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The *Sensus Communis* and Religion in John Hughes' *The Siege of Damascus* (1720)*

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Abstract. John Hughes' tragedy *The Siege of Damascus* (1720) seeks to bridge the divide between east and west, between Islam and Christianity, by advancing an understanding of a *sensus communis* in terms of sympathy, honor, and mutual respect. I argue that this articulation of a *sensus communis* relies on how the play conceptualizes 'genuine religion' in global terms. It does this primarily by universalizing the project of Anglican clergy to champion Christianity as a civil religion. The play thus points to the importance of enlightenment efforts to reconceptualize religion for a genealogy of the *sensus communis*.

Keywords: sensus communis, religion, the secular, toleration, sympathy.

By celebrating some «ingenious» commentators who interpreted a line of poetry from Horace on «common sense» as a «sense of public weal and of the common interest, love of the community or society, natural affection», the Third Earl of Shaftesbury shifted thinking about the *sensus communis* to «the intellectual and social virtue of sympathy»[1]. Building upon this formulation of the *sensus communis*, John Hughes' tragedy *The Siege of Damascus* (1720) aims to bridge the divide between East and West, between Islam and Christianity, by linking a universal capacity for benevolent feeling, mutual respect, and a sense of the common interest to religion properly understood. The play thus invites us to consider – perhaps counter-intuitively – how religion could contribute to a genealogy of *sensus communis*. More precisely, Hughes' play participates in an enlightenment construction of a normative, universal conception of genuine religion that enables its articulation of a *sensus communis*[2]. In this enlightenment literary work, a «sense of public good

* I would like to thank Roger Maioli for his helpful comments on a previous draft of this essay.

[1] A. Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1714), ed. by L. Klein, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, p. 48; H. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), Engl. transl. by J. Weinsheimer and D. Mars, Continuum, London 2004, p. 22.

[2] Peter Harrison argues that «The concepts "religion" and "the religions", as we presently understand them, emerged quite late in Western thought, during the Enlightenment [...]. If the time of this new interpretative framework was the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, then the place was England» (P. Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, pp. 1, 3). On the European enlightenment as the source of the modern conception of religion that I am arguing Hughes' play relies upon to advance its

and the common interest of mankind» is justified through the conceptualization of genuine religion[3].

Although it has largely disappeared from view, John Hughes' *The Siege of Damascus* remained on the stage from its first opening on February 17, 1720 through 1785, appearing just about every year until the 1760s. Performed at least 117 times, Edward Gibbon called it «one of our most popular tragedies», although he did not think much of it himself[4]. More recently, Bridget Orr has called attention to the play for its focus on «the dangers of religious and cultural fanaticism», highlighting its philo-Islamism and condemnation of religious persecution[5]. Contextualizing early eighteenth-century theatre in relation to the literary periodical, particularly «The Spectator», as well as Shaftesbury's «claims for the *sensus communis*» and «the power of sympathy», Orr sees Hughes' drama as part of a larger effort in the English Enlightenment that «aimed at establishing sympathy as a counter to zeal, modelling the imagining of fellow feeling rather than entrenching differences likely to encourage violence»[6]. She argues not only that Islam models such sympathy in *The Siege of Damascus* but that the play also depicts Muslims as more humane and tolerant than Christians. For it is a Muslim leader who demonstrates «moral superiority» over all the other characters, both Muslim and Christian[7]. Moreover, it is this same character who, as the new chief of the Muslim armies at the end of the play, pronounces that it is possible to bridge the divide between Islam and Christianity: «Friends as we may be, let us part in peace»[8].

In bringing forward for scholarly discussion a play with such salience for the present, Orr both reminds us about the role that enlightenment works play in fostering modern religious toleration and invites us to reconsider its genealogy. In line with much literary scholarship, Orr emphasizes the value of literature for cultivating a sympathetic imagination that can bridge religious differences, and she persuasively contends that *The Siege of Damascus* contributes to this enlightenment effort[9]. But if the play promotes sympathy as a *sensus communis*, a feeling for a common humanity that can reach across religious divides, it does so primarily by transforming the meaning of 'religion'. This transformation extends Anglican efforts to propagate an understanding of Christianity as sympathetic and civil, a conception of religion that the play combines with a neo-stoic ethic of honor and mutual respect.

For while *The Siege of Damascus* ultimately depicts Islam favorably, its argument for toleration and mutual respect is based less on its claims about the superiority of Islam to Christianity than to its construction of a standard by which both Christianity and Islam can be judged. As Orr observes, «it is hard not to see the play subjecting the two faith communities to an equally critical gaze»[10]. That standard is genuine religion. The play does not depict good Muslims and less good Christians. Instead, Hughes portrays bad and good versions of both Islam and Christianity. The good forms of each exemplify a modern understanding of genuine religion. By transforming the meaning of genuine religion into an ideal that can include both good Muslims and good Christians, the play seeks to imagine a world in which peoples that are divided from one another by different religions can peaceably honor, trust, and trade with one another. In this way, *The Siege of Damascus* works to construct a normative understanding of 'religion' as a global concept that can bridge East and West. The *sensus communis* that makes possible this tolerant cosmopolitanism is indebted to the play's articulation of a proper understanding of religion and religious sentiments: corrupt religion stifles the *sensus communis* and genuine religion enables it[11].

