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Toward a Humean True Religion: Genuine Theism, Moderate Hope, and Practical Morality by Andre C. Willis (review)

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Journal of the History of Philosophy, Volume 55, Number 1, January 2017,
pp. 168-169 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.2017.0019>



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This brief review cannot do justice to the book's richness and breadth. For any puzzle or ambiguity or seeming inconsistency in the seven sections of 1.4, Ainslie has a suggested interpretation of how to make sense of it or solve it. His analyses push us to think about a wide range of interpretive puzzles and seriously consider his way of addressing them. Some of the questions are ones rarely posed or thought of, thus revealing the complexity of Hume's ideas. Especially for those scholars immersed in Hume's texts, it is good to be reminded that even the most seemingly simple of Hume's claims are often ambiguous or overstated.

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Andre C. Willis. *Toward a Humean True Religion: Genuine Theism, Moderate Hope, and Practical Morality*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014. Pp. xii + 248. Cloth, \$74.95.

Andre Willis argues that although Hume is generally credited with being a "devastating critic" of religion, it is a mistake to view Hume solely in these terms or to present him as an "atheist." This not only represents a failure to appreciate Hume's "middle path" between "militant atheists and evangelical theists" (8), it denies us an opportunity to "enhance" our understanding and appreciation of the positive, constructive value of religion through a close study of Hume's views (6). Willis's study presents Hume as committed to a "bifurcated approach to religion" that rests on the fundamental distinction between "false religion" and "true religion" (3). False religion, which includes Christianity, is a destructive force in human society. Although Hume devotes most of his philosophical energies and attention to discrediting and undermining false religion (54), his account of true religion presents a positive alternative. It is Willis's basic aim to articulate and elaborate Hume's understanding of "true religion" in order to reorient contemporary religious sensibilities and further develop "a moderate religious consciousness" based on Hume's views (187–90).

There are three "cornerstones" to Hume's true religion, constituted by "the genuine theism engendered by our feelings of basic theism; the equanimity brought by collective, calm hopes and fears; and the development of virtuous character inspired by practical morality" (181). Articulating these presents a challenge, since Hume's writings are "inchoate" and "underdeveloped" and "offer little explicit positive content for his notion of 'true religion'" (4, 16). Willis is undeterred by the lack of detail in Hume's texts and proceeds to "cobble together substance for his underdeveloped idea of 'true religion'" (19–20). His three central chapters address the three cornerstones:

Genuine theism is grounded in "basic theism," described in terms of our (natural) sense of regularity and purposive order, which "irresistibly orients the mind to the idea of an Author of Nature" (45–46)—a "moderate claim" that is "largely uncontroversial" (47–48, 75–76) and presupposed by Hume's entire philosophy (80, 82). Basic theism can evolve either into false or true religion, though the latter is rare (86). Textual evidence for this interpretation is thin; and Willis concedes that he may be "pushing [Hume] further than he wants to go" (49). The primary authority for Willis's reading of Hume on true religion is Donald Livingston (84–86), whose general interpretation of Hume Willis draws on to argue that genuine theism does not aim to establish itself as true or to justify itself in terms of abstract thought, logic, or evidence. It is founded on habits, customs, and conventions—not philosophical argument.

Moderate hope constitutes a core feature of religion's "proper office" (89) and guides us to be "confident that the future will be what it will" as we "face life's vicissitudes" (103, 105). This "fundamental hope" provides "a sense of well-being that we might consider 'religious' in the broad sense of the term" (90). Willis draws heavily here on Joseph Godfrey, which arguably forces an alien framework and language onto Hume's (very different) concerns and approach.

Practical morality. According to Willis, Hume held that true religion “could have a positive impact for the development of character, the increase of personal happiness, and the stability of the social order” (132). The key instrument of this is the mechanism of sympathy. Willis concedes, however, that Hume presents much of this in non-religious terms, which raises the question, “What makes Humean true religion religious?” The last chapter addresses this issue.

The “middle path” Hume takes, Willis argues, has “the flavour of American pragmatism in the mode of William James and John Dewey” (180) in that its primary concern is “how religion functions, not about its truth-value” (180). For Hume, religion must always be “contextualized and assessed with reference to a set of symbols, beliefs, hopes, and practices that always take place in a particular community at a particular moment for particular purposes, which might remain unclear” (180). Following Livingston, Willis suggests that we “might provisionally understand religion as a brand of theism that simply has an effect in one’s life” for the better, and thus has religious value (184–85). Hume’s true religion forms “a quality of mindfulness that orients us in relation to complete presence or the totality of experience. This might be described as a sacred experience” (189).

There are two basic questions to ask about this book, questions that reflect two distinct audiences. Those involved in contemporary Hume studies will want to ask (i) whether Willis’s interpretation can stand up to close textual and contextual analysis. Those involved in contemporary religious studies will want to ask (ii) whether (Humean) “true religion” is recognizably religious and serves as a plausible and convincing “generative resource.” With regard to (i), Willis’s interpretation is strained, stretched, and not recognizably Hume’s. Although Willis is well-informed about much of the secondary literature, and conveys an admirable sense of purpose throughout, his account of the positive side of Hume’s attitude to religion depends, not only on reading Hume through the lens of other philosophers and theologians whose aims and concerns are alien to Hume’s, but also on ignoring many of Hume’s doubts about the value and significance of true religion itself. Finally, it is puzzling that Willis has turned to Hume as a “resource” for rethinking contemporary religion when the views that he develops are much closer to the account of true religion that Spinoza articulates and defends in his *Theological-Political Treatise*—a work that Willis neglects and overlooks.

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Nicholas F. Stang. *Kant’s Modal Metaphysics*. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xxii + 360. Cloth, \$74.00.

Nick Stang offers an extremely meticulous and original study of Immanuel Kant’s theory of modality. It is the first book dedicated solely to Kantian modality in the Anglophone Kant literature, crowning the recent surge of articles on the subject, while also setting up a fertile ground for further discussion. The book’s appeal is not limited to Kant readers. Considering its historical focus and scope, Stang’s book is unusually rigorous, analytically argued, and well informed by twentieth-century modal metaphysics and logic, making it perfectly accessible to those who are interested in modality from a contemporary metaphysical point of view.

Stang presents a developmental account of Kant’s conception of possibility, from his pre-critical texts of the 1750s and 1760s to his critical works, including the *Critique of Pure Reason* (*CPR*), in two parts of five chapters each. Stang’s interpretation of Kant’s pre-critical conception of possibility is conveyed through a broader historical narrative, placing Kant in opposition to “logicism,” the doctrine that possibility (and necessity) can be fully accounted for in terms of the logical principle of contradiction. Stang claims that logicism is commonly held by Kant’s major rationalist predecessors (G. W. Leibniz, Christian Wolff, and Alexander G. Baumgarten) and is also what commits these figures to “ontotheism,” which maintains that God exists in virtue of his essence. Against logicism, Stang argues, Kant introduces a