Chapter 2
Blasphemy, Dissimulation, and Humean Prudence

2.1 Persecution and Prosecution

Hume's discussions of religion and the supposed metaphysical truths underlying religious beliefs appeared in print at a time when public utterances or published writings denying the truth of Christianity were liable to legal prosecution in Britain and elsewhere in Europe as blasphemy. Moreover, the penalties that could be inflicted on an author or publisher remained severe even though the power of the self-proclaimed religion of love to engage in the judicial murder of its critics had, at least in Britain, atrophied to the point of permanent disuse.[1]

In the seventeenth century a person rash enough to engage in explicit or implicit public attacks on supposedly fundamental Christian doctrines would have been in danger, even in England, of being executed as a heretic. Thomas Hobbes, for example, found his life seriously threatened on grounds of irreligion and imputed atheism despite the numerous references to God and Scripture contained within his writings. John Aubrey (1626–1697) provides us with an account of the most serious incident.

> There was a report (and surely true) that in Parliament, not long after the King was settled [at the Restoration], some of the bishops made a motion to have the good old gentleman [Hobbes] burnt for a heretic. Which he hearing, feared that his papers might be searched by their order, and he told me he had burnt part of them. (1898, 153)

Hobbes survived this campaign against him, and eventually died peacefully in his bed at the age of 91 without seeing a priest or taking the sacrament (Tuck 2002, 48).

Hobbes died in 1679, and by then 2 years had passed since the final and decisive abolition in England of the death penalty for heresy and all other offences solely directed against religion (see Bonner 1934, 20). In Scotland, on the other hand, Thomas Aikenhead, a student at the University of Edinburgh aged only 20, was

[1] In Scotland the death penalty remained a legally sanctioned punishment for blasphemy throughout the eighteenth century even though no one was actually executed for this offence after 1697. It was formally abolished only in 1813. See Walter 1990, 32–3, 45.

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hanged for blasphemy as late as 1697 after making some remarks calling into question the divine authority of the Gospels (Hunter 1992, 221–6). This was the last judicial execution anywhere in Britain for the offences of blasphemy or heresy, although it is worth noting that supposed witches were still being executed in Scotland in the early years of the eighteenth century (Walter 1990, 26). In continental Europe, however, the tradition of legally sanctioned killing in support of Christianity, or some self-serving denomination of this religion, lingered on rather longer. In a case commented on by Hume himself,[2] the Chevalier de La Barre was beheaded in France on July 1, 1766 having been formally condemned as 'an execrable and abominable impious and sacrilegious person, and blasphemer' (Cabantous 2002, 128). Local political manoeuvrings in the town of Abbeville seem to have played a part in the initial prosecution, but Alain Cabantous reports that several of the magistrates in the Parlement of Paris maintained that La Barre and his alleged accomplices had 'drawn inspiration directly from their reading of philosophical works meant to topple true religion' (ibid., 129). Significantly, then, the body of this unfortunate man was consigned to the flames after his execution accompanied by a copy of Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique* (ibid., 130).

Despite the effective abolition even in Scotland of the death penalty for blasphemy, British writers of Hume's era continued to be threatened by worrying sanctions if their criticisms of religion were too overt. They were, almost by accident, free from one mechanism of repression that faced their contemporaries elsewhere in Europe. In France, for example, a writer wishing to publish anti-religious or politically radical views needed to engage in intricate scheming to evade an official regime of pre-publication censorship and the Index of Prohibited Books. So much effort was put into this formal programme of regulation that Louis XVI's financially tottering administration, on the eve of the French Revolution, was still employing more than 160 censors (Porter 2000, 72). In England, however, the Licensing Acts were allowed to lapse in 1695, and the system of prior censorship of books and other printed material was never reinstated. Official action against allegedly inappropriate writings could therefore be launched only after these had already been published (Walter 1990, 32). On the other hand, the authorities retained the option of imprisoning and fining authors and publishers after the event. Steps could also be taken after a successful prosecution for blasphemy to confiscate a publisher's stock of books and close down his business.

In England blasphemy was both an offence against statute law and an offence that could be prosecuted on the basis of the common law. The relevant statute of William III came into force in 1698 after the Lords and Commons passed 'an Act for the more effectual suppressing of blasphemy and profaneness', and it remained in force throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (see Bonner

[2] In a letter to the Marquise de Barbentane, Hume makes the following observations: 'It is strange, that such cruelty should be found among a people so celebrated for humanity, and so much bigotry amid so much knowledge and philosophy. I am pleased to hear, that the indignation was as general in Paris as it is in all foreign countries' (1932, II, 85).

1934, 21–6). This piece of legislation laid down punishments to be imposed in the following circumstances:

> if any person or persons having been educated in, or at any time having made profession of, the Christian religion within this realm shall, by writing, printing, teaching, or advised speaking deny any one of the persons in the Holy Trinity to be God, assert or maintain that there are more gods than one, or shall deny the Christian religion to be true, or the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be of divine authority (Bonner 1934, 22).

An initial conviction disqualified offenders from holding or deriving any benefit from any official appointment, irrespective of whether this was an ecclesiastical, military or civil appointment. Provision was made in the statute for the setting aside of these penalties if offenders made, within the space of 4 months, a public acknowledgement and renunciation of their erroneous opinions in the same court where they had been convicted. However, a second conviction for any of the activities specified in the statute subjected the offender to harsh penalties that could not be removed by any confession of error.

> Then he or they shall from thenceforth be disabled to sue, prosecute, plead, or use any action or information in any court of law or equity, or to be guardian of any child, or executor or administrator of any person, or capable of any legacy or deed of gift, or to bear any office, civil or military, or benefice ecclesiastical, for ever within this realm, and shall also suffer imprisonment for the space of three years, without bail or mainprize from the time of such conviction. (ibid., 22–3)

This piece of law has several interesting features. Firstly, the only practical effect of the clause concerning previous education in or profession of Christianity was to exclude people exclusively brought up in some alternative religion, principally at this period Judaism, from the jurisdiction of the Act. Any other British citizens would have been vulnerable to prosecution even in virtue of an infant baptism, a single attendance at a church service, or any kind of exposure to Christianity in the course of their schooling. Secondly, it skilfully avoided mentioning atheism or even deism by name, and sought instead to suppress attacks on highly specific religious claims whose truth implied the falsity of atheism and deism. Thus the public proclamation of atheism was made illegal without even mentioning atheism as a potential position that someone might espouse (see Berman 1990, 35–6). And thirdly, it was a statute that posed a particularly serious threat to anyone holding an official post or pension as a result of a government appointment or award. These posts and pensions were a crucial and expected source of income for men of good social standing and earnest literary pretensions. However, they were distributed as part of an intricate system of patronage and mutual favours that promoted factious rivalries and resentments. Consequently anyone suspected of irreligious views who had been awarded an administrative post or annuity by the government was potentially vulnerable to losing these advantages as a result of a prosecution instigated by a disaffected rival or opposing faction.

Despite the existence of this statute-based law, the main threat to irreligious writers at this time actually came from prosecutions launched on the basis of the common law, which is law created by established custom, precedent, and the decisions that judges are recorded to have made in trials conducted before them. A key case in

the evolution of this law took place in 1676 with the trial of John Taylor before Lord Chief Justice Hale in the King's Bench (see Bonner 1934, 28–32). Taylor's sanity seems to have been at least questionable, but he was nevertheless convicted of blasphemy for making such remarks as 'religion is a cheat and profession is a cloak', 'I am a younger brother to Christ, and angel of God', and 'Christ is a whoremaster' (Walter 1990, 31). In the course of the trial Hale made a series of pronouncements that shaped for nearly 200 years the interpretation of the law in England concerning blasphemy. In the considered opinion of the Lord Chief Justice:

> such kind of wicked and blasphemous words were not only an offence against God and religion, but a crime against the laws, State, and Government, and therefore punishable in this Court; that to say that religion is a cheat is to dissolve all those obligations whereby civil societies are preserved; and Christianity being parcel of the laws of England, therefore to reproach the Christian religion is to speak in subversion of the law. (Bonner 1934, 30–1)

With this judgement firmly placed on the record, the way was prepared for a series of prosecutions that were pressed home not on the basis of someone's obscene or offensive mode of expression but primarily on the basis of the content of the views expressed by that person. According to Hale, any denial of the truth of Christianity, no matter how restrained the language in which it is put forward, amounted to a repudiation of the legitimacy of the laws of England and hence was rightly punishable by those laws.

