

# Supervised Church and Religious Toleration in Hume

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**Abstract:** This paper offers a rational reconstruction of Hume's conception of an established church supervised by the government as a proposed solution to religious intolerance and the abuse of clerical power. Drawing on the model of the Anglican church, Hume approved of government intervention in the selection of clergy members, their remuneration as public employees, the nationalization of church property, and potentially the subjection of church doctrine to governmental authorization. Drawing on Conti's analysis of toleration, I argue that Hume assigned no intrinsic value to individual religious freedom and did not share the classical liberal principle of the separation of church and state. Rather, his position is pragmatic and utilitarian. I also highlight Hume's positive remarks on the potential social benefits of an established church. Additionally, I examine the essay *Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth* to examine Hume's apparent position on how a state-controlled church can be reconciled with a free society. There is a tension in the Humean view: monarchy, with its strong central power, can establish a supervised church; however, it thereby creates the conditions for the abuse of governmental power. By contrast, in the decentralized republic apparently preferred by Hume the government is more accountable to citizens, yet in the absence of a strong central authority, the conduct of churches cannot be so easily regulated.

**Keywords:** Hume, David; church and state; toleration, religious; religious conflict; religious freedom; state religion; religious psychology; Christianity, church and; constitution, religion, church and republic, state, church supervision, toleration

## Introduction

The devastating experience of the religious wars following the Reformation placed the relationship between church and state, as well as the problem of religious toleration, at the centre of early modern political thought. Both the liberal Lockean theory and the ecclesiastical policy set forth in Hobbes's *Leviathan* were motivated by the desire to preserve confessional peace and establish social cohesion.

In this paper, I examine Hume's various texts on religious freedom and the relationship between church and state. My aim is rational reconstruction, that is, to uncover the considerations that apparently led Hume to believe that the state ought to restrict and oversee the churches. The reconstructed argument does not appear in a unified, explicit form in Hume's writings. Rather, its individual premises and the logical connections between them are dispersed across several different texts.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the *History of England* and

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<sup>1</sup> Dees (2005) offers a rational reconstruction of Hume's arguments in favour of religious toleration. In a manner consistent with the position I develop, the concept of the state-controlled church in Dees's reading likewise serves as the precondition for a distinctive, non-liberally grounded form of toleration.

the essay *Of Superstition and Enthusiasm*, my analysis incorporates, among other works, the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, *The Natural History of Religion*, and the less frequently examined *Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth*.

Granted that religious intolerance, fanaticism, and clerical power threaten social order, the question is why and what the government must do to preserve peace and civil liberty. I reconstruct the Humean answer as follows: as with the Anglican Church, the government must bring the clergy and ecclesiastical institutions under its control. Hume approved of a government that supervises the church, including selection of clergy members, their remuneration as public employees, the nationalisation of church property, and potentially the subjection of church doctrine to governmental authorisation. This position assigns no intrinsic value to individual religious freedom and does not share the classical liberal principle of the separation of church and state. At the same time, it cannot be characterised as radically secular and authoritarian, but rather as pragmatic and utilitarian.

The reconstruction I offer draws on Conti's descriptive analysis of what Hume took to be the social and historical processes by which initially fanatical and intolerant religious enthusiasm ~~yield~~-yields peaceful religious toleration. Conti (2015) examines how religious enthusiasm is moderated, a process that may spontaneously lead to religious toleration. In that case the state's role in overseeing the churches would be superfluous, or at best supplementary. Against this view, I argue that for Hume the emergence of religious toleration is neither necessary nor does it produce long-term stability without governmental intervention.

Furthermore, I point out that, according to Hume, the philosophical and theological critique of religion can have its greatest effect primarily among the educated classes, while its broader social impact is severely limited. Religion therefore retains a significant role, namely safeguarding the morals of masses and maintaining social order. I argue that ~~an~~ institutionalized and hierarchical church, which Hume took to typically and even ideally contain strong elements of what he called superstition, is, in his view, the desirable form of a church, provided that it is supervised and controlled by a central government. Following Costelloe (2004), I examine a number of passages, drawn principally from the *History of England*, in which Hume wrote positively of the Anglican and Catholic churches, highlighting their roles in reinforcing social cohesion and transmitting knowledge. This provides us with a further reason why Hume may have been committed to the state-controlled church, since intolerance among the various denominations undermines not only peace but also religion's potentially beneficial social functions.

Finally, reflecting on the Humean conception, I examine how the idea of a state-controlled church can be reconciled with a free society, that is, how it may be possible to prevent the state from becoming autocratic. In this context, I analyse those portions of the essay *Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth* that bear on ecclesiastical policy. The Humean position implies that while monarchy, with its strong central power, affords the opportunity to institute a government-controlled church, it equally creates the conditions for abuse of power. On the other hand, in a decentralized republic, state power is more readily held accountable to citizens, yet in the absence of a strong central will, the oversight of churches can be realized only locally and ineffectively due to a scattered administration.

## 1. The origins of religion: popular religion and the philosophical critique of religion

In *The Natural History of Religion*, Hume offered the following psychological and historical account of the formation of religious beliefs. Historically, polytheism emerged first, followed by monotheism (N 1.1–3).<sup>2</sup> Both are grounded in fear of the unknown, ignorance of natural laws, and anthropomorphism, that is, the human tendency to posit personal agents behind unknown and threatening natural causes. What Hume called vulgar religion or superstition is rooted in this anthropomorphizing tendency and in the human need to understand and exert

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<sup>2</sup> See the Bibliographical Note to this issue of *Hume Studies* for a key to references to Hume's works.

control over unknown and dangerous natural phenomena (drought, floods, storms, fire, and so on.) (N1.6–8; 2.1–5). According to Hume, such a psychological and social need gives rise to religious rites and to the priesthood, whose function is to interpret positive or negative events for the faithful as divine reward or punishment. The clergy also maintains religious practice, which amounts to an expression of fearful veneration towards God or the gods.<sup>3</sup> In Hume's view, such a wholly irrational, superstitious, anthropomorphic system of belief and practice persists not only in polytheism but in Christian monotheism as well. Moreover, through scholastic theology it receives further intellectual reinforcement which, from the standpoint of Hume's empiricist critique of metaphysics, is philosophically unfounded or devoid of clear meaning (N 11.2–4).

