

**„BABEȘ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY
CLUJ-NAPOCA
FACULTY OF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY**

***Philosophy of Religion in David Hume:
The critique of religious thinking, and the limits of reason.
What are the origins and the presuppositions of the naturalistic study of
religion***

**(Doctoral thesis)
SUMMARY**

**Scientific coordinator:
Prof. univ. dr. Vasile Muscă**

**PhD Candidate:
Anghel Alexandru**

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Key words: *philosophy of religion, natural history, natural religion, reason, belief, scientific revolution, epistemology, history of philosophy, natural philosophy, empiricism, methodological naturalism, reductionism, mitigated skepticism, excessive skepticism, Epicureanism, deism, theism, the objectification of religion, evolutionism, natural selection, anthropology, biology, causality.*

In this doctoral thesis I try to identify the significant elements present in the European intellectual background that made possible the naturalistic approach to the religious phenomenon in David Hume's *The Natural History of Religion* aiming at a better understanding of this perspective both in Hume's philosophical thinking and in the context of the present naturalistic and scientific views on religion. To accomplish this, I try to answer the question: What processes and transformations contributed to an approach to religion that is interested in establishing its *causes* and not its *truth*? More exactly, the process that led to the genesis of a type of research of the religious phenomenon which, by its methodology and principles, doesn't presuppose and is not dependent on the researcher's belief (rationally justified or not) in the fundamental dogmas and creeds of the investigated subject.

To reach this aim, I will use, firstly, primary sources, i.e. the relevant works from the discussed periods which I will cite in Romanian using already existing translations (with the necessary references) and also my own translations; and, secondly, I will use, where the situation demands it, interpretations, analyses and relevant schematizations from secondary sources which contribute to the clarification and the identification of certain central discussions of this paper. Furthermore, to facilitate the communication of some of the ideas pertaining to certain stages of our research, I also used two monochrome figures, made by us, which comprehend in an accessible way the concepts discussed in this paper as a whole, or at respective place.

This aspect of the humean research of religion is probably the least studied in the specialized literature (and still less in the Romanian research area), the scholars in the field being centered more on those aspects pertaining to the philosophy of religion, i.e. the humean discussions referring to the rational foundations and explanations of religion. This is warranted by the fact that Hume consecrated the most of his work to arguments of this type. Among the relevant authors that discussed Hume's thought from the perspective of the philosophical rationality of religion are: Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (1941); Antony Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief* (1961); G. A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion* (1988).

Certain important research directions of the humean naturalistic perspective have been nevertheless furnished in different degrees by S. J. Preus (*Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud*, 1996), R. A. Segal („Hume's natural history of religion and the beginning of the social scientific study of religion”, 1994), P. J. E. Kail (*Projection and Realism in Hume's Philosophy*, 2007), M. Malherbe („Hume's Natural History of Religion”, 1995), and

even R. Popkin (*The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle*, 2003), scholars that admit the important role occupied by Hume in the birth of the modern studies of religion.

For example, Preus says, at the beginning of the chapter dedicated to the Scottish philosopher that Hume is “our clearest exemplar of the self-conscious turn from a theological to a scientific paradigm for the study of religion. With him a line of criticism definitively ends and a construction of alternative theory begins... He believed it was possible to explain religion within the purview of the ‘science of man’. In pursuit of his program, he produced a critique of each of the theological bases on which the phenomena of religion had been understood, explained, and legitimated up to his own time, and then offered naturalistic explanations of his own which opened the way for more systematic scientific investigations”.

Another example is R. A. Segal, who, at the end of his article, says about Hume’s *Natural History of Religion* that “is a pioneering work not only because of the answers it offers to the questions it broaches but, even more, because of the questions themselves.... Hume strives to differentiate what will become the questions of the social sciences from the questions of history and philosophy. His attempt to disentangle the question of recurrent origin from that of historical one, the question of effect from that of intent, and above all the question of explanation from that of justification, together with his differentiation of an empirical from a non-empirical approach to these questions, foreshadows the emergence of the social scientific study of religion”.

From what I know, there is no study about the elements that brought about the methodological naturalism applied by Hume to the religious phenomenon which go beyond the level of an article or a book chapter. If today no textbook or research discussing the philosophy of religion cannot omit humean approach to the idea of God, free will, the problem of evil, in the same way, in my opinion, no exposition of the development of anthropology, psychology or sociology of religion can consider itself complete without bringing to the fore Hume’s views about the origin of religion “in human nature”.

Thus, *in this thesis I will try to identify and classify logically and chronologically causes, processes and developments in the European intellectual background that made possible the humean naturalistic formula and thus the birth of the modern research of religion.* Furthermore, I will seek, in the light of the delineation of the above processes, to express in a concise manner

the *stages* and *mechanisms* in human nature which, according to Hume, lead to the appearance of the religious phenomenon.