Little would be gained at this point from simply listing a string of prosecutions for blasphemy carried out in England and Scotland under the precedent established by Hale. However, an illustrative sample of cases where it is clear that the alleged blasphemers were simply engaged in arguing against the truth of Christianity or the literal truth of specific incidents recorded in the Gospels will help to give an accurate impression of the circumstances under which Hume was attempting to put forward his views about religion. Similarly, an examination of these cases will also make it clear that the penalties inflicted on people convicted of blasphemy were not merely token punishments but were often remarkably harsh and vindictive.

One particularly interesting case of prosecutorial zeal is provided by the trial of Thomas Woolston (see Bury 2007, 111). Woolston was a Fellow of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, and the author of six *Discourses on the Miracles of our Saviour*. In these works he argued that many of the incidents reported in the Gospels were, if taken literally, quite contemptible and wholly unworthy of being ascribed to the agency of the omnipotent creator of the universe. He professed to believe, perhaps sincerely, that this showed that we needed to interpret these stories allegorically 'as figures of Christ's mysterious operations in the soul of man' (Bury 2007, 112). And in the case of the resurrection narrative itself, Woolston diagnosed plain fraud: he professed sympathy for the views of a supposed Jewish rabbi and friend who described it as 'the most notorious and monstrous Imposture, that ever was put upon mankind' (1729, 5). Woolston's pamphlets sold extremely well, and this seems to indicate the existence of a burgeoning public appetite for robust criticism and ridicule of biblical literalism. However, his claim to be a sincere Christian engaged in the task of recovering the real message of the Gospels failed to protect him against prosecution for blasphemy. Having been deprived of his Fellowship, Woolston was

sentenced in March 1729 to an initial term of 1 year in prison and a fine of £100 (Bonner 1934, 35). The sentence handed down also included the astonishing provision that he should then 'continue in prison for life unless he himself should be bound in a recognisance for £2,000, and two others for £1,000 each, or four for £500 each,[3] with condition for his good behaviour during life' (ibid., 35). The end result was that Woolston died in prison in 1733 without ever regaining his freedom.

Also worthy of note as showing the type of accusation brought against people who found themselves charged with blasphemy is the case in 1756 of Jacob Ilive. According to the account provided by Bonner (ibid., 36), Ilive was prosecuted because of a work entitled *Some Modest Remarks on the Late Bishop Sherlock's Sermons*. This was described in the following terms in the indictment filed by the Attorney-General:

> a profane and blasphemous libel, tending to vilify and subvert the Christian religion, and to blaspheme our most Blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; to cause his divinity to be denied, to represent him as an impostor; to scandalise, ridicule, and bring into contempt his most holy life, doctrines, and miracles; and to cause the truth of the Christian religion to be disbelieved and totally rejected, by representing the same as spurious, and chimerical, and a gross piece of forgery and priestcraft. (Bonner 1934, 36)

On being found guilty of blasphemy, Ilive was committed to Newgate prison for 1 month and forced to stand in the pillory at various locations around London. He was then transferred to the House of Correction at Clerkenwell in order to serve out an additional 3 years' hard labour.

The prosecution of Peter Annet in 1763 was a continuation of the same established pattern of repression, but it also had an intriguing connection with Hume's difficulties over the planned publication of his 'Five Dissertations'. As we saw in the first section of Chap. 1, it appears from a letter written by Warburton in 1756 that Hume and his publisher backed away from publishing this work in response to a direct threat of legal action. Significantly, however, the person mentioned by Warburton in that letter as having already been selected by the Attorney-General for prosecution as a deterrent to other authors was Annet. According to Warburton, 'the person marked out for prosecution is one Annet, a Schoolmaster on Tower hill, the most abandoned of all two legged creatures' (Mossner 1980, 323).

The fact that some 7 years elapsed between Warburton's confident claim that Annet would be prosecuted and Annet's actual trial suggests that his prosecution was not quite as high a priority for the authorities as Warburton had been led to believe. Nevertheless when Annet was eventually brought before a court for publishing his deist periodical *The Free Inquirer*, he was convicted and sentenced to both imprisonment and time in the pillory even though he was, at that time, an elderly man of 70 (Walter 1990, 34). Interestingly, the charges brought against him

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[3] Some idea of the level of malice behind the stipulation of sums of money as large as these can be gauged from the fact that when Hume was appointed in 1752 as library-keeper to the Faculty of Advocates in Edinburgh, his salary amounted, at best, to a little over 50 pounds a year (see Hume 1932, I, 164).

placed especial emphasis on his denial of the divine authority of the first five books of the Old Testament. His periodical was described as a blasphemous libel:

> tending to blaspheme Almighty God, and to ridicule, traduce, and discredit his Holy Scriptures, particularly the Pentateuch, and to represent and cause it to be believed that the prophet Moses was an impostor, and that the sacred truths and miracles recorded in the Pentateuch were impostures and false inventions (Bonner 1934, 37).

The parallel with Hume in this regard is a striking one. Hume too singled out the Pentateuch for severe criticism in his discussion of miracle reports in the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. According to Hume, if we adopt an interpretative posture of considering these five books 'not as the word or testimony of God himself, but as a production of a mere human writer and historian', then it would be far more plausible to suppose that they were full of lies and falsehood than it would be to suppose that the miraculous events reported there actually happened (1772a, 10.40/130). Hume, however, had wisely taken the precaution of presenting his criticisms as part of a supposed attempt to show how the truth of the Christian religion was best defended.

The above cases of prosecution all took place in England. Nevertheless they remain directly relevant to Hume's own circumstances as Hume resided in England for a substantial number of years and his writings were primarily published by booksellers, namely Andrew Millar and William Strahan, based in England. Moreover, the potential problems that faced him in Scotland were, if anything, even more formidable. As we have already noted, Scottish law retained the death penalty throughout the eighteenth century as a theoretical option in cases of conviction for blasphemy. Although this option was never exercised, lesser penalties of imprisonment and fines were imposed along the same lines as in England (see Walter 1990, 45). Indeed the authorities in Scotland were still enthusiastically prosecuting sellers and distributors of irreligious literature in the middle of the nineteenth century. Thus Edinburgh in 1843 and the early months of 1844 saw a series of connected trials of radical booksellers for distributing allegedly blasphemous books, and these culminated in three men and one woman[4] being sentenced to prison terms ranging from 60 days to 15 months (see Royle 1974, 83–5). Unless we take the highly implausible view that eighteenth-century Scotland was actually far more liberal in these matters, it seems clear that anyone writing or publishing irreligious books or pamphlets in Scotland during Hume's era would have needed to pay very careful attention to the risk of being put on trial in the secular courts.

