

# HOBBS & SECULARIZATION: CHRISTIANITY AND THE POLITICAL PROBLEM OF RELIGION

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*Leviathan* (1651) marks an important turning point in Hobbes's thinking about religion. For the first time he becomes fully aware of what may be called the political problem of religion. Already in the *De Cive* (1642) Hobbes had dedicated one third of his book to that topic, the last section entitled "Of religion."<sup>1</sup> But in the *De Cive* the treatment of the question remains, to a large extent, superficial. The political difficulties surrounding religion are not seen in their full theoretical depth and Hobbes will, at times, refuse to address some issues because they are, he claims, too obscure (231). In the *De Cive* the analysis of the problem remains shallow and the solution proposed is overall inadequate. There, Hobbes conceives of the problem as the difficulty of following both the law of God and the laws of men should they come to contradict each other. His solution consists in asserting that both laws rarely contradict each other and that when they do, the subject should patiently endure the harsh rule of his temporal master. Such a "solution" has often suggested that Hobbes could not be sincere, that he had no understanding of religion and considered it little more than a bothersome complication in his purely rational scheme of politics. His writings on religion, seen from this

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Elements of Law* (1640) Hobbes had given even less attention to the problem, essentially two chapters out of 29, or 21 pages out of 182 in modern editions.

point of view, are no essential part of his doctrine, but (largely unsuccessful) attempts to appease the anger of querulous clerics.<sup>2</sup>

*Leviathan* indicates an important departure from such an insufficient view of the problem. Here religion does not merely appear in the fourth and final part of the work, as an afterthought—"by the way let me show you that my political philosophy is consistent with revealed religion"—but intervenes right from the beginning in part one, "Of Man." It should be remembered that Hobbes's typically modern, philosophical project here is to rest a normative science of politics on a purely descriptive science of man. That is to say, to constitute a science of "Commonwealths as they should be" on the basis of "Men as they are." In consequence, the inclusion of religion in Book I indicates that the religious dimension of men is one of the fundamental elements of mankind which the philosopher, and the sovereign, must take as building blocks for the Commonwealth, blocks which they may perhaps somewhat refashion, but which they cannot reject or abandon. The political problem of religion, it follows, is not historically limited to the irksome question of the consistence of revealed religion with rational politics. It is as old as humankind, for, Hobbes will argue, religion is forever inseparable from the question of politics. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes will conceive of the difficulty of obeying both the law of men and the revealed law of God as a particular case of the problem of the coherence of two systems of authority, the religious and the political. The particularity of Hobbes's answer to this problem of coherence is that Christianity, according to him, constitutes a solution to the political problem of religion which, for the first time in history, may lead to the establishment of a purely rational, that is nonreligious, form of politics. In other words, according to Hobbes, secularization in politics is the normal<sup>3</sup> outcome of the action of Christianity in history. In that sense, his political philosophy is encompassed in what, John Milbank argues, can be seen as a form of theological reflection.<sup>4</sup> But before we come to that, we should first see what is, according to Hobbes, the political problem of religion.

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<sup>2</sup> There are, it is true, in the *De Cive* intimations of what is to come, like the analysis of the fall or of Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians, but overall Hobbes neither perceives the extent of the problem, nor senses the nature of its solution.

<sup>3</sup> "Normal" should be understood here in a normative sense.

<sup>4</sup> Though it need not be seen as such. It can also be seen as a proto-Weberian thesis concerning the social effect of a specific religion rather than as a theological thesis.

### Natural religion

Chapter 12 of *Leviathan*, "Of Religion," opens with the observation that religion is found in man only.<sup>5</sup> This is, of course, not an accident. Religion for Hobbes derives directly from two characteristic traits of human agents, traits which in themselves are fundamentally rational. The first is curiosity about the causes of events. The second is anxiety about future time. These two traits are intimately linked. In a rational situation the second fuels the first, as when uncertainty about the good or evil events that may befall him pushes a person to a profound inquiry into the causes of natural events. According to Hobbes, no one can pursue for long such an inquiry without ultimately falling upon the idea that there must be a cause, "whereof there is no former cause, but is eternal; which is it men call God" (167). This natural generation of theism is one of the two possible issues to which the junction of curiosity with a desire for security may lead, both of which Hobbes calls "natural religion," though they are profoundly different. The other issue, according to Hobbes, is exemplified in "the absurd opinions of Gentilisme" (173). In this case, curiosity feeds anxiety. A person's search into the causes of events, rather than appease, increases his fear about future time. The reason for this is ignorance of natural causes. Incapable of assigning the cause of the events they fear to any visible object, agents invent invisible spirits which they consider the source of good and evil. Thus, victims of their ignorance, through ridiculous ceremonies, they revere and try to appease, and ultimately fear, the creations of their own troubled imagination.

