

# The Natural History of Religion

David Hume

1757

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type. —This work was the first of *Four Dissertations*, published in a single volume.

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## Glossary

**affection:** In speaking of people's affections *for* one another, Hume uses the word as we do; but when he speaks in non-relative terms of human 'affections', the word covers all kinds of feelings, including anger, fear, etc.

**final cause:** purpose, design, what something is *for*

**genius:** intellectual skill; on page 13 intellectual level

**infidelity:** lack of religious belief

**magian:** high priest of the Zoroastrian religion

**politeness:** social polish

**principle:** Hume sometimes uses this word in a now-obsolete sense in which it means 'source', 'cause', 'driver', 'energizer', or the like.

**speculative:** theoretical (concerning what is the case), in contrast to 'practical' (concerning what to do).

**tutelar deity:** a god protecting some individual person or place or household

**vulgar:** uneducated, low-class

## Dedication

[John Home (sometimes spelled 'Hume') was a distant relative of David Hume's, and a Presbyterian minister. His *Douglas* was vastly successful in Scotland and England, his other plays much less so.]

To the Reverend John Home, author of *Douglas, a Tragedy*

My dear Sir, It was the practice of the ancients to address their compositions only to friends and equals, and to make their dedications monuments of regard and affection, not of servility and flattery. In those days of open and candid liberty, a dedication did honour to the person to whom it was addressed without degrading the author. Any partiality towards the patron was at least the partiality of friendship and affection.

Another instance of true liberty, of which only ancient times can provide us with an example, is the liberty of thought that engaged men of letters, however different in their abstract opinions, to maintain a mutual friendship and regard; and never to quarrel about principles while they agreed in inclinations and manners. Science was often the subject of disputation, never of animosity. Cicero, a Platonist, addressed his philosophical treatises sometimes to the Stoic Brutus, sometimes to the Epicurean Atticus.

I have a strong desire to renew these laudable practices of antiquity by addressing the following dissertations to you, my good friend; for such I will always call and esteem you, despite our opposition regarding many of our speculative [see Glossary] tenets. These differences of opinion I have found only to enliven our conversation; while our common passion for science and letters served as a cement to our friendship. I still admired your genius [see Glossary] even when I imagined that you lay under the influence of prejudice; and you have told me that you excused my errors on account of the candor and sincerity that you thought accompanied them.

But to tell truth, it is less my admiration of your fine genius that has brought me to make this address to you than my esteem for your character and my affection for your person. The generosity of mind that always accompanies you, the cordiality of friendship, your spirited honour and integrity, have made me desire that a monument to our mutual friendship should be publicly erected and if possible preserved for posterity.

I also have the ambition to be the first who publicly expresses his admiration for your noble tragedy of *Douglas*, one of the most involving and affecting pieces that was ever exhibited on any stage. If I expressed a preference for it over Maffei's *Merope* and over Voltaire's *Mérope*, which it resembles in its subject; if I affirmed that it contains more fire and spirit than the former, more tenderness and simplicity than the latter; I might be accused of partiality. And how could I entirely acquit myself, after the professions of friendship I have made to you? But the unfeigned tears that flowed from every eye in the numerous performances of it on this stage, the unparalleled command you appeared to have over every affection [see Glossary] of the human breast, are incontestible proofs that you possess the true theatrical genius of Shakespeare and Otway, refined from the unhappy barbarism of the one and the licentiousness of the other.

You know that my enemies have reproached me with the love of paradoxes and singular opinions, and I admit that even my friends have sometimes said the same; and I expect to be exposed to the same accusation on account of my praise for your *Douglas*. I shall be told, no doubt, that I had artfully chosen the only time when this high esteem for that piece could be regarded as a paradox, namely before its publication; and that not being able to contradict in this particular the sentiments of the public, I have at least resolved to get in before them. But I shall be amply

compensated for all these jokes at my expense if you accept this testimony of my regard, and believe me to be, with the greatest sincerity, dear Sir, your most affectionate friend and humble servant, David Hume.

## Introduction

As every enquiry concerning religion is of the utmost importance, two questions especially challenge our attention: **(i)** the question concerning its foundation in reason, and **(ii)** the question concerning its origin in human nature. Happily, question **(i)**, which is the more important, admits of the more obvious solution, or at least the clearer one. The whole frame of nature bespeaks a thinking author; and no rational enquirer can after serious reflection suspend for a moment his belief regarding the primary principles of genuine theism and religion. But question **(ii)** concerning the origin of religion in human nature is exposed to more difficulty. The belief in invisible, thinking power has been very generally diffused over the human race, in all places and in all ages; but it has perhaps not been •so universal as to have no exceptions or •even slightly uniform in the ideas it has suggested. If travellers and historians may be credited, some nations have been found that had no religious beliefs; and no two nations—indeed, hardly any two *men*—have ever agreed precisely on religious matters. So it seems that this •religious• preconception does not arise from an original instinct or **primary** impression of nature such as gives rise to

- self-love,
- affection between the sexes,
- love of progeny,
- gratitude, and
- resentment;

since every instinct of this kind has been found to be absolutely universal in all nations and ages, and has always a precise determinate object which it inflexibly pursues. The first religious principles [see Glossary] must be **secondary**; such as may easily be perverted by various accidents and causes, and whose operation may sometimes by an extraordinary concurrence of circumstances be altogether prevented. My present enquiry addresses two questions: What are the principles that give rise to the original belief? What are the accidents and causes that direct its operation?

## 1. Polytheism was the primary religion of men

It appears to me that if we consider the improvement of human society from its crude beginnings to a state of greater perfection, polytheism or idolatry *must* have been the first and most ancient religion of mankind. I shall try to confirm this by the following arguments.

It is an incontestable matter of fact that about 1700 years ago all mankind were polytheists. The doubtful and sceptical principles of a few philosophers, or the not entirely pure theism of one or two nations, do not constitute an objection worth regarding. Behold, then, the clear testimony of history. The further back we go into antiquity, the more we find mankind plunged into polytheism. No marks, no symptoms of any more perfect religion. The most ancient records of human race still present us with polytheism as the popular and established creed. The north, the south, the east, the west, give their unanimous testimony to the same fact. What can be opposed to so full an evidence?

As far as writing or history reaches, mankind in ancient times seem universally to have been polytheists. Shall we assert that in *more* ancient times, before the knowledge of letters or the discovery of any art or science, men entertained

the principles of pure theism? That would mean that while they were ignorant and barbarous they discovered truth, but they fell into error as soon as they acquired learning and politeness [see Glossary].

This would contradict not only all appearance of probability but also our present experience concerning the principles and opinions of barbarous nations. The savage tribes of America, Africa and Asia are all idolaters. Not a single exception to this rule. If a traveller transported himself into any unknown region, and found inhabitants cultivated with arts and science, he could not without further inquiry say whether they were theists (though the odds are that they would not be); but if he found them ignorant and barbarous, he could immediately declare them to be idolaters, with scarcely any possibility of his being mistaken.

It seems certain that, according to the natural progress of human thought, the ignorant multitude must first entertain some low and humdrum notion of superior powers, before they stretch their conception to the perfect Being who bestowed order on the whole frame of nature. To assert that

- they regarded the deity as a pure spirit—omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent—before regarding him as a powerful though limited being, with human passions and appetites, limbs and organs,

would be as unreasonable as to imagine that

- men inhabited palaces before huts and cottages, or studied geometry before agriculture.

The mind rises gradually from inferior to superior. By abstracting from what is imperfect, it forms an idea of perfection; and, slowly distinguishing the nobler parts of its own frame from the grosser parts, it learns to transfer only the former—much elevated and refined—to its divinity. The only thing that could disturb this natural progress of thought would be an obvious and invincible argument that

immediately led the mind into the pure principles of theism, making it overleap at one bound the vast chasm between the human and the divine nature. But though I accept that the order and frame of the universe, when carefully examined, provides such an argument, I cannot think that this consideration had an influence on mankind when they formed their first crude notions of religion.

The causes of familiar objects never strike our attention or curiosity; and however extraordinary or surprising these objects are in themselves, the raw and ignorant multitude passes them over without much examination or enquiry. Adam, rising straight into paradise in the full perfection of his faculties, would naturally be (as Milton represents him) astonished at the glorious appearances of nature, the heavens, the air, the earth, his own organs and limbs; and would be led to ask where this wonderful scene came from. But a barbarous, necessitous animal such as a man is on the first origin of society, pressed by so many wants and passions, has no leisure to wonder at the regular face of nature or enquire into the cause of the objects he has gradually become accustomed to since his infancy. On the contrary, the more regular and uniform—i.e. the more perfect—nature appears, the more familiar it is to him and the less inclined he is to scrutinise and examine it. A monstrous birth excites his curiosity, and is regarded as a prodigy. Its novelty alarms him and immediately sets him trembling, sacrificing, and praying. But an animal that is complete in all its limbs and organs is for him an ordinary spectacle, and produces no religious opinion or attitude. Ask him where that animal came from; he will tell you that it came from the copulation of its parents. And these? From the copulation of theirs. A few removes satisfy his curiosity, and set the objects at such a distance that he entirely loses sight of them. Don't think that he will so much as *start* the question of where

the first animal came from, much less what the origin was of the whole system or united fabric of the universe. And if you *do* raise such a question with him, don't expect him to employ his mind with any anxiety about such a remote and uninteresting subject lying far outside his intellectual limits.

Furthermore, if men were at first led by reasoning from the frame of nature into believing in one supreme being, they could never have left that belief in order to accept polytheism. The principles of reason which at first **produced** and diffused over mankind such a magnificent opinion would have to be able even more easily to **preserve** it. The first invention and proof of any doctrine is much more difficult than the supporting and retaining of it.

There is a great difference between historical facts and speculative opinions; and knowledge of them is propagated in different ways. When an historical fact is being passed along by oral tradition from eye-witnesses and contemporaries, it is disguised in each narration, and may eventually retain little if any resemblance to the original truth it was based on. If men's

- frail memories,
- love of exaggeration, and
- lazy carelessness

are not corrected by books and writing, they soon pervert the account of historical events. The result is something where argument or reasoning has little or no place, and the truth cannot be recovered. That is how the fables of Hercules, Theseus and Bacchus are supposed to have been originally based on true history, corrupted by tradition. But the case is quite different with regard to speculative opinions. If these opinions are based on arguments so clear and obvious as to carry conviction with people in general, the arguments that at first spread the opinions will still preserve them in their original purity. If the arguments are more abstruse and

further from what ordinary folk can understand, the opinions will always be confined to a few persons; and as soon as men stop thinking about the arguments, the opinions will be buried in oblivion. Whichever side of this dilemma we take, it seems impossible that theism could through reasoning have been the primary religion of human race and then through corruption given birth to polytheism and to all the superstitions of the heathen world. When reason is obvious, it prevents these corruptions; when it is abstruse, it keeps the principles entirely from the knowledge of the vulgar [see Glossary], who are the only ones liable to corrupt any principle or opinion.

