MILL'S *UTILITY OF RELIGION* IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE[1]

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ABSTRACT

I am comparing Mill's *Utility of Religion* with David Hume's *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* and William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. According to Hume, religious ideas generate useless and unpleasant behaviours, because only in this way can the believer distinguish himself or herself from those who don't have any religion and who simply want what is useful or immediately agreeable to themselves or to others. On the contrary, William James thinks that the religious experience can improve human nature and make people more generous and benevolent. In this sense, the saint is an effective ferment of goodness. What about Mill? Can we situate him right in the middle between these two thinkers? For Mill, supernatural religious belief is not necessary to mankind. Religion has been important as far as public opinion and early education are important. But belief in the supernatural could have a morally ennobling effect if it were based on the belief in a personified Principle of Good who needs us as fellow-labourers in the fight for a better world. And, in any case, for Mill what is really important is the creation of a Religion of Humanity, a perspective quite different from that of Hume or James.

Keywords: Religion, utility, morality.

RESUMEN

Me propongo comparar *La utilidad de la religión* de Mill con la *Investigación sobre los principios de la moral* de David Hume y con *Las variedades de la experiencia religiosa* de William James. Según Hume las ideas religiosas producen conductas inútiles y desagradables, porque sólo así puede el creyente sentirse distinto de quienes no tienen ninguna religión o simplemente buscan lo que les resulta útil o inmediatamente agradable para ellos mismos o para los demás. Por el contrario, William James piensa que la experiencia religiosa puede

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mejorar la naturaleza humana y hacer que las personas sean más generosas y benevolentes. En este sentido, el santo en un fermento real de bondad. ¿Y Mill? ¿Podríamos situarle en un punto medio entre estos dos pensadores? Para Mill la creencia religiosa en lo sobrenatural no es necesaria para la humanidad. La religión ha sido importante en tanto que la opinión pública y la educación temprana son importantes. Pero la creencia en lo sobrenatural podría tener un efecto moralmente ennoblecedor si se basara en la creencia en un principio del bien personificado que nos necesita como compañeros de trabajo en la lucha por un mundo mejor. Y, en cualquier caso, para Mill lo que es verdaderamente importante es la creación de una religión de la humanidad, una perspectiva bastante diferente de la de Hume o James.

Palabras clave: Religión, utilidad, moralidad.

I am comparing Mill's *Utility of Religion* with David Hume's *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* and William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. According to Hume, religious ideas generate useless and unpleasant behaviours, because only in this way can the believer distinguish himself or herself from those who don't have any religion and who –prompted by his or her nature- simply want what is useful or immediately agreeable to themselves or to others. So, this is the explanation of "celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude, and the whole train of monkish virtues". Hume notes that "they serve to no manner of purpose; neither advance a man's fortune in the world, nor render him a more valuable member of society; neither qualify him for the entertainment of company, nor encrease his power of self-enjoyment"[2]. So it is clear that religion –instead of supporting the morality that emerges in a natural way from our desires and necessities-creates its own morality; a morality that subverts natural impulses such as compassion and benevolence. Exemplifying this thesis, Hume writes in his *History of England* about a rebellion in Ireland in 1641 and takes note of its ferocity and cruelty: "Amidst all these enormities, the sacred name of Religion resounded on every side; not to stop the hands of these murderers, but to enforce their blows, and to steel their hearts against every movement of human or social sympathy. The English, as heretics, abhorred of God, and detestable to all holy men, were marked out by the priests for slaughter; and, of all actions, to rid the world of these declared enemies to catholic faith and piety, was represented as the most meritorious. Nature, which, in that rude people, was sufficiently inclined to atrocious deeds, was farther stimulated by precept; and national prejudices empoisoned by those aversions, more

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2   David Hume: *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*. Edited by Tom L. Beauchamp. Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1998, Conclusion, p. 146.

deadly and incurable, which arose from an enraged superstition. While death finished the sufferings of each victim, the bigoted assassins, with joy and exultation, still echoed in his expiring ears, that these agonies were but the commencement of torments, infinite and eternal."[3]

Anybody can think that if God uses infinite and eternal punishments, he is authorizing us to employ all kinds of violence. In one of the historical novels written by Walter Scott, *Old Mortality* (and we must remember that it describes the religious situation of Scotland in the years previous to Hume's birth), one of the characters –inspired by his reading of the *Bible*- says: "Who talks of peace and safe conduct? who speaks of mercy to the bloody house of the malignants? I say take the infants and dash them against the stones; take the daughters and the mothers of the house and hurl them from the battlements of their trust, that the dogs may fatten on their blood as they did on that of Jezabel, the spouse of Ahab, and that their carcasses may be dung to the face of the field in the portion of their fathers!"[4]. Thinking about divine inspiration, one can always believe that one has heard the following message: "Slay, slay – smite – slay utterly – let not your eye have pity! Slay utterly, old and young, the maiden, the child, and the woman whose head is grey – Defile the house and fill the courts with the slain!"[5] Didn't Hume write that "where the interests of religion are concerned, no morality can be forcible enough to bind the enthusiastic zealot. The sacredness of the cause sanctifies every measure which can be made use of to promote it"?[6]