IMAGINING GENUINE RELIGION THROUGH ISLAM

Hughes' play is set at Damascus in 635. The city is under siege by the Muslims, who have already conquered most of Syria from the Byzantines. The Saracens, however, are pushed back from the walls of Damascus by the Christian warrior Phocyas. His success causes the lead-

articulation of a *sensus communis,* see T. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Powers in Christianity and Islam*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1993, pp. 40-43; B. Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2013; and Ch. Taylor, *Western Secularity*, in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. by C. Calhoun, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, pp. 31-53.

[3] Shaftesbury, *Characteristics,* cit., p. 49.

[4] E. Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), ed. by W. Smith, Harper & Brothers, New York 1880, vol. V, p. 385, n. 62.

[5] B. Orr, *British Enlightenment Theatre: Dramatizing Difference*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2020, p. 74.

[6] *Idem*, pp. 40, 39.

[7] *Idem*, p. 71.

[8] J. Hughes, *The Siege of Damascus: A Tragedy in Five Acts* (1720), Longman *et al.*, London 1816, pp. 63-64 (hereafter: *SD*).

[9] Martha Nussbaum, for example, has influentially argued that literature can promote toleration and the «ethical virtues of generosity, kindness, and love by enabling us to see empathetically through the eyes of others» (*The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge [MA] 2012, p. 165).

[10] Orr, *British Enlightenment Theatre*, p. 73.

[11] I am placing the play in the context of Charles Taylor's history of the development of sympathy as an inner moral source. See Ch. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2007, pp. 245-255.

er of the Christians, Eumenes, to suspect that Phocyas wants to supplant him. Eumenes succumbs to these fears for his command when Phocyas asks to marry his daughter, Eudocia. Eumenes not only refuses his petition but also exiles him from Damascus. Phocyas is then captured by the Saracens, who first try to convert him to Islam but eventually settle instead on persuading him to join their side against the Christians. With hopes to save Eudocia from becoming the victim of «some barb'rous soldier's [...] lust – or brutal fury», Phocyas eventually agrees to betray the city[12]. He guides the Saracens to a gate where «with ease they gain admittance», and Damascus is conquered[13]. But Phocyas' betrayal is matched by the Muslim commander Caled's breaking of the terms of peace that gave the Christians safe passage from the city with some of their possessions. While leading his treacherous attack, Caled is killed by Phocyas, who thus – to some degree – restores his honor, though Phocyas also dies from the fight. With Caled dead, the Saracens' second in command, Abudah, restores the terms of the conquest, allowing the people of Damascus to depart in peace.

Hughes bases his play on Simon Ockley's *The Conquest of Syria, Persia and Aegypt by the Saracens* (1708). Appointed Professor of Arabic at Cambridge in 1711, Ockley belongs to a line of Anglican orientalists beginning with Archbishop Laud who were motivated to study Arabic and Islam out of an interest in ecclesiastical history and an Arminian-motivated Christian humanism[14]. Describing the Arabic Muslims as having «rendered themselves [...] very considerable, both by their Arms and Learning», Ockley also publishes his history out of a desire to correct those

> who have not been sufficiently acquainted with that Nation, [and] have entertain'd too mean an Opinion of them, looking upon them as meer Barbarians, which mistaken Notion of theirs, has hinder'd all further enquiry concerning them[15].

Hughes likewise shares Ockley's «desire to inform the British about Arab culture and religion»[16]. But if Hughes continues the historian's effort to correct mistaken notions about Islam and the East, he does so in the context of Anglican efforts to promote Christianity as a civil religion, which he extends to Islam[17]. As the changes he makes to his historical source material reveal, the fundamental mistaken notion that Hughes seeks to correct is not a misunderstanding about Islam's greatness in «Arms and Learning» but about the nature of genuine religion. In his play, both the Christians and the Muslims portray one another as untrustworthy barbarians. Their mistaken views of one another are corrected by the recognition that each side is civilized to the extent that they share a proper understanding of religion, one that promotes a *sensus communis* understood in terms of sympathy, honor, and mutual respect.

Ockley's history of the conquest of Damascus is narrated around two main conflicts. First, the fight itself turns on a contest between the Byzantine emperor's son-in-law, Thomas, «a man of undaunted Courage and Resolution» and the wife of an Arab commander, «a brave Virago»[18]. In Hughes' play, Thomas is represented by Phocyas, but the playwright excises the brave, Muslim virago and replaces her with the virtuous, Christian Eudocia. Through this substitution, Hughes adds to the play's plot a conflict between love and honor: Phocyas is torn between his passion for Eudocia and his duty to defend the city. As we will see, this conflict between love and honor also serves to articulate honor with genuine religion. The second key conflict in Ockley's history is between the general of the Saracen army, Caled, who is at odds with one of his followers, Abu Obeidah, about how to conquer Damascus. Caled desires to take the city «by Force, put [the inhabitants] to the Sword, and let his Saracens have the plunder, [rather] than that they should surrender, and have Security for themselves and their Fortunes»[19]. Abu Obeidah, however, «was of a quite different Disposition, a well meaning, merciful Man, who had rather at all times that they should surrender, and become Tributaries, than be exposed to any Extremity»[20]. Ockley leaves this conflict between Caled and Abu Obeidah unresolved. Hughes, however, uses Abu Obeidah as the model for his character Abudah, a Muslim military leader whose honor, sympathy, and