According to Hobbes, agents who rationally acquire the belief that there is one God eternal "cannot have any Idea of him in their mind, answerable to his nature" (167). That of course is because God is infinite and our finite mind cannot represent him more than a blind man may represent to himself, says Hobbes, the fire he feels, though he can believe there is a cause to the heat which comforts him (167). So that to say "God" is in a sense to avow our ignorance. This word is an empty marker to which corresponds no concept. - People invoke God when their search for causes comes to an end. When they know not what else to say, what cause to name, they point towards that which they do not know, and they say "God." Is this not what the Gentiles do? Foolishly to invoke their own ignorance to explain what they cannot explain? There is nonetheless one major difference between the theist and the heathen, according to Hobbes. The first acknowledges his ignorance. He has no concept in his mind corresponding to God's nature. The word "God" does not explain

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<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all parenthetical references to Hobbes's work are to *Leviathan*.

anything, because, in modern terms it has no sense or denotation, only the connotation of our own ignorance. In consequence, this belief is in no way an obstacle to the search for natural causes, though it may be an indication of how far the search has progressed. The Gentiles do not acknowledge their own ignorance, to the contrary they "stand in awe of their own imaginations" (168). They have, they believe, ideas, images, representations corresponding to the many gods they revere. They are, in short, superstitious, rather than rational believers. And those who are superstitious make little or no inquiry into natural causes, for they already have their answers at hand. God, spirits, the devil, according to them, act miraculously in the natural world. The rational belief in God paves the way for an indefinite research into the natural causes of events while natural religion irrationally opposes ignorance to inquiry into second causes. This lack of causal knowledge in turn feeds the belief in spirits invisible. Natural religion, in that sense, the positive religions of the various nations, is thoroughly irrational. Not only does it rest on irrational beliefs, but it also breeds irrationality.

In a way the political problem of religion comes from the fact that theism is much more rare than the "absurd opinions of Gentilisme." The theist is one who holds no particular religion. There is no exaggeration in saying that the rationally acquired natural belief in God according to Hobbes, constitutes a perfectly secular form of thinking. It represents the belief of one whose reaction to the mystery of the world and to the necessary limitations of human inquiry into the causes of things is uniquely rational. In a sense the theist remains as close as possible to the first seeds of religion and does not add to them any invention of his own. That is why, as we will see later on, he is, according to Hobbes, in a perfect position to receive the revealed word of God. But for the moment it is important to note that for Hobbes theism is part of natural religion, that it is one of the possible natural outcomes of the marriage of curiosity with anxiety. This means that, in spite of the fact that the first seeds of religion are ineradicable, a radically secular form of thinking is, in principle, available to the sovereign and to the political philosopher in their design of a purely rational Commonwealth.

### **The political problem of religion**

The first seeds of religion, according to Hobbes, have been made more rich and more complex, developed into positive religions, by two means: the revealed word of God and the various inventions of men. In both cases nonetheless it was done towards the same end: "to make those men that relied on them [religious leaders and beliefs], the more apt to Obedience, Lawes,

Peace, Charity and civill Society" (173). So that in one case, that of the ancient Hebrews, religion is to be deemed a form of Divine politics, while in the other, that of the early kings of the earth, it is a part of human politics. Forever then, at all times and at all places, by Divine decree or by human invention, religion has been, and is, inseparable from politics. At first sight it would seem that no particular difficulty should follow from this, since religion and politics pursue the same goals: obedience, peace, charity, and civil society. Why should not the efforts of the political and the ecclesiastical power converge to create a well ordered Commonwealth?<sup>6</sup> But this situation where they both endeavor a similar result can also be taken to mean that they are rivals, enemies, obstacles to each other on their way to the same end. The political problem of religion comes from the proximity of religion and politics. Religion and politics are competing forms of social organization which vie for the same prize, power. Yet, this quasi-identity, as we will see later on, constitutes a corruption of religion and a political mistake. The two institutions are truly radically different and, because of that, the confusion of one with the other which reigns just about everywhere is harmful to both.