On the contrary, William James thinks that religious experience can improve human nature and make people more generous and benevolent. In this sense the saint is "an effective ferment of goodness". Talking about what religion provides for the believer, William James writes about a new level of vitality that makes that magnanimities that before were considered impossible become now possible. The highest levels of confidence, courage, patience that human nature has reached have developed from religious ideals. The man animated by religious enthusiasm is free from mean and paltry interests. The religious person changes his or her emotional centre in the direction of love and harmony. The practical consequences of this disposition are that fear and anxiety disappear, and equanimity takes their place. The saint loves his or her enemies. James doesn't believe in Hume's fear (religion corrupting morality). He thinks that human beings chose their God "for the value of the fruits

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3   David Hume: *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution of 1688.* VI vols. Liberty Classics, Indianapolis, 1983, vol. V, chapter LV, p. 343.
4   Sir Walter Scott: *Old Mortality*. Edited with an Introduction by Angus Calder. Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1975, p. 273 (see 2 Kings 9: 10 and 9: 30-7).
5   *Old Mortality*, p. 274 (see Ezekiel 9: 5-7).
6   David Hume: *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion.* Edited, with an Introduction, by Norman Kemp Smith. Bobbs-Merril, Indianapolis and New York, no date, p. 222.

he seemed to them to yield. So soon as the fruits began to seem quite worthless; so soon as they conflicted with indispensable human ideals, or thwarted too extensively other values; so soon as they appeared childish, contemptible, or immoral when reflected on, the deity grew discredited, and was erelong neglected and forgotten. It was in this way that the Greek and Roman gods ceased to be believed in by educated pagans; ... Protestants have so dealt with the Catholic notions of deity, and liberal Protestants with older Protestant notions; it is thus that Chinamen judge of us, and that all of us now living will be judged by our descendants. When we cease to admire or approve what the definition of a deity implies, we end by deeming that deity incredible."[7] And later: "The gods we stand by are the gods we need and can use, the gods whose demands on us are reinforcements of our demands on ourselves and on one another. What I then propose to do is, briefly stated, to test saintliness by common sense, to use human standards to help us decide how far the religious life commends itself as an ideal kind of human activity. If it commends itself, then any theological beliefs that may inspire it, in so far forth will stand accredited."[8]

So let's ask ourselves, what are the practical consequences of a vivifying religious experience? James thinks that the saint sees behind everything a divine order, and that this produces in his or her soul an incomparable happiness and strength of mind. In his or her human relationships he or she has plenty of the wish to help others, instead of putting happiness in comfortable things. The saint never will turn his or her back to any duty. When we need any help the saint will be there to give us a hand. The saints, with their extravagances of human kindness, can be prophetic. They offer the rest of us examples to imitate, examples that can contribute in an important way to improve the world we live in. James thinks that the function of charity in social evolution is essential. Charity changes enemies into friends, because it gives people respect and dignity, and in this sense pushes people to change and be honest. So to James, judging religion not from theological criteria, but from common sense and empirical evidence, it is easy to conclude that the qualities that the saint exemplifies are indispensable to human welfare.

What about Mill? Can we situate him right in the middle between these two thinkers? Mill's *Utility of Religion* deals with the same problems we have seen in Hume's and James's works. Mill wants to know if it is the case generally that religion is morally useful; if religious beliefs

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7   William James: *The Varieties of Religious Experience.* Edited with an Introduction by Martin E. Marty. Penguin, New York, 1982, Lectures XIV and XV, p. 329. In this sense James assumes (very optimistically, I would say) that "today we abhor the very notion of eternal suffering inflicted" *Varieties,* XIV and XV, p. 330.
8   *Varieties,* XIV and XV, p. 331.

are really indispensable to the temporal welfare of mankind. But Mill poses these questions in quite a different mood from Hume. He writes that he is not interested in the mischief that religion has created. As a starting point in his research Mill thinks we ought to suppose religion to have accepted the best human morality which reason and goodness can work out. One is tempted to ask why we should do that, as it is not a supposition well supported by experience (neither in Mill's time nor in ours. Unfortunately sometimes it isn't true that we are very far from the times Walter Scott was describing). In any case, Mill's desire for fair game decides this starting point, and we can assume it. So let's ask ourselves two questions. First, what does religion do for society? Second, what does religion do for the individual? This last question can be formulated in this another way: what influence does religion have in improving individual human nature?

