

That Mortal God: Christianity, Sovereignty, and Civil Religion in Hobbes's *Leviathan*

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"The fool hath said in his heart: 'there is no such thing as Justice.'"¹

Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* is a singular political treatise, a subtle masterpiece that manages to mask the full measure and implications of its innovation behind an argument that is itself shockingly revolutionary. For a political work, it is also remarkably preoccupied with questions of religion, prophecy, and revelation. All too often, as Edwin Curley notes, the religious sections of the *Leviathan* are de-emphasized or omitted from study altogether by scholars and students, even though some of Hobbes's most radical arguments are given there.² But Hobbes does not limit his discussion of religion to the parts of the treatise specifically dedicated to that topic: his references to divinity, religion, and inspiration recur throughout the text, as do his frequent citations and interpretations of scripture. On the surface, Hobbes's treatment of Christianity seems innocent at best, and rather worldly at worst. The ambiguity of this treatment has led to widely divergent interpretations of Hobbes's religious views: some scholars consider him an atheist; some, a "tepid theist"; and still others, an orthodox Christian.³ Indeed, valid arguments for all of these positions can be supported by the text—which may well have been Hobbes's intent.

But the question is why Hobbes would dedicate so much space to religious matters in a political treatise. Hobbes is, if anything, an especially focused writer, seldom making long or pointless digressions. His frequent comments on religious questions should therefore be given due consideration, and not be dismissed as merely tangential. Hobbes draws attention

1 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 15.4 (chapter, section). Subsequent references given parenthetically in the text.

2 Introduction to *Leviathan*, xl.

3 For an argument interpreting Hobbes as an atheist, see, for instance, Strauss, "Hobbes's Political Philosophy." For a reading of Hobbes as an orthodox Christian, see Martinich, *Two Gods of Leviathan*. Curley offers a somewhat sympathetic reading of Hobbes as making radical religious arguments in "How to Read Hobbes's Treatise," suggesting that even Strauss is inconsistent in identifying Hobbes's religious viewpoint (1–2n3). Rosendale argues that Hobbes makes a valuable distinction between religion as a public act and as a private belief in "Milton, Hobbes, and the Liturgical Subject."

to such a scattered manner of writing (and indicates how to read it) at the end of Part III, saying, "For it is not the bare words, but the scope of the writer, that giveth the true light by which *any writing* is to be interpreted; and they that insist upon single texts, without considering the main design, can derive nothing from them clearly" (43.24, emphasis mine: in the Latin, Hobbes speaks specifically about scripture, while in the English he expands his comment to include all writing). By giving religion such a prominent place in a political treatise, Hobbes effectively treats religion as a political matter. The *Leviathan* might even be considered an example for the civil sovereign, showing how religion and scripture can be used to validate political claims.

But what is Hobbes's argument about religion, or what political claims is he attempting to establish? Is he simply making a political argument based on a rather muddled understanding of Christianity, innocently misquoting and misinterpreting scriptural passages? The otherwise careful craftsmanship of the text precludes this judgment. Neither should Hobbes's references to scripture be mistaken for pious deference—he frequently misquotes and misinterprets the texts, even in the expectation that doing so would offend his readers.⁴ The scattered passages on religion must not be read in isolation, solely in the context of the narrower, and usually noncontroversial, discussions in which they are situated. Placed in relation to each other, and considered in their wider application, they disclose Hobbes's argument concerning religion, allowing the reader to flesh out its implications gradually by working through the layers of qualifications, negations, apparent contradictions, and resolutions.

Hobbes begins by contrasting religion with superstition, then makes these two indistinguishable when he places them in contrast with knowledge of God—which itself he limits to acknowledging the incomprehensibility of God. Initially he presents Judeo-Christian religion as substantially different from pagan religions, being divinely instituted and concerned with spiritual things; but in later de-emphasizing its divine institution and spiritual concerns and emphasizing the authority of men and the concerns of civil society, he blurs the distinction between these two kinds of religion. He asserts God's sovereignty by nature and by compact, but then abrogates the force of this claim by questioning its efficacy. He affirms the authority of scripture as divine revelation and natural law as the standard of moral behavior, but then places the power to judge both in the hands of the civil sovereign. Thus, by the end of the *Leviathan*, he has subtly transformed Christianity into a civic religion instead of an independent institution (or institutions): an anchor of political power, a mere fence to secure the obedience of subjects. He has, in fact, made it indistinguishable from superstition except according to perspective, removed it from the divine realm, and placed it entirely under the authority of the civil sovereign.

4 "Letter Dedicatory to Sir Francis Godolphin," in *Leviathan*, 2.

I.