Nevertheless, in numerous passages of *The Natural History of Religion*, Hume appears to endorse a minimal philosophical theism: the thesis that there probably exists an intelligence responsible for the causal order of the universe (N 0.1, 3.3, 5.2, 6.2, 15.1, 15.6). It is a matter of debate among Hume scholars whether *The Natural History of Religion* is only a quasi-history of the formation of superstition, or applicable to philosophical theism as well. If the latter, then the account of the origins of religion can be read as a covert critique of philosophical theism. If philosophical theism is supported not by psychological causes but by rational (even if ultimately insufficient) arguments, then the Humean distinction between true religion and vulgar religion is not merely a rhetorical device or irony but carries substantive significance.<sup>4</sup>

Independently of this question, it is important for understanding Hume's conception of religious policy to note that he considered the philosophical critique of Christianity to have little impact on the masses and to reach the educated elite only.<sup>5</sup> Metaphysical and epistemological arguments and counterarguments are too complex and too difficult to grasp for the common people (N 1.3–8). The uneducated masses, moreover, do not believe in the existence of God because of philosophical arguments (most importantly, the argument from design), but rather because fear of the unknown and the unpredictable future, combined with ignorance of natural laws, leads them to posit capricious, invisible intelligent powers behind phenomena (N 2.2–5; 3.1–3). This is why people seek, through various rites and ceremonies, to influence the decrees of God or the gods (N 2.2–3, 3.3–4). However one understands the positive claims regarding the existence of an intelligent creator, the central argument of *The Natural History of Religion* is that mass belief in even the imperturbable, benevolent, all-powerful god of the philosophers is not grounded in the argument from design or other abstract arguments. Its foundations are not rational but psychological, and therefore it cannot easily be altered ~~on~~ by philosophical reasons.

While secularism might in principle be desirable for psychological, anthropological, and social reasons, Hume did not consider it likely that society will become entirely irreligious in

<sup>3</sup> "Those who undertake the most criminal and most dangerous enterprizes are commonly the most superstitious" (N 14.7). "To which we may add, that, after commission of crimes, there arise remorse and secret horrors, which give no rest to the mind, but make it have recourse 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 either preserves us from disastrous, melancholy accidents, or teaches us to bear them" (N 14.8).

<sup>4</sup> Kelahan (2016), Yandell (1990), and Kail (2007), on the basis of different considerations, all argue that *The Natural History of Religion* offers a critique of all possible forms of theistic belief, since anthropomorphism is irrational and undermines the rationality not only of polytheism and traditional monotheism but of philosophical theism as well. Other interpreters, such as Livingston (1998), Yoder (2008), and Gaskin (1988), read the Humean passages in support of philosophical, minimal theism as sincere and earnest expressions. If the Humean distinction between true religion or genuine theism, and popular or vulgar religion is genuine, then the argument from design may ultimately provide a respectable rational foundation for at least a weak deist position. See further Hartl (2024a; 81–102; 2024b) and Marušić (2012).

<sup>5</sup> Instead of attempting to persuade the masses, philosophers should be conformists with respect to religion and should keep their fictionalist and pragmatist attitudes towards religion to themselves. Demeter (2014, 196) argues that in E 11, Hume accepts, (even if not explicitly) a position that Demeter calls 'religious fictionalism'. According to this view, religious doctrines are false, but their truth value is not important, since religion is not an epistemic enterprise. For Demeter (198–9), 'Humean fictionalism' is an unstable position. Religious doctrines can serve as principles of action only as long as they are not called into question, and if one does not believe in religious doctrines, then religious belief cannot serve as a motive for action.

the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, Hume's remark (E 11.28) that sceptical and atheist philosophers may be "good reasoners" but cannot be "good citizens" has a clear meaning: even if religion lacks sufficient rational justification, it has a certain practical value and utility for society insofar as it encourages citizens to follow social norms.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Religious enthusiasm, superstition, and toleration

For the reconstruction of Hume's conception of religious policy, it is necessary to clarify the concepts of superstition and enthusiasm. Catholicism is the paradigmatic example of the former, and ~~the~~ Protestantism of the latter (SE 2–6). As noted above, Hume held that religion originates in the superstitious fear of the malevolence of capricious, invisible intelligent powers, and that rites and offerings serve to manage this fear. Since the powers seem too dangerous to approach directly, the masses tend to call on others "whose sanctity of life, or, perhaps, impudence and cunning" (SE 5) make them seem better qualified to intercede on ~~their~~ ~~the people's~~ behalf, and ~~they~~ ~~these others~~ become the priests of the superstition. Hume identified in superstition the danger of clerical domination and overreach, of which Catholicism furnishes the most telling example (SE 8–9). Religious enthusiasm, by contrast, is caused by an exalted mental state, rapture, and an inflamed imagination. The adherents of religious enthusiasm (e.g., Quakers, Anabaptists, Jansenists) feel themselves to be in direct communion with God and therefore have no need of a priesthood (SE 9). In Hume's view, these denominations and sects are initially more violent and fanatical than institutionalized, traditional churches, even though they moderate over time.<sup>7</sup> One reason for this is that there is no clerical body to maintain the doctrines and ceremonies of the faith.<sup>8</sup> Since religious enthusiasts are critical not only of religious but also of civil authority, Hume argued that "superstition is an enemy to civil liberty, and enthusiasm a friend to it" (SE 9).

It appears that religious toleration may ~~also~~ emerge through spontaneous social processes. Conti (2015, 179–88) calls this the 'low road' to toleration. In the following, firstly, I outline the main points of Conti's interpretation. Then, I argue that toleration arising solely from the spontaneous moderation of enthusiasm would not produce long-term stability, and that the maintenance of peace among religions and of social order requires a governmentally controlled church, and ideally a single, dominant one. In other words, Conti's analysis ultimately provides a good reason in support of the Humean ecclesiastical policy.

On Conti's (2015, 167–9) reading, Hume's account of the emergence of toleration can be contrasted with standard Enlightenment explanations, according to which toleration and social peace will eventually come about through the gradual civilizing of humanity, the spread of free trade and capitalism, or the progressive diffusion of secular philosophy.

Philosophy, according to Hume, is prone to be corrupted to enter the service of institutional religion. Theology is nothing more than metaphysical speculation that reinforces dogmas held to be ~~unquestionable and dangerous or even heretical to doubt exclusively true. Meaning, dogmas cannot be questioned and what differs from or contradicts to dogma is not only false, but heretical and dangerous.~~ For Hume, the paradigmatic cases are scholasticism and Catholicism.<sup>9</sup> Hume contrasted his own philosophical method (moderate

<sup>6</sup> Hume thus disagreed with the rationalist conception of human nature and the belief in progress that became dominant during the Enlightenment. According to that conception religious intolerance, and indeed religion itself, will sooner or later disappear with the advance of social development (Conti 2015, 167–72).