## 2. The origin of polytheism

So if we want to indulge our curiosity by enquiring into the origin of religion, we must turn our thoughts towards polytheism, the primitive religion of uninstructed mankind.

If contemplation of the works of nature led men to the thought of invisible, thinking power, they could not possibly entertain any conception except that of *one being*, who gave existence and order to this vast machine and adjusted all its parts according to one regular plan or connected system. Persons of a certain turn of mind don't find it altogether absurd to suppose that *several independent beings*, endowed with superior wisdom, might work together in devising and executing one regular plan; but this a merely arbitrary supposition that must be admitted to be supported neither by probability nor by necessity, if indeed it is even possible. All things in the universe are evidently of a piece. Each thing is adjusted to each other thing. One design prevails throughout the whole. And this uniformity leads the mind to acknowledge one author; because the thought of different authors where there is no difference of attributes or operations

serves only to perplex the imagination without bringing any satisfaction to the understanding. Pliny tells us that the statue of Laocoon was the work of three artists. But if we had not been told this, we would never have imagined that a group of figures cut from one stone and united in one plan was not the work and design of one sculptor. It is surely not natural and obvious to ascribe any single effect to the combination of several causes.

On the other hand, if we leave the works of nature and trace the footsteps of invisible power in the various and contrary events of human life, we are inevitably led to polytheism—the acknowledgment of several limited and imperfect deities. Storms and tempests ruin what is nourished by the sun. The sun destroys what is fostered by the moisture of dews and rains. War may be favourable to a nation, whom the inclemency of the seasons afflicts with famine. Sickness and pestilence may depopulate a kingdom amidst the most profuse plenty. The same nation is not equally successful by sea and by land at the same time. And a nation that now triumphs over its enemies may soon be vanquished by them. In short, the course of events. . . is so full of variety and uncertainty that if we suppose it to be immediately ordered by any thinking beings, we must acknowledge a contrariety in their designs and intentions; either

- a constant combat of opposite powers, or
- a single power which, being weak or light-minded, keeps regretting what it has done and changing its plans.

Each nation has its tutelar deity [see Glossary]. Each element is subjected to its invisible power or agent. The province of each god is separate from that of the others. And the operations of any one god are uncertain and variable. Today he protects; tomorrow he abandons us. Prayers and sacrifices,

rites and ceremonies, well or ill performed, are the sources of his favour or enmity, and produce all the good or ill fortune that are to be found among mankind.

We may conclude, therefore, that in all the nations that embraced polytheism the first ideas of religion arose not from contemplating the works of nature but from a concern with the events of life and the human mind's incessant hopes and fears. Accordingly, we find that all idolaters—having separated the provinces of their deities—have recourse to the invisible agent to whose authority they are immediately subjected, and whose province it is to superintend the activity they are currently engaged in. Juno is invoked at marriages, Lucina at births. Neptune receives the prayers of seamen, and Mars of warriors. The farmer cultivates his field under the protection of Ceres, and the merchant acknowledges the authority of Mercury. Each natural event is supposed to be governed by some thinking agent, and any prosperous or adverse event in life can be the subject of special prayers or thanksgivings.

For men's attention to be carried beyond the present course of things and led into any inference concerning invisible thinking power, they must be actuated by some passion that prompts their thought and reflection—some motive that spurs their first enquiry. But what passion can it be that has such a mighty consequence? Surely not speculative curiosity, or the pure love of truth. That motive is too refined for such gross minds. It would lead men into enquiries into the frame of nature, a subject too comprehensive for their narrow capacities. So the only passions that can be supposed to work on such barbarians are the ordinary affections [see Glossary] of human life: the anxious concern for happiness, the dread of future misery, the terror of death, the thirst for revenge, the appetite for food and other necessaries. Agitated by hopes and fears of this nature, especially the last, men

look with trembling curiosity into the course of future causes, and examine the various and contrary events of human life. And in this disordered scene, with eyes still more disordered and astonished, they see the first obscure traces of divinity.

### 3. The same subject continued

We are placed in this world, as in a great theatre, where the true springs and causes of every event are entirely concealed from us; and we do not have sufficient wisdom to foresee the ills we are continually threatened with, or any power to prevent them. We hang in perpetual suspense between life and death, health and sickness, plenty and want; which are distributed among the human species by secret and unknown causes whose operation is often unexpected and always unaccountable. So these unknown causes become the constant object of our hope and fear; and while the passions are kept in perpetual alarm by an anxious expectation of the events, the imagination is equally employed in forming ideas of the powers we so entirely depend on. If men could anatomise nature according to the most probable philosophy—or at least the most intelligible one—they would find that these causes are nothing but the particular constitution and structure of the minute parts of their own bodies and of external objects; and that all the events about which they are so much concerned are produced by a regular and constant machinery. But this philosophy is too hard for the ignorant multitude, who can only conceive the unknown causes in a *general and confused* manner; though their imagination, perpetually at work on the same subject, must try to form some *particular and distinct* idea of them. The more they consider these causes themselves, and the uncertainty of their operation, the less satisfaction they meet with in their researches; and they

would eventually have abandoned this arduous project if it were not for a propensity in human nature which leads into a system that gives them some satisfaction.

There is a universal tendency among mankind to think of all things as being like themselves, and to transfer to every object the qualities they are familiarly acquainted with and intimately conscious of. We find human faces in the moon, armies in the clouds; and, if not corrected by experience and reflection, our natural tendency leads us to ascribe malice or good-will to everything that hurts or pleases us. Hence the frequency and beauty of the devices in poetry where trees, mountains and streams are personified, and the inanimate parts of nature acquire sentiment and passion. These poetical figures and expressions have no effect on what we *believe*, but they are evidence of a certain tendency in the imagination, without which they could neither be beautiful nor natural. And a river-god is not always taken to be a mere poetical or imaginary personage, but may sometimes enter into the belief-system of the ignorant vulgar; while each grove or field is represented as possessed by a particular spirit or invisible power that inhabits and protects it. Indeed, even philosophers cannot entirely exempt themselves from this natural frailty: they have often ascribed to inanimate matter the horror of a vacuum, sympathies, antipathies, and other affections of human nature. The absurdity is not less when, as all too often happens, we look upwards and transfer human passions and infirmities to the deity, representing him as jealous and revengeful, capricious and partial—in short, a wicked and foolish *man* in every respect but his superior power and authority. No wonder, then, that mankind, being placed in such an absolute ignorance of causes, and being at the same time so anxious concerning their future fortune, should immediately acknowledge a dependence on invisible powers that have thought and feeling. The unknown causes

that continually occupy men's thought, appearing always in the same way, are all taken to be of the same kind or species. And before long we ascribe to them thought and reason and passion, and sometimes even the limbs and shapes of men, so as to bring them nearer to a resemblance with ourselves.

The more a man's course of life is governed by chance events, the more superstitious he is. This can be particularly observed in gamblers and sailors, who are of all mankind the least capable of serious reflection and the most given to frivolous and superstitious beliefs. An ancient warrior said that the gods have an influence in every affair, but above all in war, where the outcome is so uncertain. All human life, especially before the institution of order and good government, is subject to chance events; so it is natural that in barbarous ages superstition should prevail everywhere, setting men to enquire earnestly concerning the invisible powers who distribute their happiness or misery. Ignorant of astronomy and the anatomy of plants and animals, and too little curious to observe the admirable adjustment of final causes [see Glossary], they remain ignorant of the first and supreme creator, and of that infinitely perfect spirit who alone bestowed order on the whole frame of nature. Such a magnificent idea is too big for their narrow conceptions, which cannot see the beauty of the work or grasp the grandeur of its author. They think of *their* deities as being, however potent and invisible, nothing but a species of human creatures, perhaps raised from among mankind and retaining all human passions and appetites, together with bodily limbs and organs. Since each of these limited beings is incapable of extending his influence everywhere, there must be vastly many of them to answer the variety of events that happen over the whole face of nature. Thus, every place is crammed with local deities; and that is how polytheism did and still does prevail among most of uninstructed mankind.

Any of the human affections may lead us into the notion of invisible, thinking power—hope as well as fear, gratitude as well as affliction. But if we examine our own hearts or observe the conduct of others, we shall find that men are thrown onto their knees much oftener by the melancholy passions than by the agreeable ones. Prosperity is easily received as our *due*, and few questions are asked concerning its cause or author. It begets cheerfulness, activity, alacrity, and a lively enjoyment of every social and sensual pleasure; and when men are in this state of mind they have little leisure or inclination to think of the unknown invisible regions. On the other hand, every disastrous event alarms us and starts us wondering about what caused it; fears spring up regarding the future; and the mind—sunk into diffidence, terror, and melancholy—has recourse to every method of appeasing those secret thinking powers that our fortune is supposed to depend on.

No topic is more usual with all popular divines than to display the advantages of *affliction* in bringing men to a due sense of religion by subduing the confidence and sensuality which in times of prosperity make them forgetful of a divine providence. Not only moderns but also ancients have pursued this line of thought. A Greek historian [Diodorus Siculus] said that fortune has never bestowed a happiness on mankind without a mixture of envy; she has always combined her gifts with some disastrous circumstance, in order to chastise men into a reverence for the gods they are apt to forget if they have uninterrupted prosperity.

What age or period of life is the most addicted to superstition? The weakest and most timid. What sex? The same answer must be given. The leaders and examples of every kind of superstition, says the ancient Greek writer Strabo, are the women. They arouse the men to devotion and supplications, and the observance of religious days. It is rare

to meet with a man who lives apart from females and yet is given to such practices. . . . This would lead us to entertain a bad idea of the devotion of monks if we did not know—through an experience that may have been less common in Strabo’s time—that one may practise celibacy and profess chastity while maintaining the closest connections and most entire sympathy with that timorous and pious sex.

