

David Hume, The Christian ?

by Michael Cregan

'The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author, and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion'.¹

Thus might conclude almost any exposition of the traditional Argument from Design. In fact, this testimonial to teleology comes from the philosopher David Hume (1711 to 1776), usually thought of—correctly—as a foe of religion, and whose painstaking criticisms of natural theology still form the *sine qua non* of all rejections of that enterprise.

'A purpose, an intention, a design is evident in every thing', he declares, and 'we must adopt with the strongest conviction, the idea of some intelligent cause or author' since monotheism may justly boast of 'these invincible reasons on which it is undoubtedly founded'.¹

Such asides run so counter to the actual content of Hume's reasonings, and seem, at first sight, so incongruous, that the question must arise as to what he meant by them: what, in fact, did Hume believe?

It might be thought that these pro-religious sentiments are *so much* out of place, and fit so awkwardly with everything that Hume wrote, they can only be taken as completely insincere, a mixture of cautious lip-service and tongue-in-cheek 'innocence'. Irony, certainly, there is in Hume the writer; and caution in Hume the man. He himself refers to his own 'abundant prudence', and commented with pleasure on his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 'I find nothing can be more cautiously and artfully contrived'.² In the climate of the times, a degree of discretion could be a useful asset. The furies of the seventeenth century had grown enfeebled, but they could still raise the occasional hoarse mutter, as in 1762, when the schoolmaster Peter Annet—described by the Rev. William Warburton as 'that most abandoned of two-legged creatures'—was sentenced to the pillory and one year's hard labour over his *Free Enquirer*; while this same Warburton once managed to convey a threat of public prosecution to the publisher Millar over some of Hume's essays, which led to their suppression.

There were other reasons, too, for Hume's reticence. He did not, for example, wish or intend to act as a tutor to mankind, the bulk

¹*The Natural History of Religion*. This essay is both the most interesting and revealing of Hume's works on religion.

²Letter to Adam Smith.

of whom he regarded as incurably superstitious. Future generations might perhaps abandon some current superstition, but it is 'a thousand to one' that they will have beliefs 'full as absurd in their own creed, to which they will give most implicit and most religious assent'.¹ Even more savagely, after the outburst of anti-Scottish feeling in London, '... to a Philosopher and Historian the Madness and Imbecility and Wickedness of Mankind ought to appear ordinary events'. Deplorable though such characteristics might be, Hume remained pessimistic as to the possibility of any fundamental changes.

The placid Hume was further prompted to avoidance of involvement in public controversy both by a reluctance—to borrow the Catholic phrase—to 'give scandal' to the reasonable Christian (he himself maintained life-long friendships with moderates within the Scottish Kirk), and by a deep personal distaste for the often virulent and abusive strain that ran through the pamphlets and broadsides through which topics of dispute received their vigorous airings. ('I shall hang him and his fellows as they do vermin in a warren, and leave them to posterity to stink and blacken in the wind', declared Warburton of someone whose ideas offended him.)

Despite these considerations, however, there remains a compelling reason to reject the view that Hume was merely being astute—simply, that no one was deceived. Nor could he have been so naive as to think they were; his reputation as 'The Great Infidel' would have shown him the success of his occasional gambits. Warburton commented in exasperation, 'All the good his mutilation and fixing it¹ up for the public has done, is only to add to its other follies that of contradiction. He is establishing atheism and in one single line of a long essay profess to believe Christianity.'³ And in his usual graphic, if ungracious, style, 'He is an atheistical Jacobite, a monster as rare with us as a hippogriff'. There was little point in Hume's pursuing, even from 'abundant prudence', a strategy so unsuccessful. Which leaves his metaphysical moments still unexplained.

It is notable that Hume frequently makes a distinction between what he terms 'genuine theism' and 'false religion',⁴ between, that is, the pure religion of the rational thinker, and the 'sick men's dreams' as embodied in the history of the institutionalised Churches. It was the *practices* of the various Christian sects that really drew out Hume's barbs. Whereas their theologies might offend his reason, their behaviour outraged his morals; '... virtue, knowledge, love of liberty, are the qualities that call down the fatal vengeance of inquisitors; and when expelled, leave the society in the most shameful ignorance, corruption, and bondage'.¹ And even if 'among Christians, the English and Dutch have embraced the principles of toleration,

³Letter to Millar, Hume's publisher.

⁴E.g. *On Suicide; Of Superstition and Enthusiasm*.

this singularity has proceeded from the steady resolution of the civil magistrate, in opposition to the continued efforts of priests and bigots'.¹ Indeed, for Hume, any attempt to construct a morality around the (alleged) existence of a supernatural deity is foredoomed to produce a harmful effect in its subscribers. Ethical appeal is no longer made to any natural instincts of sympathy, nor to social necessities, but to ignorance, and above all, fear. Hume viewed the effects as disastrous, for when 'we abandon ourselves to the natural suggestions of our timid and anxious hearts, every kind of barbarity is ascribed to the supreme being, from the terrors with which we are agitated; and every kind of caprice, from the methods which we embrace in order to appease him. *Barbarity, caprice*; these . . . form the ruling character of the deity in popular religions'.¹ By its social effects was Hume prompted to remark bluntly: 'The Church is my aversion'.

