MUSTAPHA AND THE HOST:
SOME REFLECTIONS ON INFERENCES IN
RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

Hume, in the course of an extended comparison between theism
and polytheism in his *Natural History of Religion* (1757), relates the
following anecdote, which he tells for the purpose of showing the
absurdities which even a learned sect is capable of believing, but
which may also serve as an illustration of some of the difficulties in-
volved in the use of religious language:

> A famous general, at that time in the Muscovite service,
> having come to Paris for the recovery of his wounds, brought
> along with him a young Turk, whom he had taken prisoner.
> Some of the doctors of the Sorbonne (who are altogether as
> positive as the dervishes of Constantinople) thinking it a
> pity, that the poor Turk should be damned for want of in-
> struction, solicited Mustapha very hard to turn Christian,
> and promised him for his encouragement, plenty of good
> wine in this world, and paradise in the next. These allure-
> ments were too powerful to be resisted; and therefore, having
> been well instructed and catechized, he at last agreed to
> receive the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper.
> The priest, however, to make everything sure and solid, still
> continued his instructions and began the next day with the
> usual question, *How many Gods are there? None at all*, replies
> Benedict; for that was his new name. *How! None at all!* cries
> the priest. *To be sure*, said the honest proselyte. *You have told
> me all along that there is but one God: And yesterday I eat him.*
> Such are the doctrines of our brethren the Catholics. But to
> these doctrines we are so accustomed, that we never wonder
> at them: Though in a future age, it will probably become
> difficult to persuade some nations that any human, two-
> legged creature could ever embrace such principles. And it is
> a thousand to one, but these nations themselves shall have

something fully as absurd in their own creed, to which they
will give a most implicit and most religious assent.[1]

This anecdote is typical of Enlightenment sallies against religion
both in its malicious humor and its exploitation of a foreign per-
spective to expose familiar absurdities; it also represents a line of
attack against Christianity and its more paradoxical doctrines that
has been used since the time of Celsus and that consists in taking
these paradoxical doctrines literally and showing their absurd conse-
quences. It is a line of attack that is peculiarly liable to antagonize
believers, even in those cases when it is used against doctrines such
as the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist that demand to be
taken literally.

Among the several reactions to this line of attack that are pos-
sible, two will be examined here. The first, and the one intended by
Hume, is to say: quite right, a foolish and superstitious belief has
been exposed. The task of a philosophical critique of religious state-
ments is precisely to expose the confused and misleading claims of
religion; and Hume has done this in a deft and casual way to a
doctrine that "is so absurd, that it eludes the force of all argument."[2]
It may be admitted that Hume has settled on a particularly easy
instance, easy both because of the fact that, for reasons of earlier
religious history, transubstantiation was regarded in England as a
particularly foreign and absurd doctrine and also because of the
fact that the identification of the consecrated host or wafer with the
body of Jesus Christ can be seen to be false even before its conse-
quences are spelled out. In fact, the error and absurdity of Catholic
doctrine on this point have been obvious ever since the beginning
of Christianity; Jesus' own disciples remark after the discourse on
faith and the Eucharist in chapter 6 of John, "This is a hard saying;
who can listen to it?" (John 6.60)

Hume himself seems to feel the need to account for the ability of
men of sense and learning to believe absurdities so manifest, and he
does so in the following description of the state of mind of believers
in popular religion:

[1] David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed.
T. H. Green and T. H. Grose (London: Longmans, Green, 1912), II, 343–344.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 343.

> We may observe that, notwithstanding the dogmatical, im-
> perious style of all superstition, the conviction of the reli-
> gionists, in all ages, is more affected than real, and scarcely
> ever approaches, in any degree, to that solid belief and per-
> suasion, which governs us in the common affairs of life. Men
> dare not avow, even to their own hearts, the doubts which
> they entertain on such subjects: They make a merit of im-
> plicit faith; and disguise to themselves their real infidelity,
> by the strongest asseverations and most positive bigotry. But
> nature is too hard for all their endeavours, and suffers not
> the obscure, glimmering light, afforded in those shadowy
> regions, to equal the strong impressions, made by common
> sense and by experience. The usual course of men's conduct
> belies their words, and shows, that their assent in these mat-
> ters is some unaccountable operation of the mind between
> disbelief and conviction, but approaching much nearer to
> the former than to the latter.[3]