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[12] *SD*, p. 40.
[13] *Idem*, p. 43.
[14] On Ockley, see J. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion: The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon, 1737-1764,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, vol. I, pp. 40-42.
[15] S. Ockley, *The Conquest of Syria, Persia and Aegypt by the Saracens*, R. Knaplock in St. Paul's Church-yard, F. Sprint in Little Britain, R. Smith in Cornhill, B. Lintott in Fleet Street, and J. Round in Exchange Alley, London 1708, pp. xi, xviii.
[16] Orr, *British Enlightenment Theatre*, p. 69.
[17] On the «process of enlightenment in England as the slow but steady transformation of Anglicanism into a civil religion», see J. Pocock, *Clergy and Commerce: The Conservative Enlightenment in England*, in *L'Età dei lumi: studi storici sul Settecento europeo in onore di Franco Venturi,* vol. 1, Jovene, Naples 1985, pp. 523-563: p. 534. Cf. W. Bulman, *Anglican Enlightenment: Orientalism, Religion and Politics in England and its Empires, 1648-1715,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015, pp. 143-145; and E. Visconsi, *The Literatures of Toleration and Civil Religion in Post-Revolutionary England*, in *Taking Exception to the Law: Materializing Injustice in Early Modern English Literature*, ed. by D. Beecher *et al.*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2015, pp. 258-280.
[18] Ockley, *The Conquest of Syria*, pp. 104, 101.
[19] *Idem*, p. 108.
[20] *Ibidem*.

piety are exemplary and who ultimately replaces Caled as the commander of the Caliph's armies. Through the character of Abudah, Hughes both intensifies the conflict in Ockley's account between Abu Obediah and Caled and also celebrates Abudah's virtues.

The play opens by depicting the Arab Muslims in terms of the «mistaken notions» that Ockley decries in his history. The Christian leaders of Damascus take the stage by fulminating against the Saracens as «wretches» who «fight not at the call of honour | That sets the princes of the world in arms» but instead wage war for plunder[21]. Condemned by the Christians as «base-born», the Muslims are described as treacherous barbarians who cannot be trusted to abide by negotiated terms of peace because they do not acknowledge the universal norms of honor that govern war[22]. In addition, the Christians decry the invaders as pillaging marauders, as «locusts» hungry for the «fruitful vales» and «blooming fields of plenty» of Damascus[23]. Their rapacity likewise makes peace impossible: «What terms of peace can you expect from bands of robbers?», asks Phocyas[24]. Finally, the «phrenzy» of their faith «fires their minds», for the Muslims believe that «all that die fighting for their cause» will enter «the gates of Paradise»[25]. «What faith is this», asks the leader of the Christians, «That stalks gigantic forth, thus arm'd with terrors [...] | And marks its progress out with blood and slaughter?»[26]. For the Christians, this combination of faith and violence is «to blend religion with the worst of crimes!»[27]. By portraying the Muslims as «hungry bloodhounds» who conquer for plunder under the pretense of a dishonorable faith, the opening scenes of the play link Islam and violence[28]. Initially, the play is far from Islamophilic.

Indeed, when the three Saracen leaders – Daran, Caled, and Abudah – first appear on stage, the Christians' descriptions of the Muslims find some support. Daran begins by urging against a parley to negotiate peace by impatiently exclaiming, «What need we treat? – I am for war and plunder»[29]. His leader, Caled, seems inclined to agree with Daran's call for war, explaining that he hates «these christian dogs» and that Islamic «law enjoins» them to fight[30]. Nonetheless, Caled ultimately sides against Daran and agrees to the parley, though only in order to spare the «lives of mussulmans, not christians». Like Ockley's Caled, whose «Tears lay upon his Cheeks for the Concern he had upon him for his dear Saracens», Hughes' version of Caled sides with his fellow Muslims, but he has no capacity for sympathizing with the Christians, whom he cannot conceive of as anything other than enemies[31]. Nonetheless, Caled differs from Daran because he insists that Muslims fight not for earthly but for heavenly rewards: «Heaven [...] is promis'd only to the valiant», he explains, which is why «the happy plains | Above, lie stretch'd beneath the blaze of swords»[32]. Caled's concern with heavenly motivations is also picked up by his second in command, Abudah, who rejects «blood and plunder» as worthy motives for conquest, criticizing Daran as «loth to trust that heaven for pay; | This earth, it seems, has gifts that please him more»[33]. When the Muslim leaders in the play first appear, we see that their commander, Caled, must decide between an Islam represented by the rapacious, anti-Christian Daran and that of the honorable, pious Abudah. Since there is more than one version of Islam on offer, this further complicates an interpretation of the play as simply Islamophilic.

Hughes makes Caled's choice between Daran and Abudah dramatically central by giving Daran a more prominent and much more despicable role than he has in Ockley's history, which portrays him as a minor figure who is neither particularly bloodthirsty nor greedy. Hughes' Daran, by contrast, fights only for plunder. When given charge of the Christian hero Phocyas as a prisoner for safekeeping, Daran wishes he had courage enough to ignore his orders and kill his captive, but his bravery only extends to trying to rob Phocyas of his jewels. He is stopped by Abudah. It is also Daran who urges Caled to break the terms of peace that Abudah has negotiated, pointing to the Christians' «piles of plate, | Crosses enrich'd with gems, arras, and silks, | And vests of gold, unfolded to the sun, | That rival all his lustre!»[34]. Daran's description of these riches is enough to persuade Caled to renounce his promise to give the Christians «quarter and liberty», and he orders the pillaging and slaughter of the refugees who have fled the city[35]. Finally, as he plunders Damascus, Daran sees the «well attir'd» Eudocia, whom he tries to strip and rape before Phocyas strikes him down[36]. By casting Daran as a robber and rapist who exemplifies the Christians' initial judgment of

