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Religion and Spirituality: Adam Smith versus J-J Rousseau*

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Abstract

Adam Smith and J-J Rousseau share some common ground when it comes to religion, namely that they were born into and educated in cultural contexts deeply shaped by Reformed Christianity. However, close consideration of their writings on religion reveal marked difference. This paper explores those differences and finds that Rousseau and Smith are radically at odds on this score. Smith has almost nothing to say about personal spirituality, and locates the significance of religion in its social role. Rousseau, on the other hand, accords religion no social role whatever, and finds its value to be purely of a personal and spiritual nature. This difference is not without some contemporary relevance, since it highlights some of the issues surrounding the distinction between 'religion' and 'spirituality' in modern secularized societies.

Key words: Adam Smith; J-J Rousseau; religion; spirituality

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Introduction

It is not hard to find parallels between Adam Smith and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose lives were about the same length and fell securely within the 18th century. They were both born and raised in Calvinist countries, their philosophical writings focus primarily on social and economic themes, and they both make the relationship between human nature and social organization key to their thought. Moreover, like so many of their contemporaries, they both engage in conjectural history, that is to say, speculation on how certain social and political institutions have arisen. Set alongside these notable similarities, though, there are a few very striking differences, and one of these relates to the way they treat religion.

To begin with, at a personal level, there is a very marked contrast. Virtually nothing is known about Smith's religious practice or his own religious beliefs, and this is because these are matters on which his extensive writings are completely silent. Rousseau, on the other hand, was positively loquacious about his youthful conversion to Roman Catholicism and his later return to Genevan Protestantism. While Smith tells us nothing about his own religion, or lack of it, in several places Rousseau writes about religious matters at considerable length and with great feeling, especially in the *Letter to Franquières* composed towards the end of his life. Implicitly, Smith subscribes to some sort of providentialism, but he never explicitly engages in natural theology, and as is well known, he dropped his one brief discussion of a theological topic – atonement -- from the later editions of *TMS*. Rousseau, on the other hand, uses the long section of *Emile* entitled 'The Creed of a Savoyard Vicar' to reject appeals to revelation and to expound teleological arguments of a broadly deistic kind. It cannot be assumed, of course, that the Vicar's voice is Rousseau's own, but it is definitely his own voice that we hear in the *Letter to Voltaire* where he takes up the problem of evil in a spirit very similar to the Vicar's Creed.

In short, it is impossible to read Rousseau without coming to the conclusion that religious faith was a matter of great moment to him. After reading Smith, however, one is left with the impression that religious questions simply did not interest him very much. What makes this difference between the two writers especially intriguing is the fact that, when it comes to their systems of thought, precisely the opposite is true. While religion has a significant role to play in Smith's social philosophy, it has no role at all in Rousseau's. And as I hope to show, exploring this difference between them can shed valuable light on a distinction that is of some special interest now, the distinction between 'religion' and 'spirituality'.

Smith on Religion

If Smith was indifferent to the truth of natural theology, he was nonetheless seriously interested in the function of religion. The contrast is reflected in the fact that he writes about 'religion' much more often than he writes about 'God' (usually under some less confessional sounding term, such as 'Author of Nature' or 'the Deity'). His concern with religion is twofold -- the source of religion in human nature and its place in the development of a social life. In common with others of his time, Smith held that 'true' religion could play a beneficial role both in the lives of individuals and in the wellbeing of societies. That is why, he says, 'pure and rational religion, free from every mixture of absurdity, imposture or fanaticism [is] such as wise men in all ages of the world [have] wished to see established'. (*WN* II/II V i.g.8)

By Smith's account, the benefits of true religion lie first and foremost in the psychological and moral lives of individuals. Human beings have moral sentiments 'implanted' in their nature as deeply as the appetite for food or sex. *Contra* the Stoics, we are creatures who cannot help caring more about our own happiness than that of others, but *contra* the people Smith calls 'whining and melancholy moralists', we do not need to feel guilty about this aspect of our nature. At the same time, though a special degree of self-concern is unavoidable, human beings are not the rampant egoists portrayed by Thomas Hobbes and Bernard Mandeville. The good opinion of others truly matters to them, and they are possessed of a rational faculty that enables them to make genuinely impartial moral assessments of their own conduct. Still, though everyone possess the faculty of reason, it would be foolish to expect the average human being in the ordinary course of life to deliberate with 'exact justness' about the best way of 'acting upon all occasions with the most delicate and accurate propriety'.