Hume here attributes the reiteration of dubious and even absurd
beliefs to a confused state of mind, which expresses neither war-
ranted assent (which, in his view, would be impossible) nor open
denial (which would resolve the problem simply and expeditiously),
but simply reaffirms the absurdity more vehemently. Hume's treat-
ment of this condition in the remainder of this section of the *Natural
History of Religion* makes it clear that he regards the explicitation and
systematization of religious beliefs as likely to undo this wavering
state of mind by exposing more clearly the contradictions involved
in popular religious beliefs.[4] In view, however, of his general pessi-
mism about the readiness of most men to strive for truth and con-
sistency in their beliefs, Hume would not be greatly surprised by the
failure of modern Catholics to abandon the doctrine of transub-
stantiation or by the persistence of religious absurdities in general.

The second response, and one more likely to commend itself to
the orthodox apologist, would be to accuse Hume of having mis-
understood the language of faith. Obviously, the Catholic does not
believe that he can consume his God. In fact, as another story

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 347–348.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 352.

related by Hume about the Eucharist makes plain,[5] believers regard an empiricist literalism as a laughable misunderstanding of the doctrine of the real presence. The notion of transubstantiation itself is a metaphysical effort precisely to avoid the empirical absurdities resulting from a literal identification of the consecrated wafer with the body of Christ. It is clear that the literalist is confusing two separate languages: the language of faith, which asserts that Christ is bodily present in the host, and ordinary language, which regards the host as a piece of bread (to which symbolic significance may be attached).

Confusion of these disparate languages occurs both in superstition, when literal consequences are drawn from the propositions of faith and are then affirmed, and in rationalist criticism, in which the same consequences are drawn but are then used to discredit the original affirmations of faith. In both cases, there is a common failure to grasp the rules and the inner logic of the religious language in question; and there is an insertion of inferences drawn from an inappropriate language.

In the case under consideration, the issues involved may be clarified by converting Hume's anecdote into a series of statements:

1. Mustapha ate a consecrated host.
2. A consecrated host is the body of Christ.
3. Christ is God.
4. An object that is eaten is consumed, i.e., it ceases to exist as a separate object.
5. There is one and only one God.
6. God is an object that can not be consumed.
7. God is an object that can not be eaten.
8. Mustapha ate God.
9. Mustapha ate an object that can not be eaten.
10. God has ceased to exist as a separate object.

Number 1 is a neutral statement of fact which relates an event, the occurrence of which can be established by observations and the reports of witnesses in a way that is independent of religious convictions. (Transferring Hume's anecdote to the realm of factual

5 *Ibid.*, p. 343.

statements about the past does not affect the main issues under consideration here). Both 2 and 3 are religious statements which are affirmed by orthodox Catholics; the origin and truth of these statements are not under consideration here. And 4 is simply an explicitation of part of the meaning of the English word "eat" and is an undeniable truism, whenever that word is understood literally. Here it serves to explicitate the non-metaphorical character of the notion of eating that is used in the anecdote. Like 2 and 3, 5 is a statement of orthodox Catholic belief, though it is also asserted by non-Catholic Christians, Muslims, and deists (and perhaps by Hume himself).

Both 6 and 7 are statements derived from the notion of God that is shared by these same groups but that is not explicitated in the anecdote. They are minimal statements that assert only what is relevant to the point of the story; no effort is made here to derive them from 5 or to explicitate the notion of God in any greater detail. Number 7 can be derived from the conjunction of 4 and 6. Statement 8 is (at least in Hume's view) a consequence of 1, 2, and 3; this point will require further discussion. Number 9 is a consequence of 7 and 8 and makes explicit the essential absurdity of the doctrine under attack. Finally, 10 is a restatement of Mustapha's own conclusion and is a consequence of 4, 5, and 8.

