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Hume's "Umbrage To The Godly"
In His History Of England

Charles E. Noyes

James Boswell, who delighted in the diversity of his acquaintance, alternated for some years between polar opposites: The Great Moralist, Johnson, in London; and The Great Infidel, David Hume, in Edinburgh. As to Johnson's religious position, Boswell never felt any doubt; as to Hume's, he never felt any certainty. Readers of the Private Papers from Malahide Castle will recall that, even in his rather macabre deathbed inquisition of Hume, Boswell failed to obtain complete satisfaction. Boswell's curiosity has passed on to others, and the question of Hume's private religious convictions has exercised the ingenuity of many students of eighteenth century thought.

Ingenuity is certainly required, for the biographical evidence presents paradox after paradox. Hume's enemies among the "unco guid" considered him so irredeemably wicked that in 1755 there was a serious attempt in the General Assembly of Scotland to excommunicate him from the church. Yet Adam Smith later risked odium to publish this estimate of his friend: "... I have always considered him ... as approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit." Hume once told Boswell that "when he heard a man was religious, he concluded he was a rascal." Yet he numbered among his closest friends members of the cloth. Regarded by many as the subverter of all
religious faith, Hume was often simply referred to as “the Atheist.” Yet, dining once with a group of Parisian philosophers, he ingenuously told his host, Baron Holbach, that he did not believe in atheists—at least he had never seen one.⁴

Hume’s philosophical writings present similar contradictions. There are few shrewder strokes at the foundations of orthodox Christianity than the Essay on Miracles; and in the subsequent Natural History of Religion is a dispassionate attempt to find the origin of all religions in fear and ignorance. Yet elsewhere Hume can refer to the divine source of Christian faith as a point beyond cavil. In the Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion the skeptical Philo, brilliantly attacking the rationality of any religious belief, meticulously refutes the “argument from design”—then laughingly appears to accept it as valid.

Bibliography will show how many studies have been made to determine Hume’s own religious position; and a reading of the works there listed will show what inconsistent conclusions have been reached. They range from the familiar accusation of “atheist” and “infidel” to “a criminal skeptic,” “a deist,” “a deist who did not have time to become an atheist,” “a theist,” “a believer in the intimacy of his own soul,” “a believer” (unqualified), “a sincere believer,” and even “a faithful Christian.”⁵

Such studies are motivated by more than mere curiosity, however scholarly; for until one has formulated his own concept of Hume’s real religious convictions he cannot evaluate many passages in Hume’s works with any degree of consistence. For a single example, when Hume states that the diligence of the clergy is highly pernicious in every religion “except the true,” with what tone does he speak? Is he sincere? Or cautious? Or ironic?

One approach to the problem which has not previously been exploited is through a study of Hume’s treatment of religion in his most popular work, the History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688. The present paper is a preliminary study of that treatment.

The History of England was the last major work which Hume wrote.⁶ Its first volume appeared in 1754, when Hume was forty-
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three years old, and at a time when he had at last achieved a notable position in the world of letters. This last point is important. Hume confessed in My Own Life that “a love of literary fame” was with him “a ruling passion.” But this fame was slow in coming. He complained that his first work, A Treatise of Human Nature, had fallen “dead-born from the press” in 1739; and not until 1752, when he published his work on political economy, the Political Discourses, was his reputation as a writer and thinker solidly established. When he turned historian, he expected to enhance that reputation.

Volumes of the History of England appeared at intervals from 1754 to 1762. Hume worked, in a sense, backwards, dealing first with the Stuarts, then with the Tudors, and finally with pre-Tudor history. The 1754 volume, then, covered the reigns of James I and Charles I. Hume confidently anticipated the applause of his readers. Instead, to quote the somewhat exaggerated statement made in his My Own Life, “... miserable was my Disappointment: I was assailed by one Cry of Reproach, Disapprobation, and even Detestation.”

In part this disapproval resulted from the fact that the temper of the times was Whiggish, and Hume showed an evident sympathy for the Stuarts. Hume made much of this point in My Own Life. What he passed over almost in silence was the outcry aroused by his treatment of the religious controversies that so disrupted seventeenth-century England. To some degree this outcry was justified. Like Gibbon, who “sapped a solemn creed with solemn sneer,” Hume did not tamper with facts; but he did point up some that might better have been passed over, and his incidental reflections and his choice of language sometimes showed him straying from the impartiality he held up as his ideal. Moreover, there was this difference with regard to his handling of religious as contrasted with political affairs: With the latter, if there were even the appearance of bias, it was toward either King or Parliament, and the advocates of each might take comfort accordingly. But as for the religious antagonists, Hume’s attitude seemed often to be “a plague on both—or rather all—your houses.”