[21] *SD*, p. 14.
[22] *Idem*, p. 8.
[23] *Idem*, p. 9.
[24] *Idem*, p. 8.
[25] *Idem*, p. 9.
[26] *Idem*, p. 12.
[27] *Ibidem*.
[28] *Idem*, p. 10.
[29] *Ibidem*.
[30] *Ibidem*.
[31] Ockley, *The Conquest of Syria*, p. 106.
[32] *SD*, p. 10.
[33] *Ibidem*.
[34] *Idem*, pp. 52-53.
[35] *Idem*, p. 44.
[36] *Idem*, p. 58.

Muslims, Hughes invites the audience to agree with the Christians' claims about Islam.

Through the character of Abudah, however, the play calls these claims into question. From the first scene, Abudah always opposes Daran's calls for fighting and plunder: «Is it to propagate the unspotted law | We fight? Tis well; it is a noble cause; | But much I fear infection is among us; | A boundless lust of rapine guides our troops»[37]. Abudah also contends against Caled's eager warmongering, urging throughout the play that the conquest must be carried out honorably and humanely. As the final assault on Damascus begins, Abudah demands that «every unresisting life be spar'd»[38]. His humanity eventually requires him to contest the commands of his leader. When Caled hears the defeated soldiers of Damascus cry out for «Quarter, Mercy, Quarter!», he shouts in reply, «No quarter! Kill, I say, Are they not Christians? More blood! our prophet asks it!»[39]. Abudah, however, has successfully brokered a peaceful surrender and insists that this treaty should be honored: «Hold yet, and hear me – Heaven by me has spar'd | The sword its cruel task. On easy terms | We've gained a bloodless conquest»[40]. He persuades the reluctant Caled to agree to the terms of peace.

Abudah's appeal to his honor corrects the Christians' claim that the Saracens are barbarians who cannot be trusted to abide by their word. When Caled initially calls for the Muslims to break the peace agreement that Abudah has negotiated with the Christians, Abudah declares that «he who stirs, | First makes his way thro' me. My honour's pledged | Rob me of that, who dares»[41]. Although he praises Caled for being «bold, valiant, wise, and faithful», Abudah bids him remember that «I'm a mussulman | [...] And what we vow is sacred»[42]. The Christians are mistaken in their belief that Muslims do not keep their faith. In fact, each one of the Christians' misconceptions – that Muslims lack honor, fight for plunder, and that Islam and violence are inextricably linked – is corrected through the character of Abudah, whose honor, sympathy for non-Muslims, and fidelity to his faith exemplify genuine Islam.

SYMPATHY, RELIGION, AND THE *SENSUS COMMUNIS*

For the play's representation of good Islam, just as important as Abudah's commitment to honor and his frequent reproofs of Daran's rapacious violence is his ability to sympathize with the Christians. In line with their prejudices about Islam, however, the Christians expect no sympathy from Muslims. When captured by the Saracens, Phocyas rebukes Caled as a

> proud, blood thirsty Arab! – Well I know
> What to expect from thee: I know ye all.
> How should the author of distress and ruin
> Be mov'd to Pity? That's a human passion[43].

Given his blanket condemnation of all Muslims – «I know ye all» – Phocyas expects «racks» and «tortures» from his captors[44]. The audience has been primed to agree with Phocyas, having just witnessed at the opening of this scene Caled's cruelty towards a Christian prisoner of war. In response to a prisoner's plea for «mercy, mercy!», Caled orders the head of this «coward» to be struck off and «cast [...] o'er the gates» into Damascus – the prisoner's last words are «O bloody Saracens!»[45]. But although the Muslims threaten Phocyas, he is also surprised by sympathy. Seeing Phocyas' sufferings and hearing how dishonorably he has been treated by Eumenes, Abudah expostulates in an aside:

> My soul is mov'd – Thou wert a man, O prophet!
> Forgive, if tis a crime, a human sorrow,
> For injur'd worth, though in an enemy![46]

Abudah's sympathetic identification with Phocyas partly motivates him to conduct the siege of Damascus with honorable restraint and to make it, as far as possible, a «bloodless conquest»[47]. What moves him to sympathy is his sense of his enemy's «injured worth», the dishonor that Phocyas received from Eumenes when he forbid Eudocia from marrying him and then exiled him from the city. Phocyas describes this treatment as «the death of honour» and a «foul disgrace»[48]. By identifying this dishonor as the cause of Abudah's sympathy, Hughes coordinates the play's cardinal norms of sympathy and honor. Moreover, Abudah's insistence on the humanity of the founder of Islam – «Thou wert a man, O prophet!» – justifies extending his sympathy across the divide of Christian enemy and Muslim friend. Echoing Phocyas' assertion that «pity [is] a human passion», Abudah suggests that the prophet himself would have felt the «human sorrow» that he feels for Phocyas – or

[37] *Idem*, p. 32.
[38] *Idem*, p. 43.
[39] *Idem*, p. 45.
[40] *Ibidem*.
[41] *Ibidem*.
[42] *Idem*, p. 46.
[43] *Idem*, p. 34.
[44] *Ibidem*.
[45] *Idem*, pp. 30-31.
[46] *Idem*, p. 35.
[47] *Idem*, p. 45.
[48] *Idem*, pp. 27, 28.

at least would «forgive» this fellow feeling. The play thus identifies in genuine Islam a source of sympathy and a commitment to honor. The same claim will be made about genuine Christianity.