<sup>7</sup> Hume mentioned, among others, the Anabaptists, the Camisards, the Jansenists, the Quakers, the Levellers, the Independents, and the Scottish Covenanters as enthusiast sects (SE 6–7, 9). Interestingly, Hume counted Jansenist among the enthusiasts, although they were Catholics and did not repudiate priesthood.

<sup>8</sup> "My second reflection with regard to these species of false religion is, *that religions, which partake of enthusiasm are, on their first rise, more furious and violent than those which partake of superstition; but in a little time become more gentle and moderate*" (SE 7). But "When the first fire of enthusiasm is spent, men naturally, in all fanatical sects, sink into the greatest remissness and coolness in sacred matters; there being no body of men among them, endowed with sufficient authority, whose interest is concerned to support the religious spirit: No rites, no ceremonies, no holy observances, which may enter into the common train of life, and preserve the sacred principles from oblivion" ((SE 8).

<sup>9</sup> This thought appears in *The Natural History of Religion* (11.3–5), where Hume criticised the fusion of Christian dogmas with scholastic metaphysics, contrasting it with ancient Greek and Roman mythology, which in his view



or academic scepticism) above all with scholastic Christian philosophy and theology. However, he maintained that speculative rational arguments, which are difficult for most people to understand, have little influence on the greater part of society. For Hume speculative philosophical arguments are accessible only for a selected, learned few. The “vulgar” are typically not capable of comprehending abstract philosophical arguments, including, arguments concerning the existence of God or any theological arguments. The utility of philosophy, when it follows the correct method and thus rejects theology and scholastic metaphysics, is accessible only to ‘a few persons, who have leisure to apply themselves’ (PG 1). Beyond this, there is no indication that for Hume philosophy has any social impact or utility. He stated that “general virtue and good morals in a state, which are so requisite to happiness, can never arise from the most refined precepts of philosophy” (PG 1). If tolerance is a virtue or a consequence of a virtue, then philosophy will not bring it about it-and-or diminish religious fanaticism or intolerance.<sup>10</sup>

The other factor that might spontaneously give rise to religious toleration is the natural mildness of human beings. Against this, Hume argued that disagreement over religious doctrines is intense and that people are not inclined towards compromise. Rather, they tend to be intolerant of opposing views, finding it irritating and disturbing when they encounter contrary positions (even on speculative questions) (PG 5, 12). There is thus little reason to believe that people, upon witnessing religious wars, will of their own accord eventually become peaceful and tolerant (Conti 2015, 170).

Furthermore, Conti convincingly argues that Hume does-did not rely on the idea (also influential in the eighteenth century) that free trade eliminates social conflict. According to this view, the spread of commerce leads people and nations of different faiths and denominations to see one another not as enemies of the true faith but as business partners. Although Hume frequently wrote approvingly of the civilizing effects of commerce, his position on whether there is direct causal connection between toleration and free trade is unclear-ambiguous.<sup>11, 12</sup> According to Hume's conception of human nature, economic interests are not always primary, and considerations of doctrine and salvation therefore frequently override material calculations (Conti 2015, -171–2).<sup>13</sup>

Conti (2015, 177), however, maintains that religious toleration nevertheless emerges independently of these factors and despite our dogmatic reaction to disagreement.<sup>14</sup> Conti

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people regarded as nothing more than fables. He restated the same idea in the essay *Of Parties in General* (PG 14).

<sup>10</sup> This does not contradict the statements in the essay *Of Suicide*, if these are read as referring narrowly to the educated elite: “One considerable advantage, that arises from philosophy, consists in the sovereign antidote, which it affords to superstition and false religion.... when sound philosophy has once gained possession of the mind, superstition is effectually excluded; and one may safely affirm, that her triumph over this enemy is more compleat than over most of the vices and imperfections, incident to human nature. Love or anger, ambition or avarice, have their root in the temper and affections, which the soundest reason is scarce ever able fully to correct. But superstition, being founded on false opinion, must immediately vanish, when true philosophy has inspired juster sentiments of superior powers” (Su 1).

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the strongest statement is “[B]eside the improvements which they receive from knowledge and the liberal arts, it is impossible but they must feel an increase of humanity, from the very habit of conversing together, and contributing to each other's pleasure and entertainment. Thus industry, knowledge, and humanity, are linked together by an indissoluble chain, and are found, from experience as well as reason, to be peculiar to the more polished, and, what are commonly denominated, the more luxurious ages.” (RA 5). A possible interpretation is that “increase of humanity” would also facilitate religious tolerance, but the text is ambiguous—Hume may only have intended to refer to the improvement of good manners and civilization in history-contemporary Europe contrasted to the so-called barbarous ages.

<sup>12</sup> Hume did not, however, share the classical republican critique of free trade. Commerce, the accumulation and enjoyment of luxury goods, are not harmful or improper so long as they do not come at the expense of generosity and benevolence. Moreover, trade contributes greatly to the refinement of manners, to the advancement of the sciences and arts, and to the cultivation of civic virtues (RA 2–5).

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<sup>14</sup> Conti (2015, 174–5) identifies the influence of Shaftesbury in connection with Hume's thesis on the moderation of religious enthusiasm.

argues that the key is to be found in the *History of England*, where, in contrast to the essay *Of Superstition and Enthusiasm* Hume contended that it is not the natural calming of enthusiasm that brings about toleration. Characteristic of enthusiasm is that the faithful experience the Christian faith as an individual, subjective emotional reality, one in which the belief in objectively true theological dogmas plays no part (Conti 2015, 181–183). Hume argued [here in the History](#) that toleration is brought about precisely by the fact that enthusiast sects remain at the level of a purely emotional, dogma-free relationship with God, so that doctrinal differences cease to be relevant. According to Conti, the enthusiasm that denies the relevance or even the knowability of religious doctrines resembles the approach of sceptical philosophy. In terms of its social effect, it ultimately achieves what sceptical philosophy is incapable of achieving (Conti 2015, 183–184).