#### 4. Deities not considered as creators or formers of the world

The only point of theology in which we find almost all mankind in agreement is that the world contains some invisible, thinking power; but

- whether this power is supreme or subordinate,
- whether it is confined to one being or distributed among several, and
- what attributes, qualities, connections, or principles [see Glossary] of action should be ascribed to ·that being or· those beings,

—concerning all these points the popular systems of theology differ widely. Our ancestors in Europe, before the revival of letters, believed (as we do now) that there was one supreme God, the author of nature, whose power was often exerted by the interposition of his angels and subordinate servants who furthered his sacred purposes. But they also believed that nature was full of *other* invisible powers—fairies, goblins, elves, sprites—beings mightier than men but much inferior to the celestial natures who surround the throne of God. Now, suppose that someone in those ages had denied the existence of God and of his angels; could not his impiety have fairly been called ‘atheism’ even if by some odd capricious reasoning he had still allowed that the popular stories of elves and fairies were just and well-grounded? Such a

**b** person would differ from any **a** genuine theist infinitely more than he would differ from **c** someone who absolutely excluded all invisible thinking power ·such as elves and fairies·. It is a fallacy, merely from the casual resemblance of names—·**a** ‘theism’· and **b** ‘polytheism’—to rank such opposite opinions under the same general label.

To anyone who thinks soundly about this matter, it will appear that the ‘gods’ of all polytheists do not deserve pious worship or veneration any more than did the elves or fairies of our ancestors. These pretended religionists are really a kind of superstitious atheists, and acknowledge no being answering to our idea of a deity. No first principle of mind or thought; no supreme government and administration; no divine planning or intention in the structure of the world.

The Chinese, when their prayers are not answered, beat their idols. [Hume gives a reference for each custom reported in this paragraph.] The deities of the Laplanders are any large stone they find that has an extraordinary shape. The Egyptian mythologists, in order to account for animal worship, said that the gods, pursued by the violence of earth-born men, who were their enemies, had once had to disguise themselves as beasts. The Caunii, a nation in Lesser Asia, periodically walked to their frontiers, fully armed, beating the air with their lances to drive out foreign deities. Some German nations told Caesar that not even the immortal gods are a match for the Suevi. When (in Homer) Venus has been wounded by Diomedes, her mother Dione says: ‘Many ills, my daughter, have the gods inflicted on men; and many ills have men inflicted on the gods in return.’

If we open any classic author we’ll meet with these gross representations of the deities; and Longinus was right to say that such ideas of the divine nature, if taken literally, contain a true atheism.

Some writers have been surprised that the impieties of •Aristophanes should have been tolerated—indeed publicly performed and applauded—by the Athenians, who were so superstitious and so protective of the public religion that at that same time they put Socrates to death for his imagined incredulity. What these writers do not consider is this:

The ludicrous, familiar images under which the gods are represented by •that comic poet, rather than appearing impious, were the genuine lights in which the ancients conceived their divinities.

What conduct can be more criminal or mean than that of Jupiter in the *Amphitryon*? Yet that play, which showed his gallant [here = 'sexual'] exploits, was supposed to be so agreeable to him that it was acted in Rome by public authority whenever the state was threatened with pestilence, famine, or any general calamity. The Romans supposed that he, like all old lechers, would be highly pleased with the recital of his former feats of prowess and vigour, and that this was the best topic on which to flatter his vanity. . . .

It never enters into the head of any polytheist or idolater to ascribe the origin and fabric of the universe to these imperfect beings. Hesiod, whose writings (with Homer's) contained the canonical system of the heathens, supposes that gods and men sprang equally from the unknown powers of nature. And throughout that author's *Theogony*, the only instance of creation or a voluntary production is the creation of Pandora; and she too was formed by the gods merely out of indignation against Prometheus, who had furnished men with fire stolen from the celestial regions. The ancient mythologists, indeed, seem throughout to have embraced the idea of •generation rather than that of •creation or formation; and to have accounted in that way for the origin of this universe.

Ovid, who lived in a learned age and had been instructed by philosophers in the principles of a divine creation or formation of the world, finds that such an idea would not agree with the popular mythology that he is presenting. So he leaves it loose and detached from his system: 'Whichever of the gods it was', he says, that dissipated the chaos and introduced order into the universe. He knew that it could not be Saturn or Jupiter or Neptune or any of the received deities of paganism. His theological system had taught him nothing about this, and he leaves the matter undetermined.

Diodorus Siculus, beginning his work with an enumeration of the most reasonable opinions concerning the origin of the world, makes no mention of a deity or thinking mind; though his history shows that he was much more prone to superstition than to irreligion.

And in another passage, talking of a certain nation in India, he says, that because there is so much difficulty in accounting for their descent we must conclude them to be aborigines, without any beginning of their generation, propagating their race from all eternity. . . . He adds: 'But in such subjects as these, which exceed all human capacity, it may well happen that those who say the most know the least, reaching a plausible appearance of truth in their reasonings while extremely wide of the real truth and matter of fact.'

A strange sentiment in our eyes, to be embraced by a professed and zealous religionist! But it was merely by accident that the question of the origin of the world ever did in ancient times enter into religious systems, or was treated by theologians. Only the philosophers delivered systems of this kind, and it was pretty late before even they thought to avail themselves of a mind or supreme intelligence as the first cause of everything. So far was it from being thought profane in those days to account for the origin of things without a deity that philosophers who

did so—Thales, Anaximenes, Heraclitus and others—went unchallenged; whereas Anaxagoras, the first undoubted theist among the philosophers, may have been the first to be accused of atheism.

Sextus Empiricus tells us that Epicurus, when a boy, read with his preceptor these verses of Hesiod:

‘Eldest of beings, chaos first arose;  
Next earth, wide-stretch’d, the seat of all’,

and the young scholar first revealed his genius for inquiry by asking ‘And where did chaos come from?’ His preceptor told him that he must look to the philosophers for a solution of such questions; and from this hint Epicurus left philology and all other ·bookish· studies, in order to pursue that science from which alone he expected satisfaction with regard to these lofty subjects.

The common people were never likely to push their researches so far, or derive their systems of religion from reasoning, given that philologists and mythologists hardly ever revealed that much penetration. And even the philosophers who did talk of such topics readily assented to the crudest theory, admitting the joint origin of gods and men from night and chaos; or from fire, water, air or whatever they took to be the ruling element.

Nor was it only on their first origin that the gods were supposed to depend on the powers of nature. Throughout their whole existence, it was thought, they were at the mercy of fate or destiny. ‘Think of the force of necessity’, says Agrippa to the Roman people, ‘that force to which even the gods must submit’. And the younger Pliny tells us that amidst the darkness, horror, and confusion after the first eruption of Vesuvius some people concluded that all nature was going to wrack and that gods and men were perishing in one common ruin.

It is indeed extremely generous to dignify with the name ‘religion’ such an imperfect system of theology, putting it on a level with later systems that are based on sounder and loftier principles. The principles of Marcus Aurelius, Plutarch, and some other Stoics and Academics were much more refined than the pagan superstition, but for my part I can scarcely allow even them the honourable label ‘theism’. For if the mythology of the heathens resembles the ancient European system of spiritual beings, excluding God and angels and leaving only fairies and sprites, the creed of these philosophers may justly be said to exclude a deity and to leave only angels and fairies.

## **5. Various forms of polytheism: allegory, hero-worship**

[In this chapter, ‘hero-worship’ is meant very literally: worshipping heroic men after they have been elevated to the status of gods.]

But my chief present business is to consider the crude polytheism of the vulgar, and to trace all its various appearances in the principles of human nature from which they are derived.

Anyone who learns by argument the existence of invisible thinking power must reason from the admirable design of natural objects, and must suppose the world to be the workmanship of that divine being, the original cause of all things. But the vulgar polytheist in stark contrast defies every part of the universe, and conceives all the conspicuous productions of nature to be themselves so many real divinities. The sun, moon and stars are all gods according to his system; fountains are inhabited by nymphs, and trees by hamadryads [= wood nymphs]; even monkeys, dogs, cats and other animals often become sacred in his eyes, and strike him with a religious veneration. And thus, however strong

men's propensity to believe there is invisible, thinking power in nature, they are just as strongly inclined to rest their attention on sensible, visible objects; and to reconcile these opposite inclinations they are led to unite the invisible power with some visible object.

The allotting of distinct realms to the various deities is apt to cause some allegory, both physical and moral, to enter into the vulgar systems of polytheism. The god of war will naturally be represented as furious, cruel and impetuous; the god of poetry as elegant, polite and amiable; the god of merchandise, especially in early times, as thievish and deceitful. Admittedly, some of the allegories supposed in Homer and other mythologists have been so strained that men of sense are apt entirely to reject them, and to consider them as mere products of the whims of critics and commentators. But it is undeniable, even on the least reflection, that allegory really has place in the heathen mythology.

- Cupid, the son of Venus,
- the Muses, the daughters of Memory,
- Prometheus, the wise brother, and Epimetheus the foolish,
- Hygieia, the goddess of health, descended from Æsculapius, the god of physic;

who does not see in these and many other instances the plain traces of allegory? When a god is supposed to preside over any passion, event, or system of actions, it is almost unavoidable to give him a genealogy, attributes, and adventures suitable to his supposed powers and influence. . . .

We ought not to expect ignorance and superstition to produce entirely perfect allegories, there being no work of intellect that requires a more precise hand, or has more rarely met with success. That Fear and Terror are the sons of Mars is just; but why by Venus? That Harmony is the daughter of Venus is regular; but why by Mars? That Sleep

is the brother of Death is suitable; but why describe him as enamoured of one of the Graces? And since the ancient mythologists fall into such gross and palpable mistakes, we have no reason surely to expect such refined and long-spun allegories as some have tried to draw from their fictions.

Lucretius was plainly seduced by the strong appearance of allegory observable in the pagan fictions. He first addresses himself to Venus as to the generating power that animates, renews and beautifies the universe. But he is soon betrayed by the mythology into incoherency when he prays to that allegorical personage to appease the furies of her lover Mars. This idea is drawn not from allegory but from the popular religion, which Lucretius as an Epicurean could not consistently accept.

The deities of the vulgar are so little superior to human creatures that where men are affected with strong sentiments of veneration or gratitude for any hero or public benefactor nothing can be more natural than to convert him into a god, in this way filling the heavens with continual recruits from among mankind. Most of the divinities of the ancient world are supposed to have once been men, and to have owed their apotheosis [= elevation to divine status] to the admiration and affection of the people. The real history of their adventures—corrupted by tradition and elevated by the marvellous—became a plentiful source of fable, especially in passing through the hands of poets, allegorists and priests who successively improved on the wonder and astonishment of the ignorant multitude.