By contrast, Caled's understanding of Islam has no place for sympathizing beyond his fellow Muslims. Rigorously adhering to a friend|enemy distinction based on Islam and Christianity, Caled is willing to enter into peace talks only to save the lives of Muslims, and his favorite war cry is «Christian!». But he is not simply an evil character. Caled is consistently courageous: if his army suffers setbacks, he believes it is because of their «sluggard valour»[49]. And he is also the first character to propose religious toleration as an alternative to war: «Be Christians still, | But swear to live with us in firm alliance, | To yield us aid, and pay us annual tribute»[50]. Moreover, he is willing to listen to Abudah's counsel and initially agrees to the terms of peace that Abudah negotiates. Portrayed as a leader whose motivations are divided between, on the one hand, courage and a concern for his fellow Muslims, and, on the other, by a cruelty nourished by religious hatred, Caled ultimately aligns himself with a corrupt version of Islam that serves to cover his prejudices and warmongering. His courage slides into a love of violence, and he cannot overcome his hatred and suspicion of Christians. This hatred moves him to align himself more and more with Daran, to whom he observes, «I've remarked what a keen hatred, like my own, | Dwells in thy breast against these Christian dogs»[51]. When he needs a new leader of the army, he promotes Daran instead of Abudah. Caled is also persuaded by Daran to break the terms of peace brokered by Abudah. In their enthusiasm for renewed plunder and violence, the two trip over their lines together as Caled proclaims, «we'll stop their march, and search. » «And strip – » shouts Daran. «And kill», enjoins Caled[52]. The lines not only capture their respective vices of greed and cruelty but also unify them in opposition to Abudah's Islamic understanding of honor and sympathy.

The play leaves no doubts about the relative merits of the three Muslim leaders: both Caled and Daran die at the hands of Phocyas in the subsequent fighting, and Abudah is appointed the Saracens' new military commander. Summing up Caled's character, Abudah proclaims that he was a «great but cruel man» who died because he «violated faith»[53]. That is, Caled violated both the faith the Christians had in his honor – that he would keep faith with the terms of peace – and the faith of Islam. For Abudah, keeping faith with Islam requires keeping faith with non-Muslims. Caled, however, sees Abudah's steadfast adherence to the vows he has made with the Christians as a betrayal of Islam, and he accuses Abudah of having secretly converted: «Thou'rt a Christian, | I swear thou art, and hast betrayed the faith»[54]. Caled's conception of Islam limits «faith» to adhering to Islamic beliefs and to keeping faith with other Muslims. The play rejects this understanding of religion. But how should we understand Abudah's judgment that Caled «violated faith»? Why does «faith» properly understood require a sense for the common good of humanity rather than for just one's own community of faith?

ENLIGHTENMENT RELIGION AND THE *SENSUS COMMUNIS*

One might reasonably wonder, like Caled, if the play endorses Abudah's Islam only insofar as it is the same as Christianity. Caled links not only Abudah's appeals to honor but also his sympathy to his supposed clandestine Christianity. Insisting on keeping Abudah in the dark about his plans with Daran to break the «foolish treaty» with the Christians, Caled complains, «By the seven heavens, his soul's a Christian too! | And tis by kindred instinct he thus saves their cursed lives, and taints our cause with mercy»[55]. Because he sees sympathy for Christians as a betrayal of Islam, Caled accuses Abudah of being Christian. If he is right about Abudah's «kindred instinct», then the play's articulation of a *sensus communis* would actually be a *sensus christianus*, and Hughes' effort to promote understanding and peace between Christians and Muslims would devolve into merely equating good Islam with a version of Christianity.

But the play is imagining something beyond this equation. In the last act, the conquered leader of the Christians, Eumenes, also connects Abudah's Islam to Christianity. He praises Abudah for his concern for the safety and welfare of the conquered Christians and for restoring the terms of peace that Caled had violated:

> Still just and brave! Thy virtues would adorn
> a purer faith! Thou better than thy sect,
> That dar'st decline from that to acts of mercy!
> Pardon, Abudah, if thy honest heart
> Makes us even wish thee ours[56].

[49] *Idem*, p. 32.
[50] *Idem*, p. 13.
[51] *Idem*, p. 41.
[52] *Idem*, p. 53.
[53] *Idem*, p. 63.
[54] *Idem*, p. 46.
[55] *Idem*, p. 53.
[56] *Idem*, p. 64.

Eumenes' description of Abudah's «honest heart» captures the Muslim leader's commitment to honor and his capacity for sympathy. And yet the «purer faith» that Abudah's virtues should «adorn» is Christianity: for Eumenes, Abudah has acted as a Christian. His mercy has made him «better than thy [Islamic] sect» from which he has dared to «decline» (i.e., turn aside). For this reason, Eumenes wishes that Abudah would convert to Christianity.