John Pocock (1971) argued that faith, according to Hobbes, is a system of transmission of authority through time. He also indicated, at least indirectly, that the sovereign has no contingency for his subjects' changing preferences in time. That is to say, the social contract, the rational pact of sovereignty exists in the eternal present of logic. Against each and every temptation, each new desire or unexpected opportunity to free ride, the subject is reminded of his obligation and of the dire and inescapable ultimate consequences of transgression, the war of everyone against everyone. Frozen in a timeless logic, political sovereignty leaves no room for novelty. All departure from the word of the sovereign is mere perturbation. Leviathan is insensitive, or at least should be, to time and to changes in history. He is untouched by each and by all historical contingencies. Commonwealths, according to Hobbes, "are designed to live as long as mankind" (363), and that means, not the concept, but the particular institutions. In a perfect Commonwealth, there is no change, there is no time. This means that sovereignty in a way is outside of history. It is not a system of transmission of authority through time. At all time it is the same unchanging authority.

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<sup>6</sup> This seems pretty much to have been Hobbes's opinion in *The Elements of Law* where he suggests that the political problem of religion is a phenomena limited to the recent history of Christianity and unknown in other times or religions precisely because, in principle, politics and religion aim towards the same goal (141-2).

We learn in chapter 7, "Of the Ends or Resolutions of Discourse," that faith is when a person asserts an opinion not for some reason taken from the thing itself or from the principles of natural reason, but simply because of the authority and good opinion she has of another. Authority and good opinion in this context, Hobbes tells us, mean that the believer is tempted to recognize, in him in whom she believes, a greater ability to know the truth and thinks that she has no cause to suspect him of deceit. Consequently, belief, according to Hobbes, is a form of honor done to the person we believe, and disbelief, a form of dishonor. In the later case, it is a suspicion cast upon his veracity, in the former, a confirmation of his reputation (132-4). In consequence, should the reputation of those whom we believe fail, or should new persons come to reputation, our faith will change. Faith is a system of transmission of authority through time, but it is mainly a system of changing beliefs and authority through time.

This opposition between faith and sovereignty as regards the maintenance of authority through time is, as we will now see, no mere accident. It results from the different characteristics of "counsel" and "command," each of which founds one of the two distinct forms of authority that are faith and political sovereignty. As we know, every action of a person, according to Hobbes, aims at some good for herself. Strangely enough in chapter 25, "Of Counsel," Hobbes will define a counsel as "where a man saith, *Doe*, or *Doe not this*, and deduceth his reasons from the benefit that arriveth by it to him to whom he saith it" (303). So that one may wonder why a rational agent, according to Hobbes, would ever give a counsel. A command or an order, on the other hand, aims at the good of she who commands, not of she who is commanded. That is to say, it necessarily aims at the good of the person who gives the order, but does not necessarily aim at the good of the one who is commanded, though it may (303-4). So that the question arises, why should one obey an order? Or, to put it otherwise, if one only conforms to commands which are to her own good, she never obeys but acts of her own free will, yet if to act rationally is to follow one's own good, then how is it possible to rationally obey a command. Either it is rational to follow the command, but in that case to act in accordance with the command is not properly to obey, or it is not rational to follow the command and to obey is to act irrationally.

Hobbes suggests two general solutions to this difficulty: fear and obligation. Fear is the realization that the expected payoffs of a game have been radically modified. I thought that it was better for me to leave than to remain with you, but I see that it is preferable to stay than to incur your anger. Rationality is to choose the lesser of two evils. One reason why a person would

accept to abandon a good to herself in favor of a good for another is when that would entail a much smaller evil than the pain which would accompany the pursuit of one's original preference. But fear is unpleasantly specific. Here and now to comply is the lesser of two evils, yet this is no general rule. Fear is what Kant would call a particular judgement. So that if it may allow us to understand why it is at times rational to obey a command, it cannot show us that it is rational to obey.

Hobbes's other solution, obligation, says that one should obey because one has promised to do so. But why should one so promise? The answer is in two parts. First a person promises, perhaps out of fear, but in any case because it is better to promise than not to promise. Then a person promises to obey, that is to curtail her right to determine what is right and what is wrong because if she and all others refuse to do this, there is no good to be had. It is rational to obey in the founding situation of politics. That is, a situation in which were everyone to retain the entire right at all time to pursue the object of their own desire, their ability to obtain that object would, as a consequence, be destroyed. Now if such a situation exists, a situation in which each person's access to the good she desires depends on everyone, including her, and in which each thus relinquishes their absolute right to determine which good they desire, this situation is also one in which it is rational to give counsel, that is, to act in a way which aims at another person's good. It is also a situation in which it is rational to accept or to follow a counsel, or at least where it can be. In a way, it is a situation in which there is a natural convergence between command and counsel. Because of the essential reciprocity of the situation, by aiming at another person's good I forward my own and by aiming at my own, I promote the other's.