The course clay of which the bulk of mankind are formed, cannot be wrought up to such perfection. There is scarce any man, however, who by discipline, education and example, may not be so impressed with a regard to the general rules, as to act upon almost every occasion with tolerable decency, and through the whole of his life to avoid any considerable degree of blame. (*TMS* III.V.1)

Moral rules work to the general good, Smith thinks, because they are the commands and laws of a Deity 'who will finally reward the obedient and punish the transgressors of their duty'. Smith's providentialism is clearly at work here. At the same time he importantly observes that the working of Providence may sometimes be very hard to see, and when this is the case, a providential wisdom that guides human affairs, consequently, is hard to believe in. It is a fact about the human condition

that life does not always go well for us, and the truth of this easily weakens our resolve to keep the rules our conscience tells us we ought to. Indeed, it may sometimes appear decidedly advantageous to ignore the principles of justice and benevolence. So, what is needed to counter this temptation is the inculcation of a 'sacred regard to general rules'. This is where religion comes into play.

Religion, even in its rudest form, gave a sanction to the rules of morality long before the age of artificial reasoning and philosophy. That the terrors of religion should thus enforce the natural sense of duty, was of too much importance to the happiness of mankind, for nature to leave it dependent upon the slowness and uncertainty of philosophical researches. (TMS III.V.4)

The religious impulses of our nature are to be distinguished from the hypotheses of natural theology. The religion of ordinary people does not consist in subscription to metaphysical propositions, but rather, in a set of feelings and dispositions. These include 'the natural pangs of an affrighted conscience ... from which', Smith says, 'no principles of *irreligion* can entirely deliver [us]' (TMS III.II.9, emphasis added). The religious impulse, however, is not merely negative. Nor does it result only in injunction and prohibition. It also generates moral confidence and sustains hope in times of adversity. Religion locates the ultimate vindication of the just over the unjust beyond human welfare and belief. It thus enables moral motivation to survive the potentially baleful effects of personal temptation, popular opinion and susceptibility to 'the empire of Fortune'. In all these ways, and especially the last, religion is superior to moral philosophy.

To persons in such unfortunate circumstances, that humble philosophy which confines its views to this life, can afford, perhaps, but little consolation... Religion alone ... can tell them that it is of little importance what man may think of their conduct, while the all-seeing Judge of the world approves it. She alone can present to them ... a world of more candour, humanity, and justice, than the present; where their innocence is in due time to be declared, and their virtue to be finally rewarded... The same great principle which can alone strike terror into triumphant vice, affords the only effectual consolation to disgraced and insulted innocence. (TMS III.II.12)

The rules of morality constitute the basis of both personal happiness and social well-being, and by lending these rules a 'sacred' character, the natural religious impulses of human beings give them a firmer foundation that anything else could do. By the same token, 'false notions of religion are almost the only causes which can occasion any very gross perversion of our natural sentiments'. This is what happens when 'superstition' and

‘enthusiasm’ (i.e. dogmatism) prevail over ‘true religion’, and that is why Smith devotes a lengthy section of *WN* to discussing the proper attitude that political rulers should take to religion.

There are two ways in which the evils of superstition and dogmatism can be averted, according to Smith. The first, perhaps a little obviously, is by education in ‘science and philosophy’. The second, much less obviously, is by public entertainments. Public religion, Smith contends, is thus uniquely valuable because it serves both these purposes simultaneously, the first by edifying sermons, and the second by communal ceremonies. The fact that religion has a special solemnity about it means that it serves to avert superstition and dogmatism better than either schools and colleges, or concert halls and playhouses, separately or together, can do. When religion ceases to be properly public, and falls prey to sectarianism, however, the outcome is a ‘gross perversion of our natural sentiments’, a perversion that turns those sentiments in divisive and destructive directions. Accordingly, a wise ruler, Smith thinks, will create an ‘established’ religion and support a professional clergy to lead it, while at the same time preventing the church to which those clergy belong from being structured in ways that promote clericalism. For Smith, the church establishment that prevailed in the Scotland of his day offers one of the best illustrations of how religion, properly instituted, can serve the best interests of society.

