One of the most consequential developments in post-Reformation European history is the shift away from a view which saw ‘religion’ exclusively in terms of ‘true’ or ‘Christian religion’, towards one which—however unwillingly—saw Christianity as just one religion among many. Arising from the countervailing forces of confessionalisation and heterodoxy, this shift in turn allowed for what might be called the naturalisation of religion: its treatment as a natural phenomenon, something that might be known without the assistance of Revelation.

The most prominent manifestation of this naturalism is the investigation by numerous authors—both orthodox and heterodox in intent—of what came to be called ‘natural religion’; that is, the use of reason to establish the existence, attributes, and perhaps also the commands, of God. A second strand of inquiry, however, came to consider religion not in terms of the being and attributes of a deity, but as something that arose from what was increasingly understood in terms of ‘human nature’. Its protagonists set out to identify what they called the ‘natural seeds’ of religion and they wrote something they termed its ‘natural history’. This historical strand of religious naturalism is less prominent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries than the philosophical investigation of ‘natural

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religion’. In the hands of its exponents it also tended to be less orthodox in intent. Yet, perhaps for this reason, its implications may be even more far-reaching.

David Hume (1711–1776) contributed to both these forms of naturalistic inquiry into religion.4 Firstly, in his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (first drafted c. 1749; published posthumously in 1779) Hume treated, with raillery and artificial malice, ‘the subject of NATURAL RELIGION’.5 Secondly, in his Four Dissertations—first published, after some difficulties,6 in 1757—Hume included a treatise he called the Natural History of Religion, which took as its goal the investigation of religion’s ‘origin in human nature’.7

The Natural History of Religion begins with the assertion that ‘polytheism and idolatry was, and necessarily must have been, the first and most antient religion of mankind.’8 It goes on to offer a series of learned, droll, and rather idiosyncratic reflections on the nature of religious belief and practice, from the most ancient times onwards. The first edition of this dissertation, and the nature of the history it tells, forms the focus of the present chapter. In particular, I wish to raise two questions about it. The first question concerns the significance of Hume’s treatment of very ancient religions, and especially that of ancient Egypt. The second and larger question arises from the answer I offer to the first: who are Hume’s principal targets in the Natural History?

But before turning to answer these two questions I have some more general arguments to make about the investigation of religion as a natural and very human phenomenon in the later-seventeenth and earlier-eighteenth centuries. How did this perilous tendency arise? And why was it so closely associated with more orthodox scholarly investigations into the origins of idolatry?

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7 David Hume, Natural History of Religion, in Four Dissertations (London, 1757), 1 (Introduction). All references to the Natural History are from this first edition unless otherwise specified.

8 Hume, Natural History, 3 (§1).