Mill thinks that from a social point of view the influence of religious teaching has been the effect of teaching, not of religion. It has been the effect of what is received from early childhood, of what one sees as accepted by the general concurrence of mankind or, more realistically, by all the human beings whom one knows. We can conclude that religion has been powerful not by its intrinsic force, but because it has wielded the power of public opinion. Any other system of ideas with the same support could serve the same purpose. Someone could say that there is a specific point concerning order and morality that only religion can provide: the idea of rewards and punishments after death; but Mill thinks that these, even when credited to be eternal, don't have a very powerful effect in social life. We have to remember that our eyes have never seen them. And about its infinite magnitude Mill writes: "Even the worst malefactor is hardly able to think that any crime he has had it in his power to commit, any evil he can have inflicted in this short space of existence, can have deserved torture extending through an eternity."[9]

We must conclude that religion is not useful as an enforcer of social morality, but still we can ask if it was necessary as a teacher of it, as it is obvious that predominant moralities have everywhere a religious origin. Mill answers that there is an important evil consequent on ascribing a supernatural origin to morality. This supposed origin prevents its being discussed, criticized and improved.

With these conclusions in mind it is time to ask if religion is necessary to the improvement of individual character. But before answering this question we have to consider what needs of the human mind religion supplies. Mill is clear about that: "ideal conceptions grander and more

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9   J. S. Mill: *Utility of Religion*, in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*. John M. Robson, General Editor, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, vol. X, 1969, p. 413.

beautiful than we see realized in the prose of human life."[10] As he writes in the same page: "So long as human life is insufficient to satisfy human aspirations, so long there will be a craving for higher things, which finds its most obvious satisfaction in religion. So long as earthly life is full of sufferings, so long there will be need for consolations". In this sense religion is not a thing we can expect to get rid of. It is too deep inside human nature. But what we can discuss is the kind of religion that best provides human satisfaction and elevated feelings. Talking with more clarity: do we need to travel beyond the boundaries of this world to recognize something excellent and most important and to get these elevated feelings? One problem with supernatural religions is, according to Mill, that they are "interested"; they promote in the believer the preoccupation with his or her own personal salvation, and in this way they strengthen the selfish element in our nature. This is not an elevated feeling! Another problem with supernatural religions is that they produce an important torpidity or corruption in the intellectual and moral faculties. Mill writes in a way Hume would have enjoyed: "the worshipper must learn to think blind partiality, atrocious cruelty, and reckless injustice, not blemishes in an object of worship, since all these abound to excess in the commonest phenomena of Nature" (that supposedly the Divinity has created)[11]. This worshipper has as his or her object of devotion "a being who could make a Hell; and who could create countless generations of human beings with the certain foreknowledge that he was creating them for this fate. Is there a moral enormity which might not be justified by imitation of such a Deity? And is it possible to adore such a one without a frightful distortion of the standard of right and wrong?"[12] The only belief in the supernatural that could have a morally ennobling effect would be one based on the belief in a personified Principle of Good who needs us as fellow-labourers in the fight for a better world. This means that we resign the idea of an omnipotent creator, but obtain the idea of virtuous human beings as contributors in the final triumph of good over evil. The problem with this belief is that is not grounded in empirical evidence. We are at liberty to believe it, and of course it is a possibility, but nothing more. The same happens with the belief in life after death. It is surely a possibility, but there is nothing that proves it. And here there is a real loss. The brute fact of the death of people that have not been happy, who died too early, ... Mill tries to mitigate all this in a not very convincing way. In any case he has to recognize that there is a consolation of real value that the sceptics lose: the hope that they will see again their dear ones. I would say that we will have

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10 *Utility of Religion*, p. 419.
11 *Utility of Religion*, p. 423.
12 *Utility of Religion*, p. 424.

to accept this as the tragic condition of human beings. In any case, and assuming it, what is really important is the creation of a Religion of Humanity, of a sense of unity with mankind and a deep feeling for the general good. The indefinite duration of the life of the human species and its indefinite capability of improvement offers to the imagination and sympathies, writes Mill, "a large enough object to satisfy any reasonable demand for grandeur of aspiration."[13] This is a perspective quite different from that of Hume or James, and in our secularized societies much more important than theirs. What is at stake is the ideal of fraternity; and in a global world where our behaviour affects everywhere sooner or later this is more and more necessary.

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13 *Utility of Religion*, p. 420.