To summarise, two readings of Conti's reconstruction are possible. On the first, no governmental intervention is required to sustain toleration. On this reading, the concept of the governmentally controlled church does not follow from Hume's thesis concerning enthusiasm, and perhaps the normative principle that the state must control the church is therefore not an essential component of his conception. The state may do so but has no compelling reason to. The alternative reading, which I take to be the correct one holds that the emergence of toleration is a historically contingent process that provides no long-term guarantee against either the undesirable clerical overreach that Hume warns of, or the renewed eruption of religious conflict.

There are several arguments in defence of this position. First, for Hume, not every religion qualifies as enthusiasm. Even if it were necessary and lawful that every instance of religious enthusiasm would in time become moderate and supportive of civil liberty, this thesis could in no way apply to institutionalized, hierarchical churches, which, according to Hume, retain an organized priesthood and other relics of superstition, such as an investment in the efficacy of “works” over “grace” for personal salvation (see SE 10 and H 51: 211–12). Religious peace among different denominations must therefore be provided for in any case. Furthermore, Conti (2015, 177) notes that Hume was himself aware that enthusiasm, once calmed, may in time become fanatical again. The *History of England* provides several examples showing that the establishment of religious peace is neither irrevocable nor permanent, but rather that, as social circumstances change, religious fanaticism and persecution may re-emerge.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, as will be seen, for Hume it is not enthusiast religious communities but rather the Anglican established church that, under a governmental policy he considers desirable, is capable of generating unity, social cohesion, and religious toleration.<sup>16</sup>

### 3 The positive social effects of institutionalized religion

Hume generally employed the term 'vulgar religion' in a pejorative sense.<sup>17</sup> He had numerous historical examples of religious persecution and state violence grounded in religion, referring to the monotheistic religions in particular. One of these cases is Queen Mary I's campaign against Protestants, which Hume contrasted with Queen Elizabeth's relative toleration (H 37, 431–3; 38, 7–8, 14–15). Furthermore, Hume held that the so-called

<sup>15</sup> The most obvious example of this is the persecution of Protestants under Queen Mary I (H 37:431–6). Mary's reign created a situation in which previously calmed fanatical sentiments were reinvigorated. The persecution, eventually, inflamed “enthusiasm” and religious fanaticism. Another example is John Knox's Calvinist movement during the Scottish Reformation. The movement was persecuted under Queen Mary but was able to spread its doctrines relatively freely under the Protestant Queen Elizabeth. Knox's hostility towards female rulers and other sermons that were considered radical even in his own time played an important role in the spread of the Scottish Presbyterian Church, while at the same time reinforcing religious intolerance (H 38:31–2).

<sup>16</sup> Several commentators note that the Anglican Church serves as a kind of model for Hume (Sabl 2009, 520, 536n44).

<sup>17</sup> Gaskin (1988, 193–4) argues that Hume had a distorted and one-sided picture of the psychology of religious practice, presumably owing to the influence of the harsh Scottish Presbyterianism that shaped his upbringing. Hume's contemporaries, such as William Warburton and James Boswell, directed their criticisms against him as an 'infidel' (Mossner 2001, 232, 289–90, 325–6, 587–8).

monastic virtues (celibacy, fasting, humility, solitude, silence, etc.) are entirely useless and incapable of contributing to the human happiness that accompanies social life (M 9.3, N 10.2).

Despite his vigorous critique of institutional religion, Hume explicitly stated that the effects of religion are mixed: it has both positive and negative consequences.<sup>18</sup> In his *History of England*, in numerous passages Hume wrote of the positive historical and social role of the church and ecclesiastical institutions, and even of the clergy. He considered reasons “why there must be an ecclesiastical order, and a public establishment of religion in every civilized community” (H 29: 134–135). Although certain occupations, including the clerical order, “bring no particular advantage or pleasure to any individual” (H29: 135), the church is nonetheless “useful and even necessary” (H29: 135). Even if the church has “a natural tendency to pervert the true [religion], by infusing into it a strong mixture of superstition, folly, and delusion.” (H 29: 135–136).<sup>19</sup>

In several places, Hume acknowledged that institutional religion has, in certain cases, had a favourable influence on knowledge and the advancement of learning. Somewhat surprisingly in light of his vigorous critique of so-called Catholic superstition, he alluded to the beneficial role played by the Catholic Church in the fields of culture and education during the Middle Ages. He accepted that monks and priests played a decisive role in the preservation of ancient philosophy and science, and in the transmission and dissemination of knowledge. In one passage (H App.2: 473), Hume recalled that Catholic clergy studied and transmitted knowledge of Roman law, particularly under the reigns of Edward V and Richard III (H 23: 520). As Costelloe (2004, 182) points out, despite Hume’s severe critique of the monastic virtues, he did not deny that the monasteries had “many good effects” and that their dissolution was “much regretted by the people of England” (H 35: 368–369).

Furthermore, Hume emphasised that religion is at times capable of uniting nations and of maintaining social peace and order. Hume wrote approvingly of the positive role of the Catholic clergy. For instance, bishops and prelates checked royal despotism. Hume also admitted that “the union of all the western churches under the supreme pontiff facilitated the intercourse of nations, and tended to bind all parts of Europe into close connection with each other.” (H 29, 137). Additionally, Hume maintained that the Catholic church helped to cultivate the fine arts and refined taste by linking it to worship (H 29, 137). Costelloe (2004, 181) draws attention to Hume’s favourable account of Christianity’s civilizing influence on the early Saxon kingdoms: the opening up of commerce and communication with the continent (H 1, 27–9). Moreover, Hume considered that the church served to reconcile the interests of different social groups. Under the reign of Henry III, for instance, the archbishop and the bishops smoothed over the tensions between the king and the barons (H 12, 13–14). In this case, the clergy prevented civil war and violence.<sup>20</sup> That is to say, so-called superstition can, in certain circumstances, prove socially beneficial.

In ~~the preface~~ [note to earlier editions of the \*History of England\*](#), Hume stated that the proper role of religion is, or rather ought to be, the maintenance of social and moral order:

The proper office of religion is to reform men’s lives, to purify their hearts, to inforce all moral

<sup>18</sup> “As the good, the great, the sublime, the ravishing are found eminently in the genuine principles of theism; it may be expected, from the analogy of nature, that the base, the absurd, the mean, the terrifying will be equally discovered in religious fictions and chimeras.” (N 15.4).

