

REVIEW

The Infidel and the Professor: David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship that Shaped Modern Thought by Dennis C. Rasmussen

GORDON GRAHAM

Web: <http://gordon-graham.net>

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This is a highly readable, meticulously researched, and superbly produced book. Turning the pages is a wonderful reminder of how poor a substitute e-books are for the best that fine paper, printing and binding have to offer. Princeton University Press is to be warmly congratulated.

To those reasonably familiar with the lives and writings of Hume and Smith, Rasmussen's book will not have anything very novel to add, but it is undoubtedly, as one of the puffs on the back cover says, "an appealing introduction for the novice". Yet, it presents the novice with a familiar, but highly distorted picture, in which Hume is the Enlightenment hero (with Smith his admirably faithful young, or younger, friend) who battles to bring light to contemporaries sunk in the darkness of religious bigotry and intolerance, and is abused and reviled as a result. To my mind, the book prompts this question: At what point does biography become hagiography?

As Rasmussen notes, when Hume moved from the Old Town of Edinburgh to a more spacious house in the Georgian New Town then under construction, the street in which his new house stood had not yet been given a name. Someone, perhaps a young woman to whom he was close, chalked "St David Street" on the wall. The name stuck, though almost no one who lives there nowadays knows how it came about. The appellation was something of a joke, of course, since Hume was held to be a religious skeptic, and above all a scourge of superstitious practices such as the veneration of saints. For Rasmussen, it seems, the appellation turns out not to have been a joke. Hume was a saint, if by saint we mean someone who approaches "as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit"—Adam Smith's famous final tribute to Hume, which Rasmussen repeats sev-

eral times. It is evident, I think, that Rasmussen does not merely admire Hume; he venerates him.

Is there anything wrong with this? What people commonly mean by hagiography is the embellishment of a biography by fanciful invented episodes that only the credulous would believe. Nothing of this sort appears in Rasmussen's book. His claims are all as well grounded as the evidence will permit. And yet there are more subtle hagiographical elements. Let us suppose, though it is a matter to be returned to, that Hume was regarded in his own times as the opposite of a saint, someone who mischievously sought to undermine accepted values, and make a mockery of the simple faith of ordinary people. Rasmussen systematically inverts the meaning of the terms in which this judgment sometimes found expression. Thus 'infidel', the word he uses in his title, becomes a term of commendation, meaning 'enlightened', with the consequence that "notorious infidel" is an even greater compliment. Conversely, Hume's critics are invariably referred to "the pious" or "the devout" in a way that makes these negative terms, synonymous with 'bigoted' and 'blinkerred'. Relatedly, the educated Scottish clergy with whom Hume engaged intellectually, and among whom he counted many friends, are referred to as such only occasionally. The term Rasmussen prefers is "Edinburgh literati".

This helpfully sets them apart from their religious affiliation, though the label cannot accommodate Aberdeen clergy such as Thomas Reid and George Campbell, who thanked Hume for the intellectual stimulus he had given them, or Alexander Gerard to whom Hume (among others) awarded a prize. Nor does it do much to explain the offer of employment from Lord Hertford "noted for his religiosity", and with whom Hume seems to have formed a most satisfactory relationship. How does this appointment fit

with “the customary clamour against Hume’s irreligion” which, Rasmussen tells us, was a key factor in the ending his employment? Rasmussen expresses some surprise that one of the Edinburgh clergy, Hugh Blair—“who was a minister, recall”—should expressly agree with Smith’s final tribute to Hume. It is worth adding that Blair was no ordinary clergyman, but Minister of the High Kirk of St Giles, and the most popular and effective preacher of his day. Similarly, Rasmussen notes the concern and solicitude about Hume’s health expressed by William Robertson in a letter to Smith, and the great loss Robertson says Hume’s death would constitute. He does not note in the same place that Robertson was Moderator of the Church of Scotland’s General Assembly for many years, which rejected an ill-conceived attempt to excommunicate Hume, as well as Principal of the University of Edinburgh where Hume, for reasons that remain obscure, had failed to get the Chair of Moral Philosophy.

This leaves us asking what we are to make of all those clergy (and others), who were tolerant of Hume, admiring of his intellect, and many of whom counted themselves personal friends. Were they, or were they not, among Rasmussen’s “pious” and “devout”? If we say they were, their tolerance and affection for Hume becomes unintelligible. If we say they were not, then their religious affiliation, it would appear, was superficial, hypocritical, self-serving and sustained only by the desire to protect their social standing. This alternative is not born out by any evidence. Their re-classification as “literati”, happily, allows us to lay the question to one side.

