The Moral Culture of the Scottish Enlightenment

Review Number: 1996

Publish date: Thursday, 29 September, 2016

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ISBN: 9780300153804

Date of Publication: 2015

Price: £40.50

Pages: 224pp.

Publisher: Yale University Press

Publisher url: <http://yalebooks.com/book/9780300153804/moral-culture-scottish-enlightenment>

Place of Publication: New Haven, CT

Reviewer: Tim Stuart-Buttle

Thomas Ahnert's *The Moral Culture of the Scottish Enlightenment* is an unusual work. Little more than an extended essay, its brevity and lucidity belie the complexity and force of its central thesis. Whilst there is no doubt that the book represents an important historiographical intervention, it is rather harder to explain why or where it does so. As a contribution to our understanding of the moderate and predominantly clerical Enlightenment in Scotland – its ostensible purpose – it advances few claims which current scholars in the field would find particularly startling. It is, instead, as a contribution to the historiography of 17th- and 18th-century Protestant European intellectual culture more broadly that the real ambition and importance of *Moral Culture* come into focus. The Scottish Enlightenment is, in this regard, offered as a case-study, and made to serve a considerably larger objective: to illustrate 'the continuing importance of theological languages in Enlightenment thought', without which 'the wider intellectual history of the eighteenth century' cannot be understood adequately (p. 3).

Towards the end of the 17th century, Ahnert observes, there was a pronounced shift in Protestant European apologetic from an emphasis on theological doctrine to moral conduct as the true measure of religious belief. The story of the emergence of a 'liberal', confessionally non-aligned and ethically-oriented species of Protestant Christianity has been sketched before. As Ahnert notes in his introduction, scholars have now 'firmly established in the historiography' the concept of a 'religious' or 'clerical Enlightenment', hostile to the twin evils of superstition and enthusiasm (p. 1). Ahnert is nonetheless critical – if only implicitly – of the tendency of much of this literature to define the 'religious Enlightenment' as the application of reason to theology and its history, and to focus on its latent secularising implications. Such a tendency is exemplified by Hugh Trevor-Roper's classic essay, 'The religious origins of the Enlightenment' (1967).⁽¹⁾ Trevor-Roper drew attention to the important development of a distinctly Erasmian, sceptical and eirenic tradition by heterodox apologists inclined towards Arminianism and Socinianism. This opened the door to the kind of position occupied by Edward Gibbon (and, perhaps, Trevor-Roper), which combined a patrician, even patronising scepticism regarding the truth-claims of Christianity with a scholarly fascination with its seemingly unfathomable historical success. Despite his advocacy of a plurality of Enlightenments, it is this Arminian and Socinian-tinged, sceptical, socially and politically conservative and Erastian variant which J. G. A. Pocock privileges in his remarkable *Barbarism and Religion* series.⁽²⁾ Heterodox Protestants, Pocock argues, substituted profane history and the *ars critica* for sacred history and systematic theology, and

undermined the orthodox emphasis on confessional creeds and doctrine in the name of civil peace and unity. Gibbon's work illustrates that the concept of 'enlightened' ecclesiastical history is no more paradoxical than that of the 'clerical Enlightenment' of which it was a product – even though it took a religious sceptic to write it. Like Trevor-Roper, but with greater finesse and prolixity, Pocock suggests that the moderate Protestant Enlightenment, taken to its logical conclusion, resulted in history and criticism taking the place of religious faith.

Although its author does not directly invite us to read it in this way – which is, I think, a pity – *Moral Culture* presents a powerful alternative interpretation of the historical origins, implications and consequences of a moderate Enlightenment defined by a distinctly sceptical species of heterodox Protestantism. For Ahnert, the turn from doctrine to moral conduct may in retrospect have ushered in a more secular understanding of society. Yet, understood historically, it had its roots in pietistic movements of religious revival – even if it subsequently turned against their evangelical emphasis on the workings of unmediated divine grace. In this regard, 'enthusiasm' may not be quite the 'antiself' of Enlightenment which Pocock and others have suggested. In his previous monograph, Ahnert showed how the German Lutheran, Christian Thomasius's (1655–1728) moral and political philosophy was shaped by his involvement with Pietism, and formulated as part of a broader programme for intellectual and religious renewal.⁽³⁾ Thomasius's critique of scholastic Christianity and bookish learning was animated by theological conviction as well as practical considerations: the goal was to create a culture which encouraged self-cultivation and individual improvement as part and parcel of the economy of salvation. Here Ahnert's work engages with recent scholarship which explores the revival in the early-modern period of a conception of philosophy as intended to offer regimens for curing, ordering and educating the mind towards an ethical purpose in line with the ancient *cultura animi* tradition.⁽⁴⁾ Ahnert invites us to reconsider the relationship between this revived conception of philosophy – hostile to scholasticism, reconcilable with the new experimental and empirical method, and overwhelmingly practical in orientation – and an 'enthusiastic', rather mystical religion of love which the new learning is frequently seen to have rejected in the name of rationality.