Thus the universal alliance of religion and politics is not a contingent association, an historical accident, but the expression of a profound conceptual relationship between two modes of authority. The situation which sustains the rationality of commands, hence of politics, also grounds the rationality of counsels, hence of religion. The political problem of religion is that these two systems of authority do not cohere, they cannot concur.<sup>7</sup> Given the nature of the social contract which is of everyone with everyone in favor of the sovereign who does not take part in the contract but simply receives the transferred rights

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<sup>7</sup> More precisely they cannot concur under the aegis of politics, but we will see later on that, according to Hobbes, in the Kingdom of God which will be established after Christ's second coming, counsel and command converge perfectly. That is why, contrary to political institutions, that Kingdom is purely elective, no one can be forced to enter into it.

of the subjects, the obligation is uniquely in the hands of the subjects. The sovereign may by his acts or by his words abdicate his power, but he cannot fail his obligation.<sup>8</sup> No matter how he rules, as long as he rules, he is legitimate. The subjects' promise to obey is unconditional. So that political change, understood as the replacement of one political authority by another, is never rational or legitimate. It always supposes either war and invasion or civil strife and rebellion. Given the nature of faith, and of counsel, no one can be justly blamed for not believing. A person may be foolish for rejecting good and honest counsel, but none is obligated to believe. When religions change, the fault for this cannot be with those whose beliefs change, but with those whose duty it is to cultivate and to nurture the faith which they have awakened.

In chapter 12 Hobbes mentions four reasons which, according to him, explain all changes in religion. Three pertain to the behavior of religious ministers. The first is to enjoin contradictory beliefs, because it takes away the reputation of wisdom. The second is to impose upon others duties and beliefs which they who impose them seem neither to respect nor to believe themselves. That is because such behavior takes away the reputation of sincerity. The third is to be detected of private ends, as when the clergy prescribes obligations or ceremonies which seem advantageous to the clerics only, because it takes away the reputation of honesty. The last, the want of testimony of miracles, seems to be in an entirely different category. It is not in the hand of men and women but in the hand of God. Yet, all well considered, all four causes have the same effect. They destroy our reasons for thinking that someone has a greater ability than us to know the truth and they give us cause to suspect that that person wants to abuse us. Religious change is rational and it is legitimate. There is a rational criticism of religion, and this rational criticism, according to Hobbes, is the means through which all religious changes takes place, either in the "absurd opinions of Gentilisme" or in the revealed religion of God (179-83).

The political problem of religion comes from the fact that to seek religious legitimization for political sovereignty, which appears at first sight as a good thing, is ultimately to subject the eternal foundations of Leviathan to the changing preferences of the subjects. To appeal to a transcendent authority in order to support the political power is to surrender the immutable legitimacy of politics to the sanction of a (rational) religious criticism in constant flux. Unfortunately, the conflation of religion with politics, though it is an error, is

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<sup>8</sup> Though he may fail his office, which is protection, and consequently relieve his subjects of their obligation (719-22).



not a simple mistake. It stems from the fact that the situation which makes politics necessary is the very same which makes counsel meaningful and religion possible. The difficulty is increased through the fact that religious belief is not within the power of the sovereign. As Hobbes will repeat many times, though he may want to control faith the sovereign cannot, "because Beleef, and Unbeleef never follows mens Commands" (527). If, as the "Introduction" to *Leviathan* suggests, Hobbes speaks from the position of the sovereign, the political problem of religion is one which neither the philosopher nor the political power may by themselves resolve either by a judicious arrangement of the Commonwealth or through a wise economy of human desires.

### **Adam's fall and the Kingdom of God**

Since Hobbes qualifies Judaism as a "form of Divine Politiques" is it not strange, to say the least, that he should also think, as I have just argued, that the conflation of religion and politics is an error, both religious and political. Unless, of course, we want to accuse him of insincerity when it came to matters of religion, of deception, for reasons of prudence perhaps, when he says that the religion contained in the Old and the New Testament is the true revealed Word of God and intrinsically different from the false and ridiculous opinions of the heathens (173-7).<sup>9</sup> In that case, Hobbes's inconsistency would just be a sign of his ultimate religious skepticism. I, for one, do not think that to accommodate both of the above statements, it is necessary to take the drastic step of charging Hobbes with an opinion which is contrary to all that he published on the subject.<sup>10</sup>

According to Hobbes, the Kingdom of God is properly a Commonwealth where God rules over his subjects, ordering them through his words and defining by his commands what is good and what is evil. It is also a real dominion here on earth. It is neither a metaphorical nor a spiritual kingdom. To the ancient Hebrews God spoke indirectly, through Moses and through the high priests, until the time of the Kings, but to Adam and Eve he spoke directly, for they were not yet mortal. Adam and Eve's fault, eating of the fruit

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<sup>9</sup> The argument that Hobbes's writings on religion were insincere and used by him both to defend himself from the dangerous accusation of atheism and with a view of using Scripture to undermine the authority of Scripture was put forward by Leo Strauss (75-8).