Painters and sculptors also came in for their share of profit in the sacred mysteries; and furnishing men with sensible representations of their divinities, whom they clothed in human figures, greatly increased public devotion and fixed its object. It was probably for lack of painting and sculpture in rude and barbarous ages that men deified plants, animals,

and even brute, unorganised matter, affixing divinity to such ungainly forms rather than being without a sensible object of worship.

If any Syrian sculpture in early times could have made a good figure of Apollo, the conic stone called Elagabalus would never have become the object of such profound adoration and been accepted as a representation of the solar deity.

Stilpo was banished from Athens by the council of Areopagus for affirming that the Minerva in the citadel was not a divinity but the workmanship of the sculptor Phidias. What degree of reason must we expect in the religious belief of the vulgar in other nations, when Athenians and their council could entertain such gross conceptions?

These, then, are the general principles of polytheism, founded in **a** human nature and depending little if at all on **b** caprice or **c** accident [i.e. on **b** episodic thoughts of individual people or on **c** external events, these being in contrast to **a** human nature.] The causes that bestow happiness or misery are in general very little known and very uncertain; so our anxious concern tries to get a determinate idea of them, and finds no better expedient than to represent them as thinking voluntary agents—like ourselves except somewhat superior in power and wisdom. The limited influence of these agents, and their great proximity to human weakness, leads to their being assigned different roles, which gives rise to **allegory**. The same principles naturally deify mortals who are superior in power, courage or understanding, and produce **hero-worship**, together with fabulous history and mythological tradition, in all its wild and unaccountable forms. And as an invisible spiritual intelligence is too refined an object for the vulgar to grasp, men naturally affix it to some sensible representation, such as •the more conspicuous parts of nature or •the statues, images and pictures that a more refined age forms of its divinities.

Almost all idolaters, of whatever age or country, concur in these general principles and conceptions; and even the particular characters and domains that they assign to their deities are not very different. The Greek and Roman travellers and conquerors had little difficulty finding their own deities everywhere, saying 'This is Mercury, that Venus', 'This is Mars, that Neptune', whatever names the strange gods had in their own country. According to Tacitus, the goddess Hertha of our Saxon ancestors seems to be no other than the Mater Tellus of the Romans; and his conjecture was evidently just.

## 6. How theism came from polytheism

The doctrine of one supreme deity, the author of nature, is very ancient, has spread over great and populous nations, and among them has been embraced by all ranks and conditions of men. But if you think it has owed its success to the power of the invincible reasons on which it is undoubtedly founded, you show yourself to be little acquainted with the ignorance and stupidity of the people, and their incurable prejudices in favour of their particular superstitions. Even at this day, and even in Europe, ask any of the vulgar why he believes in an omnipotent creator of the world. He will never mention the beauty of final causes [see Glossary], of which he is wholly ignorant; he will not hold out his hand and tell you to contemplate the suppleness and variety of joints in his fingers, their bending all one way, the counterpoise they receive from the thumb, the softness and fleshy parts of the inside of his hand and all the other details that fit the hand for its destined use. He has long been accustomed to all these, and beholds them with listlessness and unconcern. He will tell you of

- this person's sudden and unexpected death,

- that one's fall and bruising,
- the excessive drought of this season,
- the cold and rains of another.

He ascribes these to the immediate operation of providence. Events that good reasoners see as the chief difficulties in admitting a supreme intelligence are with him the sole arguments for it!

Many theists—even the most zealous and refined of them—have denied a particular providence, and have asserted that the Sovereign mind or first principle [see Glossary] of all things, having fixed general laws by which nature is governed, gives free and uninterrupted course to these laws and does not keep disturbing the settled order of events by particular interventions. They say that

we get the chief argument for theism from the beautiful connection and rigid observance of established rules, which also enables us to answer the principal objections against it.

But so little is this understood by the generality of mankind that when someone ascribes all events to natural causes and denies the particular interposition of a deity, they are apt to suspect him of the grossest infidelity [see Glossary]. A little philosophy, says Lord Bacon, makes men atheists; a great deal reconciles them to religion. For men are taught by superstitious prejudices to lay the stress on a wrong place; and when that fails them, and a little reflection shows them that the course of nature is regular and uniform, their whole faith totters and falls to ruin. But being taught by more reflection that this very regularity and uniformity is the strongest proof of design and of a supreme intelligence, they return to the belief they had deserted; and now they can establish it on a firmer and more durable foundation.

Convulsions in nature, disorders, prodigies, miracles, though quite opposite to the plan of a wise superintendent,

impress mankind with the strongest sentiments of religion because these are events whose causes seem the most unknown and unaccountable. Madness, fury, rage, and an inflamed imagination, though they sink men nearest to the level of beasts, are for a similar reason often thought to be the only states in which we can have any immediate communication with the Deity.

So we can conclude, on the whole, that since the vulgar in nations that have embraced the doctrine of theism still base it on irrational and superstitious principles, they are never led into it by any process of argument but by a certain train of thinking more suitable to their genius [see Glossary] and capacity.

It can easily happen in an idolatrous nation that though men admit the existence of several limited deities, there is some one God whom they make the special object of their worship and adoration. They may suppose that **a** in the distribution of power and territory among the gods, their nation was subjected to the jurisdiction of that particular deity; or they may **b** think of one god as the prince or supreme magistrate of the rest, having the same nature as them but ruling them with an authority like what an earthly sovereign exercises over his subjects and vassals. Therefore, whether this god is considered as **a** their special peculiar patron or as **b** the general sovereign of heaven, his votaries will try by every art to insinuate themselves into his favour; and—supposing him to be pleased with praise and flattery, as they are—will spare no eulogy or exaggeration in their addresses to him. As men's fears or distresses become more urgent, they invent new strains of adulation; and even he who outdoes his predecessor in swelling up the titles of his divinity is sure to be outdone by his successor in newer and more pompous epithets of praise. Thus they proceed, until eventually they arrive at infinity itself, beyond which

there is no further progress. If they try to get further and represent a magnificent simplicity, they risk running into inexplicable mystery and destroying their deity's thinking nature, the only possible basis for any rational worship or adoration. While they confine themselves to the notion of a perfect being, the creator of the world, they *happen* to coincide with the principles of reason and true philosophy; though they are guided to that notion not by reason—of which they are largely incapable—but by the adulation and fears of the most vulgar superstition.

We often find among barbarous nations, and even sometimes among civilised ones, that when every strain of flattery has been exhausted towards human princes, when every human quality has been applauded to the utmost, their servile courtiers finally represent *them* as real divinities, and point them out to the people as objects of adoration. How much more natural is it, therefore, that a limited deity who at first is taken to be only the immediate author of the particular goods and ills in life should eventually be represented as sovereign maker and modifier of the universe?

Even where this notion of a supreme deity is already established, though it ought naturally to lessen every other worship and lower the status of every other object of reverence, if a nation has believed in some subordinate tutelary divinity, saint or angel, their addresses to that being are gradually elevated and encroach on the adoration due to their supreme deity. The Virgin Mary, before being checked by the Reformation, had risen from being merely a good woman to usurping many attributes of the Almighty; and in all the prayers and petitions of the Muscovites, God and St. Nicholas go hand in hand.

Thus the deity who lustfully converted himself into a bull in order to carry off Europa, and ambitiously dethroned his father, Saturn, became the Optimus Maximus of the

heathens. Thus, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob became the supreme deity or Jehovah of the Jews.

[After a complex paragraph on the politics of the belief in the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary, Hume continues:] Rather than relinquish this propensity to adulation, religionists in all ages have involved themselves in the greatest absurdities and contradictions.

Homer in one passage calls Oceanus and Tethys 'the original parents of all things', conformably to the established mythology and tradition of the Greeks; yet in other passages he could not forbear complimenting Jupiter, the reigning deity, by calling him 'the father of gods and men'. He forgets that every temple, every street, was full of the ancestors, uncles, brothers and sisters of this Jupiter; who was in reality nothing but an upstart parricide and usurper. A similar contradiction can be seen in Hesiod; and is less excusable because his professed intention was to deliver a true genealogy of the gods.

If there were a religion (and we may suspect Mahometanism to be one) which sometimes **a** painted the Deity in the most sublime colours as the creator of heaven and earth; sometimes **b** degraded him nearly to a level with human creatures in his powers and faculties, while also ascribing to him suitable infirmities, passions and partialities of the moral kind; that religion, after it was extinct, would also be cited as an instance of the contradictions that arise from the **b** gross, vulgar, natural conceptions of mankind, opposed to their continual propensity towards **a** flattery and exaggeration. Nothing indeed would prove more strongly the divine origin of any religion than to find it to be free from a contradiction that is so incident to human nature. And happily this is the case with Christianity.

## 7. Confirmation of this doctrine

It appears certain that although the original notions of the vulgar represent the Divinity as a limited being, and consider him only as the particular cause of health or sickness, plenty or want, prosperity or adversity, yet when more magnificent ideas are urged on them they think it dangerous to refuse their assent. Will you say that your deity •is finite and bounded in his perfections? •may be overcome by a greater force? •is subject to human passions, pains and infirmities? •has a beginning, and may have an end? They dare not answer Yes to this. Thinking it safest to go along with the higher praises, they try by an affected ravishment and devotion to ingratiate themselves with him. As confirmation of this, we may observe that in this case the assent of the vulgar is merely verbal, and that they are incapable of conceiving the sublime qualities that they seemingly attribute to the Deity. Their real *idea* of him, despite their pompous *language*, is still as poor and frivolous as ever.

The Magians [see Glossary] say that the original intelligence who is the first principle of all things reveals himself immediately to the mind and understanding alone; but has placed the sun as his image in the visible universe, and when the sun diffuses its beams over the earth and the firmament it is a faint copy of the glory that resides in the higher heavens. If you want to escape the displeasure of this divine being, you must be careful never to set your bare foot on the ground, or spit into a fire, or throw any water on it, even if it is consuming a whole city. Who can express the perfections of the Almighty? say the Mahometans. Even the noblest of his works are but dust and rubbish compared to *him*. How much more must human conception fall short of his infinite perfections? His smile and favour makes men for ever happy; and the best method to obtain it for your children is to cut

off from them, while they are infants, a little bit of skin about half the width of a farthing. The Roman Catholics say: take two bits of cloth about an inch and a half square, join them by the corners with two strings or pieces of tape about sixteen inches long, throw this over your head making one of the bits of cloth lie on your breast and the other on your back, keeping them next your skin: There is not a better secret for recommending yourself to the infinite Being who exists from eternity to eternity! . . .