So far we have been looking at cases of prosecution primarily from the viewpoint of the people subjected to this coercive treatment. It is also possible, though, to focus on the potential fate of a book rather than its author, publisher, or distributors. And an excellent example of the kind of sustained campaign that the authorities were prepared to wage in order to suppress a supposedly irreligious

[4] In the course of defending herself, Matilda Roalfe said that the 'question was not whether Christianity was true or false, but whether Atheists had an equal right with Christians to publish their opinions'. She also declared that she 'did not regret what she had done, nor did she believe that she should' (Walter 1990, 46).

book is provided by the tribulations in Britain of Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*. Part One of this work was published in 1794, only 15 years after Hume's death, and Paine was emphatically writing as a deist rather than an atheist or agnostic (Gaskin 1989, 96–7). However, the book's scathing attack on revealed religion and its open onslaught against Christianity generated an avid readership and made it widely notorious.[5] It also provoked a determined attempt in Britain to prevent its distribution and sale by prosecuting anyone publishing the work or making it available to readers.

Paine was not personally affected by this hostile campaign because he never returned to Britain after the publication of *The Age of Reason*: after leaving France, he resided for the rest of his life in the United States. However, the first prosecution in Britain took place in 1797. The bookseller Thomas Williams was put on trial for publishing and selling an edition of Paine's book,[6] and he was sent to prison for 1 year on the basis that *The Age of Reason* constituted a blasphemous libel (see Bonner 1934, 38–41). Other successful prosecutions followed, but the most momentous trial in the attempt to suppress the dissemination of Paine's anti-Christian opinions took place in 1819 when Richard Carlile was brought before a court for publishing *The Age of Reason* and Elihu Palmer's deist work *The Principles of Nature*.[7]

According to the detailed account of the case provided by Guy Aldred (1923, 76–97), Carlile had deliberately set out to draw a prosecution in an effort to bring the law on blasphemy into disrepute. The charges relating to the two books were presented in two successive trials, with *The Age of Reason* being taken first. In his initial trial, Carlile was formally charged with being 'a wicked, impious, and ill-disposed person, who had caused to be printed and published a scandalous and blasphemous libel of, and concerning, the Old Testament' (ibid., 78), and the indictment specifically cited a number of passages from Paine's book. The Attorney-General, Sir Robert Gifford, opened the case for the crown. He reminded the jury that by taking the oath, they 'had pledged themselves to the truth of Christianity' (ibid., 78), and he argued that there was accordingly no need to say anything further about the merit

[5] Paine regarded atheism as an absurd and pernicious position. But he also held that Christianity was as bad as atheism though unfortunately more widely espoused: 'As to the Christian system of faith, it appears to me as a species of Atheism—a sort of religious denial of God. It professes to believe in a man rather than in God. It is a compound made up chiefly of Manism with but little Deism, and is as near to Atheism as twilight is to darkness' (1794, 36).

[6] The prosecution was instigated by a vigilante organization that called itself The Society to Enforce His Majesty's Proclamation for the Suppression of Vice. One of its most zealous vice-presidents was William Wilberforce, the campaigner against slavery. It is worth noting, accordingly, that despite his supposed Christian sympathy for the oppressed, he was an enthusiastic persecutor of people who did not share his own religious beliefs (Bonner 1934, 39–40).

[7] Palmer's book is of considerable interest as the product of a radical freethinker born and raised in America prior to the War of Independence. It also constitutes a very early attempt to argue not just that Christianity has evolved in a morally corrupt direction but also that the original teachings of Jesus of Nazareth are themselves morally disreputable and unworthy of being espoused by any genuinely good person. According to Palmer (1802, 79), 'The maxims of the *New Testament* are a perversion of all correct principles in a code of moral virtue'.

of this religion. The defendant's behaviour was identical with cases that had seen convictions for blasphemy in the past, and the law clearly precluded him from publishing material impugning the truth of Christianity.

> To discuss its veracity was to deny its constitutional authority and to admit that it might be discussed in the manner that had given rise to the present proceedings. Not to be convicted, the defendant must abolish the Constitution and persuade the jury to ignore the solemn obligation that they had taken in the name of their Creator. (ibid., 79)

Carlile addressed the court in his own defence over a period of 3 days. This allowed him to read out and comment on the whole of *The Age of Reason*: his object here being, as Aldred points out, to 'include it in his report of the trial, and thus circulate widely a repetition of the "blasphemy" he was indicted for' (1923, 81). However, this defence failed to persuade the jury to acquit him; and he was similarly unsuccessful in his trial for publishing *The Principles of Nature*.

After some subsequent legal arguments, Carlile was sentenced to 3 years' imprisonment in the county gaol of Dorset and fines totalling £1,500. There was also a provision that even after the completion of this initial prison sentence, Carlile would remain imprisoned until he had paid in full all his fines and given security in the sum of £1,200 for his future good behaviour (Aldred 1923, 97). The clear aim of these fines and the imposed securities was to drive Carlile permanently out of business, and within an hour or so of his sentence court officials had seized the entire stock of books at his premises in Fleet Street.

Carlile and his supporters had, however, made some preparations of their own. After his sentence and imprisonment, Carlile's wife and sister and other employees in his shop continued openly to sell copies of *The Age of Reason* and *The Principles of Nature*. As these in turn were arrested, tried, and sent to gaol, fresh volunteers from freethinking societies and groups all over the country travelled to London to continue this public defiance of the authorities (Royle 1974, 35–7). Other sympathizers sent money to keep Carlile's business running and to pay for extra food and provisions for those in gaol. Bonner estimates that in total about 150 people spent time in prison as a result of taking a place in Carlile's shop as part of this protest, and she adds that their imprisonment 'was seldom for days or weeks, but usually for a year or years' (1934, 54).

One particularly important society that was organized outside of London in support of Carlile was the Edinburgh Freethinkers Zetetick Society. This was founded in December 1821, principally at the instigation of James and Robert Affleck (Royle 1974, 35). However, it soon ran into its own problems with the authorities in Scotland; and in 1823 James Affleck was prosecuted for blasphemous speech, the society was closed, and the books in its library were seized by the police (ibid., 36–7). Amongst the books taken away were Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* and Baron d'Holbach's *System of Nature*.[8] Affleck responded by starting a business as a bookseller in 1824, but this merely led to his being prosecuted again and impris-

[8] D'Holbach and Hume became friends in the course of Hume's time in Paris as Embassy Secretary (see Hume 1932, I, 496; II, 205 & 275). D'Holbach's *System of Nature* was first published in French in 1770, and as it was an explicit defence of atheism, and probably the first such defence to

oned for 3 months for selling the *Republican*, a radical newspaper published by Carlile, and Paine's *Theological Works*.

The upshot of the struggle in London was that the Home Office, under Robert Peel, eventually gave up its efforts to close down Carlile's business and to suppress *The Age of Reason*. According to Edward Royle, no more arrests were made after 1824 and Carlile himself was abruptly released in 1825 after spending more than 6 years in prison (1974, 37). He immediately proceeded to resume his publishing and bookselling activities, and he quickly reprinted both *The Age of Reason* and *The Principles of Nature*.[9] Moreover the very public failure of the campaign to suppress these works seems to have given them *de facto* immunity from subsequent attempts at prosecution. Thus Bonner reports that although other allegedly blasphemous publications continued to generate trials and prison sentences, *The Age of Reason* was never again made the subject of prosecution in Britain (1934, 55).

What the Carlile affair does reveal, however, is the willingness of the authorities in England and Scotland to make a sustained attempt, involving the imprisonment of large numbers of people, to suppress particular irreligious books. Even if an author himself was, like Paine, beyond the reach of legal sanctions, the books resulting from his literary endeavours could still be ruthlessly hounded throughout Britain in an effort to prevent both their commercial and private circulation. And if a book were only issued in a small and limited edition and the author was unable or unwilling to promote its repeated publication, there was a significant risk that the book might ultimately cease to exist in any form whatsoever.