If we are tempted to conclude that *The Siege of Damascus* is Islamophilic only insofar as Islam is made over into a version of Christianity, it is first worth recalling that this would align us with Caled. Moreover, Abudah himself rejects this way of understanding his «faith». He does not accept Eumenes' invitation to convert to Christianity, nor does he view honor and sympathy as distinctively Christian virtues. In response to Eumenes' praise for acting up to Christian standards, Abudah responds with this prayer:

> O Power Supreme!
> That mad'st my heart, and knows its inmost frame,
> If yet I err, O lead me into truth,
> Or pardon unknown error![57]

Abudah acknowledges that God has created his «heart» and thus his capacity for the sympathy that Eumenes praises. But Abudah addresses not the Christian God but a «Power Supreme», from whom he humbly asks for more knowledge and for mercy due to his ignorance. Orr sees Abudah's prayer as «thoroughly ambiguous», suggesting either «an awakening to Christianity or an articulation of deistic belief», but his ambiguous prayer does not express, as Orr suggests, «doubt» about «Eumenes' claim of spiritual kinship»[58]. After all, he does share with the Christians the «kindred instinct» of sympathy[59]. Rather, the ambiguity of his prayer creates the space for an understanding of genuine religion that allows Christians and Muslims to be «friends» who can «part in peace»[60]. By emphasizing the ethical ideals that Abudah shares with the Christians and yet not having him convert, Hughes portrays him not as exceptionally Muslim but as genuinely religious. Honor, faith, and sympathy are not Christian virtues but belong to any form of genuine religion. Rather than making Islam into a version of Christianity, the play instead contributes to the construction of a modern concept of religion, one with deep Christian motivations but that is not the same as Christianity. The play's conceptualization of genuine religion not only provides a category through which both Christianity and Islam can be apprehended but also provides an independent, normative framework by which both can be judged. In *The Siege of Damascus*, both Christians and Muslims are subjected to the critical gaze of genuine religion.

But why not interpret Abudah's words, as Orr suggests that they could be, as «an articulation of deistic belief»? This would fit with the usual story told about the relationship between religion and the Enlightenment, with deism as a kind of epistemological half-way house between Christianity and our secular age. Analyzing deism's place in this standard secularization narrative, Charles Taylor criticizes this historiography as a «classic subtraction story»: the secular is what remains after religion has been scraped away by science and reason, with deism as an important epistemological episode in this process of subtraction[61]. Taylor objects, however, that such subtraction stories prevent us from considering how the formation of the secular arises from «the fruit of new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and related practices» that «can't be explained in terms of perennial features of human life»[62]. Thus, rather than seeing the representation of religion in Hughes' play as the more rational kernel of what remains when the superstitious and fanatical elements of religion are removed, I am focusing on how the play contributes to a «newly constructed» understanding of religion that grounds a *sensus communis* capable of inspiring empathetic relations and mutual respect between Christians and Muslims[63]. While it is beyond the scope of this article to substantively connect the transformation of religion in the play to a genealogy of the secular, my analysis of this transformation follows from the criticism of «subtraction stories» that is at the core of revisionist scholarship on the secular. In *The Siege of Damascus*, we can see how the reconceptualization of religion in the English Enlightenment is about much more than science and rationality. For the play conceives of genuine religion as anchoring honor, sympathy, and other ethical and political ideals in a constellation of norms that

[57] *Ibidem*.
[58] Orr, *British Enlightenment Theatre*, p. 73.
[59] Eudocia likewise appeals to the «pitying powers» above [*SD*, p. 66].
[60] *Idem*, p. 64.
[61] Taylor, *A Secular Age,* p. 270. For Taylor's criticism of subtraction stories, see pp. 26-29, 270-274, 571-574. Cf. Talal Asad's call to analyze the construction over time of the «concepts, practices, and sensibilities [that] have come together to form the secular» (T. Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto 2003, p. 16).
[62] Taylor, *A Secular Age,* p. 22.
[63] Cf. Orr, who cites the development of a «sympathy a counter to zeal, modelling the imagining of fellow feeling» along with "contemporary advances in philosophy and science» (*British Enlightenment Theatre*, p. 39).

the analytical lens offered by the usual story of deism obscures. Rather than trying to detect deists who can play the role of philosophes in the vanguard of a secularization narrative as «England's chief contribution to Enlightenment as a unitary phenomenon», examining how religion is reconceptualized in this period opens up space for analyzing its normative continuities with Christianity[64]. We can better understand Hughes' play and its articulation of a *sensus communis* by placing it in the long history of Christian reform, and more particularly, within the context of the efforts of post-Restoration, low-church Anglican clergy who were determined that «spiritual authority must never again be allowed to challenge the supremacy of magistracy and the social order»[65]. As Pocock notes, deism differs from this effort due to its «radical separateness from that sober, even if Socinian, subordination of religion to the civil order»[66]. Finally, because deism is more historically delimited than religion, examining how the concept of religion is transformed opens up possibilities for thinking about modern religion as an enlightenment legacy, a possibility that deism does not invite.

THE ISLAMIC CRITICISM OF CHRISTIANITY THROUGH RELIGION

The play's reliance on Christian reform to conceptualize genuine religion appears in the Muslim leaders' criticisms of Byzantine Christianity as corrupt. During their initial parley with the Muslims, the Christians complain that the Saracens never sent «priests» or «doctors of your law [...] to instruct us in its precepts»:

> To solve our doubts, and satisfy our reason
> And kindly lead us through the wilds of error,
> To these new tracts of truth – This would be friendship[67].

