



# Hume's Minimal Theism and the Supervised Christian Church

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A Philosophical and Historical  
Analysis of the Idea of True Religion

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This book is the product of about ten years of research on Hume, which began in 2013 when I started my PhD at the University of Aberdeen. The book is partially based on my doctoral thesis on Hume's philosophy of religion, two published journal articles, as well as a recent, three-year project on Hume's true religion (2020–2023). During the period from 2020 to 2023 and while writing the book, I received generous financial support from the *Young Researcher Excellence Programme of the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund of the Hungarian Ministry for Innovation and Technology* (project number: FK 135152). Between 2013 and 2016, when I was a PhD student at the University of Aberdeen, my studies and research were funded by the project *Interdisciplinary Studies in Epistemology* run by the university's College of Arts and Social Sciences. I would therefore like to express my gratitude to the *Development and Innovation Fund* (currently, Hungarian Ministry of Culture and Innovation) and the College of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Aberdeen for their financial support. I would also like to thank those who gave insightful feedback and encouraged me after my earlier presentations of the core ideas in this book.

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*Taming of Religion: Hume's sceptical theism and his criticism of religion in context*, was presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in 2019, and some parts of it have been revised, updated and incorporated into this book.

Furthermore, two chapters of this book (*Against negative readings of 'true religion'; Anthropomorphism and priestly power: Hume's criticism of popular religion*) are partly based on two journal articles, *Hume and the art of theological lying* (Journal of Scottish Philosophy, 18 (2), 2020: 193–211) and *Hume on the rational and irrational origins of religion* (Hume Studies, 49 (2), 2024). I am very grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions on the drafts of both of these papers.

An earlier version of the first paper was presented at the British Society for the History of Philosophy Annual Conference at King's College London, 24–26 April 2019 (*Hume, early modern atheism and the art of theological lying*). Moreover, I gave a talk on Philo's and Cleanthes's notions of true religion (*Philo's and Cleanthes's notions of true religion—debate and reconciliation in Hume's Dialogues*) at the *Philosophy and Literature at Dialogue* conference on 8–9 December 2022, Matica Hrvatska, Zagreb. I would like to thank the organizer, Dr. Pavel Gregoric, for having me at the conference and also for his helpful comments on my paper.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

- ALCD Hume, D. 2008. A Letter Concerning the Dialogues (A Letter to Gilbert Elliot, 10 March 1751). In *David Hume: Principal Writings on Religion Including Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and The Natural History of Religion*. Edited with an introduction and notes by J.C.A. Gaskin, 25–28. Oxford University Press.
- D Hume, D. 2008. Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion. In *David Hume: Principal Writings on Religion Including Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and The Natural History of Religion*. Edited with an introduction and notes by J.C.A. Gaskin, 29–133. Oxford University Press. (Citations are by parts, paragraphs and page numbers.)
- DT Hume, D. 1985. Of The Delicacy of Taste and Passion. In *David Hume Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*. Edited with a foreword, notes, and glossary by E.F. Miller, 3–8. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- E Hume, D. 2008. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited with an introduction and notes by P. Millican. Oxford University Press. (Citations are by sections, paragraphs of this edition. Page numbers are cited by the L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch 1975 edition, 5–165.)
- EPM Hume, D. 1975. An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals. In *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch, 3rd ed., 167–323. Oxford: Clarendon Press. (Citations are by sections, paragraphs and page numbers.)
- HE Hume, D. 1983. *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, 6 vols. Foreword by W.B. Todd. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund. (Citations are by volumes, chapters, paragraphs, and the page numbers are in parentheses.)

