

The Moral Culture of the Scottish Enlightenment 1690–1805 (Review)

R. J. W. MILLS

The Moral Culture of the Scottish Enlightenment 1690–1805, by Thomas Ahnert. London: Yale University Press, 2014. Pp. 224. \$65. 978-0300153804.

This engaging work is a significant contribution to scholarship both on the Scottish Enlightenment and on the relationship between the European Enlightenment and religion. Writing with persuasive acuity, Ahnert examines how over the course of the eighteenth century a shift in emphasis occurred in Scottish theology away from doctrinal orthodoxy and toward moral conduct as the true measure of piety. The stress that leading clerical figures of the Scottish Enlightenment put on pious action was bound up with a skeptical reclassification of the capacity of unassisted reason to achieve epistemic certainty in doctrinal matters. These clergymen wanted to get away from the orthodox idea of salvation *sola fide*, which viewed good conduct as a secondary element of Christianity. The Moderates, the key grouping of “enlightened” clergymen who emerged by the 1750s, encouraged piety and virtue through recommending the “culture of the mind.” The term “culture” was used as meaning the process of cultivation: the incremental improvement of the moral and religious character of an individual through scripture-inspired practice. To avoid “papism,” however, the Moderates maintained that divine support was still necessary for salvation. Ahnert purposefully presents us with a paradox in the process of cultivation: orthodox Presbyterians maintained the existence of natural religion resulting unavoidably from the act of reasoning, whereas the Moderates believed that religious tenets were achievable through access to divine revelation and were of secondary importance to pious behavior.

Ahnert charts the ideas of theologians and moral philosophers promulgating this new understanding of religion and reason, their orthodox Presbyterian opponents’ position, and the various controversies that these rival understandings caused within the Kirk. The introduction situates Ahnert’s argument within scholarship on the relationship between religion and European Enlightenment and the characterization of the Scottish Enlightenment. The opening chapter places the reader among the theological disputes within Scottish Presbyterianism that occurred immediately after the Glorious Revolution. Orthodox Calvinists held that the Kirk was in danger from numerous threats, including the spread of fashionable deistic thinking, homegrown “Bourignonist” fanatics who believed in immediate divine inspiration, and prominent theologians including Henry Scougal, George Garden, and John Simson who maintained the importance of pious practice over doctrine acceptance. The second chapter examines the growth of heterodox Presbyterianism between 1720 and 1750. Clergymen such as Archibald Campbell, William Wishart, and Francis Hutcheson stressed the importance of genuine faith focusing on charitable action. Reason is weak: knowledge of religious truths is imperfect and hence should not be disputed dogmatically. Instead, pious conduct was central to justification; salvation was not achieved by faith alone but by action and divine support. Hutcheson’s religious thought is innovatively recontextualized within this new theological current.

The third chapter offers a fresh perspective on the Moderates in the 1750s. Ahnert focuses here first on their position on patronage: they undertook a difficult balancing act between maintaining the authority of the General Assembly and respecting the tender consciences of individuals. He then examines how the Moderates, with Hugh Blair a key

figure, accepted and extended the arguments of the heterodox figures discussed in the previous chapter on moral and religious “culture.” In both cases the Moderates were less secular than commonly argued. Ahnert next explores their orthodox critics, with John Witherspoon the main focus, and their arguments during the disputes in the mid-eighteenth-century Kirk. Ahnert stresses how the orthodox maintained a far stronger belief in the possibility of natural religion, and he discusses the Common Sense philosophers’ views on relationship between religion and reason. Primarily using Thomas Reid as an example, he shows that the Common Sense school held that the Moderates’ appeal to natural sentiments in encouraging pious action was naïve. But Reid and his colleagues did share a focus on the culture of the mind, rather than adherence to doctrine, as being central to good character. The conclusion examines the Moderates’ position during the Leslie Affair of 1805.

Historiographical orthodoxy here is that Moderates had become a backward-looking interest group trying to maintain their grip on power. Ahnert examines them from this institutional angle, but he also analyzes the continuation of their earlier generation’s views of “culture” and the successful characterization of the Moderates by the Popular Party as a complacent and lethargic grouping within the Kirk.

Ahnert has written an innovative and persuasive book with broader significance for understanding the European Enlightenment. And he has new things to say about many of the conventional interpretations of key controversies within the Scottish Enlightenment. The following thoughts emerge as conversation points and not criticisms. Many of the “enlightened” theorists that Ahnert discusses maintained a belief, despite their skepticism about unassisted reason, that humans are providentially framed to passionately believe in the existence of one God by dint of internal sense or intuitive principles. As a result, “enlightened” Scots dampened, rather than rejected, the earlier Calvinist belief in the unavoidable knowledge of religious doctrine. Secondly, the paradox of the “enlightened” being skeptical about reason is less puzzling when viewed from the perspective of the dispute over innate religious ideas in the late seventeenth century. Viewed in the context of the abandonment of the innatist doctrine partly following from Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Locke’s stress on the hard work involved in reasoning and the role of revelation for the majority, and the increased willingness to view the anthropological testimony of human societies as demonstrating religious diversity, the Moderates’ position can seem eminently “enlightened.” Is Locke not more important in framing the philosophical developments described? Moreover, the relationship between the contemporaneous Scottish and English debates over the religious capabilities of human nature would be a fruitful area for further research. Finally, Ahnert describes the changing understanding of the role of moral conduct as being primarily a theological dispute and certainly far less to do with the positive reception of ancient thought, especially in the form of “Christian Stoicism.” Another potential line of further investigation would be the relationship between these theological debates and the study of religion within the “science of human nature.” In the case of many of the key works—those of Archibald Campbell, Lord Kames, and William Robertson spring to mind—skeptical positions on human reasoning powers were being grounded on arguments framed using these new methods of investigation.