Hobbes veils his intention to undermine the independence of religion beneath an outward show of piety for several possible reasons. Curley argues that he felt compelled to conceal his intentions because, living in the “repressive culture” of Catholic France when he wrote the *Leviathan*, he feared being persecuted for his arguments.⁵ Moreover, Curley notes that in England religious toleration was in a state of flux, and Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, even as written, was at various times considered too dangerous and unorthodox—even heretical—to be reprinted.⁶ Thus Hobbes, writing in fear of repression by the Catholic Church in France, excluded or rephrased brazenly anti-Catholic arguments in the Latin text that he made more openly in the English; but even in the English, he was not so bold as to make *all* of his arguments obvious, particularly those that would offend not only Catholics but Christians in general.

Another possible reason for Hobbes to veil his arguments, besides the fear of persecution, is that radical views presented openly are often not even granted the favor of consideration. Subtlety and ambiguity are useful for introducing what Machiavelli called “new modes and orders” in such a way that they will be heard but not immediately felt.⁷ In his autobiographical poem, Hobbes writes that the *Leviathan*’s controversial character “made it read by many a man, / And did confirm’t the more.”⁸ The obvious argument about the sovereign’s absolute power (but power conferred on him by the people) was enough to attract attention, allowing the extensive implications of the religious aspect of the treatise to seep more gradually into political discourse. Considering the importance of his work, one ought to take Hobbes seriously as a thinker, which means not dismissing the contradictions and subtleties of his text as mere errors or extravagancies, but rather studying them with careful attention as fully intended elements of his argument.

II.

Hobbes frames his discussion of religion in the first few chapters of the *Leviathan*, initially distinguishing religion from superstition but then breaking down this distinction with each successive stage in the argument. In chapter 12, “On Religion,” Hobbes states that, because religion appears in man alone of all creatures, its root must be in something peculiar to him—in his curiosity about the causes of things (12.2). Curiosity or inquiry into causes is not an unusual or offensive quality to call the source of religion, and if this were Hobbes’s first reference to religion it would not be particularly

5 “How to Read Hobbes’s Treatise,” 68–9.

6 *Ibid.*, 8–10.

7 Machiavelli, *Discourses*, bk. 1, preface to chap. 1. If this was Hobbes’s intent, it is debatable whether or not he was successful. Bowle argues that he was not—that the immediate reaction to the *Leviathan* was a strong surge in the opposite direction, a “widespread re-assertion of accepted principles” (*Hobbes and His Critics*, 13). Skinner disagrees with this argument, which he considers simplistic, giving significant evidence that the *Leviathan* was read popularly and engaged seriously by Hobbes’s contemporaries in “Hobbes Political Thought.”

8 “Verse Autobiography,” lines 270–71, in *Leviathan*, lx.

controversial. However, his first definition of religion, in the discussion of the passions six chapters earlier, does not appear in his description of curiosity, but in the paragraph on fear that follows it: "*Fear of power invisible, feigned by the mind, or imagined from tales publicly allowed, RELIGION; not allowed, SUPERSTITION. And when the power imagined is truly such as we imagine, TRUE RELIGION*" (6.36, emphasis in original).

Subsequently, in chapter 11, Hobbes suggests that the fear of invisible power (or religion) is rooted in ignorance of causes: "And they that make little or no inquiry into the natural causes of things, yet from the fear that proceeds from the ignorance itself [of those causes] are inclined to suppose and feign unto themselves several kinds of powers invisible" (11.26). This statement, however, conflicts with the previous paragraph, in which Hobbes states that the idea of a first cause, or God, results from "the love of the knowledge of causes" (11.25). The conflict between these two passages highlights the ambiguity in Hobbes's account—does Hobbes argue that all religions, even a monotheistic religion such as Christianity, emerge from superstitious fear, or are some rooted in laudable curiosity about the causes of things? At the end of the chapter Hobbes indicates his answer: "And this fear of things invisible is the natural seed which everyone in himself calleth religion, and in them that worship or fear that power otherwise than they do, superstition" (11.25–27). This point is elaborated in Hobbes's reply to Bishop Bramhall, in which he states that "the fear of a God, though not of the true one, to [savage people] was the beginning of religion, as the fear of the true God was the beginning of wisdom to the Jews and Christians."⁹ Ignorance-based fear, then, and not curiosity about causes, is the root of all religion—and the only distinction between religion and superstition for Hobbes is one of perspective.

Hobbes begins the chapter on religion with an apparent negation of his earlier argument that religion is based on ignorance of causes, saying rather that curiosity about causes is the root of religion (12.1). Yet immediately following this assertion he makes a new distinction: curiosity does not lead directly to knowledge of God, but first to fear and anxiety about the future. This fear must have an object, Hobbes says, "and therefore, when there is nothing to be seen, there is nothing to accuse... but some power or agent *invisible*" (12.6). Hobbes then adds another provision to the argument, saying that only polytheism results from fear and ignorance, while "the acknowledging of one God, eternal, infinite, and omnipotent, may more easily be derived from the desire men have to know the causes of natural bodies" (12.6). This treatment of religion offers us two valuable insights into Hobbes's method. First, we can see his technique of affirmation-negation: in this case, first positing something radical (ignorance of causes is the root of religion), then qualifying his argument (ignorance is the root of polytheism, but curiosity of causes leads to the knowledge of one God), then qualifying the qualification to make a new argument (curiosity of causes of future things leads to polytheism, while curiosity of natural causes leads to a knowledge of God). In effect, this inconspicuously ratchets up the radical

