THE

PHILOSOPHICAL WORKS

OF

DAVID HUME.

INCLUDING ALL THE ESSAYS, AND EXHIBITING THE MORE IMPORTANT ALTERATIONS AND CORRECTIONS IN THE SUCCESSIVE EDITIONS PUBLISHED BY THE AUTHOR.

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ESSAY X.

OF SUPERSTITION AND ENTHUSIASM.

That the corruption of the best of things produces the worst, is grown into a maxim, and is commonly proved, among other instances, by the pernicious effects of superstition and enthusiasm, the corruptions of true religion.

These two species of false religion, though both pernicious, are yet of a very different, and even of a contrary nature. The mind of man is subject to certain unaccountable terrors and apprehensions, proceeding either from the unhappy situation of private or public affairs, from ill health, from a gloomy and melancholy disposition, or from the concurrence of all these circumstances. In such a state of mind, infinite unknown evils are dreaded from unknown agents; and where real objects of terror are wanting, the soul, active to its own prejudice, and fostering its predominant inclination, finds imaginary ones, to whose power and malevolence it sets no limits. As these enemies are entirely invisible and unknown, the methods taken to appease them are equally unaccountable, and consist in ceremonies, observances, mortifications, sacrifices, presents, or in any practice, however absurd or frivolous,
which either folly or knavery recommends to a blind and terrified credulity. Weakness, fear, melancholy, together with ignorance, are, therefore, the true sources of Superstition.

But the mind of man is also subject to an unaccountable elevation and presumption, arising from prosperous success, from luxuriant health, from strong spirits, or from a bold and confident disposition. In such a state of mind, the imagination swells with great, but confused conceptions, to which no sublunary beauties or enjoyments can correspond. Every thing mortal and perishable vanishes as unworthy of attention; and a full range is given to the fancy in the invisible regions, or world of Spirits, where the soul is at liberty to indulge itself in every imagination, which may best suit its present taste and disposition. Hence arise raptures, transports, and surprising flights of fancy; and, confidence and presumption still increasing, these raptures, being altogether unaccountable, and seeming quite beyond the reach of our ordinary faculties, are attributed to the immediate inspiration of that Divine Being who is the object of devotion. In a little time, the inspired person comes to regard himself as a distinguished favorite of the Divinity; and when this phrensy once takes place, which is the summit of enthusiasm, every whimsey is consecrated: human reason, and even morality, are rejected as fallacious guides; and the fanatic madman delivers himself over, blindly and without reserve, to the supposed illapses of the Spirit, and to inspiration from above.—Hope, pride, presumption, a warm imagination, together with ignorance, are therefore the true sources of Enthusiasm.

These two species of false religion might afford occasion to many speculations; but I shall confine myself,
at present, to a few reflections concerning their different influence on government and society.

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* My first reflection is, that religions which partake of enthusiasm are, on their first rise, much more furious and violent than those which partake of superstition; but in a little time become much more gentle and moderate. The violence of this species of religion, when excited by novelty, and animated by opposition, appears from numberless instances; of the Anabaptists in Germany, the Camisars in France, the Levellers, and other fanatics in England, and the Covenanters in Scotland. As enthusiasm is founded on strong spirits and a presumptuous boldness of character, it naturally begets the most extreme resolutions; especially after it rises to that height as to inspire the deluded fanatics with the opinion of Divine illuminations, and with a contempt of the common rules of reason, morality, and prudence.

It is thus enthusiasm produces the most cruel desolation in human society: but its fury is like that of thunder and tempest, which exhaust themselves in a little time, and leave the air more calm and serene than before. The reason of this will appear evidently, by comparing enthusiasm to superstition, the other species of false religion, and tracing the natural consequences of each. As superstition is founded on fear, sorrow, and a depression of spirits, it represents the person to himself in such despicable colors, that he appears unworthy, in his own eyes, of approaching the Divine presence, and naturally has recourse to any other person whose sanctity of life, or perhaps impudence and cunning, have made him be supposed to be more favored by the Divinity. To him they intrust their devotions: to his care they recommend their prayers, petitions, and sacrifices: and by his means hope to render their addresses acceptable to their incensed Deity. Hence the origin of Priests,† who may justly be regarded as proceeding from one of the grossest inventions of a timorous and abject superstition, which, ever diffident of itself, dares not offer up its own devotions, but ignorantly thinks to recommend itself to the Divinity by the mediation of its supposed friends and servants. As superstition is a considerable ingredient of almost all religions, even the most fanatical, there being nothing but philosophy able to conquer entirely these unaccountable terrors; hence it proceeds, that in almost every sect of religion there are priests to be found. But the stronger mixture there is of superstition, the higher is the authority of the priesthood. Modern Judaism and Popery, especially the latter, being the most barbarous and absurd superstitions that have yet been known in the world, are the most enslaved by their priests.