<sup>19</sup> Against interpreters who read Hume in the context of a radical secular or even anti-religious Enlightenment (Russell 2008), many scholars have defended an interpretation according to which Hume’s position is considerably more complex and in which the positive or necessary role of especially an institutional church is given its due weight (Livingston 1998; Yoder 2008; Willis 2014). These approaches are generally grounded in a reading of the Humean concept of true religion that allows for a positive, or even weakly deist, interpretation (Hartl, 2020; Hartl 2024a, 103–49). Independently of the question of the weak deist reading, it is worth noting, however, that although Hume occasionally spoke positively of the church as an institution and of the social role of the clergy, he has nothing favourable to say about religious rites as such (Nong 2019, 139).

<sup>20</sup> “It must be acknowledged, that the influence of the prelates and the clergy was often of great service to the public. Though the religion of that age can merit no better name than that of superstition, it served to unite together a body of men who had great sway over the people, and who kept the community from falling to pieces, by the factions and independant power of the nobles.” (H12: 14).

duties, and to secure obedience to the laws and civil magistrate. While it pursues these salutary purposes, its operations, tho' infinitely valuable, are secret and silent, and seldom come under the cognizance of history. That adulterate species of it alone, which inflames faction, animates sedition and prompts rebellion, distinguishes itself on the open theatre of the world, and is the great source of revolution and public convulsions.<sup>21</sup>

It may be ~~supposed-charged~~ that this ~~is-was~~ not a sincere declaration and ~~intended solely to excuse the focus on the 'adulterate species' of religion that critics had found in earlier chapter-was included solely in order to deflect from Hume from the charge of anti-clericalism and atheism. Hume deleted even the note from editions of the History published after 1767.~~ One might argue that here Hume was not interested in discussing social utility of religion, but to defend himself against the charge of atheism and his critical treatment of religion in *The History of England*.<sup>22</sup>

~~The reason why Hume omitted this passage from later editions is Hume deleted this note from editions of the History published after 1767 for unclear reasons. If the role of passage was merely tactical and Hume wrote it purely out of conformism, then it would have been in his interest to keep this passage in later editions as well. On the other hand, it is also possible that Hume changed his mind about whether he needed to excuse himself against charges of irreligion. Here Hume draws an important distinction between "the proper office of religion" and the "adulterate species" of religion. He explains why he focuses so much on the latter while neglecting the former. However, prima facie, the context of the passage concerns the task of a historian rather than indicating a convoluted self-defence against charges of anti-clericalism or atheism. The fact that Hume tacitly admitted that his narrative does not pay serious attention to "the proper office of religion" does not imply that the note was insincere or ironic, unless there are strong independent reasons for thinking so.~~

In any case, it is worth noting that Hume omitted this passage from editions of the *History* published after 1767, for reasons that remain unclear. It is possible that Hume came to think that offering an excuse for focusing mainly on the so-called adulterate species of religion conceded too much to his critics, given that, as shown above, he had not in fact been blind to the salutary influences of the church. The removal of the paragraph may indicate only that he changed his mind about whether he needed to excuse himself from charges of irreligion, rather than any actual change in his views on the good and bad consequences of religion.<sup>23</sup>

Regardless of Hume's intention, the passage is coherent with Hume's positive statements about the established Anglican church. As Sabl (2009, 520) points out, the

<sup>21</sup> H1767 71: 539Ed.n13. This note is drawn from a draft Preface intended for the original (1757) edition of the second Stuart volume of what was then called the *History of Great Britain*. The original draft is cited in Mossner (2001, 306–307; and H 71: 539Ed.n13). ~~Hume deleted even the note from editions of the History published after 1767 but imported a variant into the Dialogues (12.12) where it appears in an observation made by Cleanthes but immediately qualified by Philo. For analysis see Hartl (2024a, 141–3).~~

<sup>22</sup> This is the central thesis of the so-called ironic atheist interpretation of Hume, the examination of which falls outside the scope of the present study. Arguably, the most sophisticated case for this interpretation has been advanced by Berman (1983, 1987). For a detailed critique of Berman's reading of Hume, see Hartl (2020 and 2024a, 46–53). A comprehensive summary and thorough critique of the ironic atheist interpretation in general is provided by Yoder (2008, 21–51).

<sup>23</sup> ~~Though Hume deleted the note, he imported a portion into Dialogues 12.12, where it appears in an observation made by Cleanthes but immediately contested at some length by Philo on the ground that it applies only to "philosophical and rational" and not "popular" religions. But the popular religions Philo was concerned with are those that are not subject to civil authority. He does not consider the possibility of government supervision of "popular religion" until D 12.21, where his position becomes more detailed and qualified. When the topic is finally discussed, Philo's concern is whether the "wise magistrate" could actually supervise the church effectively. Here, Philo is not defending himself against a charge of anti-clericalism. His point is solely that such governmental supervision entails serious difficulties and uncertainties. Nevertheless, he states that the government must attempt to regulate and control religion. This position is coherent with Hume's views expressed elsewhere. His eventual position on the latter (D 12.21) is more fraught. For further analysis see Section 4 below and Hartl (2024a, 141–3).~~



Church of England served as a kind of model for Hume.<sup>24</sup> The established church, which creates stability and social cohesion, and whose authority derives from its close association with strong, monarchical central power, provides the means not only to prevent religious warfare, but also to sustain the positive effects of the institutional church outlined above.

#### 4. The Humean principles of pragmatic ecclesiastical policy

The Humean argument can be reconstructed as follows: although religious enthusiasm may give rise to religious toleration, the peace thus established is generally not durable without political intervention. Lasting social peace and cohesion are most effectively provided by an established church. Institutional religion, without governmental control, can easily endanger liberty. Since complete secularization is unachievable for psychological and social reasons, and since the social effects of the philosophical critique of religion are limited, the government must bring ecclesiastical institutions and the clergy, who pose a potential threat to social peace, under its control. A moderate or reformed institutional Christianity, supervised by the government, would be beneficial to society. Since Hume's historical examples of the church creating social cohesion or disseminating knowledge are linked to either the Catholic Church or the Church of England rather than protestant sects without a priesthood, religion cannot fulfil its possible, albeit limited positive role without a clerical hierarchy.<sup>25</sup> Hierarchical Clerical-clerical power, for Hume, in turn requires-needs government governmental check and control.<sup>26</sup>

Hume's argument rests on a further premise: laws, governmental measures, and socio-political institutions are to be assessed on the basis of their social utility.<sup>27</sup> Justice is an artificial virtue that arises through convention and whose maintenance is justified by social utility.<sup>28</sup> In the hypothetical situation in which available goods were not scarce, or in which human beings were entirely unselfish, there would be no need for justice or property rights (T 3.2.2.1–11). Since we are not in that situation, the laws governing private property benefit society (M 3.1). Peaceful order and the public interest require not only that property be distinct and separate, but that “the rules, which we follow, in making the separation, [be] such as can best be contrived to serve farther the interests of society” (M 3.22). With regard to government, citizens owe obedience to authority because we have an interest ‘in the preserving of peace and order in society.’ (T 3.2.8.7).