These statements can be formalized into a valid argument, but such a procedure would not dispose of the difficulties which the orthodox Catholic would bring against this line of argument. These difficulties would center around the use of 4 and the move from 1, 2, and 3 to 8. As has been pointed out, 4 is an explicitation of our ordinary notion of "eating". But the interpretation of the expression "to eat the body" in Catholic doctrine and practice is obviously against allowing premises of this type to be used in the argument.

A quotation from the eucharistic hymn of St. Thomas Aquinas, *Lauda Sion*, will suffice to show the willing acceptance of the paradoxes that result from the prohibition of inferences employing a literal understanding of terms from ordinary language: "His body is our food, His blood our drink. And yet Christ remains entire under each species. The communicant receives the complete Christ – uncut, unbroken and undivided. Whether one receive or a thousand, the one receives as much as the thousand. Nor is Christ con-

sumed by being received."[6] In general it may be said that orthodox
theology has shown considerable selectivity in the inferences that it
allows to be drawn from a literal understanding of the terms it bor-
rows from ordinary language.

A somewhat similar difficulty can be found in the inference from
1, 2, and 3 to 8. In the New Testament accounts of the institution of
the Eucharist, Jesus is represented as commanding his disciples to
eat his body, but not to "eat God". These narratives and the dis-
course in chapter 6 of John have set the pattern for Catholic lin-
guistic usage in this matter. Adherence to this usage is, however,
more than merely a matter of preserving a traditional expression;
it is also the result of the reflection on the constitution of Jesus Christ
found in the controversies of the early church, which resulted in the
doctrine of the hypostatic union of two natures in one divine person
and so prevented any simple equating of the body of Christ with the
divine nature. Without such an equation, it is not possible to make
the move from 1, 2, and 3 to 8. Within the linguistic rules laid down
by the Christian community, one moves to the following statement:

8a. Mustapha ate the body of Christ.

Nor is this simply a question of adhering to linguistic rules in
making statements about the Eucharist; the devotional attitudes
and practices differ in accordance with the linguistic rules. The
history of Catholic eucharistic piety seems to show an inverse rela-
tionship between adoration of the divine presence in the Eucharist
and receiving the body of Christ in communion.

Now, when one replaces 8 by 8a or else reduces the meaning of 8
to that of 8a, one is in a position to repudiate 9 and 10, which are
dependent on 8, even while the paradoxes of the *Lauda Sion* are ac-
cepted as expressions of the "mystery" of the Eucharist. In the
Catholic theological tradition, then, it is possible to assert that bread
becomes the body of Christ and that what is eaten is not consumed,
but it is not possible to say that the believer can eat the spiritual and
eternal God. Yet all these statements, both the licit and the illicit,
are bound to strike the Humean bystander as absurd. The restric-
tion of inferences based on the literal meaning of terms used in ordi-
nary language is especially arbitrary and unsatisfactory, because it

[6] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Lauda Sion*, in *Hymns of the Roman Liturgy*, tr. and ed. Rev. Joseph
Connelly (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1957), p. 126.

is precisely these inferences, which deal with what we know best, that should be soundest.[7]

The general situation may be stated thus: the upholders of traditional religious views stand accused of making claims which, on any careful and honest examination, are not merely paradoxical but are self-contradictory and absurd. Their attempts to evade these contradictions are arbitrary and inconsistent. They insist on using terms taken from ordinary language but are unwilling to draw legitimate inferences from the statements they make with these terms. Their theological reasoning can scarcely be called reasoning at all, since it is subject to arbitrary prohibitions of those inferences that lead to unorthodox conclusions, that is, to those conclusions that they are unwilling to accept. In this case, although they claim that Christ is really present in the consecrated host and anathematize those who would maintain a merely symbolic presence of Christ, they are unwilling to abide by the consequences of this claim, which, indeed, "eludes the force of all argument". Unwillingness to abandon this absurd claim can only be put down to the general unwillingness of men to follow the light of reason and to abandon religious folly, especially when such folly is sanctioned by tradition.