This is a major flaw on Rasmussen’s part, I think, because it overlooks the inconvenient fact that Hume’s attitude to religion was, and remained, ambivalent. To begin with, and contrary to what Rasmussen often implies, no more than anyone else did he rise completely above the assumptions and temper of his own times. On the contrary, what he writes about “monkish virtues”, superstition and “frivolous observances” would have been music to the ears of Protestants in general and Calvinists in particular. Equally welcome would have been the mocking tone he adopts in the *Natural History* when he recounts “the beliefs of our brethren the Catholics”, and his contention in the same place that the doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ is “so absurd that it eludes all force of argument”. Why would the Calvinist “pious” take offence at this? Moreover, far from concluding the *Natural History* with an easy or emphatic dismissal of religion, Hume muses. “Look out for a people entirely destitute of religion. If you find them at all, be as-

sured, that they are but a few degrees removed from brutes”, and the persistence of religion, he concludes, cannot be simple foolishness. It is a “riddle”, “an inexplicable mystery”. In the face of this mystery, Hume says, his only recourse is to make his “escape into the calm regions of philosophy”, from which of course, at another time, backgammon was called upon to rescue him.

In the essay ‘Of Superstition and Enthusiasm’ Hume expressly refers to ‘true religion’. There has been much debate as to whether he really believed there was such a thing, and just what he meant when he identified it (elsewhere) as a “species of philosophy”. But he does say in a letter, in a spirit rather more agnostic than atheistic, that he only records doubts, and leaves the matter of convictions to others. Perhaps this serves to explain a measure of ambivalence even at the time of his death. It seems certain that Hume never exhibited the fearful, tearful penitence that some of the ‘pious’ might have wished him to do. Rasmussen, on the other hand, is determined that he faced death cheerfully, without thought of consolation. Yet in a letter to his ‘pious’ brother John, written just a few months before his death, Hume writes “Dr Black (God bless him) tells me that . . . I shall dye with much greater tranquillity in St David’s Street . . . Besides, where can I expect spiritual Assistance so consolatory as from Dr Blair and Dr Robertson? Not to mention a casual Exhortation from Carlyle or from you.” Could Rasmussen’s Hume write this letter sincerely? Was he pandering to his brother’s ‘piety’? Was he mockingly blessing his attentive physician? Was he gently ridiculing his three clerical friends? The existence of any desire for consolatory spiritual assistance, it seems, is incompatible with enlightened sainthood. So what about this letter from St David?

Hume supported the idea of an established religion, giving preference (in common with most Scottish Protestants) to a religion that places ‘improving’ sermons at the heart of its observances. Why was this? Was religion something that had to be fed to the poor and ill-educated to prevent disturbances and make them content with their social subservience? I doubt if Hume held this view, but as Rasmussen observes in one or two places, unlike Smith (in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*), he did not have much sense of the real role religion could play in the lives of those who were not “of the middle station” of life. Whatever Smith’s personal religious beliefs may have been, he understood how a deep belief in a justly ordered universe could elevate the lives of people whose lot was mostly endless toil, and could provide some consolation to the innocent victims of violence and

injustice. This important function, Smith thinks, “is of too much importance to the happiness of mankind, for nature to leave it dependent upon the slowness and uncertainty of philosophical researches” (TMS III.V.2). If, as Hume suggests ‘true’ religion is indeed “a species of philosophy”, it may serve to enlighten the educated and well-to-do, but it has nothing to offer the vast majority of people, living lives of a kind that Smith seems much more cognizant of than Hume.

There is no doubt that Hume differed sharply from many of his contemporaries on the matter of religion. He thought, as anyone who regarded the previous century could hardly fail to think, that religious conflict had been enormously damaging. Strictly speaking, however, it was religious factionalism, not simply religion in itself, that had caused so much suffering and disorder. Hume’s *bête noire* was faction, political no less than religious, which is why he often lumps “Whigs” and “Tories” with “Christians” in the class of the dogmatically partisan. Rasmussen misses this, I think, and ironically commandeers Hume as a partisan on the side of an anti-religious faction. This becomes clear in his treatment of Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.

There has long been an assumption that Philo is Hume’s voice in the *Dialogues*. This assumption confronts an interpretative puzzle. If Philo is Hume, what are we to make of Philo’s conclusion right at the end, that “a person seasoned with a just sense of the imperfections of natural reason will fly to revealed truth” and that “to be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most important step to being a sound believing Christian”? Why, moreover, does Hume not endorse Philo’s scepticism, but conclude the whole work with the judgment that “Philo’s principles are more probable than Demea’s, but that those of Cleanthes approach still nearer to the truth”? Is this Hume being inauthentic out of caution? Why would he see any need to do that? This was a work that he was very keen to have published, but the public, he knew, was not going to see until after his death when he would be beyond any “clamour” that it might cause.