<sup>10</sup> Hobbes's recently published complete correspondence yields no new evidence in favor of his atheism, and reveals a man whose closest friends and most frequent correspondents were either Catholic priests or devout Huguenots (Malcolm xxxiii-xxxvi). This said, a good interpretation of Hobbes's strictures on religion, I think, should be neutral towards the question of his own belief or unbelief.

of the tree of good and evil, according to Hobbes. is to try to become like God, and to take upon themselves God's prerogative, which is to judge between good and evil. "Whereupon having both eaten, they did indeed take upon them God's office, which is judicature of Good and Evil; but acquired no new ability to distinguish between them aright" (260). Adam's fall is the rejection of the Kingdom of God.

The consequences of this are twofold, death and political philosophy. Death, because, as Hobbes reminds us in chapter 31, "Of the Kingdom of God by Nature," political dominion does not consist in the sheer exercise of force, but in a rule by words and command. Thus those who recognize no words as God's should be deemed His enemies, for they remain in a state of nature in relation to Him. To reject God's Kingdom is to assert ourselves his enemies. To rebel against His rule is to take arms against Him whose power is irresistible. Our punishment is the privation of eternal life (395-6, 443). This rebellion has also made us preys and predators of each other. Having taken upon ourselves the freedom to judge between good and evil, we have "acquired no new ability to distinguish between them aright." Now that we are abandoned to our own devices, each person's absolute right to determine what is good and what is evil leads to the war of everyone against everyone. The Fall leads, then, to political philosophy and to the erection of Leviathan, the mortal god, under whose protection men seek security from each other. Incapable of enduring God's rule we are forced to accept the rule of just anyone, as long as one rules.

From the point of view of revealed religion, the proximity between religion and politics hides, it seems, the fundamental fact that politics and Leviathan are the sons of sin. The fundamentals of human nature on the basis of which Hobbes elevates his science of politics are the characteristics of a fallen nature. This "fact" of course does not have the same meaning for the theologian as for the political philosopher. For the former it is to be seen in the context of a history which extends to the fulfillment of a promise of redemption. For the later, the absolute right of everyone to judge what is right and what is wrong, is just a fact of human nature, fallen or not. Hobbes, we should now begin to understand, in his reading of the Bible, plays both roles, that of the theologian and that of the political philosopher.

The election of Saul as first king of Israel, according to Hobbes, is an event which is similar to the Fall, inasmuch as it also consists in the rejection of God's rule. When the people of Israel asked Samuel to make them a King that would govern them like all the nations, they deposed the government of God. God ordered Samuel to listen to the people, *"for they have not rejected*

*thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them"* (508).<sup>11</sup> Yet, Hobbes tells us, God consented to it. This last point is not unimportant. God who is omnipotent, whose right to sovereignty comes from his irresistible power, consents to His subjects' rebellion. The reason why this is so, Hobbes will assert later on, is because God "never accepteth forced actions, (which is all that the law produceth) but the inward conversion of the hearth" (592). This should not be surprising, for it is in perfect keeping with the system of authority which is faith. If God does not accept forced action, it is because he wants us to take his commands as counsel, that is, as propositions which aim to our own good.

The religious legitimization of politics is a political mistake, dangerous to the stability of the Commonwealth, because it subordinates the a-temporal power of the sovereign to the evolution of religious belief. Symmetrically, the political enforcement of religion is a religious error, injurious to faith, because it replaces sincere belief with constrained assent. It also seemingly relieves the priests from their obligations of honesty, charity, and wisdom, because it suggests that the faith of the men now rests on other shoulders than the good reputation of the clergy. Thus it becomes one of the major causes of changes in religion (181-3). In spite of their conceptual proximity, the alliance of religion and politics is unnatural and it is harmful to both.

### **The two political problems of religion**

Christianity, as interpreted by Hobbes, can be seen as a solution to the political problem of religion, understood both as the problem of the religious legitimization of politics and as the problem of the political enforcement of religion. According to Hobbes, Christianity is God's promise to men of a new covenant to replace the divine kingdom which was lost through Adam and Eve's fault and through the rejection of God by the election of Saul. It is the promise of eternal life, but of an eternal life here on earth. The elects shall not ascend to heaven. They will live on earth (480-95) and they shall be secured against "all Evil, comprehending Want, Sicknesse and Death itself (490). The materiality of eternal life and of God's kingdom, according to Hobbes, is of course consistent with the rest of his philosophy, but it also means that no earthly power has the ability to institute the Kingdom of God. Thus God's promise which is addressed to each person individually, demands of each only the acceptance of God's rule in order to be received among the elect. But for its realization, the Kingdom of God is dependant on God's own good will.