To the argument of the scarcity of the exhaustive studies regarding this side of Hume's thought, and the argument of the importance that the Scottish philosopher has in the development of the modern naturalistic study of religion, it can be added the argument of the renewal at the general philosophic and scientific level in the last twenty years of the study of religion (in this category we can mention studies such as: *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (1995) by the anthropologist S. E. Guthrie; *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* (2002) by the anthropologist S. Atran; *Religion Explained* (2002) by the anthropologist P. Boyer; *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (2003) by the biologist D. S. Wilson; *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (2005) by the neuroscientist S. Harris; *The God Delusion* (2006) by the biologist and science popularizer R. Dawkins). An author whose ideas are very close to Hume's approach is the contemporary philosopher Daniel Dennett, who can be considered one of the most important champions of this renewal, and who considers himself indebted to the ideas expressed by Hume over 250 years ago. At the same time, in the same spirit of emphasis on the relevance of Hume's ideas to the modern thought, on the course of our paper, we sought to bring contemporary arguments and reformulations of certain tenets in Hume's philosophy, and also to apply certain methodological principles (derived from the humean argument) for the assessment of religious claims concerning miracles to a relatively recent case of miraculous cure recorded in Lourdes, France in the second half of the twentieth century.

In his *The Natural History of Religion*, Hume makes a distinction between two avenues in the study of religion: one that is concerned with its "foundation in reason", and the other which is directed at the understanding of its "origin in human nature". The first enterprise is the oldest pertaining, since Plato's time, to the philosophical interpretation, argumentation and research of religion by a series of rational concepts and arguments the avatars of which, in the works of different authors before and after Hume, represented some of the most used sources for grounding the arguments for the divine existence, design and attributes. The second enterprise, which constitutes the research focal point of the present thesis, is the result of certain processes undergone on several levels in the centuries that precede the Enlightenment, which prompted and

was prompted, we might say, by Hume's thought: namely the naturalist reductionist approach to the religious phenomenon.

Following the above mentioned humean distinction, I divided this thesis on two coordinates or interdependent parts composed of two chapters each.

Thus, *the first part*, referring to the *rational foundations of religion*, contains a discussion about the role reason played in relation with religion in particular, and about the transformations undergone by the philosophy of religion in general.

- a) **The first chapter**, entitled "Philosophy of religion: between reason and belief", contains, first, an exposition of the concept of "philosophy of religion" in the modern sense, followed, in the succeeding sections, by a diachronic analysis of the different roles and the different transformations which reason underwent as an instrument in the understanding of reality, and of its relation with religion in general and revelation or faith in particular. The discussions in this chapter refer thus to the platonic "philosophical religion" and the turn it took afterwards in the philosophy of Aristotle, whose teleological cosmology will influence European thinking and the Christianity during the Middle Ages. The next step is defined by an assessment of the millenarian connection between reason and faith or revelation in the medieval (Christian) thinking, connection established initially by Philon of Alexandria and adopted by Augustine and Boethius. In this chapter section my aim is particularly to establish the limits and the role conferred to reason by the medieval theologians and philosophers in connection with religion and revelation, and also the rational arguments used by them to the end of supporting on philosophical grounds the different religious tenets. The figures I refer to here are: Augustine, Pierre Abelard, Anselm of Canterbury, Adelard of Bath and Thomas Aquinas. The next section, devoted to "natural religion", follows the path reason took under the influence of such thinkers as René Descartes, Herbert de Cherbury, John Toland, Matthew Tindal, John Locke, succeeded by a comparative section between the medieval and the modern worlds.
- b) **The second chapter**, called "Hume and the religion of reason", contains, in its first section, an analysis of two important concepts from the humean philosophy, the concept of "reason" and the one of "belief", and the relation between the two. The next section, which is relatively the most comprehensive, introduces the problems of

natural religion or of the religion of reason, which encompass arguments about *the existence and the attributes of the one God, the problem of evil, the origin and nature of the universe or the possibility of miracles*. And these arguments are divided, in modern usage, in teleological arguments, design arguments, cosmological arguments, the history of which goes back to Plato. The next step is an exposition, in two subsections, of two humean critiques directed against the probability of miracles and against the likeliness of the design argument, to which I added a discussion on Hume's counterarguments concerning the incompatibility between the assertion of a benevolent God and the fact of the existence of evil in the world.