Such a line of argument, which is implicit in sections 11 and 12 of the *Natural History of Religion*, is, when thus generalized, just as applicable to the orthodox Protestantism with which Hume was familiar as it is to Catholicism; for orthodox Protestant theology is bound to run into comparable difficulties in its Trinitarian and Christological doctrines. The general question that is being raised here is that of the existence and determination of acceptable decision procedures for evaluating the truth-claims of what Hume termed popular theism, by which he meant that form of religious belief that, not content with the conclusions of philosophical theism (which were, for Hume, quite limited), goes beyond them to make doctrinal affirmations about revealed "mysteries". More specifically, it deals with the problem of setting up procedures for determining the validity of inferences within a given theological system. If inferences that are acceptable in ordinary language are rejected because they contradict the basic propositions of the system, can intel-

[7] Cf. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Social Sciences, 1948), p. 144.

lectually honest procedures be established to control theological inferences?

The problems which this line of argument presents may seem to be no more than the carpings of an unsympathetic rationalistic by-stander, who is unwilling to enter into the spirit of faith and makes no effort to grasp the peculiar logic of religious discourse. "Will you set profane reason against sacred mystery? No punishment is too great for your impiety."[8] But, as Hume himself points out, these same difficulties can be found within the Christian religious tradi-tion; for, in his view, those Christians who have been branded as heretics are precisely those who have been on the side of reason and who have tried to control their theological conclusions by some form of rational procedure.[9] Is the rejection of their inferences and con-clusions anything more than the triumph of irrationality? Further-more, Hume's original story suggests that the belief-system under scrutiny (Roman Catholicism) is self-contradictory and that rela-tively simple inferences suffice to expose at least some of the contra-dictions of the system. If this is the case, then the believer must either abandon the principle of contradiction and with it any effort to build a coherent doctrinal structure or to make serious truth-claims, or he must modify his original propositions so that they will not be contradictory. (Hume also pointed out that comparable difficulties confront the philosophical theologian in drawing inferences from the order of the visible universe.)[10]

What account, then, can be given of rules for allowing or dis-allowing theological inferences of the type discussed in our original example, that is, inferences which use the implications of terms in ordinary language to arrive at theological conclusions? Various rules have been proposed, of which three may be briefly considered: 1) a written rule of faith (in this case, the Bible); 2) the common agreement of the believing community; 3) a visible teaching author-ity empowered to lay down and interpret general and specific rules to guide theological reasoning. The first alternative runs into three major difficulties, the last two of which have been severely aggra-vated by modern historical scholarship. First, the written rule of

[8] Hume, *Natural History*, p. 342.
[9] *Ibid.*
[10] Hume, *Dialogues*, pp. 165–169.

faith is not self-interpreting but requires interpretation and application. Even if only those theological sentences are to be allowed which are found in the written rule (this would be the strictest sort of fundamentalism and would mean the death of creative theology), it would be necessary to determine whether a given sentence was identical with one of the allowed sentences. As translators are aware, this is not so simple as it sounds. Determination of the identity of two theological propositions would be more difficult still, and establishing the general "conformity" of theological sentences to the written rule would be a task of still greater difficulty. Second, if the written rule is even remotely comparable in complexity and internal differentiation to the Bible or even to the New Testament, it cannot be assumed that all sentences in the written rule are non-contradictory; in fact, there are very good reasons for thinking that the Bible contains contradictory sentences. Third, it is not possible to derive the statements of Christian theology from the Bible alone; doctrinal affirmations, at least from the time of Nicea on, have been made in non-Biblical terminology, the precise relationship of which to Biblical sentences is frequently ambiguous.

The next two proposals for coping with this problem of rules are both extrinsic solutions. While they can both provide the inquirer with publicly ascertainable statements about the legitimacy or truth of particular theological inferences (the second can do this more easily than the first), the problem still remains of determining what their own rule for governing inferences is. The problem has been relocated, not resolved. Any further account of the basic decision procedure seems to involve a privileged access to the religious realities under consideration either for the religious community or for its leaders and teachers; it is also likely to involve an increased emphasis on the character of the community as itself a sacred reality not subject in any final or decisive way to profane scrutiny.[11]

An illustration of this type of account can be found in the following remarks of the fourth-century Greek theologian, St. Gregory of Nyssa, on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity in his *Catechetical Oration*:

[11] For an illustration of this tendency in contemporary Catholicism, consult Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, especially nos. 4, 22, and 25, in The Documents of Vatican II, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: Guild Press, 1966), pp. 17, 42–44, 47–50.