- IM Hume, D. 1985. Of The Immortality of the Soul. In *David Hume Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*. Edited with a foreword, notes, and glossary by E.F. Miller, 590–598. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- L Hume, D. 2011. *The Letters of David Hume*. 2 vols. Edited by J.Y.T. Greig. Oxford University Press. (Citations are by volumes, the number of the letter, and the page numbers are in parentheses.)
- LG Hume, D. 1967. *A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh*. Edited by E.C. Mossner and J.V. Price. Edinburgh University Press.
- NHR Hume, D. 2008. The Natural History of Religion. In *David Hume: Principal Writings on Religion Including Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and The Natural History of Religion*. Edited with an introduction and notes by J.C.A. Gaskin, 134–196. Oxford University Press. (Citations are by sections, paragraphs and page numbers.)
- NL Hume, D. 2011. *New Letters of David Hume*. Edited by R. Klibansky and E.C. Mossner. Oxford University Press. (Citations are by the number of the letter, and the page numbers are in parentheses.)
- OS Hume, D. 1985. Of Suicide. In *David Hume Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*. Edited with a foreword, notes, and glossary by E.F. Miller, 577–589. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- SE Hume, D. 1985. Of Superstition and Enthusiasm. In *David Hume Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*. Edited with a foreword, notes, and glossary by E.F. Miller, 73–79. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- SH Hume, D. 1985. Of The Study of History. In *David Hume Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*. Edited with a foreword, notes, and glossary by E.F. Miller, 563–568. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- T Hume, D. 1978. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. 2nd ed. Edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press. (Citations are by books, parts, sections, paragraphs and page numbers.)
- TS Hume, D. 1985. The Sceptic. In *David Hume Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*. Edited with a foreword, notes, and glossary by E.F. Miller, 159–180. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.



## Introduction

David Hume's contemporaries and many modern scholars have typically portrayed him as a sceptic (or often even an atheist) and as one of the great critics of religion in modern philosophy. Regarding the question of Hume's specific view on the nature and existence of God, virtually all logically possible positions have been attributed to him, from amoral theism (Yoder 2008, 143) and attenuated deism (Gaskin 1988, 219–223) to complete agnosticism or atheism (Cordry 2011, 78; Flew 1986, 61; Russell 2008, 279–290). Despite the widespread portrayal of Hume as completely anti-religious and secularist, some scholars argue that he did not want to brush aside religion altogether, but he only criticized what he considered to be corrupted forms thereof (Willis 2014, 176–183; Yoder 2008, 145–146).

The lack of consensus results from Hume's ambiguous and apparently contradictory ideas on theism, religion and natural theology. Despite his penetrating criticism of early modern natural theology and the view that Christian doctrines can be justified by reason, and also his general empiricist and anti-metaphysical philosophical stance, he sometimes appears to accept, if not endorse, some weak and indeterminate theistic belief without any further specification (Gaskin 1988, 219–221). Moreover, both Hume and his fictional characters sometimes refer or allude to 'true religion', which is typically juxtaposed with 'vulgar religion', or 'superstition' (SE, 73–74). The references to 'true religion' are positive and affirmative, and the contrast between true religion and vulgar superstition

seems to be sincere (D, 12.9, 121). Likewise, despite Hume's criticism of so-called vulgar religion and his views on the negative emotional, moral and social effects of institutional religion, in some places, he admits that institutional it does have some positive effects on society, and that "every civilized community" needs some form of religious institution (HE, III. 29.1, (135)).

Hume's claims about theism and religion in general, as well as his apparent approval of true religion, involve various complications and ambiguities, which have provoked contrasting interpretations. Many attempts have been made to render coherent these diverging and seemingly contradictory claims and arguments. Some scholars have argued that Hume's apparent affirmations of true religion (just as his affirmations of an intelligent creator or supreme being) should not be taken seriously, and that 'true religion' lacks any substantial meaning (Millican 2002a, 37, fn. 17). According to this approach (hereafter called the *negative reading*), Hume is not sincere when he apparently admits the existence of some form of intelligent creator or cause, and affirms some form of 'true religion'. His positive claims and affirmative remarks on true religion and philosophical or minimal theism should not be taken at face value. Hume tried to conceal his atheism or agnosticism, either due to his conformism towards religion, or to reconcile himself with some of the moderate Christians of his era. Similarly, Berman (1983; 1987) has suggested that these apparent affirmations are, in fact, clever literary devices by which Hume communicates his atheism and ironically mocks religion at the same time. According to the negative reading, Hume's allusions to true religion only play a tactical role. They allow him to conceal either his atheism or agnosticism, and to maintain a good relationship with some of his Christian friends, by suggesting that he is criticizing only the bad and corrupt forms of religion, rather than religion per se (Millican 2002a, 37–38; Mossner 1977, 12–14).

By contrast, this book argues in detail against the negative reading (the ironic and insincere interpretation) from both a methodological and historical point of view. I will examine various forms of the negative reading to argue that all varieties of it are implausible. This leads me to the conclusion that an ironic-insincere or negative interpretation should not be the default response to the exegetical challenges raised by some conflicting passages on theism and religion in Hume.