This particular judgment may reflect a somewhat unwarranted complacency about the church in his native land, but the principle point is that by Smith’s account, religion is chiefly significant for the twofold *function* that it has. First, religious sentiments are part of human nature and therefore have a key role to play in the life of human beings as moral agents. Second, social organization can channel these sentiments in directions that are either beneficial – or destructive – to society at large. ‘True’ religion, in other words, both helps the individual to live well, and fosters a social order that is beneficial to all. The idea at work here is the same that underlies his account of commercial society. Human beings have a natural inclination to ‘truck and barter’; the social institution of a properly functioning and regulated market both serves this natural inclination, and does so to the economic betterment of all.

There are a number of critical questions that Smith’s account of religion raises. Does there have to be anything *metaphysically true* about ‘true’ religion for it to fulfill its function successfully, or would traditional ‘myths’ serve just as well? Are the ecclesiastical forms and practices of which Smith approves adequate to the distinctively religious sentiments he identifies? Or do they in fact require the sort of religious observances that he dismisses as ‘frivolous’? Can an appeal to ‘sacred’ rules be

morally inspiring as well as regulatory? These questions all raise important challenges to Smith on religion, in my view, but I shall leave them aside here, because my main purpose is simply to note that the protection and promotion of religion has a significant role to play within Smith's account of the relation between human nature and social organization. In this respect, it contrasts very sharply with Rousseau's.

Rousseau on Religion

Book IV, section 8 of Rousseau's best known work, the *Social Contract*, is devoted to the subject of religion. It was adding this extra section to an earlier version that brought down upon him the condemnation of Protestants as well as Catholics, and forced him into permanent exile. In it Rousseau identifies three possible forms that a civil religion might take, but he finds none of them to be wholly satisfactory. First, there is what he calls 'the religion of man', a version of which he himself elsewhere seems to subscribe to. This is a religion 'without temples, altars or rites, limited to purely inward reverence of the Supreme God and the eternal duties of morality' (ER 109). This, he says, is 'the pure and simple religion of the Gospel, the true theism'. The second form that civil religion might take is that of an established national religion, with "its own tutelary deities . . . dogmas . . . rites [and] external worship prescribed by laws' (ER 109). Such a religion is obligatory for citizens, defines and excludes 'foreigners', and does not admit of personal variation or difference. It is, in short, a national religion, and while this does have its strengths, its defects outweigh them. '[B]eing founded on falsehood and error', Rousseau thinks 'it deceives men, makes them credulous and superstitious and drowns true worship of the Divinity in vain ceremonies'(ER 110). Moreover, national religions have a tendency to put peoples at war with one another and so threaten the security of the State. Besides, though Rousseau does not say this, compulsory religion is antithetical to freedom, which is precisely what the idea of the social contract was intended to secure.

The third possible form of civil religion that Rousseau identifies, divides the political and the religious and sets up two distinct authorities. Political life is ordered by the State, while an independently constituted Church rules on religious matters. This arrangement has historical exemplars, of course, but Rousseau dismisses it out of hand as highly undesirable. Indeed 'it is so obviously bad' he tells us, 'that amusing myself with its drawbacks would be a waste of time' (ER 110).

So having rejected a single national religion, and dismissed the equality of Church and State, Rousseau is left with the first, 'the pure and simple religion of the Gospel'. Now while he clearly thinks that this is

undoubtedly the best from a spiritual point of view, in virtue of its being an essentially otherworldly religion, it cannot serve the purposes of society. 'Christianity is a wholly spiritual religion. . . The Christian's homeland is not of this world'. The result is that true Christians are necessarily indifferent to both civic accomplishments and political dangers. However spiritually admirable this otherworldliness may be, it has the politically negative effect of making individuals highly susceptible to servitude and dependence. That is because the spirit of pure and simple religion 'is too favorable to tyranny for tyranny not always to take advantage of it' (ER 112).