## 8. Rise and fall of polytheism and theism

It is remarkable that the principles of religion have a kind of flux and reflux in the human mind, and that men have a natural tendency to rise from idolatry to theism, and to sink again from theism into idolatry. Because the vulgar—i.e. all mankind with a few exceptions—are ignorant and uninstructed, they never

- elevate their contemplation to the heavens, or
- dig into the secret structure of vegetable or animal bodies

far enough to discover a supreme mind or original providence that bestowed order on every part of nature. They take a more confined and selfish view of these admirable works: finding their own happiness and misery to depend on the secret and unforeseen influence of external objects, they constantly attend to the unknown causes that govern all these natural events and distribute pleasure and pain, good and ill, by their powerful but silent operation. The unknown causes are still appealed to on every occasion; and this general appearance or confused image embraces the perpetual objects of human hopes and fears, wishes and anxieties. The active imagination of men, uneasy in this abstract conception of objects that it is incessantly thinking

about, gradually begins to make them more particular and to give them shapes more suitable to the imagination's natural grasp. It represents them as sensible, thinking beings, like mankind; actuated by love and hatred, and capable of being swayed by gifts and entreaties, by prayers and sacrifices. Hence the origin of religion, and hence the origin of idolatry or polytheism.

But the anxious concern for happiness that creates the idea of these invisible, thinking powers does not allow mankind to remain long with the first simple conception of them as

- powerful but limited beings,
- masters of human fate but slaves to destiny and the course of nature.

Men's exaggerated praises and compliments still swell their idea, so that—elevating their deities to the utmost bounds of perfection—they eventually beget the attributes of unity and infinity, simplicity and spirituality. Such refined ideas are not a good fit for vulgar comprehension, so they don't remain long in their original purity but have to be supported by the notion of inferior mediators or subordinate agents that interpose between mankind and their supreme deity. These demi-gods or middle beings, partaking more of human nature and being more familiar to us, become the chief objects of devotion and gradually bring back the idolatry that had formerly been banished by the ardent prayers and panegyrics of fearful and poverty-stricken mortals. But as these idolatrous religions continually fall into grosser and more vulgar conceptions, they at last destroy themselves and, by the vile representations they form of their deities, make the tide turn again towards theism. But in this alternate revolution of human sentiments the propensity to return to idolatry is so strong that the utmost precaution cannot effectively prevent it. And some theists—particularly the

Jews and Mahometans—have been aware of this, as can be seen in their banishing all the arts of statuary and painting, and not allowing sculptures or pictures even of human figures lest the common infirmity of mankind should lead from them to idolatry. The feeble apprehensions of men cannot be satisfied with conceiving their deity as a pure spirit and perfect intelligence, but their natural terrors keep them from attributing to him the least limitation or imperfection. They fluctuate between these opposite sentiments. Their infirmity drags them downwards from •an omnipotent and spiritual deity to •a limited and corporeal one, and from that to •a statue or visible representation. And their endeavour at elevation pushes them upwards from •the statue or material image to •the invisible power, and from that to •an infinitely perfect deity, the creator and sovereign of the universe.

## 9. Comparing the two with regard to persecution and toleration

Polytheism or idolatrous worship, being based entirely on vulgar traditions, is liable to the great inconvenience that any practice or opinion, however barbarous or corrupted, may be authorised by it; and full scope is given for knavery to impose on credulity until morals and humanity are expelled from the religious systems of mankind. At the same time, idolatry also has the evident advantage that by limiting the powers and functions of its deities it naturally admits the gods of other sects and nations to a share of divinity, and makes all the various deities—as well as rites, ceremonies and traditions—compatible with one another. Theism is opposite in both its advantages and its disadvantages. Because it supposes one sole deity who is the perfection of reason and goodness, it *should* banish from religious worship everything frivolous, unreasonable or inhuman, and set before men

the most illustrious example of justice and benevolence as well as the most powerful motives for them. These mighty advantages could not be *outweighed* but they are somewhat *diminished* by inconveniences arising from the vices and prejudices of mankind. With only one object of devotion being acknowledged, the worship of other deities is regarded as absurd and impious. Indeed, this unity of object seems naturally to require the unity of faith and ceremonies, and provides scheming men with a pretence for representing their adversaries as profane and as the objects of divine as well as human vengeance. Each sect is positive that its own faith and worship are entirely acceptable to the deity, and none can conceive that the same being should be pleased with different and opposite rites and principles; so the various sects naturally fall into animosity and discharge on each other the most furious and implacable of all human passions—sacred zeal and rancour.

The tolerating spirit of both ancient and modern idolaters is very obvious to anyone with the least knowledge of the writings of historians or travellers. When the oracle of Delphi was asked 'What rites or worship are most acceptable to the gods?', it replied: 'Those that are legally established in each city.' It seems that even priests in those ages could allow salvation to those of a different communion. The Romans commonly adopted the gods of the conquered people, and never disputed the attributes of the local and national deities in whose territories they resided. The religious wars and persecutions of the Egyptian idolaters are indeed an exception to this rule, but ancient authors explain them as arising from singular and remarkable causes. Different species of animals were the deities of the different sects among the Egyptians; and the deities were in continual war, engaging their votaries in the same quarrels. The worshippers of dogs could not for long remain at peace with

the adorers of cats or wolves. But where that factor was not at work, the Egyptian superstition was not so incompatible as is commonly imagined, since we learn from Herodotus that very large contributions were given by the Egyptian pharaoh Amasis towards rebuilding the temple of Delphi.

The intolerance of almost all religions that have maintained the unity of God is as remarkable as the contrary principle of polytheists. The implacably narrow spirit of the Jews is well known. Mahometanism set out with still more bloody principles, and even today it deals out damnation—though not fire and faggot—to all other sects. And if among Christians the English and Dutch have embraced the principles of toleration, this has come from the steady resolution of the civil magistrate in opposition to the continued efforts of priests and bigots.

The disciples of Zoroaster shut the doors of heaven against all but the Magians. Nothing could obstruct the progress of the Persian conquests more than the Persia's furious zeal against the temples and images of the Greeks. And after the overthrow of that empire we find the polytheist Alexander immediately re-establishing the worship of the Babylonians, which their former monotheist princes had carefully abolished. Even that conqueror's blind and devoted attachment of to the Greek superstition did not stop him from sacrificing according to the Babylonian rites and ceremonies.

I venture to affirm that few corruptions of idolatry and polytheism are more pernicious to society than this corruption of theism, namely, religious intolerance, when carried to the utmost height. The (i) human sacrifices of the Carthaginians, Mexicans and many barbarous nations scarcely exceed (ii) the Inquisition and persecutions of Rome and Madrid. For one thing, less blood may be spilled in (i) than in (ii). Also, the human victims in (i), being chosen by lot or by some exterior signs, do not affect the rest of the

society in as considerable a degree as **(ii)** does, where virtue, knowledge and love of liberty are the qualities that call down the fatal vengeance of inquisitors, the loss of them leaving the society in the most shameful ignorance, corruption and bondage. The illegal murder of one man picked out for this by a tyrant is more pernicious than the death of a thousand by pestilence, famine or any *undistinguishing* calamity.

### **10. . . . with regard to courage or abasement**

From the comparison of theism and idolatry we can form some other observations that will also confirm the vulgar opinion that the corruption of the best things gives rise to the worst.

Where the deity is represented as infinitely superior to mankind, this belief—though altogether just—is apt when joined with superstitious terror to sink the human mind into the lowest submission and abasement, and to represent the monkish virtues of mortification, penance, humility and passive suffering as the only qualities acceptable to him. Whereas where the gods are conceived to be only a little superior to mankind, many of them having been advanced from that inferior rank, we are more at our ease in our addresses to them, and may even without profaneness aspire sometimes to rivalry with them. This leads to activity, spirit, courage, magnanimity, love of liberty, and all the virtues that make a people great.

The heroes in paganism correspond exactly to the saints in popery and the holy dervishes in Mahometanism. The place of Hercules, Theseus, Hector and Romulus is now filled by Dominic, Francis, Anthony and Benedict. The means of obtaining celestial honours among mankind, which used to involve the destruction of monsters, the subduing of tyrants and the defence of our native country, now involves

whippings and fastings, cowardice and humility, abject submission and slavish obedience.

One great incitement to the pious Alexander in his warlike expeditions was his rivalry towards Hercules and Bacchus, whom he rightly claimed to have excelled. After that generous and noble Spartan Brasidas fell in battle, the inhabitants of Amphipolis, whose defence he had embraced, paid him heroic honours, declaring him to have become a minor god. And in general, all founders of states and colonies among the Greeks were raised to this inferior rank of divinity by those who reaped the benefit of their labours.

This gave rise to the observation of Machiavelli that the doctrines of the Christian religion (meaning the Roman Catholic, for he knew no other) which recommend only passive courage and suffering had subdued the spirit of mankind and fitted them for slavery and subjection. This would certainly be right if there were not many other circumstances in human society that control the genius and character of a religion.

Brasidas seized a mouse and, being bitten by it, let it go. 'There is nothing so contemptible', he said, 'that it cannot be safe if it only has the courage to defend itself.' Bellarmine patiently and humbly allowed fleas and other odious vermin to prey on him. He said: 'We shall have heaven to reward us for our sufferings; but these poor creatures have nothing but the enjoyment of the present life.' Such difference there is between the maxims of a Greek hero and those of a Catholic saint.

### **11. . . . with regard to reason or absurdity**

Here is another observation to the same effect, and new evidence that the corruption of the best things begets the worst. If without prejudice we examine the ancient heathen

mythology, as contained in the poets, we shall not find in it any such monstrous absurdity as we may at first tend to expect. Where is the difficulty in conceiving that the same powers or principles [see Glossary], whatever they were, that formed this visible world, men and animals, *also* produced a species of thinking creatures of more refined substance and greater authority than the rest? It is easy to conceive that these creatures may be capricious, revengeful, passionate and voluptuous, and among ourselves nothing is more likely to engender such vices than the licence of absolute authority. In short, the whole mythological system is so natural that it seems more than probable that somewhere in the vast variety of planets and worlds contained in this universe it is really carried into execution.