In a study of Hume it would be most unseemly to argue post hoc ergo propter hoc; but if Hume’s figures are correct, 450 copies of his book sold in Edinburgh alone in the first weeks after publication,
before the furor began, and in the succeeding year only forty-five copies sold anywhere. If the situation were to be retrieved, steps must be taken; and among them, something should be done to quiet the outcries of those Hume dubbed "the godly."

While never given to a pusillanimous saying and then unsaying, Hume on occasions other than this showed himself willing to avoid outraging the religious sensibility of others. When he prepared the manuscript of his Treatise of Human Nature for Bishop Butler's perusal, he omitted from it his attack on miracles. He excised two essays, one defending suicide and the other questioning immortality, from one volume of his works when friends pointed out to him how many might be offended by them. He was repeatedly dissuaded from publishing his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion during his lifetime, leaving them to appear posthumously. While, then, the disappointment over the reception of the first Stuart volume caused Hume to write theatrically of giving up the project and retiring to France, he actually did what one might expect a canny Scot to do—go on with his history and mend matters as best he could.

There were three obvious things that Hume might do, and he did all three. The first was to avoid giving offense in the future wherever it might be avoided; the second was to defend, or at least plead extenuation for, what he had already written; and the third was to make less offensive, when the opportunity presented, the volume already published.

The first of these tasks was taken in hand at once. Discussing the manuscript of the second volume of the Stuart history with his new bookseller, Andrew Millar, in a letter of April 12, 1755, he wrote ruefully, "I shall give no farther Umbrage to the Godly." When the second volume of the Stuart history appeared in 1757, an attentive reader might detect in it immediately a different tone. This is not to say that Hume avoided the subject of religion—that would hardly be possible in a volume dealing with the Commonwealth, the Restoration, and the Revolution—nor that he paid court to any religious faction. But it is to say that Hume minded his language very carefully; that he ceased to mock; that when he did condemn he did
so soberly and reasonably; and, above all, that he took great pains to state precisely what he meant and what he was prepared to stand by.

Hume revised his History tirelessly through edition after edition (dying, as Lord Monboddo wittily put it, confessing, not his sins, but his Scotticisms). The present writer, in collating this first edition of the second Stuart volume with the last edition for which Hume himself furnished the corrections, examined every passage which bore on religious matters. In only four did Hume make any change not merely stylistic. Of these four, the revised versions are more conciliatory toward religion in two instances, less conciliatory in the other two. Plainly, Hume took enormous pains when he prepared the manuscript of this second volume to let no inadvertent expression slip by to embarrass him subsequently.

Hume's second move, his comment on what he had already written in his first volume, was more complicated. First he drafted a preface which he intended to prefix to the second volume. In it he defended himself, but one can read between the lines the suggestion of an apology. This is particularly true in a part of the conclusion which runs, "These hints . . . the author thought proper to suggest, with regard to the free and impartial manner in which he has treated religious controversy. As to the civil and political part of his performance, he scorns to suggest any apology . . ."

Hume decided against printing this preface. A large part of it, however, he incorporated in a long footnote near the end of the volume for which it was intended. In the footnote version, the tone is changed; it is less one of apology, more one of extenuation. To quote an excerpt:

This sophism, of arguing from the abuse of any thing against the use of it, is one of the grossest, and at the same time, the most common, to which men are subject. The history of all ages, and none more than that of the period, which is our subject, offers us examples of the abuse of religion; and we have not been sparing, in this volume more than in the former, to remark them: But whoever would thence draw an inference to the disadvantage of religion in general would argue very rashly and erroneously. . . . That adulterate species
of it [religion] alone, which inflames faction, animates sedi-
tion, and prompts rebellion, distinguishes itself on the open
theatre of the world, and is the great source of revolutions and
public convulsions. The historian, therefore, has scarce occa-
sion to mention any other kind of religion; and he may retain
the highest regard for true piety, even while he exposes all the
abuses of the false . . .