2.2 Humean Prudence

It is clear, therefore, that an eighteenth-century author wishing to question the truth of Christianity or to advance even more radically irreligious views was confronted by a formidable apparatus of legal repression. How, then, might such an author proceed? One option was to avoid all written discussion of matters of religion and to confine these potentially dangerous topics exclusively to private conversation. At the other extreme, there was the option of simply ignoring the threat of prosecution and social ostracism in favour of a bold or foolhardy policy of setting out one's views in a blunt and unambiguous manner. Significantly, though, Berman's very thorough survey (1990) of the early history of atheism in Britain finds no evidence

be published anywhere in Europe, it was wisely put before the public under the name of Jean Baptiste de Mirabaud.

[9] Given the deist nature of these two books, it is perhaps ironic that during their imprisonment Carlile and some of his closest supporters had abandoned deism in order to espouse atheism or aggressive agnosticism. In 1826 Carlile summed up his new position as follows: 'we have ventured to ask–WHAT IS GOD? We find no one to answer the question with an intelligible sentence, and finding no one to answer the question, having no answer of our own, we have found that an honest inquirer after truth can and should proceed without the use of the word god' (see Royle 1974, 42).

of any British author prepared openly to declare himself or herself to be an atheist, or even what we would today call an agnostic, prior to 1782, 6 years after Hume's death. In much the same fashion, deist writers of this period also tended to be very reluctant to deny explicitly the truth of Christianity. The need for such overt denials was averted by the skilful use of some conventional formulae that preserved an appearance of consistency with Protestant Christianity while encouraging the reader to draw conclusions that went beyond anything directly asserted in the text (see Porter 2000, 111–19). One popular formula was to construct a case for the conclusion that Christianity contained nothing of crucial importance beyond what could be established by unaided natural reason. The alert reader would then be forced to reflect on what motive there could possibly be for a separate divine revelation if natural reason was already self-sufficient. Even more widely used, however, was the device of arguing at length against the corruptions that had supposedly arisen to disfigure the true essence of Christianity: either early Christians had been intellectually unsophisticated and had failed to respond appropriately to divine prompting, or the various forms of Christianity prevalent in the modern world had come, under the influence of priests and deranged enthusiasts, to incorporate mistaken doctrines that accordingly needed eradication or revision. Such formulae were not adequate vehicles for insinuating doctrines as radical as atheism, agnosticism, or even attenuated deism. However, the deist manoeuvrings just outlined do point the way towards a middle path for the eighteenth-century irreligious author who wished to avoid prosecution. If one were prepared to engage in a certain amount of textual dissimulation, it was possible to put before the public a powerful argumentative case for some very radical conclusions while remaining free from any serious threat of legal sanctions.

The question that arises at this point is whether Hume is a writer who dons a cloak of dissimulation when he approaches sensitive religious issues or is instead someone whose pronouncements on such topics must generally be taken at face value. Two opposed considerations come into play here. The historical context to Hume's writings plainly suggests that if he does have strongly irreligious views, then it is quite likely that he would choose to express them under the protection of a certain amount of disguise. Moreover, Berman's insightful analyses of the works of such unwarrantedly neglected authors as Collins and Radicati provide substantial grounds for concluding that in adopting such an approach, Hume would have been participating in a well-established tradition of radical dissimulation that had grown up alongside, and partly obscured by, the disguised repudiations of Christianity by deists who regarded themselves as far removed from anything as outrageous as agnosticism or rank atheism (see 1990, 70–92, 93–5). On the other hand, claims of dissimulation and irony run the risk of allowing a person committed to a particular interpretation of Hume's views on religion to disregard in an unhelpfully arbitrary manner any inconvenient counter-evidence. Thus William Sessions raises worries about ascriptions of irony.

> Irony as incongruity between what is straightforwardly said or done and its hidden significance is a handy but much-abused tool for construing a text that appears to say the opposite of what one thinks it ought to say. (2002, 210)

And even Gaskin, who is certainly not averse to diagnosing some important remarks and passages in Hume's writings as instances of irony or protective camouflage, insists on the need for caution in this area: 'We should beware of so relying upon Hume's irony that we read an often repeated declaration as an often repeated denial' (1988, 220).

An important piece of evidence in support of the hypothesis that Hume writes in a way that is intended to insinuate a radically irreligious outlook while allowing him some scope for plausibly denying that this is his aim comes from a letter in which he sets out his attitude towards a policy of pretending to have religious beliefs that one actually lacks. Hume's friend Colonel James Edmonstoune had written to him in 1764 for advice about a mutual acquaintance, a Mr Vivian, whose religious doubts had left him uncertain whether to remain a clergyman or become a layman. Hume's response to Edmonstoune is that this person is not under any obligation to abandon the clerical profession merely because he lacks the beliefs conventionally expected of a clergyman. As Hume acerbically puts the matter:

> it is putting too great a Respect on the Vulgar, and on their Superstitions, to pique one'self on Sincerity with regard to them. Did ever one make it a point of Honour to speak Truth to Children or Madmen? (1954, 83)

Significantly this piece of private correspondence equates mainstream Protestant Christianity with superstition. Hume often criticizes superstition in his published works, but he is usually careful to leave it open to the reader to interpret him as criticizing only such positions as Catholicism, extreme Protestant enthusiasm, Islam, and polytheism. In this particular instance, however, when Hume is in the relatively safe position of engaging in correspondence with a friend he trusts, he appears entirely happy to include the Christianity of his Protestant contemporaries in the category of superstition. Moreover, the suggestion that even educated Anglicans and members of the Church of Scotland are, in respect of their religious convictions, on an intellectual par with 'Children or Madmen' should certainly give pause to anyone inclined to suppose that Hume sees Christianity as a religion that is a genuine option for a true philosopher.

In the same letter Hume goes on to lament his own inability to put into practice the advice he has forwarded to Edmonstoune.

> I wish it were still in my Power to be a Hypocrite in this particular: The common Duties of Society usually require it; and the ecclesiastical Profession only adds a little more to an innocent Dissimulation or rather Simulation, without which it is impossible to pass thro the World. Am I a Lyar, because I order my servant to say I am not at home, when I do not desire to see company. (ibid., 83)

It seems clear from these remarks that Hume would have had no moral reservations whatsoever about adopting a mask of faith and religious conviction in order to make life easier for himself. On the other hand, he also seems to be implying that his past choices and actions mean that this is not a policy that would have any chances of success in his own case. So it might be suggested that by the date of this letter at least, Hume would have had no motive to mask in his writings his real views about religion: his reputation as an irreligious thinker was already so established that it could do him no harm to express his views quite openly.

One response to this suggestion would be to point out that Hume is specifically discussing the merits of affecting Christian belief rather than some more nebulous set of religious sentiments. The former mode of dissimulation might no longer have been an option for Hume, but that would not necessarily have prevented him from successfully presenting himself in public as embracing some religiously significant form of deism. However, this is not a fully satisfactory reply. As we saw in the preceding section, it was the denial of the truth of Christianity that was legally problematic in Hume's time: prosecution could not be averted by showing that one's denunciations of Christianity were combined with a repudiation of atheism and agnosticism. These latter positions were indeed effectively outlawed, but only because they implied a denial, or at least an obdurate refusal to affirm, that Christianity was true. What does need to be kept in mind, though, is that prosecutions for blasphemy were targeted against public speech and published writings rather than private opinions. So a reputation as an apostate did not leave one vulnerable to prosecution even though it might have some unfortunate social consequences. The key consideration in terms of personal safety for an author like Hume was the need to avoid publishing material that explicitly attacked Christianity or any propositions whose truth was entailed by the truth of Christianity. Implied attacks rarely attracted the interest of the authorities unless the overlying disguise happened to be almost non-existent.

