that its own faith and worship are entirely acceptable to the deity, and as no one can conceive that the same being should be pleased with different and opposite rites and principles, the several sects fall naturally into animosity, and mutually discharge on each other that sacred zeal and rancour, the most furious and implacable of all human passions’ (60-61). So while the pluralism of true religion tends to overcome conflict, its monotheism tends to sustain animosity within it, and this fissure vitiates the peace and security at which the Spinozist aims. So much so, in fact, that if Spinozists ceased to delude themselves, they would be forced to acknowledge that the dynamics of superstitious fear<sup>9</sup> remain poised to destabilize any attempt to institute a true religion. Doctrinal disputes will continue to generate conflict, and the submissive attitudes that fear continues to produce will undermine liberty by making people abject and servile. As Hume puts it, citing Machiavelli’s *Discorsi*, true religion will ‘subdue the spirit of mankind and fit people for slavery and subjection’ (63-4).<sup>10</sup>

A final delusion lies in the Spinozist view that, while superstition damages our capacity to think, true religion can be epistemologically productive and set people on the path to philosophical knowledge. Since an imaginatively-grounded faith in a unique and benevolent deity shares some of the central beliefs around which philosophical religion is organised, one might suppose that true religion could play a role in promoting philosophical understanding. But the *Natural History* firmly denies this. In order to inspire reverence for God, it reminds us, true religion countenances appeals to phenomena that exceed the bounds of common sense such as mysteries and miracles, and in doing so departs from the rational

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<sup>9</sup> Combined with a tendency of the mind to be ‘wonderfully fortified by unanimity of sentiments’ that it ‘lays hold on every mind that approaches it’ (Hume, *Of Parties in General*, 60).

<sup>10</sup> *Discorsi* II.ii.

epistemological standards on which philosophy relies. Where true religion is tolerant of absurdities and contradictions, philosophy is not. But the more the doctrines of true religion resemble those of philosophy, as they do in modern monotheism, the more true religion will be subjected to philosophical criticism. And in the resulting epistemological struggle, philosophy ‘is at every turn perverted to serve the purposes of superstition’ (66). Since philosophical maxims are no match for the torrent of scholastic religion, the irrational doctrines that true religion allows will tend to corrupt philosophy and impede the growth of understanding. The Spinozist assumptions that the two can peacefully co-exist, and that true religion can to some extent pave the way for philosophical thinking, are therefore unduly optimistic. In practice, philosophy will either have to give way to religion or be condemned as heresy.

With this set of arguments, the *Natural History of Religion* systematically confronts the Spinozistic claim that imaginatively grounded forms of monotheistic religion can overcome the various deficiencies of superstition, and generate ways of life that are loving, constant, contented, peaceful and epistemologically productive. On the contrary, Hume contends, such ways of life share superstition’s limitations, and cannot shake off the sources of fear that tend to instability, misery, divisiveness and error. This dark conclusion does not, of course, imply that apparently truly religious ways of life are invariably disastrous. But where they are not, Hume argues, their success does not lie within imaginatively-based monotheism itself. In some cases, co-operative ways of life can be attributed to extra-religious factors that hold religion in check (64), and the most powerful of these is undoubtedly common sense. Strong as religious commitments may be, Hume warns, ‘the conviction of the religionists, in all ages...scarcely ever approaches...to that solid belief and persuasion which governs us in the common affairs of life’ (71). Whatever people may say, their religious lives are ordinarily grounded on attitudes that lie somewhere between conviction and disbelief and give way to common sense (72).<sup>11</sup>

A second guiding force is politics. Responding to the objection that truly religious societies have sometimes managed to generate tolerant ways of life, Hume asserts that, in places such as England and Holland, these benefits are due to political rather than religious circumstances. Peace has been sustained by the efforts of statesmen, and not priests, who have on the whole encouraged conflict rather than curing it. Finally, a third factor that affects the capacity of a community to live in a truly religious fashion is the origin and history of the faith to which it adheres. For example, the spirit of persecution ‘which has poisoned Christian societies and been the source of the most inveterate factions’ partly derives from the fact that, within Christianity, religious authority originally lay with ecclesiastical rather than civil powers.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This line of thought is reiterated in the *Dialogues* and the *History of England* (vol. 2, ch. 6). It is famously explored by Bayle in his *Pensées diverses sur la comète* (1682). Bayle argues that theological principles have less influence on us than our passions, particularly our *amour propre*. We act well because of our passions, not because of our belief in providence and divine punishment (sections 83, 138-9, 171). Atheism is consequently not dangerous to social order.