In *The Moral Culture of the Scottish Enlightenment 1690-1805* (2014), Thomas Anheer makes a very strong case for thinking that the moderate Scottish clergy whom Hume knew well, would have subscribed to a view something like Philo’s. They had a more “just sense of the imperfections of natural reason” than the more zealous Calvinist, and this made them more inclined to look for “revealed truth”. It may even have inclined them to the view that being a philosophical sceptic is an important step in becoming a believ-

ing Christian. It is possible to read Thomas Reid in this light, and Hugh Blair described the *Dialogues* as “exceedingly elegant”. If this is correct, then the *Dialogues* leaves open the possibility of what the times might have called ‘enlightened religion’. According to Rasmussen, however, nothing of this sort is left open. “[I]n his published writings [Hume] had always refrained from marshalling all his sceptical challenges at once, thereby appearing to leave some kind of refuge for the devout. . . . The uniqueness of the *Dialogues* lies in its comprehensiveness, which leaves the pious reader *no way out, no safe haven*” (p.188, my emphasis). Is this view borne out by the text of the *Dialogues*? Or is it rather, the view that Rasmussen would like to borne out by them?

In *Hume: a philosophical biography* (2016), James Harris argues persuasively that the form of the *Dialogues* is essential to them. That is to say, this is not a philosophical refutation that happens to be cast into a dialogue and might as well have been a treatise. Rather, it is an exemplification of how the discussion of contentious and difficult philosophical subjects, on which equally serious opinions differ, can avoid faction and dogmatism. It is a literary demonstration of how Hume thought ‘enlightened’ philosophy ought to proceed. The implication is that, contrary to what has been supposed almost without demur since Kemp Smith’s edition, Hume has *no voice* in the *Dialogues*. His own voice is the irenic one that composed the work. This way of construing the text does not solve every interpretative puzzle, but it does allow us to take it seriously without impugning Hume’s own integrity. Philo’s is not Hume’s *voice*. He is Hume’s *invention*, and consequently these closing statements are not stratagems to appease the wrathful ‘pious’ (*post mortem!*), but a final acknowledgement that no one position can dogmatically insist on being the last word on the subject. It did not prove easy for Hume’s critics to see the *Dialogues* in this light. Rasmussen’s treatment of the work shows that it does not prove much easier for his admirers to do so either. Thus it was predictable that (some of) the ‘pious’ would castigate Hume for them, and this may explain Smith’s hesitation in taking on responsibility for seeing them to publication. But it is no less predictable that convinced atheists would find in them a vindication, and hence a reason for Hume’s veneration. If Harris is right, both parties have missed the point.

Rasmussen correctly observes that “nearly everything Hume wrote bears on religion in one way or another”. It is a subject that seems to have had a great fascination for him. Yet Hume, in my estimation, lacked any religious sensibility, in a way that Nietzsche, for instance, arguably Christianity’s fiercest critic, did not. When it came to religion, Hume, we

might say, was tone deaf, and along with Smith, he uncritically accepted the Scottish Calvinist's narrow conception of religion as theological doctrine plus moral injunction. Any wider conception of religion escaped him. In the period that Hume was writing, Wren's great architectural masterpiece—St Paul's Cathedral --had been in existence less than 50 years, Bach composed the *St Matthew Passion*, Handel composed *The Messiah*, and Charles Wesley wrote verses that came to be regarded as among the finest devotional poems ever written in the English language. None of these examples fits the category of 'frivolous observance', and it is absurd to suppose that everything good about them could be generated by a "species of philosophy". This lack of sensibility did not prevent Hume from writing about religion with critical acumen, wit and occasional insight. There is nonetheless never any sense in his writings that he appreciated why religion *matters* to people, still less why it matters *so much*.

The same might be said of Rasmussen. His accounts of the 'attacks' on Hume by, for example, Bishops and Archbishops, can only construe them as diatribes of narrow minded intolerance. He evidently sees nothing that might be learned from such people, despite their being, as Hume acknowledged, among his most highly educated contemporaries. John Wesley has no criticisms to offer, he only "thunders" denunciation, and the "baneful and pestilential influence of false philosophy on the human heart" of which Horne, the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford warned, and about which philosophers from Plato to Nietzsche have been concerned, is not, it seems, a possibility that we ever need take seriously. Indisputably, religious adherents have their share of intolerance, prejudice and narrow mindedness. But they do not have a monopoly on it, and philosophers, it appears, can have their share.