The second part, referring to the *anthropological grounds of religion*, contains the central discussion in this paper focused on the prerequisite elements that made possible the humean naturalistic approach in his treatise called *The Natural History of Religion*. Thus, this part is divided in two chapters, one in which I point the candidate ideas and processes at the origin of the humean perspective, and the other in which I discuss directly Hume's view on the origin of religion. In particular, the problems are set as follows:

- a) In the **third chapter**, titled "Natural philosophy and the birth of the naturalistic study of religion", I have introduced, in the first section, a contemporary distinction between two perspectives, the *naturalistic* and the *supernaturalistic* one, present in the different approaches regarding the religious phenomenon – a distinction which Hume prefigures implicitly in his work. The following section, titled "The new science", establishes point by point the principles of the Scientific Revolution, particularized in the works of some natural philosophers, like Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton, which, in my opinion, had the function of an *implicit cause* in the formation of the humean naturalistic view. To these principles it can be added what I called *explicit causes*, which comprise specific naturalistic research projects aimed at religion which are represented, among others, by Jean Bodin, Herbert of Cherbury, Bernard Fontenelle, Giambattista Vico, and John Trenchard.
- b) **The fourth and last chapter**, titled "Hume and the natural origin of religion", analyses, in the first section, the concept of "natural history" found in the title of Hume's treatise. The second section discusses the association of religion with a natural phenomenon and the origin of this association. The following section, simply

called “The origin of religion”, has at its center the effect the causes of which I try to identify in the previous sections: the humean discussion of the origin of religion in human nature expounded in his work *The Natural History of Religion*. And the last section represents an up-to-date approach brought about through an analogy between Hume’s time and the contemporary period, an analogy centered on the similitudes between the methodology and certain general concepts of the two periods.

All four chapters are followed by the Conclusions, where I reformulate the pursued objectives and where I make a point by point exposition of each of the processes, causes and developments I identified on the course of this paper, and which made possible the seminal humean (modern naturalistic) study of religion.

Thus, schematizing the discussions in this thesis, I will expound below the different processes and transformations that prepared the way for the birth of the humean naturalist analysis:

I. According to the first coordinate (defined by the first part of this paper), the humean (“mitigated” skeptical) critique of the rational arguments that form the ground of natural religion was made possible due to an intellectual process (championed mainly by Descartes, Locke and the deists in general) by which the foundations of religion ceased to be established through revelation (which had the last word in any theological dispute), but by its “handmade” – *reason*. Thus, owing to the fact that the arguments of religious faith started to be grounded and sifted using rational criteria, it was possible at the same time for the same arguments to be refuted using similar rational criteria the probability of which can have at least the same probability.

II. According to the second coordinate (defined by the second part of this paper), the humean methodological naturalism directed at the origin of the religious phenomenon is the outcome of at least two important causes which I consider *implicit* and *explicit* respectively.

a) The implicit causes are represented by the natural philosophy the transformations of which, being brought about by the Scientific Revolution, furnished a model of naturalistic research which, due to its efficacy in the study, classification, and understanding of nature, exercised an irresistible appeal to certain seventeen century philosophers and intellectuals who, by readapting this model, used it to study human nature and society. This conversion prompted thus the next set of causes.

- b) The explicit causes are represented by an array of individual naturalistic research projects of (the origin of) religion – projects exemplified by Jean Bodin, Herbert of Cherbury, Bernard Fontenelle, Giambattista Vico, and John Trenchard – resembling to a certain degree with the humean approach, which they precede. These individual projects differ primarily from Hume’s view in the use of the operative distinction (more or less explicitly affirmed) between “true” and “false” religion, a distinction generally absent in Hume.

III. The third aspect is represented by a process generated by the changes that took place at the level of the two above coordinates, following which the concept of “religion” undergoes two interdependent transformations which open the way to a scientific naturalistic study of the human religious propensities and ideas:

- a) A transformation is one in which religion (in certain intellectual quarters) changes its role, becoming from a *solution* and a *mystery* of human existence a *problem* related to human nature that requires a solution using a series of conceptual instruments that it (religion) didn’t established.
- b) The other transformation is the one in which the concept of religion suffers a “radical semantic externalization”, where the religious fact, as a set of personal beliefs, loses some of its personal and inner relation with man, becoming rather a research *object* that comprehends an array of propensities and attitudes structurally analyzable.

All these three aspects contributed to what today we would call the humean “reductionism” in the analysis of the religious phenomenon, by which the Scottish philosopher limits the scope of the research of its causes in the grasp of experience and empirical observation – in this case, the human psyche or understanding. In this sense, Hume operated a transfer of a concept used in natural philosophy, i.e. “natural history” – applied originally with reference to the natural world (mineral, vegetal, and animal) –, which he applied at the human level, accomplishing virtually a theoretical history of the formation of the idea of divinity in the human mind. In this enterprise, Hume had a practical and theoretical justification (furnished by the results obtained in the work of the seventeenth century taxonomists, biologists, and physicists) for a reductionist analysis of the first manifestations of religious ideas and experiences, an analysis which he nevertheless projects into a hypothetical past reconstructed by the aid of reason, experience and introspection.

This process wouldn't be possible without the exercise of an epistemic distancing or objectification of the studied phenomenon just like it happens in the case of the naturalist philosopher when he analyses a rock, a plant, or an animal. In this way, the religious phenomenon can be embedded and thus studied in the limits of the natural laws, in the hope of achieving the exactness reached in the flourishing and successful practice established by the same natural philosophers or scientists.

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