It seems legitimate to conclude, therefore, that Hume's awareness that he had acquired a widespread reputation as a critic of Christianity and perhaps as an even more radically irreligious thinker would not have given him any motive to abandon a policy of dissimulation in his published writings. Indeed the acquisition of such a reputation is just what we would expect to happen if Hume were indeed engaged in the covert advocacy of irreligious opinions. If an author's protective camouflage is too perfect, then he fails to convey his underlying message to his readers. But if it is too diaphanous, then it fails to serve as a way of avoiding prosecution. The perfect compromise for an irreligious writer of Hume's time would have been a level of dissimulation that allowed, even prompted, a thoughtful reader to construct from the text powerful arguments against various religious beliefs while preserving a veneer of plausible deniability to hold in check any threat of legal sanctions.

Given that we have been able to confirm that Hume is not an author with moral scruples about misrepresenting his religious views, or the absence of these, in order to make life safer or easier for himself, the next step in building a strong case for supposing that Hume does take steps to conceal how radical a position he is really seeking to defend would be to find some direct evidence that Hume is anxious about how far he can prudently go in setting out his criticisms of religious belief. This turns out not to be a difficult task. One of the main themes of Hume's letters is his concern about the potential adverse consequences of the positions, both religious and political, that he chooses to advance in his writings.

In the case of Hume's worries about the *Treatise*, we have already examined some of the relevant evidence in the second section of the previous chapter. Hume's comments about his cowardice or prudence in revising the *Treatise* in an attempt to ensure that 'it shall give as little offence as possible' (1932, I, 25) plainly indicate

that he has no intention of being a martyr, or indeed of attracting needless opprobrium, in the cause of religious scepticism. Christian enthusiasts might be happy to sacrifice themselves on behalf of their superstitious beliefs, but Hume believes that such deranged enthusiasm is blameworthy rather than something to be commended. Dangerous levels of purely philosophical enthusiasm are, in Hume's opinion, extremely rare (see 1739, 1.4.7.13/272); but given his strictures against enthusiasm in other areas, he was intent on not succumbing to this disorder himself.

This same concern for prudence and discretion also manifests itself in his correspondence with Francis Hutcheson, at that time the Professor of Philosophy at the University of Glasgow, about the content of Book 3 of the *Treatise*. Hutcheson had provided Hume with some comments on a draft version of this part of the *Treatise*, and Hume gives the following account of the revisions he had made as a consequence:

> Since I saw you, I have been very busy in correcting & finishing that Discourse concerning Morals, which you perus'd; & I flatter myself, that the Alterations I have made have improv'd it very much in point of Prudence and Philosophy. (1932, I, 36)

Moreover, in a subsequent letter Hume asks Hutcheson to consider whether there is any way to avoid the conclusion that the connection between moral judgements and human sentiments means that morality 'regards only human Nature & human Life' and cannot be a part of our relationship to any 'superior Beings' (ibid., I, 40). Hume says that this is an objection that has often been raised against Hutcheson's account of morality, and he indicates that it is a matter worthy of further consideration even though it is a delicate and potentially dangerous one.

> If you make any Alterations on your Performances, I can assure you, there are many who desire you woud more fully consider this Point; if you think that the Truth lyes on the popular Side. Otherwise common Prudence, your Character, & Situation forbid you touch upon it. (ibid.)

Turning next to the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* in its initial guise of the *Philosophical Essays*, we find from his letters that Hume is still concerned with issues of prudence, but has clearly decided to take a bolder line than is manifest in the *Treatise*. In a letter to James Oswald, Hume discusses his plans to publish the *Philosophical Essays*, and he says that he has been advised not to do this by Henry Home.

> I have some thoughts of … printing the Philosophical Essays I left in your hands. Our friend, Harry, is against this, as indiscreet. But in the first place, I think I am too deep engaged to think of a retreat. In the second place, I see not what bad consequences follow, in the present age, from the character of an infidel; especially if a man's conduct be in other respects irreproachable. What is your opinion? (1932, I, 106)

And in a letter written only a few months later to Home himself, Hume confirms that he is setting about the publication of a new edition of his *Essays* and an initial edition of the *Philosophical Essays*. Once again the issue of the prudence of this latter step is something that engages Hume's attention.

> The other work is the Philosophical Essays, which you dissuaded me from printing. I won't justify the prudence of this step, any other way than by expressing my indifference about all the consequences that may follow. (1932, I, 111)

The question of what has led Hume to think of himself as 'too deep engaged to think of a retreat' is an intriguing one. Two possibilities come to mind. The first is the fact that his authorship of the *Treatise* seems to have been quite widely known in Edinburgh despite the fact that this work had been published anonymously. The other possibility is that Hume was reflecting on the fact that his published philosophical views and his alleged views on religion had already sufficed to bring about the embarrassing defeat of his candidacy for an academic post at Edinburgh. He might well have thought that given his existing reputation, no further harm would result from removing a little more of the disguise from his criticisms of religion.

It does seem clear, however, that Hume is deliberately deciding in the case of the *Philosophical Essays* to be less cautious than he had been when preparing the final version of Book 1 of the *Treatise*. Moreover, his letters indicate that he is expecting this new work to reinforce the impression that he is defending an infidel position. Now Hume's evident mastery of philosophical style in the *Philosophical Essays* would seem to guarantee that if this impression were actually a mistaken one, Hume could readily have written a book expressing his true views in a way that would at least have avoided giving fresh impetus to the view that he had abandoned Christian belief. After all, the reception accorded to the *Treatise* would already have warned him about the ease with which it was possible to acquire an irreligious reputation. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion, therefore, that Hume is anticipating an interpretation of the *Philosophical Essays* as an infidel work because that is precisely what it is, albeit under a certain amount of precautionary disguise intended to ward off prosecution for blasphemy.

The same concern with the delicate balance between prudent and discreet presentation on the one hand and robust argumentative content on the other also extends to the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. Hume had circulated an initial draft of a substantial portion of these dialogues to some of his close friends more than 25 years before his death. However, Hume refrained from publishing them at that time, and in the final year of his life one of his principal preoccupations was trying to find some way of ensuring that they would be published either before his death or without undue delay afterwards.

The reaction to this work when his friends first saw it seems to have been one of consternation. Writing in 1763, Hume complains in a humorous though pointed way to Gilbert Elliot of Minto about his intransigence in insisting that it would be unwise for the *Dialogues* to be published.

> Is it not hard & tyrannical in you, more tyrannical than any Act of the Stuarts, not to allow me to publish my Dialogues? Pray, do you not think that a proper Dedication may atone for what is exceptional in them? I am become much of my friend, Corbyn Morrice's Mind, who says, that he writes all his Books for the sake of the Dedications. (1954, 71)

And we also have a fascinating letter written in 1763 by Hugh Blair, one of Hume's closest friends amongst the Scottish clergy, in which Blair congratulates Hume on his imminent departure for France with Lord Hertford's ambassadorial party but also suggests that Hume might find himself viewed by the French *philosophes* as not sufficiently hostile towards religious belief. However, Blair can envisage a potential

means of remedying this affront to his friend's national status as a standard-bearer for urbane irreligion.

> But had you gone but one Step farther—I am well informed, in several Poker clubs in Paris your statue would have been erected.[10] If you will show them the MSS of certain Dialogues perhaps that honour may still be done you. But for Gods sake let that be a posthumous work, if ever it shall see the light: Tho' I really think it had better not. (1954, 72–3n4)

In Hume's reply, he teasingly implied that if he were to decide to publish 'the work you mention', he would be strongly tempted to dedicate it to Blair (ibid., 72).

In the period immediately preceding his death, Hume became determined that the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* should indeed be published. And even at this point, the work still retained the power to alarm both Hume's friends and his usual publisher. A protracted correspondence about publication with Adam Smith saw Smith making a variety of excuses to avoid taking on the responsibility to ensure that the *Dialogues* were published after Hume's death. Smith did express a willingness to keep the manuscript safe so that the option of publication at some point would not be lost, but a letter from Smith to Hume's publisher, William Strahan, indicates that this offer was primarily intended to dissuade Hume from taking more active steps to initiate publication.