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<sup>11</sup> Book of Samuel, quoted by Hobbes.

Redemption is God's promise and it will only be realized when God chooses, at the time of His second coming. In the meantime, all that is asked from us is "the inward conversion of the hearth." Christianity, for Hobbes, is excellent counsel, good advice. It demands that we submit today to a kingdom which will come tomorrow and which for this reason can never be a rival to earthly powers. In return it promises eternal life, absence of all evil. But because it is the present promise of future submission to a King absent, Christianity gives us no new law. It holds us only to respect our promises to our actual sovereign and all those precepts of right reason which are called the laws of nature. That is why, as was said at the very beginning, according to Hobbes, the commands of the sovereign can so rarely contradict those of God.

Christianity resolves the political problem of religion because its existence as a religion indicates that we are in a time in which we are condemned to give to ourselves our own laws. Christianity is the religion which teaches that God gives us no laws and imposes on us, as a punishment of our first parent's sin, the judicature of good and evil. As a consequence there is no religious legitimization of political power, only something like a meta-legitimization, an explanation of why it is that we are doomed to live by human laws only. This means that, apart from the precepts of right reason, there is no code or doctrine to which the commands of the sovereign must conform in order to be legitimate. Christianity also resolves the political problem of religion understood as the problem of religious toleration. Because by its very nature as a promise which only needs to be believed in, it places all religious obligation outside the reach of the sovereign. It is in consequence perfectly appropriate to the structure of faith. Christianity is pure counsel. The Kingdom of God is a kingdom where counsel and command will converge perfectly, for the elects are those who have taken as counsel the commands of God. Because God's omnipotence, contrary to the sovereign's power, does not rest on his subjects' consent, He can establish a rule which is never forced to resort to constraint or coercion, a rule that is based on pure assent. That is why it can be said that in a way, for Hobbes, human political institution caricatures the Kingdom of God.

So interpreted, Christian faith may be seen as solving the two aspects of what can be called the theologian's political problem of religion. Should the political power receive religious legitimization? Should the political power be the enforcer of religious precept? In both cases Hobbes's answer is negative. These are answers which, Hobbes hopes, are satisfactory to the theologian, but are they sufficient for the political philosopher? That is, are they of any help to the sovereign? In a sense the response must be no. That religion, according

to Christianity and according to the nature of faith, should not be made law is a normative statement, one which shows that, in principle, there can be no contradiction between the precepts of religion and the commands of the sovereign. That belief, given the conceptual structure of religious and political authority, is forever outside the reach of the sovereign is a descriptive statement. According to Hobbes, it is simply a fact that the sovereign cannot control the religious beliefs of his subjects. If it so happens that his subjects are religious fanatics, convinced that political power is only legitimate if it is ordained by God and that the sovereign should be subject to what they believe is God's commands, what is the sovereign to do?

According to Hobbes, there is very little the sovereign can do. Given a situation where the people are already possessed by religious infatuation, there is "no remedy to be applyed, that any men could invent" (709). Yet we know that such a situation is given in Hobbes's time and that, according to him, it was always the case that religion and politics were indissociable. The absurd religious opinions of the Gentiles were a form of politics. In the kingdom of Israel after the election of Kings, the people "alwaies kept in store a pretext, either of Justice, or Religion, to discharge them selves of their obedience, whensoever they had hope to prevaile" (510). Finally, the English civil war which rages while Hobbes is writing *Leviathan* is proof enough that the Christian message separating the Church from the State has not been heard. It follows that though Christian faith and political philosophy present the sovereign with a perfect solution in the complete separation of religion and politics, this message remains of little consequence. Hobbes's reading of the Bible is like a void recommendation, an empty injunction. It is not within the sovereign's power to change his subjects' beliefs. The solution to the political problem of religion, though it exists in principle, is in fact unavailable to the sovereign. Though the difficulty is intellectually resolved, the problem is not solved practically and it seems that it cannot be solved practically, at least not through any initiative of the political power. To the political problem of religion, there is no human remedy possible.