Rousseau's additional chapter is entitled 'Civic Religion' but he seems to have left himself without the possibility of such a thing. In the end, he places his faith in toleration, and opts for a 'purely civil creed' whose tenets are determined by the sovereign. But its content, he says, would not be 'dogmas of religion' so much as the 'sentiments of sociability' that it is essential to inculcate in people if they are to be good citizens and loyal subjects (ER113). In short, the 'purely civil creed' that his conception of political society requires need not be recognizably religious at all.

It may seem odd that, having devoted a chapter to the subject, Rousseau can find no place for religion in his account of civil society. It can be argued, however, that a more profound mistake lay in his attempt even to look for one. The purpose of *The Social Contract*, we should recall, is to show how subservience to the law can be made compatible with the natural liberty of human beings. As his famous opening declaration says, we are born free, and yet we find ourselves in chains. These are the chains of social obligation enforced by law. But these cease to be 'chains' when they no longer simply imposed, but arise from the free and equal exercise of the will of all citizens – which is to say, the 'general will', Rousseau's most famous concept. A society that has come to be structured on the basis of 'The Principles of Political Right' (to give the book its alternative title), will be one in which human freedom is realized, albeit in a rather different form to that in which it was enjoyed in the state of nature.

But why is such a realization needed? The answer to this question will be found by turning to Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*. This prize winning discourse, which first brought him to fame, sketches a conjectural history that purports to show how inequality results from early forms of social interaction. In the state of nature, according to Rousseau, human beings are solitary, and motivated primarily by self-interest (*amour soi*), though they also have a natural compassion that prompts them to assist other human beings in their misfortunes. As social interaction and

collaboration increases, however, the solitary individual develops a third type of motivation – *amour propre* or self-esteem. *Amour propre* is a quite different kind of concern with self than *amour soi*. Individuals are no longer driven by simple desires and an equally simple sympathy for others. They begin to *compare* themselves with others, in terms of appearance, accomplishment and possessions. Once they start making this comparison, though, they become subject to something new, a ‘consuming ambition, a drive to raise the relative level of their fortunes, less from real need than from a desire to place themselves above others’ (ER 183). The result is that the relative tranquility of life in the state of nature degenerates into a competitive life resulting in strife, suffering and subjugation. This is highly lamentable, of course, and yet there is no going back to the simple condition of life that has been lost. Consequently, the only hope must lie with a still to be imagined political order in which the negative aspects of social life are overcome. In this prospective world, human freedom will be recovered, but not in its original natural form. A society structured in accordance with the principles of political right, remedies the Hobbesian world of competitive brutality held in check by power, not with a return to nature, but through the emergence of civic unity, a unity that can properly incorporate diversity.

Commentators have pointed out that the conjectural history Rousseau outlines bears a very striking resemblance to traditional Christian salvation history (see Grimsley 1968, and Neuhaus 2008). Originally human beings lived in paradise, but they fell from this condition, bringing sin and suffering upon themselves. Once sin entered the world, a return to the innocence of paradise was impossible. The hope lay not in re-creation, but in redemption, which is to say, a transformation of sinful human beings. Redemption restores the blessings of paradise, but in a new and better world.

Set alongside the Christian vision, we can see that *amour propre* is a variety of *hubris* or *superbia*, and insofar as the parallel holds, we can now see why there is no place for religion within Rousseau’s scheme of things. A society structured in accordance with the principles of political right does not need any divine or transcendental means of redemption and salvation. It is *itself* the means. Moreover, the agency of this redemption is the general will of citizens, with the result that in Rousseau’s theodicy, humanity becomes the instrument of its own salvation. In short, the political vision underlying the second *Discourse* and the *Social Contract* is a humanized conception of salvation that makes divine assistance unnecessary. By placing his political faith ultimately in a ‘purely civil creed’ that aims to encourage ‘sentiments of sociability’, Rousseau reveals that the only space left for anything we might call religion is either the

individual's spiritual quest for another world, or the metaphysician's theological speculations.