In a subsequent volume of essays, co-edited with the late Susan Manning, Ahnert extended this argument by switching his focus from Germany to Scotland.⁽⁵⁾ Ahnert's contribution was an essay on Hugh Blair (1718–1800): a leading representative of the Moderate party in the Kirk, and the inaugural Professor of Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres at the University of Edinburgh. Blair and his circle of friends among the Moderate clergy and professoriate – including the historian William Robertson – occupy a central place in Ahnert's narrative in *Moral Culture*. This is appropriate: Blair is far more representative of the intellectual culture of the Scottish Enlightenment than is David Hume; and by shifting the focus away from Hume – an unlikely hero in both Trevor-Roper and Pocock's narratives of Protestant Enlightenment – we are better placed to recapture the fundamental, animating concerns behind the turn against Calvinist orthodoxy north of the Tweed. Ahnert warns his reader that his central thesis might appear 'paradoxical' or 'counter-intuitive': it was the heterodox Moderates, rather than their orthodox opponents, who were most sceptical about the extent to which reason alone could acquire religious and moral knowledge. The Moderates' scepticism, however, was of a distinctly different character to that identified by Trevor-Roper and Pocock, and was put to markedly different, practical ends: the creation of a 'moral culture' which encouraged self-improvement. Heterodox Protestantism in Scotland did not result in a turn from systematic theology to the *history* of theology, but rather to the study of rhetoric, practical divinity, moral philosophy and civil history. This emphasis on moral conduct cannot be understood simply as a pragmatic attempt to reconcile Scottish Presbyterianism with the secular values of a 'polite' modern culture (modelled on the idealised portrayal of England presented by Addison's *Spectator*). Nor was it merely part and parcel of the Moderates' project to advance their own corporate interest as leaders of Scottish society in the aftermath of the Union with England: a project the remarkable success of which was well-captured by Richard Sher in his *Church and University*.⁽⁶⁾ Instead the emphasis on moral conduct was founded upon a 'technical theological argument' regarding the processes of sanctification and justification and the conditions of salvation (p. 7).

In his opening two chapters Ahnert endeavours to excavate the Scottish theological origins of Moderatism. The widely-recognised influence of the English latitudinarians and the third earl of Shaftesbury on the

development of moral and religious thinking in Scotland, beautifully explored by Isabel Rivers, is quite deliberately underplayed.⁽⁷⁾ There is similarly little mention of engagement with the Socinian and Arminian currents of thought flowing on the Continent (and in England). Instead, in his opening chapters Ahnert draws on important recent research by (among others) Clare Jackson, Colin Kidd and Alasdair Raffe into the formation of confessional (Episcopalian and Presbyterian) religious cultures in post-Restoration Scotland.⁽⁸⁾ Despite its re-establishment in 1690, the Presbyterian Church of Scotland perceived its position to be precarious, not least due to the challenges it faced from Episcopalians (who sought to elicit the sympathies of their Anglican brethren) and 'deists'. William III's desire for a broad-based, comprehensive and tolerant Kirk was frustrated. Instead, the Kirk increasingly employed the Westminster Confession as a test of doctrinal orthodoxy: a renewed emphasis on subscription to articles of faith which took place throughout Protestant Europe in these years. Any perceived deviation from it was decried as Socinianism, Arminianism or worse, and led to prosecution – as indicated by the prolonged proceedings against the heterodox Professor of Divinity at Glasgow, John Simson from 1714.

The increasing doctrinal rigour of the orthodox from the 1690s, however, was resisted by an Episcopalian-Jacobite preference for a simple, spiritual Christianity which drew on the mysticism of marginalised Catholic communities in France, notably the followers of Antoinette Bourignon and the Quietist circle around Mme de Guyon. This emphasis on repentance and moral conduct rather than predestination and grace won admirers across the confessional divide, as indicated by the popularity among a younger generation of moderate Presbyterians of works such as James Garden's *Comparative Theology* (1707) – although Ahnert confuses James with his brother, George, a keen Bourignonist (pp. 24–5). By this means Ahnert seeks to downplay the importance of a reverence for ancient moral philosophy, most notably Stoicism, in the development of Scottish 'moral sense' philosophy from Francis Hutcheson onwards. Here as elsewhere, Ahnert qualifies the claims of recent scholars (such as Sher and James Moore) that Hutcheson and his admirers endeavoured to 'merge pagan philosophy with Christian thought' (p. 102). Their interest in the affections rather than reason, emphasis on the naturalness of virtue, sociability and benevolence, and the culture of sensibility to which it gave rise need not reflect a secularising or rationalising impulse.