It is important to understand this distinction between an intellectual problem (which I have called the theologian's problem) and a practical one (which I have termed the sovereign's or the political philosopher's problem). It is also important to clearly identify the nature of the difficulty which this distinction represents. In fact the impossibility for the sovereign to implement by himself the conditions of a complete separation of religion and politics puts the political philosopher in an untenable position. It means that he cannot supply the sovereign with a perfectly rational, or a conceptually adequate,

solution to what constitute perhaps the central difficulty of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century politics. The solution contained in the Bible, it seems, can only become politically available if men turn into model Christians, and this is precisely what Hobbes cannot ask, at least if his science of Commonwealth is to rest on men as they are, rather than as they should be.

in view of this, of the unavailability of the best solution, Hobbes will elaborate what can be seen as a worse case scenario. Of course this worse case corresponds to all actual and historical situations and to all evolutions that can be humanly foreseen. It is exemplified by another trend in Hobbes's text, of which I have not spoken until now, and which can be summarized by one word, erastianism. Erastianism is the doctrine of the entire subordination of the Church to the State in matters political and religious. Following Hobbes's erastianism, the sovereign is the supreme leader of the church. He has sole authority to appoint religious ministers, and to determine the nature of the cult and the content of the doctrine. In the absence of a thorough separation of the two domains, Hobbes's advice to the sovereign is to control as much as he can the external and institutional dimension of religion in order to reduce to the utmost all independent influence from the church. This solution is unsatisfactory, for faith we know never obeys men's command, but it is the best political philosophy can offer.

### **Christianity and the Word of God in history**

What cannot be provided by reason and the political philosopher, can perhaps be offered by religion and history. In the fourth and last part of *Leviathan*, "Of the Kindome of Darknesse," Hobbes will suggest the possibility of another solution, secularization. He will view secularization as the effect of God's Revelation in history. In order to see exactly how this is possible, it is useful to look at the way Hobbes viewed the Biblical text and its reception. In chapter 33, "Of the Number, Antiquity, Scope, Authority, and Interpreters of the Books of the Holy Scripture" (which is in part three), Hobbes addressed two strongly interrelated questions: the "canonicity" and the "authenticity" of scripture. The first one is, How can the rules of the Scriptures ever be made law? The answer is, in keeping with his erastianism, that they can only be made law through a decision of the sovereign. Yet, Hobbes reminds us, the sovereign "may oblige me to obedience, so, as not by act or word to declare I beleieve him not; but not to think any otherwise then my reason perswades me" (411).

Under the heading of authenticity Hobbes gathers all the questions which pertain to what we would call today "critical editorial practice." Who are the

authors of the various books of the Bible? When were they written? Were they compiled from older sources? Is the text corrupted? Etc. In order to answer these questions, Hobbes resorts to a method of criticism which is based on the internal coherence of the text. For example, wanting to know if Moses is the author of the Pentateuch, Hobbes notices that in many of its passages Moses's death is spoken of in the past tense. He concludes that the "books of Moses" must have been compiled after his death from various earlier sources. Hobbes also invokes, especially concerning the New Testament, the reason we have or have not for questioning the sincerity of those who were responsible for the transmission of the texts. Overall, Hobbes's method of criticism is consistent with his explanation of religious change in history. When we ask the question of authorship, we reject the traditional answer if it implies contradictory beliefs. Concerning the question of corruption we inquire into the honesty and design of those responsible for the transmission of the texts. The motives or reasons which justify our interpretation are the very causes of religious changes in history. But there is more; in all cases Hobbes's inquiry about the antiquity, source, and authenticity of the books of Scripture leads to one fundamental result: Revelation is not to be seen as a divine message, dictated directly by God through supernatural inspiration and faultlessly transcribed by a perfect scribe. To the contrary, the books of the Old Testament which we read today should be seen as the result of a historical process of religious change through which older sources are criticized and modified. In other words, the historical process through which the Sacred Text was written has exactly the same structure as the process of criticism through which present-day readers arrive at their interpretation. This entails, I believe, two fundamental consequences.

The first one is that Revelation is a profoundly historical process. Like faith, and unlike political authority, it does not consist in the intact transmission in time of some original donation. Revelation is a process of historical change. It is a system of transmission of belief in time and it is through this continuous transmission that the books of the Old and New Testament, as we read them today, have been written. This suggests that there is no radical difference between the original compilers of the books of Scripture and Hobbes, and all other modern interpreters. And this suggests further, that Revelation extends all the way to the present, that it has not stopped at some point in time and that we are merely the caretakers of some original endowment. The second fundamental consequence is that Revelation is essentially a human process. Though Revelation can be seen as being in the hand of God, the process is realized through human events and institutions only. This

stresses the contingent dimension of Revelation. The fact that it has no philosophical necessity. As Hobbes will repeat many times, when we come to believe that some statement is the Word of God, we believe, in any case, in men only. For it is through a radically contingent series of accidents that we came to be exposed to this doctrine and it is because of some unnecessary characteristics of those who taught us that we believe them (366).