Religion and Spirituality

The differences between Smith and Rousseau on religion, and the way these differences are connected with their respective social theories can be made to throw some light on the modern contrast between 'religion' and 'spirituality'. Smith identifies three distinctively religious sentiments that he regards as irreducibly part of human nature – a sense of justice that transcends the vagaries of the positive law and the contingencies of life, an aspiration to moral excellence beyond anything social conformity would require, and what he calls 'piacular feeling', which is to say, a sentiment that moves us to seek atonement for any actions of ours that are not morally blameworthy, but nevertheless damage other people. These three sentiments are aspects of our nature that neither philosophical thought, nor legal provisions, nor the mechanisms of the market can adequately accommodate. By appealing to human nature in this way, Smith's theory explains the value of institutions of religion in terms of what human societies require, even if some individuals, like Smith himself perhaps, may not have much use for them. In other words, religion has a distinctive social function connected with the kind of beings that we are. If, for whatever reason, this function cannot be given common public recognition and expression, societies run the risk of factionalism, a risk of which many 18th century writers were acutely aware. This is a point to which I will return.

The conception of human nature that underlies Rousseau's social theory is importantly different in this respect. Not only do we find no reference to religious sentiments in it, even more significantly, there is no place for them. 'The passions have their origins in our needs', Rousseau says, and 'the only needs [savage man] experiences are for food, a female and rest. The only evils he fears are pain and hunger'. 'Knowledge of death and its terrors', he expressly adds, 'was one of the first things that man acquired by departing from the animal condition' (ER154). In other words, distinctively religious needs and sentiments are neither original, nor natural. Rather, they are part of the unhappy condition that comes with increasing socialization. It seems to follow from this that the transformation brought about in a society structured by the principles of political right will eliminate those senses. In this respect Rousseau may be said to prefigure Marx's contention that the appearance of communist society would eliminate the 'opiate' of religion.

In the *Letter to Franquieres* Rousseau says that he has been religious all his life – 'I believed in my childhood by authority, in my youth by

sentiment, in my mature age by reason, and now I believe because I have always believed' (RPMR 228). If he also believed his own social theory, he might have added that his religious inclinations, however deep seated and sincere he felt them to be, were not ineliminable natural sentiments. Rather, they were simply a consequence of not yet being able to live in the sort of society envisioned in the *Social Contract*, where, necessarily, the traditional idea of religion would be displaced by a purely civil creed, and any residual impulse transformed into a personal spiritual quest or an abstract theological theory.

Smith believed in an established religion, not because he was committed to any particular dogmas, but because he thought the deep-seatedness of religion in our nature was something that political societies could not ignore, or at any rate ignored to their peril. It was thus a political task to channel them in ways that would both grace the lives of individuals and work to the good of all. The 'national church' that this seems to imply is something Rousseau expressly rejects, preferring to elevate a purely civil creed. On this point, it seems to me, modern opinion firmly concurs with Rousseau. Though the Smithian sounding declaration 'In God we Trust' was adopted as the official motto of the United States as recently as 1957, *E pluribus unum* (out of many, one), the older slogan on the Great Seal of 1782 is more in keeping with Rousseau, and probably a more faithful reflection of the political ideal that lay at the heart of the new republic. For all this, the question over which Smith and Rousseau disagree remains. How does religion relate to the unity that must bind together the many? If Rousseau is right, it has no role to play, and the more widely a purely civil creed is adopted as the basis of unity, the more religion will be displaced by spirituality. Someone looking at the drift from religion to spirituality in Western liberal democratic societies today might see in them a vindication of Rousseau.

But someone looking elsewhere might see something of Smith's alternative contention vindicated. In those parts of the world where the protagonists of religion pursue social and political campaigns on its behalf, the result has been factional violence and civil strife. Religious sentiment, such contexts suggest, is generated and sustained by something much deeper than social tension, and it is striking that appeals to toleration and the principles of a liberal democratic creed, seem to meet with complete indifference. On the question of how in these circumstances unity in diversity might be secured, perhaps Smith still has something important to say. There is an element of paradox here. Smith is widely regarded as a founding figure in liberal political theory, while a national church, or a national religion is unthinkable within the framework of contemporary liberalism. There is a case to be made for thinking that this

paradox is in fact disguised within creeds that unify people who proclaim their 'diversity by not appearing obviously religious. Furthermore, while individual spirituality is the recognized role of religion in most developed societies of the 21st century, there is a new 'creed' that seems to do this. The widespread political subscription to environmentalism, it may be argued, is a creed that binds, and thus serves the hidden purposes of a public religion.

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