



THE NATURAL HISTORY OF RELIGION

DAVID HUME

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THE
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RELIGION

BY
DAVID HUME

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY JOHN M. ROBERTSON

The Natural History of Religion by David Hume.

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the most criminal and most dangerous enterprises are commonly the most superstitious;" as an ancient historian⁴ remarks on this occasion. Their devotion and spiritual faith rise with their fears. Catiline was not contented with the established deities and received rites of the national religion. His anxious terrors made him seek new inventions of this kind,⁵ which he never probably had dreamed of, had he remained a good citizen, and obedient to the laws of his country.

To which we may add that, even after the commission of crimes, there arise remorse and secret horrors, which give no rest to the mind, but make it have recourse to religious rites and ceremonies, as expiations of its offences. Whatever weakens or disorders the internal frame promotes the interests of superstition; and nothing is more destructive to them than a manly steady virtue, which either preserves us from disastrous, melancholy accidents, or teaches us to bear them. During such calm sunshine of the mind, these spectres of false divinity never make their appearance. On the other hand, while we abandon ourselves to the natural undisciplined suggestions of our timid and anxious hearts, every kind of barbarity is ascribed to the supreme Being, from the terrors with which we are agitated; and every kind of caprice, from the methods which we embrace in order to appease him. Barbarity, caprice; these qualities, however nominally disguised, we may universally observe, form the ruling character of the deity in popular religions. Even priests, instead of correcting these depraved ideas of mankind, have often been found ready to foster and encourage them. The more tremendous the divinity is represented, the more tame and submissive do men become to his ministers; and the more unaccountable the measures of acceptance required by him, the more necessary does it become to abandon our natural reason, and yield to their ghostly guidance and direction. Thus it may be allowed that the artifices of men aggravate our natural infirmities and follies of this kind, but never originally beget them. Their root strikes deeper into the mind, and springs from the essential and universal properties of human nature.

⁴ Diod. Sic. lib. xx. 43.

⁵ Cic. Catil. i. 6. Salust, de Bello Catil, 22.