The chief objection to it with regard to *this* planet is that it is not warranted by any sound reason or authority. The ancient tradition insisted on by heathen priests and theologians is a weak foundation; and it has been transmitted by so many contradictory reports, all supported by equal authority, that it became absolutely impossible to fix a preference among them. So a few volumes must contain all the polemical writings of pagan priests, and their whole theology must consist more of traditional stories and superstitious practices than of philosophical argument and controversy.

But where the fundamental basis of any popular religion is theism, that tenet is so agreeable to sound reason that philosophy is apt to combine with such a system of theology. And if the other dogmas of that system are contained in a sacred book such as the Koran, or are determined by any visible authority like that of the Roman pope, speculative reasoners naturally go on assenting to a theory that •has been instilled into them by their earliest education and •possesses some degree of consistency and uniformity. But as these appearances will certainly *all* prove deceitful, philosophy

will soon find herself very unequally yoked with her new associate; and instead of regulating each principle as they advance together, she is constantly being diverted to serve the purposes of superstition. For besides the unavoidable incoherences that must be reconciled and adjusted, it is safe to say that all popular theology—especially the scholastic—has a kind of *appetite* for absurdity and contradiction. If that theology didn't go beyond reason and common sense, its doctrines would appear too easy and familiar. Amazement must be raised, mystery affected, darkness and obscurity sought after, and a foundation of merit provided for the devout votaries who want an opportunity to subdue their rebellious reason by believing unintelligible sophisms.

Ecclesiastical history sufficiently confirms these reflections. When a controversy is started, some people always claim with certainty to foretell the outcome. Their view is:

Whichever opinion is most contrary to plain sense is sure to prevail, even where the general interest of the system does not require that decision. The reproach of 'heresy' may for a while be bandied about among the disputants, but it always ends up being held against the side of reason. Anyone who has enough learning of this kind merely to know the definitions of 'Arian', 'Pelagian', 'Erestian', 'Socinian', 'Sabellian', 'Eutychian', 'Nestorian', 'Monothelite'—not to mention 'Protestant', whose fate is still uncertain—will be convinced of the truth of this observation.

This is how a system becomes more absurd in the end, merely from being reasonable and philosophical in the beginning.

Opposing the torrent of scholastic religion by such feeble maxims as that

- it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be,
- the whole is greater than a part,
- two and three make five

is trying to stop the ocean with a bull-rush! Will you set up profane reason against sacred mystery? No punishment is great enough for your impiety. And the fires kindled for heretics will serve also for the destruction of philosophers.

## 12. . . .with regard to doubt or conviction

We frequently meet with people who are •so sceptical with regard to history that they assert it to be impossible for any nation ever to believe anything as absurd as the principles of Greek and Egyptian paganism, and at the same time •so dogmatic with regard to religion that they think that no other communion is guilty of the same absurdities. Cambyses entertained such prejudices, and very impiously ridiculed—and even *wounded*—Apis, the great god of the Egyptians, who appeared to his profane senses to be nothing but a large spotted bull. Herodotus judiciously ascribes his passionate outburst to a real madness or disorder of the brain, because if Cambyses had been sane he never would have openly affronted any established worship; for on that head every nation are best satisfied with their own, and think they have the advantage over every other nation.

The Roman Catholics are a very learned sect; apart from the church of England, no one communion can dispute their claim to be the most learned of all the Christian churches. Yet Averroes, the famous Arabian, who surely had heard of the Egyptian superstitions, declares that of all religions the most absurd and nonsensical is the one whose votaries create their deity and then eat him.

I believe, indeed, that no tenet in all paganism would give so fair a scope to ridicule as this of the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. For it is so absurd that it eludes the force of all argument. There are even some funny stories about it,

which are commonly told by the Catholics themselves. [He tells two: One relates that a communicant was mistakenly given a counter instead of a wafer, and complained to the priest: 'I wish you had not given me God the Father; he is so hard and tough there is no swallowing him.' The other concerns a newly converted Turk who, the day after his first communion, was asked how many Gods there are and replied: 'None. You have told me all along that there is but one God, and yesterday I ate him.']

Such are the doctrines of our brethren the Catholics. But we are so accustomed to these doctrines that we never wonder at them; though in a future age it will probably become difficult to persuade some nations that any human creature could ever embrace such principles. And it is a thousand to one that these nations will themselves have something just as absurd in their own creed, to which they will give a most implicit and most religious assent.

[Hume recalls observing a Turkish ambassador and a French Capuchin friar beholding one another in astonishment. He comments:] Thus all mankind stand staring at one another; and there is no beating it into their heads that the turban of the African is as good or as bad a fashion as the cowl of the European. . . .

We can imagine this conversation between a scholar from the Sorbonne and a priest of ancient Egypt:

- 'How can you worship leeks and onions?'
- 'If we worship them, at least we do not at the same time, eat them.'
- 'But what strange objects of adoration are cats and monkeys?'
- 'They are at least as good as the relics or rotten bones of martyrs.'
- 'Are you not mad to cut one another's throat about the preference of a cabbage or a cucumber?'

•Yes, I will agree, if you will admit that it is even madder to fight about the preference among volumes of sophistry, ten thousand of which are not equal in value to one cabbage or cucumber.

Every bystander will easily judge (though unfortunately there are few bystanders) that if any popular system could be established merely by exposing the absurdities of other systems, every votary of every superstition could give a sufficient reason for his blind and bigoted attachment to the principles he has been brought up with. But even without this support, there is still plenty of religious zeal and faith among mankind. Diodorus Siculus reports a remarkable example of this, of which he was himself an eye-witness. While Egypt lay under the greatest terror of the Roman name, a Roman soldier was accidentally guilty of the sacrilegious impiety of killing a cat; and the whole people rose upon him with the utmost fury, all the efforts of the prince not being enough to save him. I'm sure that the senate and people of Rome would not have been so delicate with regard to *their* national deities. A little time after that episode, they very frankly voted Augustus a place in the celestial mansions, and they would have dethroned every god in heaven for his sake, if had he seemed to want this. . . .

'Despite the sanctity of our holy religion,' says Cicero, 'no crime is more common with us than sacrilege; but was it ever heard of that an Egyptian violated the temple of a cat, an ibis, or a crocodile?' In another place he says: 'There is no torture an Egyptian would not undergo rather than injure an ibis, an aspic, a cat, a dog or a crocodile.' Thus, what Dryden observes in *Absolom and Achitophel* is true:

Of whatso'er descent their godhead be,  
Stock, stone, or other homely pedigree,  
In his defence his servants are as bold  
As if he had been born of beaten gold.

Indeed, the baser the materials of which a divinity is composed, the greater the devotion he is likely to arouse in the breasts of his deluded votaries. They exult in their shame, and think their deity regards it as meritorious in them to brave for his sake all the ridicule and abuse of his enemies. Ten thousand Crusaders enlist under the holy banners, and *openly* triumph in the parts of their religion that their adversaries regard as the most disgraceful.

There is admittedly a difficulty in the Egyptian system of theology, as indeed few systems of that kind are entirely free from difficulties. Given their method of propagation, a couple of cats could in fifty years stock a whole kingdom; and in twenty more years, if religious veneration were still paid to them, not only would it be easier in Egypt to find a god than a man (which Petronius says was the case in some parts of Italy), but the gods would eventually starve the men, leaving themselves neither priests nor votaries. It is probable, therefore, that this wise nation—the most celebrated in antiquity for prudence and sound policy—foresaw such dangerous consequences and reserved all their worship for the full-grown divinities, drowning the holy spawn or little unweaned gods without any scruple or remorse. So the practice of warping the tenets of religion in order to serve worldly interests is emphatically not to be regarded as an invention of these later ages.

When the learned and philosophical •Varro was discoursing about religion, he did not claim to be delivering anything beyond probabilities and appearances—such were his good sense and moderation! But the passionate and zealous Augustine insults •the noble Roman on his scepticism and reserve, and professes the most thorough belief and assurance. Yet a heathen poet, contemporary with Augustine, regards his religious system as being so false that even the credulity of children could not get them to believe it.

Is it strange, when mistakes are so common, to find everyone positive and dogmatic? And that the zeal often rises in proportion to the error? Spartian writes: 'At this time the Jews began a war, because they had been forbidden to mutilate the genitals.'

If there was ever a nation or a time in which the public religion lost all authority over mankind, we might expect infidelity in Rome during the time of Cicero would openly have erected its throne, and that Cicero himself would in every speech and action have been its most open supporter. But whatever sceptical liberties that great man might take in his writings or in philosophical conversation, in the common conduct of life he seems to have avoided the charge of irreligion and profaneness. Even in his own family, and to his wife Terentia whom he highly trusted, he was willing to appear a devout religionist; and there remains a letter addressed to her in which he seriously asks her to offer sacrifice to Apollo and Æsculapius in gratitude for the recovery of his health.

Pompey's devotion was much more sincere: in all his conduct during the civil wars he paid a great regard to auguries, dreams and prophecies. Augustus was tainted with superstition of every kind. As it is reported of Milton that his poetical genius never flowed with ease and abundance in the spring, so Augustus observed that his own genius for dreaming was never as perfect or as reliable during that season as during the rest of the year. That great and able emperor was also extremely uneasy when in changing his shoes he happened to put the right shoe on the left foot. In short, it cannot be doubted that the votaries of the established superstition of antiquity were as numerous in every state as those of the modern religion are today. Its influence was as universal as the modern religion's, though it was not as great. It was assented to by as many people, though that assent seems not to have been so strong, precise,

and affirmative.

We may observe that despite the dogmatic, imperious style of all superstition, the conviction of the religionists in all ages is more pretended than real, and hardly ever comes anywhere near the solid belief and persuasion that governs us in the common affairs of life. Men dare not admit, even to their own hearts, the doubts they entertain on such subjects. They make a merit of implicit faith, and disguise to themselves their real infidelity by the strongest assertions and most positive bigotry. But nature is too *hard* for all their endeavours, and doesn't allow the dim flickering light offered in those shadowy regions to equal the strong impressions made by common sense and by experience. The usual course of men's conduct belies their words, and shows that their assent in religious matters is some inexplicable operation of the mind between disbelief and conviction, but coming much closer to the former than to the latter.

Thus, given that the mind of man appears to have such a loose and unsteady texture that even today when so many persons earn their livings using the hammer and chisel on it, they cannot engrave theological tenets on it with any lasting impression; how much more must this have been the case in ancient times when so many fewer people were dedicated to the holy function? No wonder that the appearances were then very inconsistent, with men sometimes seeming to be determined infidels and enemies to the established religion, without being so in reality—or at least without knowing their own minds in that respect.