> The result is that he who attentively scrutinizes the depths of the mystery receives in his spirit by a secret intuition a very fair degree of comprehension of the doctrine relating to the knowledge of God, even though he cannot express clearly in speech the ineffable depth of this mystery, how the same thing admits of being numbered and yet escapes numeration; is perceived in a way that involves division and yet is apprehended as a unity; is distinct as regards person, and not divided as regards underlying essence.[12]

Here the use of inferences from ordinary language, a subject on which Gregory makes a number of remarks elsewhere in this same treatise,[13] is to be controlled by reference to a privileged intuition which the believer possesses and yet which presents difficulties of interpretation and requires careful scrutiny. The situation supposed here in some way resembles that of a person who has had a dream or an extraordinary sense experience for which there do not exist readily available descriptions in ordinary language. Such a person will commonly use the terms and conventions of ordinary language to describe and to suggest to us the content of his experience, and we recognize the value and legitimacy of this kind of talk, even though the person would deny at least some of the inferences that would normally be appropriate in ordinary language. We do not, however, regard his statements as correct or normative accounts of common objects of belief and concern. Comparison of such descriptions of personal experiences with the statements of religious believers will show that there remain considerable differences between them. Normally the believer who makes statements like 2 or 3 in our original example is not giving a report of his personal experiences, even though some believers may (and probably do) have experiences that prompt them to make such statements. The believer and the theologian are making statements that they expect to be subscribed to by an indeterminately large community which is not defined, at least explicitly, by such a shared private experience. But if the believer or the theologian appeals to a special intuition of

[12] St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Oration*, tr. J. H. Strawley (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1917), p. 31.
[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 26–27, 54, 55.

the type described by St. Gregory, he cannot expect others to sub-
scribe to his statements unless they share such an intuition or unless
they are prepared, with or without reason, to accept his authority as
a witness of that intuition. Also, it is far from clear just how it is
possible to have intuitions of the sorts of things described in Chris-
tian theological statements or how such intuitions can be given
appropriate linguistic expression.

A fourth possibility remains, however, which should be indicated,
for it is a point at which "popular religion" makes contact with
"philosophical" religion and it also returns us to our original ex-
ample. This last possibility is the elaboration of rules of inference on
the basis of a prior metaphysical analysis of the realities under con-
sideration. It states that only those ordinary language inferences
from the basic theological propositions are to be allowed which are
compatible with the nature of the realities under consideration.
A good illustration of such an effort to use a metaphysical doctrine
to control ordinary language inferences can be found in the Eucha-
ristic teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas in his use of the central notion
of transubstantiation.[14] This control of ordinary language inferences
is an important aspect of the Catholic effort to forestall a superstitious
understanding of the real presence; John Macquarrie observes that
the doctrine of transubstantiation "is in fact one of the strongest
possible safeguards against magical views."[15]

Clearly, such a move is legitimate if and only if it is possible to
have knowledge of the divine nature independently of the state-
ments that are to be controlled. The possibility of arriving at meta-
physical knowledge of a type that can perform this regulative
function with regard to theological statements is an issue for the
theory of knowledge; the success, adequacy, or consistency with
which such regulation of inferences is carried out is an integral part
of systematic theological argument; consideration of either problem
exceeds the scope of this paper on the analysis of religious language.

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[14] For an exceptionally clear illustration of this, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*,
III, q. 75, art. 8, "Utrum haec sit vera, 'ex pane fit corpus Christi'" (Is this proposition
true, "The body of Christ comes from the bread?"). For a historical treatment of some
of the problems presented by the relation of the metaphysical notion of transubstantia-
tion to the original faith affirmation of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, con-
sult James McCue, "The Doctrine of Transubstantiation from Berengar through Trent,"
Harvard Theological Review, 61 (1968), pp. 385–430.
[15] John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Scribner's, 1966), p. 425.