The controversy aroused by Simson's trial is presented by Ahnert as a test-case which confirms this larger thesis. The orthodox hostility to Simson cannot be explained by his preference for a natural religion of reason. On the contrary, Simson depreciated natural religion and emphasised the need for revelation: it was precisely because reason could *not* establish doctrinal truths with any certainty that the imposition of articles of faith was so unreasonable. Simson's position implied that, without the light provided by revelation, the ancient philosophers had been unable to identify the true grounds of moral duty; consequently their eternal damnation on account of their unavoidable ignorance must appear an act of divine caprice and cruelty. The Christian revelation, then, had enlarged exponentially on the insights offered by even the greatest philosophers, the Stoics: a position Ahnert also ascribes to Hutcheson. Consequently it was orthodox Calvinists who were most concerned to defend 'a more extensive natural religion', which left pagans with no excuse and justified their punishment (p. 37). On this point Ahnert invites a conclusion which he nonetheless refrains from drawing. Given the vulnerability of this attempt to establish Christian doctrine on the basis of scholastic philosophy to the sceptical barbs of infidels such as Hume, it was arguably the apologetic approach of orthodox, not moderate, Presbyterians which was both more rationalistic and more compromising to the cause of religion.

In subsequent chapters Ahnert is at pains to establish that the Moderate party, which properly came into existence in 1751–2 over the vexed issue of patronage, continued to emphasise the limits of reason and the need for revelation. The continuities between their thinking, and that of earlier moderate Presbyterians such as William Wishart and Robert Wallace, are in this respect more important than their differences. Similarly, even as the 'common sense' philosophers in Aberdeen disagreed with Hutcheson's moral sense theory in important respects, their position on the relationship between reason and revelation, knowledge and faith was almost identical. The primary objective of the Scottish moralists, with the exception of Hume, and their clerical allies was practical and pedagogical, not speculative: if they impugned systematic theology, they did so in the name of the betterment of Christian society and the moral and spiritual regeneration of its citizens.

The Moderate commitment to hierarchy and order in the Kirk was a means to this end: under Robertson's leadership they made the reviled system of lay patronage, imposed in 1712 against the explicit terms of the Treaty of Union, work for the cause of Enlightenment by ensuring that only learned and virtuous men (meaning those sympathetic to the Moderate cause) received preferment in the Church as in the universities.

Moral Culture offers a powerful revisionist thesis which should be recommended reading for scholars not only of 18th-century Scotland, but of Enlightenment intellectual history more broadly. It suggests that the 'religious Enlightenment' in Scotland grew up from 'enthusiastic' theological roots, and sought to cultivate a 'moral culture' which conduced to national spiritual regeneration rather than merely to social peace, politeness or the Anglicisation of Scottish culture. Here Ahnert contributes to recent scholarly attempts to decentre the Scottish Enlightenment away from Hume (and, to an extent, Adam Smith), in order to recapture its fundamental animating concerns – and, perhaps, to suggest that its relationship to 'modernity' is rather more complex than is sometimes suggested.⁽⁹⁾ The mainstream moderate Protestant Enlightenment, in Scotland as in Germany, might better be understood as the precursor to 19th-century European religious revivalism than as a step on the road to modern (or post-modern) scepticism, rationalism and religious disenchantment.

It is, perhaps, to be regretted that Ahnert did not explore more extensively some of the avenues he opens up – including the complex, but clear affinities between Hume's scepticism regarding natural religion and that of his moderate Presbyterian compatriots and personal friends. It might furthermore be questioned whether some of the book's fundamental claims hold up under detailed scrutiny. To give one, important, example. The broadly Augustinian, spiritualist theology which acquired devotees from the later 17th century continued to emphasise the importance of unmediated divine grace for spiritual and moral regeneration. Sin, and the importance of Christ's death as an expiatory sacrifice, was not simply swept under the carpet; and Ahnert doesn't explain satisfactorily how the more mystical, even antinomian dimensions of their theology dropped out of the picture. The Moderates were notably tight-lipped about the precise workings of grace, a point not lost on their orthodox opponents; and Ahnert is similarly evasive in his repeated claims that moderate Presbyterians 'seem' to have retained an important place for grace in the economy of salvation. On one level, this is understandable: precisely because the Moderates shied away from declaring their position on finer points of theology, the historian is faced with the challenge of reconstructing it on the basis of limited evidence. Yet why did moderate Presbyterians, from Wallace and Wishart onwards, esteem the virtue of discretion – concealing one's true sentiments regarding the truth-claims of the Westminster Confession, for example – quite so highly?