> I once had perswaded him to leave it entirely to my discretion either to publish them at what time I thought proper, or not to publish them at all. Had he continued of this mind the manuscript should have been most carefully preserved and upon my decease restored to his family; but it never should have been published in my lifetime. (1932, II, 453)

Nor was Hume any more successful in the case of Strahan himself. Strahan was happy to bring out new and corrected editions of Hume's other writings, but he deflected with great determination all of Hume's efforts to persuade him to commit to publishing the *Dialogues*. In a letter written in June 1776, Hume argued that the *Dialogues* were no more controversial and dangerous than some of the material Strahan was already publishing on his behalf.

> I seriously declare, that after Mr Millar and You and Mr Cadell have publickly avowed your Publication of the *Enquiry concerning human Understanding*, I know no Reason why you shoud have the least Scruple with regard to these Dialogues. They will be much less obnoxious to the Law, and not more exposed to popular Clamour. (1932, II, 323–4)

Strahan remained unconvinced; and despite discussions after Hume's death with Hume's nephew, David Hume the Younger, and Hume's elder brother, John Home, Strahan eventually confirmed that he would not publish the *Dialogues*. The manuscript was then returned to Hume's nephew in accordance with the terms of Hume's will, and the *Dialogues* were eventually published in 1779 (1932, II, 454). They bore Hume's name, but the names of the publisher and editor were conspicuously absent.

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[10] In Edinburgh Hume and many of his friends were members of the Poker Club, a dining and discussion society originally set up to promote the reinstatement of a Scottish militia. See Mossner 1980, 272–3, 284–5.

It is clear, therefore, that Hume's letters show him to have an enduring interest in the issue of how far he can prudently go in expressing his philosophical and religious views. We have also seen that Hume's friends were often very worried about the likely consequences of some of his publications or proposed publications. And it is noticeable that Hume himself distinguishes between two potential sources of danger or social harassment. One such source is 'popular Clamour', which one might perhaps downplay as no more than the abuse and unpopularity that is usually the lot of someone who defends unfashionable opinions. But Hume's reference to 'the Law' makes it evident that he is also well aware of the potential risk of formal legal prosecution run by the authors, publishers, and sellers of irreligious or seemingly irreligious literature. Moreover, these points need to be considered, as we have seen, in conjunction with Hume's candid recommendation of a policy of dissimulation and ambiguity if the open avowal of one's true sentiments in matters of religion would place one at a personal disadvantage. We can hardly avoid inferring, accordingly, that the astute interpreter, when confronted by an apparent tension in Hume's writings between irreligious observations and arguments on the one hand and bland reassertions of more orthodox views on the other hand, would be strongly inclined to conclude that the position for which Hume is really constructing a case is the irreligious one.

2.3 Dissimulation Unmasked

Further grounds for favouring an interpretative strategy that recommends strongly discounting Hume's surface protestations of religious convictions in favour of an emphasis on the irreligious elements in his writings can be drawn from the various occasions when Hume's letters and accounts by other people of his private conversations allow us to be very confident indeed that elements of his published writings deliberately misrepresent his actual views on religious topics. A particularly useful source here is James Boswell's record of a lengthy conversation he had with Hume a few weeks before Hume's death. Boswell had called upon Hume with the specific though, in the circumstances, possibly impertinent intention of questioning him about his views on the likelihood of an afterlife. Hume's answers provide a great deal of information about his candid opinions on both religion in general and the possibility of personal immortality, and they clearly indicate that some of the assertions on these topics in Hume's published works are nothing more than misdirection and protective colouring.

On the topic of survival after death, Boswell's written account of the conversation indicates that he directly asked Hume whether he thought that such survival was possible. Hume was emphatic, however, in saying that belief in an afterlife was not a reasonable option.

> He answered it was possible that a piece of coal put upon the fire would not burn; and he added that it was a most unreasonable fancy that we should exist for ever. (Fieser 2005, I, 288)

Moreover, Boswell gives no indication of any grounds for suspecting that Hume was being insincere in thus repudiating personal immortality. The topic was certainly one in which Boswell had a strong interest, and he found the opinions expressed by Hume very disturbing. But the impression he placed on record shortly after the conversation concluded that Hume genuinely did not believe in an afterlife.

> I had a strong curiosity to be satisfied if he persisted in disbelieving a future state [Heaven] even when he had death before his eyes. I was persuaded from what he now said, and from his manner of saying it, that he did persist. (ibid., I, 288)

Boswell's account of his interview with Hume also sheds important light on Hume's religious convictions and his assessment of the moral consequences of religious belief. In respect of the former issue, Boswell says that Hume admitted to being religious when he was young. However, he had subsequently altered his stance. According to Boswell, 'he said he never had entertained any belief in religion since he began to read Locke and Clarke' (ibid., I, 288). Moreover, Hume then went on to attack the influence of religion on people's behaviour.

> He then said flatly that the morality of every religion was bad, and, I really thought, was not jocular when he said that when he heard a man was religious, he concluded he was a rascal, though he had known some instances of very good men being religious. (ibid., I, 288)[11]

And in the course of further explaining these remarks about the dubious moral character of religious believers, Hume made some very significant observations about the opinions of George Keith, 10th Earl Marischal of Scotland. Boswell's report of these particular observations is based on his later memories rather than his entries in his contemporaneous journal, but he is clearly attempting to record Hume's exact words and the context in which they occurred.

> He said, 'One of the men' (or 'The man' – I am not sure which) 'of the greatest honour that I ever knew is my Lord Marischal, who is a downright atheist. I remember I once hinted something as if I believed in the being of a God, and he would not speak to me for a week'. He said this with his usual grunting pleasantry, with that thick breath which fatness had rendered habitual to him, and that smile of simplicity which his good humour constantly produced. (ibid., I, 290)

Boswell's account of Hume's lack of belief in an afterlife seems convincing enough in its own right, and it is usefully corroborated by a conversation set down in Caulfeild's *Memoirs*. When Caulfeild asked Hume for his opinions about the immortality of the soul, Hume gave him the following reply:

> 'Why troth, man,' said he, 'it is so pretty and so comfortable a theory, that I wish I could be convinced of its truth, but I canna help doubting.' (Fieser 2005, II, 213)

In the *Treatise*, by way of contrast, Hume includes a passage that strongly implies, if read as sincerely expressing his position, that he views the case for supposing that the soul is immortal as a thoroughly convincing one (1739, 1.4.5.35/250).

[11] See also Philo's claim: 'And when we have to do with a man, who makes a great profession of religion and devotion, has this any other effect upon several, who pass for prudent, than to put them on their guard, lest they be cheated and deceived by him?' (1779, 12.221).

The context of this passage is a somewhat complicated one because Hume is primarily intent on arguing that the supposition that the soul is a simple and unextended substance offers no more support to the doctrine of the immortality of the soul than is offered by the supposition that the soul is an extended compounded substance. His assessment, though, of the implications of these rival suppositions takes the following form:

> In both cases the metaphysical arguments for the immortality of the soul are equally inconclusive; and in both cases the moral arguments and those deriv'd from the analogy of nature are equally strong and convincing. If my philosophy, therefore, makes no addition to the arguments for religion, I have at least the satisfaction to think it takes nothing from them, but that every thing remains precisely as before. (1739, 1.4.5.35/250–1)

In the light of the evidence we have just been reviewing, our suspicions are likely to be immediately aroused by Hume's claim to have the satisfaction of believing that his investigations do no harm to 'the arguments for religion'. Why would that chain of reflection give any satisfaction to someone who does not entertain any belief in religion? Even more clearly, however, the contrast Hume has drawn between the metaphysical arguments on this topic and 'the moral arguments and those deriv'd from the analogy of nature' would be a profoundly misleading one unless he believes that these latter arguments are genuinely sufficient to ensure that it is true or at least probably true that we have immortal souls. Yet both Boswell and Caulfeild agreed, after interrogating Hume on the topic in person, that Hume did not have a belief in personal immortality or an afterlife.