My interpretation of Hume is a variant of the *positive reading*. I follow those scholars who interpret him as a minimal theist (or someone who is

not critical of minimal theism) and thus highlight the positive, constructive elements in his philosophy of religion (Garrett 2012; Gaskin 1988; Livingston 1998; Nong 2019). Even though there are differences between these approaches, they all interpret Hume's statements on true religion as sincere, relevant and important for his philosophical system (Livingston 1998; Sessions 2002; Willis 2014).

The alternative interpretation to the ironic-insincere reading that I present relies on distinctions between true religion and superstition, as well as true and false philosophy. This analysis is based on contextual references to 'true religion' in other early modern authors (including early modern Scotland) and highlights several problems with the ironic-insincere readings. Additionally, both critical and positive aspects of philosophical theism and popular religion shall be examined. In this respect, my account is similar to Nong's (2019), who distinguishes four positions in Hume: true and false philosophical religion and true and false popular religion. Although my account does not closely follow Nong's terminology, I argue that Hume sincerely expresses his substantial view (or views) by referring to some 'true religion'. By analysing and elaborating these distinctions, the book analyses Hume's complex, sometimes underdeveloped ideas on true religion, and the relations between philosophy, religion, morality and society in his thought. The title of this book, therefore, refers to a two-fold positive or constructive account and proposal by Hume: *minimal theism* for philosophers and a *supervised church* for the rest of society.

Hume (SE, 73–74) contrasts popular religion (superstition and enthusiasm) with true religion and deems the former to be a corruption of the latter. Philo calls true religion as a part of philosophy (D, 12.22, 125), relating it to the true, philosophical adoration of some first intelligent cause of the order of the universe. True religion has different psychological and emotional origins (the love of truth, curiosity and adoration of the beauty and order in the universe) than popular religion (fear, ignorance and indigence). True religion and genuine theism are based on evidence of divine design, whereas popular religion (superstition) is not—instead, it is a product of anthropomorphic thinking, fear and ignorance about natural laws.

Accordingly, I characterize Hume's position as irreligious, since he rejects traditional religious doctrines on divine perfection and supernatural interventions and is critical of Christian apologetics and natural theology. Relying on Garrett's (2012) reconstruction, I argue that for Hume,

‘true religion’ could refer to an indeterminate position that is compatible with minimal theism and a more agnostic position on the analogy between the human mind and God. That said, I also examine the question of whether Hume (at least in some of his works) allows for, if not endorses, a weak form of minimal theism—that is, the view that there exists an intelligent creator of the universe, though we cannot make more specific claims about this being and cannot be sure to what extent it is analogous to human intelligence.

In addition, this book also articulates a picture of Hume’s true religion as a part of true philosophy, via a discussion of Hume’s theory of emotions and his sentimentalism, as well as his criticism of anthropomorphism. Both philosophical, minimal theism and agnosticism can be acceptable to the ideal philosopher, although Hume, in some of his writings, leans towards accepting, or even endorsing, some form of minimal theism or deism.

Regardless of the exact propositional content of such a philosophical theism or deism, my book shows how Hume, in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (as well as in other works, such as the first *Enquiry or The Natural History of Religion*), depicts an ideal philosophical discourse, as exemplified by Philo and Cleanthes. In a sense, true religion coincides with a proper philosophical discussion about God. This picture is coherent with Hume’s other remarks on the moral and emotional aspects of philosophy. Thus, true religion also has moral and emotional elements. As a part of philosophy, true religion exerts positive emotional effects in moderating our passions and cultivating our character intellectually. It includes peaceful passions, which, ideally, should be the motive for belief in God: the passion of seeking the truth through philosophical discussion, amazement at the beauty and order of the universe, intellectual humility and friendship.

Moreover, unlike some other positive readings of Hume on true religion and theism (such as Gaskin 1988), this interpretation also reconstructs his case for a reform of popular religion. My thesis is that Hume had a positive or constructive idea of both true religion for philosophers (minimal theism or agnosticism) and a proposal for popular or institutional religion. Hume harboured some underdeveloped ideas of how popular religion should be reformed and what would be the proper role of institutional religion in modern Christian societies. This includes a recognition of the psychological and social necessity of some form of religion and a fictionalist attitude towards religious doctrines, which allows for recognition of its moderately positive social effects. Since philosophical



criticism of religion has no or little effect on so-called vulgar people, Hume argues, religious institutions have to be regulated and administered by the government to avoid deleterious effects on society. This idea is referred to as the supervised church.