In addressing this question, the influence of Shaftesburian freethinking is arguably more important than Ahnert allows. We know that the early Edinburgh moderates who studied under William Hamilton and established the Rankenian Club – Wishart, Wallace, Leechman – corresponded with Robert Molesworth and his circle of Whig commonwealthmen in Ireland, and imbibed a distinctive preference for a Harringtonian conception of civil religion as a prerequisite for civil peace. This concern for peace was even more prevalent among Robertson's Moderates, whose bond was forged in part through their youthful attempt to defend Edinburgh from Jacobite forces in 1745. Shaftesbury, like Harrington, advocated the maintenance of an established church on the basis of its political and social utility – yet his elitist moral theory made it quite clear that he rejected Calvinism (and, in all likelihood, Christianity) *tout court*, and followed his Stoic guides in believing in the possibility of moral perfectibility through self-cultivation. Even as the early moderates (and Hutcheson) were unquestionably Christian believers, they nonetheless found in Shaftesbury's writings an account of human nature which prioritised moral education and which – unlike those Christian 'enthusiasts' whom Shaftesbury held in contempt – had no place for the Christian story of imputed sin and redemption through irresistible divine grace.

Here it is important to note that while orthodox Presbyterians may well have been more 'rationalist' than their opponents, the point on which Ahnert focuses, this only gets us so far. It was arguably the Moderates' emphasis on man's capacity for moral regeneration without divine assistance – that is, his self-sufficiency – which was the main point in dispute from the Simson trial onwards. It was for this reason that the orthodox

accused the Moderates of being slavishly devoted to Shaftesbury and the Stoics. As unapologetic admirers of Shaftesbury, moderate Scottish Presbyterians were arguably more conscious of – and vexed by – the problematic nature of this relationship between a broadly Stoic ethical theory and Christian teaching than Ahnert allows. After all, and as Ahnert recognises, even as the Moderates claimed that reason alone could not establish the existence of a future state, they simultaneously suggested that the individual was quite able to lead a moral life without this knowledge. Scottish Enlightenment moral philosophy – developed in the pulpit as well as the lecture hall – strongly suggested that virtue, as the ancient Stoics had recognised, was its own reward. Moral obligation could be explained in a broadly secular idiom. For the Moderates, Ahnert notes, ‘Christianity was uniquely useful for furthering the “culture” that moral reform and salvation required in equal measure’ (p. 65). Perhaps so; but was Christian belief uniquely *necessary* for the moral life, and if so, why? This was a question to which the orthodox had a clear answer. This was also the question asked of the Moderates by Hume, who nonetheless recognised the utility of an established church and shared their contempt for orthodox Calvinist philosophical theology. It was a question which Hume’s Moderate compatriots struggled to answer.

Notes

1. H. R. Trevor-Roper, ‘The religious origins of the Enlightenment’, in idem, *The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century: Religion, the Reformation and Social Change* (London, 1967), pp. 179–218. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion* (6 vols, Cambridge, 1999–2015). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. T. Ahnert, *Religion and the Origins of the German Enlightenment: Faith and the Reform of Learning in the Thought of Christian Thomasius* (Rochester, NY, 2006). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. cf. S. Corneanu, *Regimens of the Mind: Boyle, Locke, and the Early Modern Cultura Animi Tradition* (Chicago, IL, 2012). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *Character, Self, and Sociability in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. T. Ahnert & S. Manning (New York, 2011). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. R. B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1985; rev. edn with a new preface, 2015). [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. I. Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660–1780* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1991–2000). [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Ahnert draws particularly heavily on A. Raffae, ‘Presbyterians and Episcopalians: The formation of confessional cultures in Scotland, 1660–1715’, *English Historical Review*, 125 (2010), 570–98. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Cf. the essays in *Scottish Philosophy in the Eighteenth Century, Volume I: Morals, Politics, Art, Religion*, ed. A. Garrett and J. A. Harris (Oxford, 2015). [Back to \(9\)](#)

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