Something else that made the ancient religions much looser than the modern ones is that the former were traditional and the latter are scriptural; and the ancient tradition was complex, contradictory, and often doubtful, so that it could not possibly be reduced to any standard and canon or yield any *determinate* articles of faith. There were

countless stories of the gods, as there are popish legends; and though almost everyone believed some of these stories, no-one could believe or know all of them; while at the same time they must all have admitted that no one story stood on a better foundation than the rest. The traditions of different cities and nations were often directly opposite, and no reason could be given for preferring one to another. And as there were countless stories that were not firmly embedded in the tradition, there was an insensible gradation from the most fundamental articles of faith to those loose and precarious fictions. So the pagan religion, whenever one got close to it and examined it piecemeal, seemed to vanish like a cloud. It could never be pinned down by any fixed dogmas and principles. And though this did not convert the general run of mankind from this absurd faith—for when will the people be reasonable?—it did make them falter and hesitate more in maintaining their principles, and was even apt to produce, in certain frames of mind, some practices and opinions that had the appearance of settled infidelity.

To which we may add that the fables of the pagan religion were in themselves light, easy, and familiar; without devils, or seas of brimstone, or any object that could much terrify the imagination. Who could refrain from smiling when he thought of the loves of Mars and Venus, or the amorous frolics of Jupiter and Pan? In this respect it was a true poetical religion, except that it had too much levity for the graver kinds of poetry. We find that it has been adopted by modern bards, who have not talked with greater freedom and irreverence of the gods they regarded as fictions than

the ancients did of the gods they regarded as real.

Here is an inference that might be thought to be sound:

A certain system of religion made no deep impression on the minds of a people; *therefore* it was positively rejected by all men of common sense, and opposite principles were generally established by argument and reasoning, in spite of the prejudices of education.

This is certainly not sound; indeed, I think that a contrary inference may be more probable. The less pushy and dogmatic any sort of superstition appears to be, the less will it provoke men's anger and indignation, or provoke them into enquiring into its foundation and origin. Anyway, his much is obvious: the command of *any* religious faith over the understanding is wavering and uncertain, subject to every variety of mood and dependent on present events that strike the imagination. Religions differ in this respect only in degree. An ancient will alternate clear signs of impiety with clear signs of superstition alternately throughout a whole discourse;<sup>1</sup> a modern often thinks in the same way, though he may be more guarded in his expression.

Lucian tells us explicitly that anyone who did not believe the most ridiculous fables of paganism was regarded by the people as profane and impious. And, indeed, why would that agreeable author have employed the whole force of his wit and satire against the national religion if that religion had not been generally believed by his countrymen and contemporaries?

<sup>1</sup> Witness this remarkable passage of Tacitus: 'Besides the manifold vicissitudes of human affairs, there were prodigies in heaven and earth, the warning voices of the thunder, and other intimations of the future, auspicious or gloomy, doubtful or not to be mistaken. Never surely did more terrible calamities of the Roman people, or evidence more conclusive, prove that the Gods take no thought for our happiness, but only for our punishment.' Augustus's quarrel with Neptune is an instance of the same kind. If the emperor did not believe Neptune to be a real being with dominion over the sea, what was his anger based on? And if he *did* believe it, what madness to provoke that deity still further!

Livy acknowledges, as frankly as any divine would do today, the common incredulity of his age; but then he condemns it as severely. Who can imagine that a national superstition which could delude such an able man would not also impose on the general run of the people?

The Stoics bestowed many magnificent and even impious epithets on their ·ideal· sage—that he alone was rich, free, a king, and equal to the immortal gods. They forgot to add that he was no more prudent or intelligent than an old woman. For surely nothing can be more pitiful than that sect's views on religious matters, when they seriously agree with the common augurs that when a raven croaks from the left it is a good omen, but a rook's making a noise from the same direction is a bad one. Panaetius was the only Greek Stoic who so much as *doubted* with regard to auguries and divinations. Marcus Antoninus tells us that he himself had received many admonitions from the gods in his sleep. It is true that Epictetus forbids us to pay any attention to the language of rooks and ravens; but it is not because they do not speak truth; it is only because they can foretell nothing but the breaking of our neck or the forfeiture of our estate—which he says are circumstances that nowise concern us. Thus the Stoics join a philosophical enthusiasm to a religious superstition. The force of their mind, being all turned to the side of morals, unbent itself in that of religion. . . .

The same Cicero who in his own family put on an appearance of being a devout religionist does not scruple in a public court of judicature to treat the doctrine of a future state as a ridiculous fable to which nobody could give any attention. Sallust reports Caesar as speaking the same language in the open senate.

But that all these freedoms did not imply a total and universal infidelity and scepticism among the people is too

obvious to be denied. Though some parts of the national religion hung loose on the minds of men, other parts adhered to them more closely; and it was the chief business of the sceptical philosophers to show that there was no more foundation for one than for the other. This is the procedure of Cotta in the dialogues concerning the nature of the gods. He refutes the whole system of mythology by leading orthodox readers from •the more momentous stories that were believed to •the more frivolous ones that everyone ridiculed, doing this *gradually*: from the gods to the goddesses, from the goddesses to the nymphs, from the nymphs to the fauns and satyrs. His master, Carneades, had employed the same method of reasoning.

Upon the whole, the greatest and most observable differences between •a traditional, mythological religion and •a systematic, scholastic one are two. **(i)** The former is often more reasonable, as consisting only of a multitude of stories which, however groundless, do not involve outright absurdity and demonstrative contradiction. **(ii)** The former also sits so easily and lightly on men's minds that, though it may be as universally accepted ·as the latter·, it fortunately makes no such deep impression on the affections and understanding.

### **13. Impious conceptions of the divine nature in popular religions of both kinds**

The primary religion of mankind arises chiefly from an anxious fear of future events; and it is easy to conceive what ideas will naturally be entertained of invisible, unknown powers when men are subject to dismal anxieties of any kind. Every image of vengeance, severity, cruelty and malice must occur, and must increase the ghastliness and horror that oppresses the dazzled believer. Once a panic has seized the mind, the active imagination still further multiplies the

objects of terror; while the profound darkness—or, worse, the glimmering light—we are surrounded by represents the spectres of divinity in the most dreadful forms imaginable. And no idea of perverse wickedness can be formed that those terrified devotees do not unhesitatingly apply to their deity.

This appears to be the natural state of religion when surveyed in one light. But if instead we consider the spirit of praise and eulogy that necessarily has a place in all religions and is the consequence of these very terrors, we must expect a quite contrary system of theology to prevail. Every virtue, every excellence, must be ascribed to the divinity, and no exaggeration will be regarded as sufficient to reach the perfections he is endowed with. Whatever strains of praise can be invented are immediately embraced, without consulting any arguments or phenomena. They are regarded as sufficiently confirmed by the fact that they give us more magnificent ideas of the divine objects of our worship and adoration.

Here therefore is a kind of contradiction between the different principles [see Glossary] of human nature that enter into religion. Our natural terrors present the notion of a devilish and malicious deity; our propensity to adulation leads us to acknowledge one that is excellent and divine. The influences of these opposite principles are various, according to the different situations of the human understanding.

In very barbarous and ignorant nations, such as the Africans and Indians—indeed, even the Japanese—who can form no extensive ideas of power and knowledge, worship may be paid to a being whom they admit to be wicked and detestable; though they may be cautious about uttering this admission in public, or in his temple, where he may be supposed to hear their reproaches.

Such rough and imperfect ideas of the Divinity stay for a long time with all idolaters, and it is safe to say that the

Greeks themselves never entirely got rid of them. Xenophon remarks, in praise of Socrates, that this philosopher did not accept the vulgar opinion that the gods know some things and are ignorant of others; he maintained that they knew everything—what was done, said, or even thought. But as this was a strain of philosophy much above the conception of his countrymen, it is not surprising that in their books and conversation they very frankly *blamed* the deities whom they *worshipped* in their temples. Herodotus in particular often freely ascribes envy to the gods, the most suitable sentiment of all to a mean and devilish nature. The pagan hymns, however, sung in public worship, contained nothing but epithets of praise; even while the actions ascribed to the gods were the most barbarous and detestable. When the poet Timotheus recited a hymn to Diana, enumerating with the greatest eulogies all the actions and attributes of that cruel, capricious goddess, one of his audience said: ‘May your daughter become such as the deity whom you celebrate.’

As men further exalt their idea of their divinity, it is their notion of his power and knowledge that is enlarged, not their notion of his goodness. On the contrary, their terrors naturally increase in proportion to the supposed extent of his knowledge and authority; while they believe that no secrecy can conceal them from his scrutiny, and that even the inmost recesses of their hearts lie open before him. So they must be careful not to form explicitly any sentiment of blame and disapproval. All must be applause, ravishment, extasy. And while their gloomy anxieties make them ascribe to him measures of conduct that would be highly blamed in human creatures, they must still purport to praise and admire that conduct in the object of their devotional addresses. So it is safe to say that popular religions are, in the conception of their more vulgar votaries, really a kind of demonism; and the higher the deity is exalted in power and knowledge, the lower

he is automatically depressed in goodness and benevolence, no matter what epithets of praise may be bestowed on him by his dazzled adorers. Among ·low-level· idolaters **a** the words may be false, and belie **b** the secret opinion. But among higher-level religionists **b** the opinion itself contracts a kind of falsehood and belie **c** the inward sentiment. The **c** heart secretly detests such measures of cruel and implacable vengeance; but **b** the judgment doesn't dare not to pronounce them perfect and adorable. The additional misery of this *inward* struggle worsens all the other terrors by which these unhappy victims to superstition are for ever haunted.

Lucian observes that a young man who reads the history of the gods in Homer or Hesiod, and finds their factions, wars, injustice, incest, adultery and other immoralities so highly celebrated, is much surprised when he later comes into the world and finds that punishments are inflicted by law on the very actions he had been taught to ascribe to superior beings. The contradiction is perhaps even stronger between the representations given us by some later religions and our natural ideas of generosity, lenience, impartiality and justice; and in proportion to the multiplied terrors of these religions the barbarous conceptions of the divinity are multiplied on us. Nothing can preserve untainted the genuine principles of morals in our judgment of human conduct but the absolute necessity of these principles to the existence of society. If common conception can indulge princes in a system of ethics somewhat different from what should regulate private persons, how much more those superior beings whose attributes, views, and nature are so totally unknown to us? The gods have maxims of justice peculiar to themselves.