But it may be profitable to point out some of the consequences of this proposal for metaphysical control of theological inferences.

First, this proposal raises again the specter of the corruption of philosophy by superstition which so pained and angered Hume.[16] But it may fairly be said that the very limited conclusions that Hume was prepared to accept about the supreme Being left him without principles that could be employed in controlling theological discourse and so led him to an overly sharp distinction between philosophical and popular religion which left no room for the work of metaphysical or philosophical theology. Once the effort to move beyond a naive, popular view of the Eucharist to an ordered and consistent understanding of the Eucharist by the use of philosophical categories is ruled out, then the original doctrine is left exposed in its absurdity. But such a conclusion does serious injustice to the intent, at least, of systematic theologians and does little to illuminate the nature of their activity, which cannot properly be identified with either philosophical or popular religion in Hume's sense.

Second, this proposal obviously presupposes the possibility of making serious faith affirmations such as 2 and 3 in the original example, and does not concern itself with the problem of justifying such affirmations. It does, however, suggest a means of proceeding in the explication of the content of such affirmations as well as a means of defending them against the charge of superstition.

Third, the proposal does not resolve the question of which sentences are to be treated in this way. The method proposed is one fitted for the explication of religious propositions that have some claim to be taken literally, e.g., the Catholic claim that the host really is the body of Christ. But which statements state such propositions is matter for the prior judgment of believers; and the task of determining what sentences have been used to state such propositions in Scripture or in the history of the religious community is matter for exegetical and historical inquiry.

Fourth, if the objection is raised that adopting this procedure is a desperate expedient intended to rescue religious discourse from its all too obvious absurdities, it should be realized that the procedure, despite its conservative character, offers no guaranteed outcome. In the application of this procedure to particular doctrinal or creedal

[16] Hume, *Natural History*, p. 341. Cf. also pp. 362–363.

affirmations, it may become clear that the religious affirmations to be controlled and clarified by this procedure fail to meet either logical or empirical criteria of acceptability or that they conflict with the metaphysical principles being used. In either case, various moves are possible: one may reject the religious affirmation as false; one may reinterpret it as metaphorical; one may modify one's empirical beliefs or logical or metaphysical principles; one may suspend judgment or appeal to the notion of "mystery"; one may try to revise the content of the original affirmation. The point is that many moves are possible – some orthodox, some not, no one of them necessary. The judgment of the appropriateness of a given move will have to depend on careful consideration of all the factors in a particular theological quandary. Certainly, in the case of the scholastic effort to wed Hebraic and Christian religious affirmations with the principles of Platonic, Aristotelian, and neo-Platonic metaphysics, there can be no initial guarantee of a successful outcome. In any case, the riskiness of the outcome is, one may surmise, a prime reason for the long-standing suspicion and distrust that some believers and theologians have felt toward philosophy and philosophical theology.

Fifth, it should be noted that the adoption of this procedure on an official basis (as has generally been the case in Roman Catholicism) leads to the creation of a division between two ways of understanding religious statements. The first is a simple literalism which adheres to traditional religious formulations. This literalism may slide into unorthodox or superstitious expressions of the original faith affirmation; or, content not to probe too deeply or to range too widely, it may persist in a dogged fidelity to what it has received. The second course is a sophisticated and frequently highly technical understanding of religious affirmations and a careful discrimination of permissible and impermissible theological statements. These can only be appropriated by religious professionals, who until recently were nearly all members of the clergy, though some of the conclusions of this procedure could be and were communicated to simple believers in catechetical instructions and sermons. (A great deal of Catholic religious instruction was until recently dominated by the effort to impart such conclusions rather than by the effort to re-create the existential basis for the original faith affirmations.)

Finally, it should be pointed out that this method of controlling inferences from religious statements and analogies is bound to set up

a tension between the need to restrict the implications of meta-
phorical religious language for the sake of consistency with meta-
physical principles and the desire to exploit the poetic and vital
connotations of such language. If this tension within the religious
community is undone by the unquestioned dominance of the meta-
physical principles, the community runs the risk of stifling religious
imagination or diverting it to areas that are peripheral to the great
religious issues.

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