What of this distinction between 'false' and '*genuine*' religion? If their own histories put the organised Churches beyond Hume's pale, would a 'pure' religion draw his allegiance, a non-organised, 'personal' religion? There was an approximation to such a movement—if that is not a contradiction—in Hume's day, in the form of Deism, a kind of religion of Nature and Reason, whose exponents included Matthew Tindall and Pope, and which held that although God does exist, the paraphernalia through which Christians bid men approach him is superfluous, the best form of worship being an honourable life. (A sentiment of which Hume would have approved.) Hume a Deist, then? The answer must be no. Although, in passing, he deems the Deists to be 'friends to toleration', (a great compliment from him), on the occasion he was greeted as a fellow Deist—by a woman with the delightful name of Mrs Mallet—he replied sharply that he was 'no Deist', did not style himself so, and did not wish to be so called. It is true that in some quarters Hume was so considered; his election to the Librarianship of the Faculty of Advocates at Edinburgh in 1752 was exuberantly hailed as a deist's victory over orthodoxy. Nevertheless, the most sympathetic reading of his work could find nothing to compel such a belief. The disavowal made to Mrs Mallet is final.

The real solution to the apparently unresolved tension in Hume's writings on theology lies in not taking his favourable references to theism at face value; they were inserted with a very different intention arising from Hume's philosophy as a whole, and the period in which it was developed.

To the British contemporaries of Hume, this was to be the Age of Reason, when theology, ethics, and the physical universe were to be examined in the light of intellect, and whatever could not face the scrutiny rejected. Locke and Newton—above all Newton—were the ideals for the era, and form its watershed. The appeal to reason

extended to the Churchmen also. 'It seems incumbent on our parts', wrote one, '. . . to examine fairly and without bitterness the objections which are brought against the religion which we profess; and to take care that those who produce their difficulties should be by no means molested or any way injured on that account'.⁵ Another assured: 'It is therefore of the utmost importance to the cause of true religion that it be submitted to an open and impartial examination . . . Let no man be alarmed at the attempts of atheists or infidels'.⁶

The other side of this coin was the reaction of the eighteenth century against the strife and conflict of the seventeenth, with its violence, bloodshed and death. The outstanding characteristic of that era, to Hume's contemporaries, was its terrible fanaticism and bigotry—its *enthusiasm*. If reason was its new hope, 'enthusiasm was the *bête noire* of the age'.⁷ Samuel Clark even felt constrained to comment of Christ that one could not 'without the extremest malice and obstinacy in the world charge him with enthusiasm'.⁸ In this respect, Hume shared the general attitude; he too, had a great horror for 'that sacred zeal and rancour, the most furious and implacable of all human passions'.¹ It was partly this revulsion towards any kind of dogmatism and overweening self-assurance that made Hume hostile towards avowals of outright atheism. Of D'Holbach and the French *philosophes*, Gibbon records that they 'laughed at Hume, preached the tenets of atheism with the bigotry of dogmatists, and damned all believers with ridicule and contempt'. Laughter never worried the cheerful Hume—but dogmatism always. It was toleration he desired, and enthusiasm he hated. And to his mind, enthusiasm did not have to be devout to be devastating.

Nor was it solely a suspicion of a new dogmatism; there was also involved a question of strict philosophy. For 'it is of the essence of his theory of knowledge to deny that any general view of the ultimate nature of things is capable of rational demonstration'.⁹ Atheism, to Hume, committed itself to just such a 'general view'.

For Hume did not share the upsurge of belief that reason could conquer all it confronted. Natural theology, the Churchmen's pride, is based on unprovable assumptions; in the field of ethics, reason is, and ought to be, the slave of the passions; and even our belief in a regular and unvarying sequence of cause-and-effect, which governs our everyday lives, is merely a product of 'custom and habit'. Any confident assertion about the existence or non-existence of God is to pretend knowledge

⁵A. A. Sykes; *An Essay*.

⁶Bishop R. Lewth; *Sermons and Other Remains*.

⁷G. R. Cragg; *Reason and Authority in the Eighteenth Century*.

⁸S. Clarke; *A Discourse Concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation*.

⁹H. D. Aiken; Introduction to Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.

which it is forever beyond our faculties to obtain; it is to make claims which, in the nature of things, can never be supported.

Yet, for all that, it is no misrepresentation to consider Hume an atheistic philosopher. He may indeed occasionally profess a 'genuine theism', but the phrase has so little content for him that one might invoke Newman's comment: 'I do not see much difference between avowing that there is no God, and implying that nothing definite can be known for certain about him'.¹⁰ No consequences flow from theism of Hume's, no ethical code extracted, 'No new fact can ever be inferred from the religious hypothesis; no reward or punishment expected or dreaded, beyond what is already known by practice and observation'.¹¹ And if, nevertheless, Hume does sometimes recommend that hypothesis, it can only be in the way of a counterbalance to the general weight of his philosophy, a tacit admonition that a balanced scepticism should not deteriorate into an unwarranted atheism. Hume's professions of faith are, in short, a covert warning against intellectual arrogance and against any temptation to trespassers outside the strictly limited, 'narrow capacity of human understanding'.¹¹

¹⁰Newman: *The Idea of a University*.

¹¹*An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.

Adam, Abraham and Health

by Stan Windass

*Draft Impressionistic Report on Alternative Society Week-end
'Towards an Alternative Concept of Health'*

Held at Ammerdown House, Radstock, February 8-10, 1974

This is not meant as an academic report. Statements are bald and unqualified, intended to recall themes to those who took part and to suggest themes to others.