#### 14. Popular religions' bad influence on morality

Here I cannot refrain from mentioning a fact that may be worth the attention of students of human nature. It is certain that in every religion, however sublime the verbal definition it gives of its divinity, many and perhaps most of the votaries will still seek the divine favour not through virtue and good morals, which alone can be acceptable to a perfect being, but by

- frivolous observances,
- intemperate zeal,
- rapturous ecstasies, or
- believing mysterious and absurd doctrines.

The least part of the Jewish prayer-book, as well as of the Pentateuch, consists in precepts of morality; and we can be sure that that part was always the least observed and regarded. When the old Romans were attacked with a pestilence, they never ascribed their sufferings to their vices or dreamed of repentance and amendment. They never thought that they were the general robbers of the world, whose ambition and avarice made the earth desolate and reduced rich nations to want and beggary. They only created a dictator to drive a nail into a door, thinking that this will have sufficiently appeased their angry deity. . . .

It never happens, but just suppose that a popular religion were found in which it was explicitly declared that nothing but morality could gain the divine favour, and that an order of priests was instituted to inculcate this doctrine in daily sermons and with all the arts of persuasion. So inveterate are the people's prejudices that for lack of some other superstition they would regard the essential thing in religion not as •virtue and good morals but as •attendance on these sermons. . . .

Why are people like that? Well, people everywhere degrade their deities into something like themselves, and consider them merely as a species of human creatures, somewhat more potent and thinking. But this does not answer the question; for there is no man so stupid that he would not, judging by his natural reason, regard virtue and honesty as the most valuable qualities any person could possess. Why not ascribe the same sentiment to his deity? Why not make all religion, or the chief part of it, consist in these attainments?

Nor is it satisfactory to say that the practice of morality is rejected because it is more difficult than the practice of superstition. For, not to mention the excessive penances of the Buddhist monks, it is certain that the Ramadan of the Moslems—

during which the poor wretches, for many days, often in the hottest months of the year and in some of the hottest climates of the world, remain without eating or drinking from sunrise to sunset

—must be more severe than the practice of any moral duty, even for the most vicious and depraved of mankind. The four Lents of the Muscovites, and the austerities of some Roman Catholics, appear more disagreeable than meekness and benevolence. In short, all virtue is agreeable, when men are reconciled to it by ever so little practice; whereas all superstition is always odious and burdensome.

Perhaps the following account may be received as a true solution of the difficulty. The duties a man performs as a friend or parent seem to be something he owes to his benefactor or his children, and he cannot fail in these duties without breaking through all the ties of nature and morality. A strong inclination may prompt him to the performance; a sentiment of order and moral obligation joins its force to these natural ties; and the whole man, if he is truly

virtuous, is drawn to his duty without any effort or endeavour. Even with regard to the virtues that are more austere and more founded on reflection—such as public spirit, filial duty, temperance or integrity—the moral obligation removes, we think, all claim to religious merit; and the virtuous conduct is regarded as merely what we owe to society and to ourselves. A superstitious man finds nothing in all this that he has performed for the sake of this deity or that can specially recommend him to the divine favour and protection. He does not consider that the most genuine method of serving the divinity is to promote the happiness of his creatures. He still looks out for some more immediate service of the supreme Being, in order to allay the terrors that haunt him. And any practice that is recommended to him and that either •serves no purpose in life or •offers the strongest violence to his natural inclinations he will the more readily embrace precisely because of those very circumstances that should make him absolutely reject it. It seems ·to him· more purely religious because no other motive or consideration comes into it. And if for its sake he sacrifices much of his ease and quiet, his claim of merit appears to be strengthened in proportion to the zeal and devotion he exhibits. When he restores a loan or pays a debt, this does nothing for his divinity, because these acts of justice are what he was bound to perform—and what many *would* have performed—if there were no god in the universe. But if he fasts for a day or gives himself a sound whipping, he sees this as having a direct reference to the service of God. No other motive could draw him to such austerities. By these distinguished marks of devotion he has now acquired the divine favour, and he may expect to be rewarded with protection and safety in this world and eternal happiness in the next.

Hence the greatest crimes have often been found compatible with a superstitious piety and devotion. Hence it is

rightly regarded as unsafe to draw confident conclusions about a man's morals from the fervour or strictness of his religious exercises, even if he himself believes them to be sincere. Indeed, it has been observed that enormities of the blackest dye have been apt to produce superstitious terrors and *increase* the religious passion. Bomilcar, having formed a conspiracy to assassinate the whole senate of Carthage and invade the liberties of his country, lost the opportunity because of a continual regard to omens and prophecies. Those who undertake the most criminal and most dangerous enterprises are commonly the most superstitious; as an ancient historian remarks on this topic, 'Their devotion and spiritual faith rise with their fears.' Catiline was not contented with the established deities and accepted rites of the national religion. His anxious terrors made him seek new inventions of this kind, which he would probably never have dreamed of if he had remained a good citizen and obedient to the laws of his country.

To which we may add that after the commission of crimes there arise remorse and secret horrors, which give no rest to the mind but make it resort to religious rites and ceremonies as expiations of its offences. Whatever weakens or disorders the internal frame •promotes the interests of superstition; and nothing is more •destructive to them than a manly, steady virtue, which preserves us from disastrous and melancholy accidents or else teaches us to bear them. During such calm sunshine of the mind, these spectres of false divinity never make their appearance. On the other hand, while we abandon ourselves to the natural undisciplined suggestions of our timid and anxious hearts, every kind of **barbarity** is ascribed to the supreme Being, because of the terrors we are agitated by; and every kind of **caprice** because of the methods we adopt to appease him. **a** Barbarity and **b** caprice; these qualities, however disguised verbally, can be

seen to form the ruling character of the deity in all popular religions. Even priests, instead of correcting these depraved ideas of mankind, have often been found ready to foster and encourage them. The more **a** tremendous the divinity is represented as being, the more tame and submissive men become to his ministers; and the more **b** unaccountable the measures of acceptance he requires, the more necessary it becomes to abandon our natural reason and yield to the ministers' ghostly guidance and direction. Thus it may be allowed that the artifices of men *worsen* our natural infirmities and follies of this kind but never originally *beget* them. Their root strikes deeper into the mind, and springs from the essential and universal properties of human nature.

### 15. General corollary

Though the stupidity of barbarous and uninstructed men is so great that they may fail to see a sovereign author in the more obvious works of nature that are so familiar to them, it scarcely seems possible that anyone of good understanding should reject that idea once it has been suggested to him. A purpose, an intention, a design is evident in everything; and when our thinking broadens enough to contemplate the first rise of this visible system, we must adopt with the strongest conviction the idea of some thinking cause or author. The uniform regularities that prevail throughout the universe lead us—naturally, if not necessarily—to conceive this intelligence as single and undivided, where the prejudices of education do not oppose such a reasonable theory. Even the contrarieties of nature, by revealing themselves everywhere, become proofs of some consistent plan and establish one single purpose or intention, however inexplicable and incomprehensible.

Good and ill are universally intermingled and confounded; happiness and misery, wisdom and folly, virtue and vice. Nothing is pure and entirely of a piece. All advantages are accompanied by disadvantages. . . . It is not possible for us by our most chimerical wishes to form the idea of a station or situation that is altogether desirable. According to the poet's fiction, the draughts of life are always mixed from the vessels on each hand of Jupiter; or if any cup is presented altogether pure and unmixed, it is drawn (as the same poet tells us) from the vessel on the left.

Few exceptions are found to this uniform law of nature: The more exquisite any good is of which a small specimen is provided for us, the sharper is the evil allied to it.

- The most sprightly wit borders on madness;
- the highest effusions of joy produce the deepest melancholy;
- the most ravishing pleasures are accompanied by the most cruel lassitude and disgust;
- the most glittering hopes make way for the severest disappointments.

And, in general, no course of life has as much safety as the temperate and moderate course, which maintains as far as possible the middle of the road and a kind of insensibility in everything. (I say 'safety' because happiness is not to be dreamed of.)

As the good, the great, the sublime and the ravishing are found eminently in the genuine principles of theism, it may be expected, from the analogy of nature described in the preceding paragraph, that the base, the absurd, the mean and the terrifying will be equally discovered in religious fictions and chimeras.

The universal propensity to believe in invisible, thinking power, if not an original instinct, is at least a general attendant of human nature and so may be considered as a kind of

mark or stamp that the divine workman has set on his work; and surely nothing can more dignify mankind than to be thus selected from all other parts of the creation, and to bear the image or impression of the universal Creator. But consult this image as it appears in the popular religions of the world. How is the deity disfigured in our representations of him! What caprice, absurdity, and immorality are attributed to him! How much is he degraded even below the character we would naturally in common life ascribe to a man of sense and virtue!

What a noble privilege is it of human reason to attain the knowledge of the supreme Being, and to be enabled to infer from the visible works of nature such a sublime principle [see Glossary] as its supreme Creator? But look at the back of the medal. Survey most nations and most ages. Examine the religious principles that have in fact prevailed in the world. You will scarcely be persuaded that they are anything but sick men's dreams; or perhaps you'll regard them as the playful whimsies of monkeys in human shape rather than the serious, positive, dogmatic assertions of a being who dignifies himself with the label 'rational'.

Hear the verbal protestations of all men: Nothing so certain as their religious tenets. Examine their lives: You will scarcely think they have the smallest confidence in them.

The greatest and truest zeal gives us no security against hypocrisy. The most open impiety is accompanied by a secret dread and compunction.

No theological absurdities are so glaring that they have never been embraced by men of the greatest and most cultivated understanding. No religious precepts are so rigorous that they have not been adopted by the most voluptuous and most abandoned of men.

*Ignorance is the mother of devotion*—a maxim that is proverbial, and confirmed by general experience. Look out

for a people with no religion at all; if you find them, be assured, that they are only a few degrees above brutes.

What is so pure as some of the morals included in some theological systems? What is so corrupt as some of the practices these systems give rise to?

The comfortable views exhibited by the belief in a future life are ravishing and delightful. But how quickly they vanish on the appearance of that life's terrors, which keep a more firm and durable possession of the human mind!

The whole thing is a riddle, an enigma, an inexplicable mystery. Our most careful scrutiny of this subject produces nothing but doubt, uncertainty and suspense of judgment. But such is the frailty of human reason, and such the irresistible contagion of opinion, that even this deliberate doubt could scarcely be upheld if we didn't enlarge our view, oppose one species of superstition to another, and set them quarrelling, while we happily make our escape, into the calm though obscure regions of philosophy.