Hume's pragmatic-utilitarian political philosophy is an alternative to social contract theory and classical Lockean liberalism. Hume did not write about individual freedom of conscience, nor of the separation of the respective jurisdictions of church and state. He did not mention theologically inspired arguments against state coercion or forced religious conversion, either. He argued that coercion can prescribe only outward religious observance (which is of no value in the eyes of God) but cannot shape personal conviction. But his counterargument against religious persecution is grounded entirely on political stability and utility: the persecution of religions is counterproductive, since martyrdom does not weaken but actually strengthens the persecuted denomination (H 31: 216–17).

If the task of the state is to secure social order and peace, then the justification for

<sup>24</sup> “Of all the European Churches, which shook off the yoke of papal authority, no one proceeded with so much reason and moderation as the church of England; an advantage, which had been derived partly from the interposition of the civil magistrate in this innovation, partly from gradual and slow steps, by which the reformation was concluded in that kingdom” (H 40: 119). “And the new religion, by mitigating the genius of ancient superstition, and rendering it more compatible with the peace and interests of society, had preserved itself in that happy medium, which wise men have always sought, and which the people have so seldom been able to maintain” (H 40: 120).

<sup>25</sup> Susato (2012, 293) argues that Hume's views on religious institutions were inspired by Shaftesbury, Mandeville, and Burnet.

<sup>26</sup> Dees (2005) reconstructs three Humean arguments in favour of toleration, the last of which is the pragmatic-utilitarian consideration.

<sup>27</sup> In Sabl's (2009) interpretation, religious toleration too may be regarded as an artificial virtue, which, like justice, is a useful social convention.

<sup>28</sup> Susato (2012, 293) argues that Hume's views on religious institutions were inspired by Shaftesbury, Mandeville, and Burnet.

toleration towards, or restrictive measures against, any given denomination depends on whether and to what extent they promote social peace.<sup>29</sup> Hume's pragmatic-utilitarian stance on religious policy explains why he does not entirely repudiate even the absolutist reign of Henry VIII.<sup>30</sup> One of the principal advantages of the state-controlled church, in Hume's view, is that it can prevent religious wars and intolerance. The paradigmatic example of this in Europe is the Thirty Years' War, which was brought about by the conflict between Catholic and Protestant states.<sup>31</sup> In this connection, Hume stated unambiguously that the government may introduce an established religion in order to prevent religious warfare:

Where sects arise, whose fundamental principle on all sides is to execrate, and abhor, and damn, and extirpate each other; what choice has the magistrate left but to take part, and by rendering one sect entirely prevalent, restore, at least for a time, the public tranquillity? The political body, being here sickly, must not be treated as if it were in a state of sound health; and an affected neutrality in the prince, or even a cool preference, may serve only to encourage the hopes of all the sects, and keep alive their animosity. (H 37: 434)

Furthermore, Hume supported even the idea that the government should pay the salaries of priests and ecclesiastical leaders in order to keep them under supervision:

And in the end, the civil magistrate will find, that he has dearly paid for his pretended frugality, in saving a fixed establishment for the priests; and that in reality the most decent and advantageous composition, which he can make with the spiritual guides, is to bribe their indolence, by assigning stated salaries to their profession, and rendering it superfluous for them to be farther active, than merely to prevent their flock from straying in quest of new pastures. And in this manner ecclesiastical establishments, though commonly they arose at first from religious views, prove in the end advantageous to the political interests of society. (H 29: 136)

It is worth noting that in Part XII of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Philo puts forward a very similar proposal: that in the interest of social stability and peace, the government must bring religion and ecclesiastical authorities under its control.<sup>32</sup>

Philo's rhetorical question is what could be a "more certain and infallible" maxim in politics than that "both the number and authority of priests should be confined within very narrow limits" (D 12.21). He further adds that "the utmost a wise magistrate can propose with regard to popular religions, is, as far as possible, to make a saving game of it, and to prevent their pernicious consequences with regard to society" (D 12.21). The dilemma facing the government is whether to favour a single religious denomination or several. If it tolerates only one, it "must sacrifice, to an uncertain prospect of tranquillity, every consideration of public liberty, science, reason, industry, and even his own independency" (D 12.21). If, however, the government tolerates several different denominations equally, it must "preserve a very philosophical indifference to all of them, and carefully restrain the pretensions of the prevailing sect; otherwise he can expect nothing but endless disputes, quarrels, factions, persecutions, and civil commotions" (D 12.21.).<sup>33</sup>

It is important to emphasise that Hume left room for toleration among different denominations, and therefore his position does not entail absolutism, even if, in his view, religious toleration can be guaranteed only through the direct governmental control of

<sup>29</sup> Hume's proposal can also be interpreted as an attempt at moderation of the negative effects of religion. For a more detailed analysis see Hartl (2024a, 144–8).

<sup>30</sup> "The acknowledgment of the king's supremacy introduced there a greater simplicity in the government, by uniting the spiritual with the civil power, and preventing disputes about limits, which never could be exactly determined between the contending jurisdictions. A way was also prepared for checking the exorbitancies of superstition, and breaking those shackles, by which all human reason, policy, and industry had so long been encumbered." (H 30: 206–7).

<sup>31</sup> Hume contrasted Queen Elizabeth I's relative toleration with the persecutions under the reign of Queen Mary I (H 38: 6–8), as well as with the intolerance of the Catholic King Philip II of Spain (H 39: 52–55).

<sup>32</sup> Since Hume argues for state control over the churches in a work published under his own name, it may be assumed at this point that Philo represents Hume's own position, or at least one very close to it.

<sup>33</sup> See also Hartl (2024a, 147–8).

religious affairs.<sup>34</sup>

According to Hume, a church established and supervised by the government can simultaneously be suited to preserving the positive effects of institutional religion within certain limits, while preventing, as it were, the tyranny of priests, religiously motivated violence, and intolerance.