<sup>12</sup> *Of Parties in General*.

External factors can therefore help to suppress the destructive aspects of true religion and create the way of life to which it aspires. But there is also an internal feature of true religion that perversely leans in the same direction, namely its own superstitious tendency towards polytheism. Since polytheism is not as affectively demanding as monotheism, polytheistic adaptations of monotheistic religions are easier for ordinary people to live by. They are, as Hume puts it, reasonable (76) and natural (65), and ‘set light and easy on men’s minds’ (76). These features in turn help to promote civil virtue. ‘Where the gods are conceived to be only a little superior to mankind,...we are more at ease in our addresses to them, and may even, without profaneness, aspire sometimes to a rivalry and emulation of them. Hence, activity, spirit, courage, magnanimity, love of liberty, and all the virtues which aggrandise a people’ (63). Psychologically, morally and politically, then, true religion is most productive in the phases of its existence when it tends to polytheism, that is to say, in the very phases when its doctrines move away from those of its philosophical counterpart and become epistemologically least promising. As Hume mischievously concludes, true religion is at its best when it is polytheistic. In its monotheistic forms, it can only be achieved in propitious historical and political circumstances where common sense is given its head.

Among the various theological positions that the *Natural History of Religion* sets out to undermine is what I have been calling the Spinozist view that there is a morally and theologically valuable distinction to be drawn between imaginatively grounded superstition and imaginatively grounded true religion. What separates the two, according to the Spinozist, is not the fact that one position espouses false beliefs while the other espouses true ones. Both will often rely on falsehoods. Rather, the distinction between them rests on the passions that dominate and drive each type of practice, and thus on the difference between the fear that shapes superstition and the love or devotion around which true religion is organised.

According to Hume, however, these two clusters of affects are mutually dependent, and the psychological links between them cannot be broken. Because the psychological interdependence of hope and fear cannot be dislodged, true religion will produce the dysfunctional consequences with which superstition is traditionally associated.

The arguments on which Hume grounds this conclusion are assertive, fast and loose. No serious Spinozist will deny that a tendency to fear God, and thus descend into superstition, survives in truly religious communities. Nor will a serious Spinozist claim that true religion can, by itself, function as a guarantee against theological and civil conflict. Hume knows all this, of course, but is not bothered by it. His purpose is not to engage with the niceties of the Spinozist conception of true religion or thrash out its pros and cons in detail.

But what, then, is he doing? One of his aims, I have argued, is to show that the attempt to differentiate superstition from true religion in fundamentally psychological terms, by appealing to their guiding passions will not stand up. Since the same affective dynamics and their consequences run ineliminably through both, true religion as the Spinozist conceives of it turns out to be nothing other than a form of superstition. This move leaves us with two categories instead of three—an enlarged conception of superstition on one side and an undeveloped conception of philosophical religion on the other. But how, according to Hume, are categories to

be distinguished? As we know from his other works, Hume does not deny that there are significant psycho-social differences between people who are superstitious and people who have a philosophical grasp of God. Whereas the former are condemned to live with unstable passions and the conflicts they engender, *The First Enquiry* proposes, philosophy is not alluring, and its unexalted image of God can sustain tranquil and benevolent affections.<sup>13</sup> In principle, then, it might be possible to produce a primarily psychological account of the difference between superstition and philosophical religion. But in *The Natural History of Religion* this is not the route Hume takes. What primarily distinguishes philosophical religion from superstition, in this account, is the fact that the first is epistemologically dubious whereas the second is philosophically respectable. As Hume remarks, the chief objection to superstition is that it is not supported by reason or authority' (65). To put the point another way, the trouble with superstition is that it does not have the balance of evidence upon its side. To be superstitious is to espouse religious beliefs that are false. Moreover, since all religious people whose convictions are less than philosophical are more or less superstitious, they are all tarred with the same epistemological brush.