Further strong evidence of Humean dissimulation on the topic of personal survival after death can be found in the essay 'Of the Immortality of the Soul' (1777a, 590–8). This essay ends with the following observations:

> By what arguments or analogies can we prove any state of existence, which no one ever saw, and which no wise resembles any that ever was seen? Who will repose such trust in any pretended philosophy, as to admit upon its testimony the reality of so marvellous a scene? Some new species of logic is requisite for that purpose.….
>
> Nothing could set in a fuller light the infinite obligations, which mankind have to divine revelation; since we find, that no other medium could ascertain this great and important truth. (1777a, 598)

The wording of the concluding paragraph is calculated to suggest to the unwary reader that Hume does believe in an afterlife, albeit on the basis of revelation rather than natural reason. But even if we set aside the sustained attack on revelation that Hume seems to mount in Section 10 of the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, his private conversations surely allow us to conclude that he has no belief whatsoever in an afterlife, no matter what source for that belief might be proposed. Similarly, Hume's pronouncements in this essay on the cogency of the arguments for personal immortality clash jarringly with the position implied by his comments on the same issue in the *Treatise*. As we have just seen, the *Treatise* contains a dismissal of the merits of the metaphysical arguments for immortality but includes an implied endorsement of the moral arguments and those based on analogy. In 'Of the Immortality of the Soul', however, Hume presents a far less favourable assessment of these latter arguments. No such arguments are capable of

establishing the existence of an afterlife, and any belief in personal immortality can only be supported by revelation.

We can also readily locate in Hume's writings and conversations some obvious dissimulation over the issue of the existence of atheists. Hume is happy to describe the 10th Earl Marischal as 'a downright atheist' to Boswell. There is doubtless some element of levity in Hume's anecdote: it is extremely unlikely that the good-natured Earl Marischal, who was on very friendly terms with Hume (see Hume 1932, I, 372, 413; II, 365), would genuinely have refused to speak to Hume for a period of a week merely because he had inadvertently said something that could be construed as though he 'believed in the being of a God'. However, it is equally unlikely, given the opprobrium attached to atheism at that time, that Hume would have misrepresented as an atheist someone for whom he had the utmost respect.[12]

It is also the case that letters written by Hume well before his final conversation with Boswell portray the Earl Marischal's views on religion in a manner that would fit very well with the supposition that Hume believed him to be an atheist. In a letter sent in 1762 to Benjamin Franklin, Hume discusses the efforts of Frederick the Great of Prussia and the Earl Marischal to arbitrate in a vicious theological dispute that had broken out amongst the clergy in the Republic of Neuchâtel. Hume had been kept informed of this controversy by the Earl Marischal himself, and it is clear that Hume regards the involvement of these particular arbiters as richly ironic.

> But surely, never was a Synod of Divines more ridiculous, than to be worrying one another, [u]nder the Arbitration of the K. of Prussia & Lord Marischal, who will make an Object of Derision of every thing, that appears to these holy Men so deserving of Zeal, Passion, and Animosity. (1954, 67)

Moreover, in a letter of 1773 to Sir John Pringle, Hume refers to the judgements of the Earl Marischal and Helvétius, one of the leading French *philosophes*, concerning the character of the Young Pretender, Charles Edward Stuart. These judgements were extremely unfavourable except in regard of his freedom from bigotry. Both the Earl Marischal and Helvétius viewed him as purporting to hold all religion in contempt. Hume reports this as the one element of praise they were prepared to confer on this particular prince.

> You must know that both these persons thought they were ascribing to him an excellent quality. Indeed, both of them used to laugh at me for my narrow way of thinking in these particulars. However, my dear Sir John, I hope you will do me the justice to acquit me. (1932, II, 274)

We can safely conclude, therefore, that Hume was not amusing himself in his conversation with Boswell by passing off one of his particularly pious friends as an obdurate and thoroughgoing atheist.

[12] Writing to Hugh Blair from Paris in 1763, Hume encouraged his friends in Edinburgh to extend their best hospitality to the Earl Marischal on his return to Scotland, and included the following fulsome praise of his character: 'Do you imagine, that you ever saw so excellent a Man? Or that you have any Chance for seeing his equal, if he were gone?' (1932, I, 421).

But once we accept that Hume was acquainted with at least one 'downright atheist' in the form of the Earl Marischal, how are we to interpret his reported remarks on finding himself, soon after his arrival in Paris in 1763, in the company of Baron d'Holbach? D'Holbach had been converted from deism to atheism by Denis Diderot in 1763, and thereafter he was an enthusiastic proselytiser on behalf of his new convictions (White 1970, 138). According to Diderot:

> The first time that M. Hume found himself at the table of the Baron, he was seated beside him. I don't know for what purpose the English philosopher took it into his head to remark to the Baron that he did not believe in atheists, that he had never seen any. The Baron said to him: 'Count how many we are here.' We are eighteen. The Baron added: 'It isn't too bad a showing to be able to point out to you fifteen at once: the three others haven't made up their minds.' (Mossner 1980, 483)

Mossner (1977, 18n38) takes Hume's remarks at face value, and he accordingly concludes that 'it is certain that Hume did not regard himself as an atheist'. It is evident, however, that these remarks cannot be given a straightforward interpretation. Hume, as we have seen, thought that the Earl Marischal was an atheist, and the two of them had actually met again in London immediately before Hume's departure for France with Lord Hertford (Mossner 1980, 438–9). It seems plausible to suppose, therefore, that Berman (1990, 102) is correct in interpreting Hume's conversational gambit as a calculated attempt to lure d'Holbach into confirming the wide prevalence of atheism among the assembled diners.

An attribution of dissimulation seems even more necessary in the case of some words given by Hume to Philo in Part 12 of the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. Philo says, 'I next turn to the atheist, who, I assert, is only nominally so, and can never possibly be in earnest' (1779, 12.218). As we saw in Chap. 1, the predominant view amongst commentators since Kemp Smith's analysis of the *Dialogues* is that Philo is the character who comes closest to being Hume's personal spokesman. However, even if we set aside that interpretative supposition, it remains the case that Philo's comments about the non-existence of real atheists are not criticized or questioned by any of the other characters in the *Dialogues*. Yet these comments seem to have been added to the text in the course of Hume's final revisions to the manuscript in 1776. By this time Hume had enjoyed a lengthy friendship with the Earl Marischal and had met and discussed philosophy with Baron d'Holbach and his coterie of atheist friends in France. It seems most unlikely, therefore, that Hume could have sincerely believed at that stage in his life that no genuine atheists existed. But if Hume did not believe this, then Philo's unchallenged comments about atheists insinuate in the reader's mind a conclusion that Hume himself regarded as false even as he was engaged in the process of shaping the *Dialogues* to lead his readers, or at least some of them, in that direction.