It is no proof of irreligion in an historian, that he remarks
some fault or imperfection in each sect of religion, which he
has occasion to mention. . . . It is the business of an historian
to remark these abuses of all kinds; but it belongs also to a
prudent reader to confine the representations, which he meets
with, to that age alone of which the author treats.\(^{15}\)

Hume retained this footnote through at least two subsequent editions;
later it was dropped.\(^{16}\)

Hume’s third step was to amend the offending Volume I of the
Stuart history. He had been working on his next major project, the
Tudor volumes; but before sending this manuscript to the printer he
prepared a revised edition of the Stuart volumes. In fact, he did more
than interrupt his work on the Tudor history. Finding that a part of
the first edition of the Stuart volumes remained unsold, he agreed to
assume a part of the financial loss resulting from putting out a
second edition before the first had been exhausted.\(^{17}\)

This second edition appeared in 1759.\(^{18}\) Like the first, it was in
two quarto volumes. In Volume II the changes in passages dealing
with religious matters were negligible; as has been noted, only four
such passages in the second Stuart volume ever received any significant
revision. In Volume I, on the contrary, this writer has noted some
fifty significant changes in such passages; and every one would tend
to give less umbrage to the godly.

Many of these revisions are quite limited in extent. Often no more
than a word is changed, but that word is enough to give a quite dif-
ferent cast to the passage concerned. For example, in his first edition
Hume wrote that the uprising of the Scots against Charles I resulted
from “religion mingling with faction” (I, 226). In the second edition
this becomes instead, “fanaticism mingling with faction” (I, 216).
Charles’s “pious prejudices” in the 1754 volume (I, 453) become his
“religious principles” in the 1759 revision (I, 442). Yet again, the statement “James endeavored to infuse a small tincture of superstition into the national worship” (I, 63) is revised to read “James endeavored to infuse a small tincture of ceremony into the national worship” (I, 54).

Sometimes the change is the dropping out of a derogatory adjective—“fanatic,” or “bigoted,” or “superstitious,” or an ironic “pious.” Sometimes it is a matter of qualification. Where Hume first wrote that Puritan zeal promoted “each vice or corruption of mind” (I, 303), he later softened his phrasing to “many vices or corruptions of mind” (I, 292). In the 1754 edition, the famous Covenant was described as being “composed of the most furious and most virulent invectives, with which any human beings had ever inflamed their breast to an unrelenting animosity against their fellow creatures” (I, 227). In the 1759 volume the wording is much milder: the Covenant is now “composed of many invectives, fitted to inflame the minds of men against their fellow creatures, whom heaven has enjoined them to cherish and to love” (I, 217).

Sometimes changes are made to rid the text of levity. Discussing the religious usages James I had tried to impose on the Scottish churches, Hume first wrote:

It will be sufficient to give an account of one or two of the ceremonies, which the King was so intent to establish. . . . On these occasions, history is sometimes constrained to depart a little from her native and accustomed gravity.

As episcopal ordination was still wanting to the Scotch bishops, who derived their character merely from votes of parliaments and assemblies; James had called up three of them to England. By canonical ceremonies and by imposition of hands, they received from the English bishops that unknown, and therefore the more revered virtue, which, th’ innumerable prelates, had been supposed to be transmitted, without interruption, from the first disciples and apostles. And these three bishops were esteemed sufficient to preserve alive that virtue, to transport it into Scotland, and to transfer it, by their touch, to their brethren and successors in that kingdom. (I, 63-64)
Three paragraphs follow in the same jocular vein, concluding with a listing of the proposed changes in ceremony. But in the 1759 volume, Hume’s archness has wholly disappeared, along with a good portion of the text:

It will not be necessary to give a particular account of the ceremonies, which the King was so intent to establish. . . . It is here sufficient to remark, that the rites introduced by James regarded the kneeling at the sacrament, private communion, private baptism, confirmation of children, and the observance of Christmas and other festivals. These ceremonies were afterwards known by the name of the articles of Perth, from the place where they were ratified by the assembly. (I, 54-55)

There are other excisions, minor in scope, yet revealing. Hume had first written how the House of Commons in 1625 attacked a book written by one of Charles’ chaplains “which, to the great disgust of the commons and all good protestants, saved virtuous catholics, as well as other christians, from eternal torments” (I, 150). The revised version (I, 140) omits the gibe at the Protestants. A second example tells even more. An original passage runs, “Had Charles been of a disposition to regard all theological controversy, as the mere result of human folly and depravity; he yet had been obliged, in good policy, to adhere to episcopal jurisdiction. . . . But Charles had never attained such enlarged principles” (I, 390). Revised, this begins, “Had Charles been of a disposition to neglect all theological controversy; he yet had been obliged, etc.” (I, 380).