Genuine religion, the Christians assert, cannot justify conversion through conquest and violence but should instead be limited to the peaceful, rational, and generous discussion of doctrines. The Muslims respond, however, that for precisely this reason it would have been pointless to send missionaries to the Christians:

> Friendship like this
> With scorn had been receiv'd: your numerous vices,
> Your clashing sects, your mutual rage and strife,
> Have driven religion, and her angel guards,
> Like outcasts from among you[68].

The Christians' own sectarian violence would have made friendly debates between Christians and Muslims impossible. Caled even claims that the Christians have not actually been practicing «religion». Their violence, he argues, can be traced back to failing to properly understand religion as a set of beliefs that could be debated. Instead,

> Usurping superstition bears the sway,
> And reigns in mimic state, 'midst idol shows
> And pageantry of power. Who does not mark
> Your lives, rebellious to your own great prophet,
> Who mildly taught you?[69]

If corrupt Islam falls short of genuine religion because it provides cover for fanatical violence and plunder, Byzantine Christianity requires radical reform because it uses idolatry and superstition – the «pageantry of power» – to «mimic» and usurp the power of the state[70]. As the cause of «mutual rage and strife», this corruption of genuine religion has made Christians into rebels both to Jesus and the state. According to Caled, Jesus taught a religion opposed to idolatry and superstition that was therefore mild and civil. A reformed, more disenchanted and doctrinal Christianity would have made civil order possible for the Syrians and also enabled discussions between the Christians and Muslims about religious «precepts». (Significantly, the play's representation of Islam makes no mention of its rituals). Caled actually justifies the conquest of the Christians as a providential instrument of religious reform: because the Christians have betrayed «religion», «Mahomet has brought the sword, to govern you by force»[71]. The war is being fought, according to Caled, to establish genuine religion and thus civil order. Throughout the play, the Muslims contend that they fight to «propagate the unspotted law»[72]. For Abudah in particular, a precondition for the establishment of law and civil order both within and between peoples is a reformed understanding of genuine religion

[64] Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, p. 68. I follow here Taylor's call to think about the indebtedness of what he terms "the modern moral order" to a "template of true religion" (*Western Secularity*, p. 51).
[65] Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, p. 26. Cf. Bulman's claim that «If anything, the rebirth of civil and natural religion in the early Enlightenment was due more to the efforts of divines than to the ingenuity of their enemies» (*Anglican Enlightenment*, p. 145).
[66] Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, p. 68.
[67] *SD*, p. 12.
[68] *Ibidem*.
[69] *Ibidem*.
[70] Daran's rapaciousness is also attributed to an incomplete conversion to Islam: «Was not the founder of our law a robber? | Why, twas for that I left my country's gods, | Menaph and Uzza. Better still be pagan, | than starve with a new faith» [*SD*, p. 37].
[71] *SD*, p. 12. Cf. Ockley, *The Conquest of Syria*, p. XI.
[72] *Idem*, p. 32.

as belief in doctrines, the source of sympathy, and enabling honor and mutual respect.

Somewhat surprisingly, Eumenes agrees with Caled's condemnation of the Christians as corrupt idolaters, exclaiming in an aside to the audience, «O solemn truths! Though from an impious tongue!»[73]. The Christians themselves acknowledge that their corrupt religion needs to be reformed and purged of superstition, priestcraft, and violence[74]. If the play stages bad and good forms of Islam, it also stages good and bad forms of Christianity. *The Siege of Damascus* therefore endorses neither Islam nor Christianity, for both are found wanting before the standard of genuine religion, a concept that the play works to construct partly by combining Christian reform with the political aim of promoting a civil Christianity, a project that was not necessarily understood as antithetical to Christianity since it was an effort largely led by Anglican divines in the wake of the English civil war. The play extends this British, clerical effort to contain religious violence by taking the concept of genuine religion global. By universalizing this concept, Hughes' play aims to propagate a *sensus communis*, a feeling for not just one's own faith and fellow believers but for the whole of humanity.

HONOR, LOVE, AND FAITH: *SENSUS COMMUNIS*

The play's normative conception of genuine religion includes sympathy and a commitment to keeping faith with others, but how does the play articulate this understanding of a *sensus communis* with the need to keep faith with one's own community and with one's own religious beliefs? Hughes addresses these questions through the play's romantic subplot. Absent from Ockley's history, the tragic love story of Eudocia and Phocyas replaces the martial conflict between Thomas and the «brave Virago». Given the two violent Muslim characters Daran and Caled, Hughes apparently saw no place for a Muslim virago, and his conception of female virtue is stoic rather than martial. Blinded by his passion for Eudocia, Phocyas believes that he can protect her only by betraying Damascus to the Arabs. Through this betrayal, however, he loses Eudocia's love and, as she makes clear, his honor:

> What were dominion, pomp,
> The wealth of nations, nay, of all the world,
> If weigh'd with faith unspotted, heavenly truth,
> Thoughts free from guilt, the empire of the mind,
> And all the triumph of a godlike breast,
> Firm and unmov'd in the great cause of virtue?[75]