This shift to an epistemologically-grounded conception of superstition is not of course entirely novel. Throughout the early modern period, discussions of superstition that are fundamentally classical in their approach are complemented by accounts that dwell on superstition's epistemic shortcomings. To return to Trenchard and Gordon, their letter on *The Common Notion of Spirits, their Power and Feats Exposed* offers a naturalistic analysis of superstitious delusions including miracles, that would have delighted Spinoza as much as Hume. 'Nor can I see any foundation in nature, reason or scripture', the letter concludes, 'that there are any such capricious and fantastical beings as they are usually represented to us.'<sup>14</sup> However, while Trenchard and Gordon fail to discuss the classical conception of superstition that plays such a crucial role in Spinoza's triadic analysis, Hume's *Natural History* sets out to undermine it. Rather than simply letting it alone, he aims to show that it relies on an unfounded distinction between true religion and superstition, and directs religious discourse in a conceptually ungrounded direction. If we think of superstition in classical and Spinozist terms, as a fundamentally psychological category, we shall be wrongly encouraged to overlook the superstitious features of true religion, and to hold out excessive hope for a morally commendable though philosophically unjustifiable form of religious life. Far better to grasp the nettle and redefine the border between superstition and philosophy in epistemological terms.

So one of the things that Hume is doing in seeking to discredit true religion is to indirectly generate support for the view that superstition is primarily characterized by rationally unjustifiable religious beliefs and frivolous religious practices, regardless of the passions by which they are sustained. In the long dialectical debate between advocates of the classical conception of superstition and advocates of its modern counterpart, he stands on the modern side, and employs a range of tools, philosophical and rhetorical, to criticize its opponents.

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<sup>13</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Enquiry, xi.

<sup>14</sup> *Cato's Letters*, vol. 2, 574.

This is the conclusion towards which I have been working, and which I've sought to defend. Before closing, however, there is one large issue on which I'd like to touch. According to many early-modern theorists, the intrinsic instability of superstition enables it to encompass both the abject fear by which it is principally driven, and the periods of religious elation to which it can give rise. The self-persecuting monk and the enthusiast, high on his or her certitudes, are both subject to superstition, and illustrate the opposing extremes to which it can go. Hume is perfectly familiar with this view, and in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* expresses it in the voice of Philo. 'It must be acknowledged that, as terror is the primary principle of religion, it is the passion which always predominates in it, and admits but of short intervals of pleasure. Not to mention that these fits of excessive, enthusiastic joy, by exhausting the spirits, always prepare the way for equal fits of superstitious terror and dejection.'<sup>15</sup> Here, enthusiasm is presented as a phase of superstition, and, as the *Natural History of Religion* explains, a manifestation of a deep fact about human nature, namely that the more delightful the pleasures we experience, the more painful are the pains associated with them. 'The most sprightly wit borders on madness; the highest effusions of joy produce the deepest melancholy; the most ravishing pleasures are attended with the most cruel lassitude and disgust' (85).

In some of his earlier works, however, Hume presents superstition and enthusiasm as distinct species of false religion.<sup>16</sup> This is clearest in his 1741 essay *Of Superstition and Enthusiasm*, where superstition is said to arise from weakness, fear and melancholy, and enthusiasm from hope, pride, presumption, ignorance and a warm imagination (OSE, 74). Where superstition sustains priestly government, enthusiasts oppose ecclesiastical rule; where superstition endures, enthusiasm tends to burn itself out; and where enthusiasm allies itself with political liberty, superstition opposes it.<sup>17</sup> In these passages, Hume seems to suggest that enthusiasm manifests a kind of courage that is more than a reaction against fear, and thus that the religious passions have more than one psychological source. But as far as I can see this view is not in play in *A Natural History of Religion*, which elaborates the line of argument I have explored.

Returning to Hume's epistemological interpretation of superstition, it is fair to say, I suppose, that his has turned out to be the winning side. Indeed, the fact that, at least in Anglophone parts of the world, contemporary philosophical debate about religion focuses overwhelmingly on questions about the truth or falsehood of religious propositions represents the triumph of what is sometimes regarded as a distinctively Humean view. But if one reflects on the rival positions I have distinguished, it is hard not to feel that—in this historical development—something of value has been suppressed. There is also the Spinozist question of whether, or how, something like true religion can play a part in binding people together and enabling them to live peaceful and co-operative lives.

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<sup>15</sup> *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part XII.

<sup>16</sup> David Hume, 'Of Superstition and Enthusiasm' (1741) in *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Millar (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), pp.73-9. Abbreviated to OSE.

<sup>17</sup> The enthusiast's side of this mantra is repeated in Volume 1 of *A History of England*, where Hume describes the inflamed imagination and inflexible intrepidity of English Puritans.