This is an especially significant matter for Rasmussen's book. He means it to be an account of "the friendship that shaped modern thought". I will return to the matter of friendship, and leave aside the question of what exactly 'shaping' in this context means. The important point to note here is that one of the ways modern thought was shaped by the times about which Rasmussen writes, requires us to employ a conception that can find no place in the picture he paints. This is the ideal of the *unity* of 'science and piety'. The pursuit of this ideal underlay the establishment, and shaped the development of college education in the American colonies, and subsequently the United States. Douglas Sloan's celebrated book *The Scottish Enlightenment and American College Ideal* (1971) recounts this history, and

a key figure in it is John Witherspoon. Witherspoon was allied to the evangelical or "Popular" party in the Church of Scotland, and so unquestionably falls within Rasmussen's category of "the pious". In 1768 he became President of the College of New Jersey (subsequently Princeton University). As President, and *in the interests of religion*, Witherspoon modernised the curriculum by introducing experimental science and the moral philosophy of Francis Hutcheson, 'Father' of the Scottish Enlightenment. A leading activist in the Presbyterian Church in the United States and a signatory of the Declaration of Independence, under Witherspoon Princeton provided a steady stream of leaders for the new Republic in politics, law and education. Similar curricular reforms were emulated across the country. How is this possible if Scottish enlightenment and piety were as far apart as Rasmussen depicts them?

This aspiration to a 'unity of science and piety' continued to be influential long into the nineteenth century, and the Scottish philosophers who were studied included Hutcheson and Reid, and later Brown and Hamilton. By contrast, after the third edition of 1804, Hume's *Dialogues* were not reprinted until 1875. Something of the same gap occurred for almost all his works. It was the twentieth century before Hume's philosophical work began to attract serious attention again.

Smith's *Wealth of Nations* fared rather better. Five editions appeared in his lifetime, many editions after his death, and the work has never been out of print. Furthermore, it is possible to find reference made to it by both British and American politicians and policy makers. Rasmussen makes a case for thinking the Hume's ideas influenced Smith very significantly, not only in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (about which many commentators would agree) but also in the *Wealth of Nations*. In the chapter that he devotes to it, Rasmussen finds Hume's presence in several important places. He notes that Smith himself identified Hume as the sole writer to have noticed the wider social impact of the growth of "commerce and manufactures" and particularly on the promotion of personal liberty and security. He is even prepared to say that the "basic outlines" of "one of the most famous sections of Smith's most famous book . . . are lifted straight from Hume [since] a similar narrative is present in both the *Political Discourses* (very briefly) and several volumes of the *History of England*."

Rasmussen is careful not to overstate his case, but he undoubtedly attributes a very significant role to Hume in the gestation of the *Wealth of Nations*. Since the work proved hugely influential, then even if Hume's own philosophical

writings fell into the shadows for a good many decades, there is some support here for the subtitle's claim that it was their *friendship* that shaped modern thought.

But what do we really know about that friendship? A perpetual source of frustration to biographers of Smith has been the lack of material relating to what we may call his inner life. He was not a great correspondent, and any papers that might have given some indication of thoughts he had not published, were probably among those his friends, on his instructions, destroyed. Even the evidence of what he did, where he travelled, whom he met is on the patchy side, and evidence for what he felt and believed is virtually non-existent. Our knowledge of what he thought is confined to what he thought fit to be published. Every biography, accordingly has of necessity to include a large measure of surmise—probably this, and possibly that. Rasmussen's account of Smith and Hume's friendship is no less given to surmise.

There is undoubtedly evidence of friendship, but at one point Rasmussen describes Smith as Hume's *closest* friend. What are the grounds for supposing the Hume's friendship with Smith was closer than many of the other warm relationships he had (with Drs Blair and Robertson, for instance)? It is impossible to overlook the fact that for long periods they did not meet, and for equally long periods they do not appear to have corresponded, or if they did, we no longer have a record of it. It seems that Hume often urged Smith to visit him in vain. When they were both in London for several months, Rasmussen says "we can be sure that they spent some of this time together", but he is obliged to add, "though there is virtually no record of it". When they overlapped in Paris, Rasmussen says that "Hume surely would have introduced Smith and the young duke to some of his Parisian friends and admirers", only to add "though there is little record to go by". Over the long years in which Smith retired to Kirkcaldy, his home town, to work on the *Wealth of Nations*, he was a relatively short distance by sea from Edinburgh, but visited very occasionally. Remarking on this period, Rasmussen says "though Hume and Smith had seen each other very little in the previous three years, they did their best to make up for lost time". Once again he has to add, "Unfortunately, there is little surviving evidence of what they did or said during this time" (207). It's just a guess, then, that whatever they did, or did not do, was nevertheless "making up for lost time".

Hume had many good friends. Smith was one of them. He wrote a beautiful account of Hume's last days, and made him a most eloquent tribute. They shared a view on

many matters, and there are striking parallels in some of the things they wrote. Hume's influence can be detected not only in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, but in the *Wealth of Nations*. While there have been lengthy periods of neglect, their writings have generally stood the test of time, and continue to attract the serious engagement of philosophers and economists today. All these propositions are true. Even in combination, however, they fall dramatically short of supporting the claim that this was "the friendship that shaped modern thought".