Blending Christianity and neo-stoicism, Eudocia links the exhortations found in Matthew 16.26 («For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?») to the dignity – «the triumph of a godlike breast» – that reflection upon one's «faith unspotted» provides. And yet if «faith unspotted» requires for Abudah that one keep faith with others to preserve one's honor, for Eudocia such faith also demands devotion to one's national and religious community. Phocyas kept his Christian faith (Caled had demanded that he convert or die), but he failed to keep faith with his countrymen. Because Phocyas betrays the city of Damascus, he cannot feel the stoic dignity acheived by reflecting with «thoughts free from guilt» on one's «empire of the mind». Honor requires keeping faith with others – as modelled by Abudah – but it also requires keeping faith with one's own religious beliefs and community[76]. Eudocia thus complements Abudah's claim that keeping faith with Islam requires keeping faith with non-Muslims. For honor begins with a stoic respect for one's own «empire of the mind» and its commitment to «heavenly truth», a claim that can only make sense when religion is conceptualized as a set of beliefs. Such respect can also be extended to the minds and beliefs of others, but the origin of such respect is within oneself, in one's own admiration for one's fidelity to one's religion and community. Hughes' play contends that the dignity one feels by keeping faith with one's religion can allow one to recognize the dignity of others who are likewise committed to their own «heavenly truth». Keeping faith with those of other genuine religions is thus a form of respect that originates in one's respect for one's own faith and community. This is why no one in the play needs to convert from Christianity to Islam or the reverse: all that is required is a conversion to genuine religion as doctrinal, sympathetic, and mutually respectful. It is through this proper understanding of religion that *The Siege of Damascus* promulgates a *sensus communis*.

A CODA ON COMMERCE AND THE *SENSUS COMMUNIS*

This cultivation of a sense of the common good also includes a commitment to commerce. Unsurprisingly,

[73] *SD*, p. 12.

[74] As Max Weber, Marcel Gauchet, Charles Taylor, and many others have pointed out, disenchantment was a project of Christian reform undertaken well before nineteenth-century science. For Taylor's account, see *A Secular Age,* pp. 77-80.

[75] *SD*, p. 50.

[76] Cf. Eudocia's praise of her father, «you have preserved | Immortal wealth, your faith inviolate | To Heaven and to your country» [*SD*, p. 57].

Daran is invested in conquest as opposed to trade. In his first line, he complains to Caled and Abudah about the Christians coming to parley, «What! Are we merchants then, that only came to traffic with those Syrians?»[77]. His criticism of commerce is also partly how he persuades Caled to break the peace treaty with the Christians that allows them safe passage with some of their goods:

> By Mahomet, the land wears not the face
> Of war, but trade! And thou would'st swear its merchants
> Were sending forth their loaded caravans
> To all the neighb'ring countries[78].

Daran prefers the desolation of war to even the appearance of flourishing merchants and trade, and Caled similarly mistakes the glory of conquest for the true source of honor, which is to abide by what you have pledged. The play argues that keeping faith with others is now the better part of glory and that honor is particularly important for trade agreements. Against Daran and Caled, the play contends for commerce over conquest[79]. Hughes thus supports a version of what Steven Pincus calls «Addison's Empire»[80]. Pointing to Whig efforts to end the War of the Spanish Succession in 1709 and their criticisms of the Tory Peace Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, Pincus contrasts a Tory ideology of empire based on slavery, military conquest, and territorial expansion with a Whig conception of an «integrated commercial empire»[81]. The play aims to advance this Whig agenda, but a fundamental element of this effort is its conceptualization of genuine religion, an aspect of «Addison's Empire» that Pincus' focus on the centrality of debates about political economy sidelines. In Hughes' play, genuine religion points to commerce as part of a providential, benevolent order of mutual benefit[82].

GENUINE RELIGION, *SENSUS COMMUNIS*, AND ENLIGHTENMENT

The Siege of Damascus neither celebrates Islam over Christianity nor depicts Islam in Christian terms but instead works to advance a normative conception of genuine religion, partly by globalizing an Anglican effort to make Christianity civil. Through its conceptualization of genuine religion, the play articulates a *sensus communis* as sympathetic fellow feeling, an understanding of faith as belief that grounds a code of honor and mutual respect, and the peaceful promotion of human flourishing through commerce. Accordingly, instead of asking whether Enlightenment texts like *The Siege of Damascus* valorize Islam or Christianity, it may be more illuminating to ask how such works participate in the period's reconceptualization of 'religion' – and to what ends. Such an endeavor would also differ from debating whether a work like Hughes' play is really religious or really secular, a not very fruitful debate if our modern, commonsense concepts of both the 'secular' and 'religion' were still being formed in the early Enlightenment. A genealogical approach to these concepts that is alert to their historical co-formation may offer more insight for Enlightenment studies than our usual recourse to a secularization narrative. Such an approach, moreover, doubles down on Orr's claim that Enlightenment literary representations of non-Europeans can create «the possibility of self-reflective critique»[83]. This is because attending to the formation of the modern religious/secular binary in such works invites reflection on the background conditions and normativity of these concepts. By reflecting on the formation of these bridging concepts that Enlightenment works such as *The Siege of Damascus* use to apprehend and evaluate the world beyond Europe, we can examine their legacy and adequacy for conceptualizing the *sensus communis* in the present.

[77] *SD*, p. 10.
[78] *SD*, p. 53.
[79] Cf. A. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1977.
[80] S. Pincus, *Addison's Empire: Whig Conceptions of Empire in the Early 18th Century*, «Parliamentary History» 31, 2012, 1, pp. 99-117.
[81] *Idem*, p. 113.
[82] On this aspect of providential deism, see Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 164-185.
[83] Orr, *British Enlightenment Theatre*, p. 33.