It is, however, an open question to what extent it is appropriate or necessary for the state to restrict religious freedom. If the state can restrict liberty in the case of religion, can it invoke the protection of social order to adopt restrictive measures against other institutions it deems dangerous? If the freedom of religious practice is justified not by fundamental individual rights but by the collective interest of establishing social peace, what would guarantee that the government will not, on other occasions, restrict citizens' freedom of association by appealing to the necessity of social order and peace? To examine these questions, I will focus on Hume's proposal ~~of~~ for a republican constitution.

## 5. The state-supervised church in the 'perfect commonwealth'

Hume had no explicit and detailed proposal concerning the state-supervised church. He did, however, compose a constitutional plan in which relevant thoughts on the relationship between the churches and the state also appear. In what follows I analyse his essay *Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth*, which was inspired by James Harrington's political tract *The Commonwealth of Oceana*.

In contrast to the classical Aristotelian-Ciceronian republican tradition, in this work, Hume innovatively combined the principles of representative parliamentary government and ministerial responsibility characteristic of the British constitutional monarchy with the concept of a decentralized system of mutually checking local legislative bodies.<sup>35</sup>

As Harris (2015, 287) characterises it, Hume's constitutional plan sought to unite the governmental transparency of the city-state republics with the stability associated with larger kingdoms. This twofold character may also help resolve the dilemma of controlling religion: how effective oversight of the church is possible without the system becoming authoritarian and radically restricting liberty in other domains. To examine this question, I briefly outline the most important elements of Hume's republican constitutional plan, with particular attention to his proposals concerning the church.

In Hume's conception, Great Britain would be divided into 100 counties, and each county into 100 smaller units. The 100 counties and 100 smaller units would produce a total of 10,000 elected representatives, who would collectively constitute the legislative power of the republic. Each county would elect a senator through a complex procedure designed to eliminate party domination, and the senate of 100 members would elect the executive, which would take its decisions collectively, as a council. The proposed statutes would be sent by the senate to the counties, which would decide upon the proposals. By this means, the legislative and executive powers would be sharply separated (IPC 6–24).

For the purposes of our inquiry, the passages concerning the governmental management of the churches merit particular attention. Within the central executive, a

<sup>34</sup> Hume further argued that the ancient polytheistic religions (in contrast to the monotheists who worship a single God) were more tolerant, since they made room for a variety of beliefs and cults. He argued that monotheism is more prone to intolerance than polytheism, because when people believe that there is only one true God, "the worship of other deities is regarded as absurd and impious" (N 9.1). He took this as the root of religious intolerance and persecution. It is evident that he downplayed the significance of the persecution of Christians by the Roman polytheists. Even if it may be argued that such persecution was politically motivated, the fact that polytheism can appear as a state religion intertwined with autocratic government weakens (if it does not wholly undermine) Hume's argument in favour of tolerant polytheism.

<sup>35</sup> Sakamoto (2022, 51–55) convincingly demonstrates that Hume, like other thinkers of the period such as Adam Smith, either departed from or substantially reinterpreted ancient republicanism on several essential points in his constitutional conception. The ancient republican tradition regarded the cultivation of virtue, and the rule of free and equal citizens through law, as the proper aim of politics (Sakamoto 2022, 49–51). By contrast, in Hume's constitutional republic there is no popular assembly; that is, the people do not participate directly in legislation or adjudication. As Hume wrote, the Athenian popular assembly did not function properly. ~~Eventually, the such a constitutional system was dissolved~~ (OC 16).

council of religion and learning would oversee the clergy and the universities (IPC 22). The locally elected magistrates would appoint the clerical offices for each parish. The ecclesiastical government would be presbyterian in structure. It is important to note, however, that the ecclesiastical government would be supervised by civil magistrates, just as the military would be under control of the executive power (IPC 64). The county magistrate would also have the power to take on any cause from the church court, and to remove or suspend any presbyter from office (IPC 33–4).

Let us consider what consequences follow from this constitutional conception.<sup>36</sup> The republican constitutional plan seeks to secure peace among the various denominations at the level of local authorities. Although in the republic, too, the individual denominations are subordinate to the state (or to local public authorities), the decentralized nature of public power ~~allows~~<sup>means</sup> that there will be no single centrally established religion. Strong local autonomy may sustain religious pluralism across the republic as a whole. Within a single country, however, different denominations have greater or lesser numbers of adherents in different regions. It is not a single central authority that imposes the same Christian denomination across the entire country; rather, the decision to support or to officially recognise one denomination or another is made at the local level.

Under Hume's proposal, local bodies would have an influence on the appointment of priests and ministers. Although a central governmental council for ecclesiastical affairs would also exercise a supervisory function on behalf of the government, control would operate primarily at the local level. There would be a council of religion at the national level, but county representatives would appoint and dismiss presbyters (IPC 32; 34). The county magistrates would have a right to take any cause from the presbyterian court and decide it themselves. (IPC 19; 33–4). Depending on which denomination holds a majority in a given county or town, the elected representatives would presumably favour that denomination over others; and this could in certain cases extend to the restriction of the rights of minority denominations in the given region or county.

To draw a historical analogy: while Hume's republican constitutional plan is comparable to the constitutional system of the autonomous Swiss cantons,<sup>37</sup> the strong central government with an established church is to be found in absolute (or absolutism-tending) monarchies. The common ground between the two conceptions is that in both the church is not an autonomous institution relative to the state or to local organs of state power. It cannot decide its internal affairs independently, since, unlike in Lockean theory, it is not to be regarded as the private association of free individuals. Whether in a kingdom or a republic, the churches are always institutionally and financially subordinate to public authority.

Scholarly opinion is divided on whether Hume preferred the monarchical form of government or the republic. Hume distinguished between barbarous and civilized monarchy on the one hand, and free government, which may be either a limited monarchy or a republic, on the other. Between the latter two, he appeared ultimately to prefer a republic, though he also highlights the advantages of limited and civilized monarchy (Miller 1981, 142–62). In any case, it is clear that Hume's republican constitutional plan seeks to serve two mutually opposed aims. On the one hand, the institutional control of religion would justify the maintenance of a strong central authority and a single established church. A strong central authority of the Hobbesian type is more effective in combating religiously motivated violence and strife. This model presupposes a relatively strong central power (that is, a monarchical one); without it, the internal workings of the church officially recognised by the government cannot be effectively overseen.

On the other hand, the concentration of power is dangerous to a free society. For this reason, public liberties are more likely to be maintained within a republican, decentralized constitutional framework. In the absence of central control, however, there is a danger that in

<sup>36</sup> Charlette (2022) examines in a thorough study how Hume's constitutional plan inspired later constitutional thought, in particular James Madison's federalist scheme and the political thought of John Millar and Dugald Stewart.