Taken together these two elements intimate that the process of religious transformation Hobbes is witnessing, the Reformation and the English civil war, could be construed as a part of Revelation, as the continuation of the same religious history which is at work in the Old and New Testaments. As Hobbes will say, the Word of God can also be taken as the effect of His word (454). The effect of that word, according to Hobbes, is to bring about a complete disenchantment of the world and, through the disorders of the present times, which occasioned the writing of *Leviathan*, to accomplish a perfect separation of religion and politics.

The first consequence of Revelation in relation to the political problem of religion according to Hobbes, is the disenchantment of the world, the decline of magic, the rationalization of belief, and the exclusion of spiritual agencies in favor of natural explanations. This aspect of Hobbes's reading of Scripture has been well documented and is now relatively standard Hobbesian lore.<sup>12</sup> I will not have anything to say about it and will concentrate my attention on the other dimension of the problem, the separation of religion and politics.

The texts relevant to this issue are all to be found in the fourth book of *Leviathan* (627-727). The main one is a mere four pages long (709-12). In those pages, after recounting the way in which throughout the history of Christendom the kings progressively lost their absolute sovereignty to the machination of churchmen, and lamenting that once the people were "possessed by those spiritual men, there was no humane remedy to be applied, that any man could invent" (709), Hobbes declares: "But as the Inventions of men are woven, so also are they ravelled out; the way is the same, but the order is inverted" (510). He then proceeds to argue that the course of the English Reformation—from Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth through the rising influence of the Presbyterians and up to the then present disorder of the English civil war, especially the growing influence of the Independents—constitutes a complete dissolution of the religious constraints upon the power of the sovereign. "And so that we are reduced to the Independancy of the Primitive Christians to follow Paul, Cephas, or Apollos, every man as he liketh

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<sup>12</sup> See among others, David Johnston.



best" (711). It should be remembered that, at the end of part II of *Leviathan*, in chapter 31 which deals with the Kingdome of God by nature, Hobbes says: "And therefore, where many sorts of Worship be allowed, proceeding from the different Religion of Private men, it cannot be said there is any Publique Worship, nor that the Commonwealth is of any Religion at all" (405). The effect of Revelation in history is to guide us to a commonwealth which is of no religion at all.

I think it is no exaggeration to say that in Hobbes's mind the Independents' victory constituted a special moment, a rare opportunity in history. It created the possibility of a purely rational politics. It has been suggested that after the publication of *Leviathan* Hobbes returned to England and submitted to Cromwell because he was fleeing possible persecution from the Roman Catholic Church. It also has been suggested, especially by Professor Quentin Skinner, that *Leviathan* should be seen as a tract in what has been called the "engagement controversy," and that Hobbes in that dispute argued on the side of the "de facto theorist," that is, those who urged submission to Cromwell, so that he had theoretical reasons also to return to England. It could be that he also thought this was a unique historical juncture. But one which was a contingent historical fact, and not a necessity, for he also wrote: "But who knows that this Spirit of Rome, now gone out, and walking by Missions through the dry places of China, Japan and the Indies, that yeeld him little fruit, may not return, or rather an Assembly of Spirits worse than he, enter, and inhabite this clean swept house, and make the End thereof worse than the Beginning?" (714-5).

### A unique solution

Hobbes is an artful writer. From his text it is pretty much impossible, I think, to decide whether or not he believed that the window of opportunity opened by the English civil war was only a rare occasion to be grasped or if it also indicated the constant direction of the history initiated by the Christian Revelation. In other words, it is difficult to determine up to what point Hobbes was an historicist and to what extent he thought that the radically contingent event which made possible a purely rational politics was inscribed in a teleological process. In spite of this uncertainty concerning the ultimate status of the historical accident which, according to him, could make his normative science of Commonwealth accessible to the sovereign, he has sketched what, I think, is the only possible solution to the political problem of religion.

If religion always was a form of social organization, the bond which unites people together, the frame of reference which delimits the domain of

legitimacy of political institutions, then the constitution of a nonreligious political power which rests on the sole consent of its subjects, is only possible through a transformation of their religious beliefs. In those conditions, only religion, not the political power, can teach the people that the legitimacy of the sovereign rests on the sole consent of the subjects. Hobbes was not the first to think that Christianity implied that conclusion and to make of consent the foundation of political order (see Pocock, Williamson, and Kantorowicz). But he was the first to suggest, centuries before Max Weber, that secularization was the normal effect of the Christian Revelation in history.

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