Finally, it is important to note Hume's tendency to take on, at potentially delicate or hazardous moments within his writings, the persona of a Christian believer. In the very first paragraph of the essay 'Of the Immortality of the Soul', we find him making the following assertion: 'But in reality, it is the gospel, and the gospel alone, that has brought life and immortality to light' (1777a, 590). While engaged in his attack in the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* on the credentials of revelation,

Hume refers to Christianity as ‘our most holy religion’, and he professes to be delighted that his discussion ‘may serve to confound those dangerous friends or disguised enemies to the CHRISTIAN religion’ who have rashly or mischievously suggested that it can be founded on reason rather than faith (1772a, 10. 40/129–30). In *The Natural History of Religion* Hume maintains that there is an almost irresistible tendency for religions to incorporate gross inconsistencies as a result of the conflict between ‘the natural conceptions of mankind’ and the disposition of religious worshippers to seek to ingratiate themselves with their deity or deities through flattery and exaggerated praise. However, he singles out one religion as managing to overcome this tendency:

> Nothing indeed would prove more strongly the divine origin of any religion, than to find (and happily this is the case with Christianity) that it is free from a contradiction, so incident to human nature. (1777c, 157)

And in the concluding part of the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Philo is made to refer to ‘our Faith’ only two sentences before he delivers the following aphorism for the supposed edification of Pamphilus: ‘To be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian’ (1779, 12.227–8).

In the case of these attempts to masquerade as a Christian, it seems entirely clear that Hume is simply engaged in some unsubtle misdirection. As Christianity is definitely an example of a religion and eighteenth-century thinkers show no inclination to embrace the curious idea that one can adhere to a religion without embracing any distinctive creedal content, we could simply refer once again to Hume’s avowal to Boswell that after his youth, he ‘never had entertained any belief in religion’. However, an early letter to William Mure of Caldwell (Hume 1954, 10–14) usefully reinforces this avowal. In the course of his letter, Hume discusses a sermon by William Leechman in which it is argued that prayer is a pious and efficacious activity. Hume cannot resist making the point that according to an alleged Platonic classification of three kinds of atheist, Leechman turns out to be an atheist. The main thrust of the letter, though, is an argument Hume constructs against ‘Devotion and Prayer, & indeed to every thing we commonly call Religion, except the Practice of Morality, & the Assent of the Understanding to the Proposition *that God exists*’ (ibid., 12–13). Hume does not insist that this argument is unanswerable: indeed he expresses the hope that Leechman will address the issue in any second edition of his sermon. But the letter does strongly imply that Hume himself is not aware of any effective answer to the argument he is putting forward. Moreover, the residual content left to religion if this argument goes through does seem to be very similar to Philo’s account, in the concluding pages of the *Dialogues*, of what some people say is the content of the whole of natural theology: ‘one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, *that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence*’ (1779, 12.227). Clearly, there is much more to Christianity as a religion than ordinary morality and intellectual assent to the undefined claim that God exists. So if Hume himself is not prepared to go any further, his show of Christian piety is mere pretence.

We can also point to the account of Hume's last days preserved by William Cullen, one of the physicians attending Hume during this period. Cullen reports, like Adam Smith, a conversation in which Hume runs through some possible excuses he might make to the mythical ferryman Charon in order to avoid being carried across the river Styx to Hades. In Smith's more discreet version, one that was written with a view to publication in conjunction with Hume's *My Own Life*, Hume is described as contemplating the following appeal:

> But I might still urge, 'Have a little patience, good Charon, I have been endeavouring to open the eyes of the public. If I live a few years longer, I may have the satisfaction of seeing the downfall of some of the prevailing systems of superstition' (Fieser 2005, I, 300).

Cullen, however, is more forthright: in his version Hume explicitly refers to Christianity rather than unspecified systems of superstition.

> He thought he might say that he had been very busily employed in making his people wiser, and particularly in delivering them from the Christian superstition, but that he had not yet completed that great work. (ibid., I, 294)

Summaries of Hume's views on religion by his friends and acquaintances further confirm the impression that it would be a major mistake to take as sincere Hume's occasional expressions of Christian sentiments. In addition to the judgements by Carlyle and Caulfeild that were considered in Sect. 2.1 of the preceding chapter, it is illuminating to reflect on the opinions of George Dempster and Lady Mary Coke. Dempster is plausibly viewed as a friend of Hume's from his time as a student at Edinburgh University (see Mossner 1980, 45–6). According to Dempster, writing in 1756:

> It seems difficult for me (for me who dotes upon David) to believe that he can have a great regard for even the best mode of religion and the least extravagant if we consider how destitute he is of that only support of it, Faith. Without faith devotion must be faint and cold, the hopes of a future state weak and mixed with doubt. (1934, 22)

This observation plainly tells heavily against the supposition that Hume's attacks on superstition in the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, *The Natural History of Religion*, and the *Dialogues* are intended to leave untouched some particularly refined and intellectually austere version of Christianity. Lady Mary's testimony comes from a time some 11 years later, soon after Hume's appointment to the office of Under-Secretary of State for the Northern Department. Over the course of a stay at the country seat of General Conway, Lord Hertford's brother, she took the opportunity to interrogate Hume gently about his views on religion, concluding:

> You know Mr Hume is a great Infidel: 'tis the only thing I dislike in him. I have had some conversation with him, but I have no hopes of converting him from his erroneous way of thinking, &, thank God, his infidelity does not invalidate my belief. (Coke 1889–1896, II, 314)[13]

This reference to Hume's infidelity provides yet further confirmation that Hume was, after the years of his youth, no Christian. And Lady Mary's evident lack of

[13] Religion was not the only thing about which they disagreed: 'Mr Hume does not like Shakespeare. Would you have thought it possible that a Man of Genius shou'd not be able to discover the Beauties of that admirable writer? We are all against him' (Coke 1889–1896, II, 314).

success in persuading him to reconsider his stance seems to indicate that Hume had long ceased to feel any disquiet or anxiety about this rejection of Christianity.

2.4 Some Provisional Conclusions

In the course of this chapter we have seen that Hume's decision to engage in the public examination of the credentials of religious belief placed him in a potentially dangerous situation. At the time when Hume was writing, publications viewed as denying the truth of Christianity or any proposition whose truth was implied by the truth of Christianity were still vulnerable to prosecution for blasphemy irrespective of the manner in which such denials were framed. And this was far from being a merely theoretical risk. Although no mechanism of pre-publication censorship existed and the enthusiasm of the authorities for launching prosecutions after publication seems to have fluctuated in an unpredictable manner, authors like Woolston and Annet still found themselves in prison for denying the literal truth of key aspects of Christian doctrine.

In the light of this very real threat of prosecution and other sanctions, it is useful to draw a comparison between the views expressed by Paine in *The Age of Reason* and some of the private opinions on matters of religion that can plausibly be ascribed to Hume. *The Age of Reason* was, as we have seen, the target of a determined campaign of suppression that saw more than a hundred people sentenced to substantial terms of imprisonment for reprinting, selling, or distributing that particular work. Yet Paine was a sincere and avowed believer in the existence of a supremely wise and morally exemplary God who offers us the opportunity to enjoy further life after the dissolution of our current physical bodies (Paine 1794, 7, 32–3). In contrast, even our initial survey of Hume's opinions indicates that he did not believe in an afterlife and that he plainly lacked Paine's optimism about the legitimacy of ascribing moral excellence and great wisdom to any deity that might happen to exist. It is clear, then, that in these important respects Hume's private views, if explicitly put into print, would have been even less acceptable to the authorities than those published by Paine. It follows, therefore, that Hume would have had a strong incentive to make use of a substantial degree of dissimulation in his writings on religion in order to stave off the kind of campaign waged against Paine's book. And we have already noted Hume's concern with issues of prudence and his readiness to recommend a policy of hypocrisy or misdirection as an appropriate response to intrusive inquiries into one's personal beliefs. When all this is combined with his evident willingness, when it suited him, to insinuate a level of commitment to Christianity that he did not genuinely possess, we are inevitably led to conclude that any judicious interpretation of Hume's stance with regard to religious belief must allow for the possibility that his works in this area are permeated through and through by protective dissimulation and creative ambiguity. In the next chapter, therefore, we will explore the hypothesis that Hume's writings on religion are best seen as an artfully constructed web of irreligious argument that seeks to push forward a radical outlook that only emerges when the attention shifts from the individual strands of the web to its overall structure and context.