<sup>37</sup> According to Hume's proposal, the military would be also organised on the model of the Swiss cantons (IPC 35).



certain regions the various religious denominations may become intolerant of one another, thereby undermining social cohesion. Decentralized state power permits exclusivity and intolerance at the local level. Local representatives and local power are, however, constrained by elections, by a system of sortition, and by institutionalized opposition (IPC 17–19; 25–27). According to Hume, it is in principle by these means that the abuse of local or national power can be prevented.

Furthermore, for Hume, the Anglican established church served as a model (H 40: 119–20). In the absence of a monarch, who functions as the head of the Anglican church, there cannot be an established state church. This raises doubts about whether the positive social effects associated with the church, such as social cohesion, could be realized at a local level where each county may have different Christian denominations. Interestingly, Hume's historical examples of the positive effects of religion often relate to either Catholic or Anglican institutions. These effects include the advancement of learning, the transmission and dissemination of knowledge, the unification of nations during crises, the maintenance of social peace and order, the cultivation of the fine arts through their connection to worship, and the civilizing influence on the early Saxon kingdoms. It is important to note, however, that Hume's examples of clergy checking royal power do not come from decentralized republican states. The beneficial effects of an established church are not confined to republican constitutions. In fact, these benefits are typically associated with established churches within monarchies, which are prone to despotism. The dilemma for Hume is as follows: While that while civic freedom may be maintained more effectively in a decentralized republic, this form of government lacks an established church. Without a central political authority, it becomes challenging to control the power of the clergy and to prevent religious fanaticism and intolerance.

In sum, Hume's view has internal tensions between the apparent liberalism in his republican constitutional proposal and his overall non-liberal, pragmatic attitude towards religion.<sup>38</sup> The elaboration of a detailed and coherent view, however, was not a project that Hume opted to pursue.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

In this study I have offered a rational reconstruction of an implicit position found across Hume's texts: that it is both necessary and appropriate for the government to bring the churches under its control. A state church established and overseen by the government moderates religious controversy and keeps the political power of the clergy in check. The government can thereby secure peace, unity, and social order, while at the same time permitting a measure of religious toleration. In Hume's view, the best means of realizing such a moderate or reformed popular religion and of securing its limited positive social role is the establishment of a government-controlled church.

Hume's argument in favour of a government-controlled church proceeds through the

<sup>38</sup> Interpreting Hume as Tory or an early conservative has a respectable precedent in Hume scholarship. The classic statement of the "Tory Hume" thesis can be found in Bongie (2000). More recently, among others, Livingston (1984) reconstructed Hume's political philosophy as conservative (in some sense). Hume in "My Own Life" famously stated that all changes made to History of England were to the Tory side (MOL 15). Moreover, Hume expressed his concerns about "too much liberty" (L2 434: 209–10, 439: 216). It could mean that for Hume, at least in some cases, social stability was more important than civic liberty. That said, as we saw, it is plausible to interpret the republican constitution along classical liberal lines.

<sup>39</sup> Arguably, Hume himself thought that such a project is very difficult to pursue. For example, Philo concludes that: "the utmost a wise magistrate can propose with regard to popular religions, is, as far as possible, to make a saving game of it .... Every expedient which he tries for so humble a purpose is surrounded with inconveniencies." (D 12.21). See also the following passage from *History*: "But it is an observation, suggested by all history, and by none more than by that of James and his successor, that the religious spirit, when it mingles with faction contains in it something supernatural and unaccountable; and that, in its operations upon society, effects correspond less to their known causes than is found in any other circumstance of government. A reflection, which may, at once, afford a source of blame against such sovereigns as lightly innovate in so dangerous an article, and of apology for such, as being engaged in an enterprize of that nature, are disappointed of the expected event, and fail in their undertakings." (H 47: 66).

following steps. Religion originates in human nature: in fear of, and ignorance about, the causes of natural phenomena, and in anthropomorphism. Since human nature is unchanging, religion will not disappear in the long run. Institutionalized religion is a social given; Hume did not believe in rapid secularization, for psychological and social reasons. The philosophical critique of Christian theology and theistic metaphysics is intelligible and accessible only to a narrow, educated circle. These arguments have no effect on the masses, because they are not religious for philosophical reasons. So-called religious enthusiasm, if it moderates over time, may contribute through spontaneous social processes to the emergence of a tolerant society; however, this is not a necessary outcome, and even where it does occur, it is unlikely to be permanent. The 'low road' to toleration, as Conti calls it, does not in any case apply to institutional Christianity, that is, to what Hume terms "superstition," of which Catholicism and Anglicanism are the typical examples. According to Hume, the institutional church (and the Anglican church in particular) is capable of holding society together and generating unity. However sharply Hume criticised institutional Christianity and the clergy, he nonetheless acknowledged in numerous passages the positive role played by the church and the clergy in reinforcing social cohesion and in the transmission of knowledge and learning. Certain passages suggest that he regarded the Anglican state-church as comparatively the most beneficial (or, at least, less harmful) to society. Needless to say, Hume believed in no ecclesiastical or Christian doctrine whatsoever; his cautiously expressed preference was motivated exclusively by considerations of utility and practical advantage.

The Humean proposal does not appeal to classical liberal arguments. For example, that the freedom of thought and religion is intrinsically valuable, that it is not the state's function to take a position on religious questions, or that free debate is necessary for the discovery of truth. Hume's position is closer to the Hobbesian conception than to the classical liberalism of Locke or Adam Smith. Governmental control does not, however, entail total control or radical secularist persecution of religion, since such measures are, in Hume's view, counterproductive from the standpoint of social peace and liberty. But unlimited religious freedom is equally dangerous, in his view, since it leads to clerical domination and to the emergence of mutually competing, violent sects. The attainable optimum would be to moderate the negative effects of religion as far as possible, while preserving the advantages of the institutional established church.

The principles laid down in Hume's republican constitutional plan could provide the basis for striking this delicate balance. The monarchical and centralist model and the decentralized Swiss-type republic would cause different problems and require different ecclesiastical policy solutions. The dilemma for Hume is that he wanted both an effective governmental oversight and an effective prevention of the abuse of power. Had Hume elaborated his theory, a detailed proposal for ecclesiastical policy and constitutional design of this kind would have constituted a distinctive and significant alternative to the other accounts of church-state coexistence found in the eighteenth century.<sup>40</sup>

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