† By priest, I understand only the pretenders to power and dominion, and to a superior sanctity of character, distinct from virtue and good morals. These are very different from clergymen, who are set apart to the care of sacred matters, and the conducting our public devotions with greater decency and order. There is no rank of men more to be respected than the latter.
priestly power, and enthusiasm not less, or rather more contrary to it, than sound reason and philosophy. As supersti-

As the church of England has a strong mixture of Popish superstition, it partakes also, in its original constitution, of a propensity to priestly power and dominion, particularly in the respect it exacts to the priest. And though, according to the sentiments of that church, the prayers of the priest must be accompanied with those of the laity, yet is he the mouth of the congregation; his person is sacred, and without his presence few would think their public devotions, or the sacraments and other rites, acceptable to the Divinity.

On the other hand, it may be observed, that all enthusiasts have been free from the yoke of Ecclesiastics, and have expressed a great independence in their devotion; with a contempt of forms, traditions, and authorities. The Quakers are the most egregious, though at the same time the most innocent enthusiasts that have been yet known; and are, perhaps, the only sect that have never admitted priests amongst them. The Independents, of all the English sectaries, approach nearest to the Quakers in fanaticism, and in their freedom from priestly bondage. The Presbyterians follow after at an equal distance in both these particulars. In short, this observation is founded on the most certain experience; and will also appear to be founded on reason, if we consider, that as enthusiasm arises from a presumptuous pride and confidence, it thinks itself sufficiently qualified to approach the Divinity without any human mediator. Its rapturous devotions are so fervent, that it even imagines itself actually to approach him by the way of contemplation and inward converse,—which makes it neglect all those outward ceremonies and observances, to which the assistance of the priest appears so requisite in the eyes of their superstitious votaries. The fanatic consecrates himself, and bestows on his own person a sacred character, much superior to what forms and ceremonious institutions can confer on any other.

It is therefore an infallible rule that superstition is favorable to priestly power, and enthusiasm as much, or rather more, contrary to it, than sound reason and philosophy. The consequences are evident. When the first fire of enthusiasm is spent, man naturally, in such fanatical sects, sinks into the greatest remissness and coolness in sacred matters; there being no body of men amongst them endowed with sufficient authority, whose interest is concerned, to support the religious spirit. Superstition, on the contrary, steals in gradually and insensibly; renders men tame and submissive; is acceptable to the magistrate, and seems inoffensive to the people: till at last the priest, having firmly established his authority, becomes the tyrant and disturber of human society, by his endless contentions, persecutions, and religious wars. How smoothly did the Romish church advance in their acquisition of power! But into what dismal convulsions did they throw all Europe, in order to maintain it! On the other hand, our sectaries, who were formerly such dangerous bigots, are now become our greatest freethinkers; and the
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Quakers are perhaps the only regular body of Deists in the universe, except the literati, or disciples of Confucius in China. My second observation with regard to these species of false religion is, that superstition is an enemy to civil liberty, and enthusiasm a friend to it, &c. — Editions A and C.
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My second reflection with regard to these species of false religion is, that religions which partake of enthusiasm, are, on their first rise, more furious and violent than those which partake of superstition; but in a little time become more gentle and moderate. The violence of this species of religion, when excited by novelty, and animated by opposition, appears from numberless instances; of the Anabaptists in Germany, the Camisars in France, the Levellers, and other fanatics in England, and the Covenanters in Scotland. Enthusiasm being founded on strong spirits, and a presumptuous boldness of character, it naturally begets the most extreme resolutions; especially after it
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My third observation on this head is, that superstition is an enemy to civil liberty, and enthusiasm a friend to it. As

* The Chinese literati have no priests or ecclesiastical establishment.
superstition groans under the dominion of priests, and enthusiasm is destructive of all ecclesiastical power, this sufficiently accounts for the present observation. Not to mention that enthusiasm, being the infirmity of bold and ambitious tempers, is naturally accompanied with a spirit of liberty; as superstition, on the contrary, renders men tame and abject, and fits them for slavery. We learn from English history, that, during the civil wars, the Independents and Deists, though the most opposite in their religious principles, yet were united in their political ones, and were alike passionate for a commonwealth. And since the origin of Whig and Tory, the leaders of the Whigs have either been Deists or professed Latitudinarians in their principles; that is, friends to toleration, and indifferent to any particular sect of Christians: while the sectaries, who have all a strong tincture of enthusiasm, have always, without exception, concurred with that party in defence of civil liberty. The resemblance in their superstitions long united the High-Church Tories and the Roman Catholics, in support of prerogative and kingly power; though experience of the tolerating spirit of the Whigs seems of late to have reconciled the Catholics to that party.

The Molinists and Jansenists in France have a thousand unintelligible disputes, which are not worthy the reflection of a man of sense: but what principally distinguishes these two sects, and alone merits attention, is the different spirit of their religion. The Molinists, conducted by the Jesuits, are great friends to superstition, rigid observers of external forms and ceremonies, and devoted to the authority of the priests, and to tradition. The Jansenists are enthusiasts, and zealous promoters of the passionate devotion, and of the inward life; little influenced by authority; and, in a word, but