Most important of all were Hume’s complete excisions from his text. Originally, in filling in the background for the reign of James I, he had written a lengthy “Character of the Puritans.” The initial paragraph will indicate its tenor:

The first reformers, who made such furious and successful attacks on the Romish SUPERSTITION, and shook it to its lowest foundations, may safely be pronounced to have been universally inflamed with the highest ENTHUSIASM. These two species of religion, the superstitious and fanatical, stand in diametrical opposition to each other; and a large portion of the latter must necessarily fall to his share, who is so
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courageous [sic] as to control authority, and so assuming as to
obtrude his own innovations upon the world. Hence that rage
of dispute, which every where seized the new religionists; that
disdain of ecclesiastical subjection; that contempt of cere-
monies, and of all the exterior pomp and splendor of worship.
And hence, too, that inflexible intrepidity, with which they
braved dangers, torments, and even death itself; while they
preached the doctrine of peace, and carried the tumults of war,
thro’ every part of Christendom. (I, 7-8)

In the edition of 1759, the “Character of the Puritans” has dis-
appeared entirely, and it was never reprinted. Some pages over, there
is a comparable “Character of the Catholics.” It, too, was omitted
entirely in the revised edition. Most of Hume’s readers would not be
offended that he should attack Catholicism; but what good Protestant
would not bristle at such sentences as the following:

And the dreadful tribunal of the inquisition, that utmost in-
stance of human depravity, is a durable monument to in-
struct us what a pitch iniquity and cruelty may rise to,
when covered with the sacred mantle of religion. . . . Like
all other species of superstition, it [Catholicism] rouses
the vain fears of unhappy mortals; but it knows also the
secret of allaying these fears, and by exterior rites, cere-
monies, and abasements, tho’ sometimes at the expence of
morals, it reconciles the penitent to his offended deity.
(I, 26-27)

A further heaping up of examples might do more to weary the
flesh than to illuminate the spirit. Enough has been set forth to show
what compromises and concessions Hume was willing to make when
his first Stuart volume was attacked on religious grounds. First, he
curbed his own pen in continuing the history, commenting wryly that
he would give no further “umbrage to the godly.” Second, he pub-
lISHED a defense of his first volume, a defense that contained an im-
plied apology, saying his readers should not infer anything to the
disadvantage of “religion in general” because he had offered examples
of religious abuses. Third, as soon as it was feasible he sent to the
press a new, “corrected” edition of the Stuart history carefully re-
vised so as to be less offensive to the pious reader. In this version
Hume abandoned the spirit of levity with which he sometimes treated religious matters; he softened expressions from their original acerbity; he excised entire passages of "editorializing" which reflected upon the sincerity of religious sects; and he maintained an historian's objectivity much more consistently than he had in the first edition.

Such knowledge of how Hume reacted when his last great work drew theological odium down upon his head may give us some clue to the nature of Hume's own religious convictions. More important, perhaps, is the knowledge that may be gained of just how far Hume would retreat under fire. Of the history, as revised, he might well have said, "Here I stand." A study of his treatment of religious matters in these volumes will not in itself solve, but will at least throw needed light upon a fascinating puzzle in Hume's character—a puzzle whose solution would aid enormously in our understanding of that philosopher.

2 Adam Smith's letter, originally printed with Hume's My Own Life (London, 1777), is perhaps most easily accessible in the Letters, II, 450-452.
4 The widely reprinted account of this dinner, originating with Diderot, is best placed in context in Ernest Campbell Mossner's The Life of David Hume (Austin, Texas: The University of Texas Press, 1954), p. 483.
7 Reprinted in Letters, I, 4.
8 See, however, Mossner, "Was Hume a Tory Historian?" JHI, II (1941), 225-236.
9 Letters, I, 4, 214. For other factors impeding the sale, see Mossner, The Life of David Hume, pp. 305-316.
10 Letters, I, 25.
12 My Own Life, in Letters, I, 4.
13 Letters, I, 218. Hume went on to add, "Tho' I am far from thinking, that my Liberties on that head have been the real Cause of checking the Sale of the first Volume." His subsequent actions, however, reflect some doubt as to the strict accuracy of this statement.
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15History of Great Britain (London, 1757), II, 449-450. It will be noted that this becomes Volume VI when the completed work is reprinted in quarto under the title of *The History of England* in 1762, and Volumes VII and VIII in the many subsequent octavo editions.

16It appears in the octavo edition of 1763 (VIII, 319-320). It has disappeared by the edition of 1773. Two intervening editions have not been examined by this writer. Presumably Hume felt that his plea had lost its raison d'être after wide circulation of the revised volumes of Stuart history.

17Letters, I, 281-282. A letter from Hume to Andrew Millar (*Ibid.*, p. 265) shows Hume's desire to revise the Stuart volumes as early as 1757, a few months after Volume II appeared.

18The History of Great Britain Under the House of Stuart. The second edition, corrected (London, 1759). In the following discussion of variations between the 1754 and the 1759 editions of Volume I of this history, page numbers concerned will simply be run in with the text.