Hume (unlike French atheists like D’Holbach) does not think that institutional religion can or should be eliminated. He emphasizes, and, I shall argue, occasionally admits, the positive social role of institutional religion. To prove this, I will analyse some key passages from *The History of England*, the fictional dialogue in Section XI of the first *Enquiry* about the role of philosophical criticism in society, as well as Philo’s and Cleanthes’s thoughts on the possible social and moral benefits of religious beliefs (most notably, the belief in an afterlife). Hume rejects the classical liberal view of the separation of church and state. His position is thus different from the classical liberal, religious conservative and radical secularist positions. He proposes a return to the ancient pagan stance on the role of religion: it has an important social function, but its teachings are considered mere myths. Hence, the state rather than religious leaders should administrate and regulate religious institutions and rituals. For Hume, establishing a state church exerts relatively positive effects on popular religion, without the dangers and harms of clericalism and religious fanaticism.

In sum, this book studies Hume’s methodological and pragmatic notions of different forms of false and true forms of philosophical thinking. For Hume, philosophy can corrupt religion, and there is nothing worse than for philosophical theism to be corrupted. The account of religion and philosophy presented here consists of both critical and positive parts of Hume’s overall, nuanced position. The book criticizes the negative readings in detail, while reconstructing Hume’s criticism of vulgar religion as well as natural theology. In doing so, I will elaborate on the underdeveloped, positive and constructive parts of Hume’s account of true religion as an ideal form of philosophy, allied with either minimal theism or agnosticism—the former being the more reasonable interpretation. In the final chapter I will reconstruct Hume’s concept of reformed popular religion. What follows is a summary of each of the aforementioned chapters.

First of all, Chap. 2 examines general methodological problems with interpreting Hume’s statements and remarks on theism and religion. It investigates how an author’s intention and position could be best interpreted, and how and when can we take at face value what an author writes and apparently endorses. It begins with a primary analysis of true religion

and summarizes the main arguments for the positive and negative readings. Furthermore, I argue that the methodological principle (according to which Hume's best arguments entail a non-theistic conclusion) motivating the ironic or insincere readings of Hume's statements on theism is problematic and does not support a negative reading. Apart from the general problem of how to identify the author's position in a fictitious dialogue, there are reasons to doubt that Hume really thinks that his criticism of the design argument is incompatible with all forms of theism. Finally, I argue that there are some clues in Hume's use of language about religion, theism and the distinction between true and vulgar religion/philosophy to indicate the sincerity of his positive remarks on both philosophical, minimal theism and true religion.

The subsequent Chap. 3 criticizes in detail the ironic and insincere interpretations of Hume's positive or affirmative remarks on theism and (true) religion. Adherents of the negative reading typically state that Hume was a conformist, causing him to be insincere or ironic due to his fear of persecution and public stigmatization. By analysing textual and circumstantial evidence, I argue that the case for Hume's conformism is overstated. Although he was cautious when writing about religion, in the light of textual and contextual evidence it is implausible that he was completely insincere, or deliberately misrepresented his own views. Insincerity would also be incompatible with Hume's ideal of philosophy as an essentially truth-seeking activity.

Additionally, the ironic-atheist reading of Hume's affirmative, theistic passages appears to be underdeveloped or unfounded, because a coherent and plausible attribution of irony to a writer requires an explanation of when and why irony is being used. Such a coherent and rigorous analysis is rarely given by the defenders of the negative (or, ironic) reading, with the one notable exception of David Berman's account of theological lying-interpretation. The final section of this chapter is therefore devoted to a critical analysis of Berman's theory, which I argue is unsupported by historical evidence and deploys a problematic methodology. Thus, irony and insincerity concerning theism and religion should not be taken as the default position for responding to exegetical challenges.

Chapter 4 summarizes Hume's criticism of so-called vulgar religion, based mainly on his analysis of the origins of religion in *The Natural History of Religion*. I reconstruct Hume's account of the origin of religion and explain why popular religion is harmful in his view. Likewise, I analyse