9 English Works, 4:292.

quality of the argument. The second insight is related. Hobbes first offers a general statement that is radically offensive to his audience's endoxa, then immediately places it in a particular context that will reduce or eliminate the scandal. The explanation seems to weaken the initial argument, and obscures the fact that it was made without any qualifications. Curley notes this same method, remarking that the reader "may accept the disavowal and miss the suggestion."¹⁰

Hobbes's arguments concerning religion continue later in the treatise when he says that, apart from acknowledging the basic qualities of God (his eternity, infinity, and omnipotence), no one should inquire any further into the divine, for "disputing of God's nature is contrary to his honour... and therefore, when men, out of the principles of natural reason, dispute of the attributes of God, they but dishonour him" (31.33). Thus rational inquiry about God is contrary to the dictates of piety and can even lead to the loss of faith (12.31); further, for Hobbes the political consequences of such inquiry are quarrelling, fragmentation of society, and rebellion, since the resulting doctrines (for example, those developed in the universities and the Church from classical philosophy) are "a great many... things that serve to lessen the dependence of subjects on the sovereign power of their country" (46.18).

Thus Hobbes creates a disjunction between religion and reason. "Knowledge" of the true God belongs to natural reason, but "true religion" is "fear" of the same God, where "fear" does not mean the sort of awe and reverence that is typically understood in the phrase "fear of God," but rather follows the definition Hobbes gives of it as "Aversion with opinion of hurt from the object" (6.16). Referring to the Bible, Hobbes says that "the Scripture was written to shew unto men the kingdom of God [here, the kingdom that will be established in the world after Jesus's second coming, when he will rule as king over those who acknowledge him as the Christ (chapter 41)], and to prepare their minds to become his obedient subjects, leaving the world and the philosophy thereof to the disputation of men for the exercising of their natural reason" (8.26). In a similar vein, he states that "it is with the mysteries of our religion as with wholesome pills for the sick, which, swallowed whole, have the virtue to cure, but chewed, are for the most part cast up again without effect" (32.3). From these passages it is clear that, for Hobbes, the role of reason in religion is limited to showing that there is a God who is one, infinite, and omnipotent; beyond providing this basic foundation for natural religion, reason has no place in religion, but only in the "world and the philosophy thereof." Nor is the mode of the worship of God a subject for reason to decide. Reason may "suggest" modes of worship in the case of religion, but it does not obligate anyone to perform them. Worship is rather to be determined by "those they believe to be wiser than themselves" (12.9), or, from the Latin, "the laws of particular commonwealths" (12.9n6). But here Hobbes is essentially discussing what he has previously called superstition; he refers to "expressions of reverence" that may be the result of pious devotion, but the implication is that they

10 "How to Read Hobbes's Treatise," 67.

are futile and superstitious (12.9); later he speaks of “rational worship,” but then states that it “argues a fear of [God], and fear is a confession of his power” (31.33).

But what is the cure provided by the “wholesome pills” of religion? Or, put another way, what does religion cure? The answer does not lie in the “seeds” of religion but in religion as an established or communal mode of worship, since the seminal state of religion, which is all fear and ignorance, could not be curative of anything. Hobbes writes that the seeds of religion are cultivated by two sorts of people, those who act by their own will and those who act by God’s will:

But both sorts have done it with a purpose to make those men that relied on them the more apt to obedience, laws, peace, charity, and civil society. So that the religion of the former sort is a part of human politics, and teacheth part of the duty which earthly kings require of their subjects. And the religion of the latter sort is divine politics, and containeth precepts to those that have yielded themselves subjects in the kingdom of God. (12.12)

The founders and legislators of pagan commonwealths are examples of the former; examples of the latter are Abraham and Moses, who were also civil sovereigns during the “kingdom of God” as the period of Judaic history when God ruled over his people (see chapter 40), and Christ, also a civil sovereign in his promised kingdom. Yet both sorts employ religion to make subjects sociable by curing the disobedience, unruliness, war or discord, enmity, and anarchy that characterize man’s natural state.¹¹ In a word, religion cures subjects of their natural state, making them fit to be ruled. Or, alternatively, instead of disobedience “individual sovereignty” might be placed opposite “obedience,” since obedience implies surrendering one’s right to self-rule to the person obeyed. But even if Hobbes, as Timothy Rosendale argues, allows private belief to exist outside the cognizance of the state, that belief is passive only—an “assenting” to supernatural law and a “gift which God freely giveth to whom he pleaseth” (26.41)—and not offended when the civil laws demand obedience to doctrines or acts of worship contrary to its disposition.

III.

Hobbes makes a distinction between pagan and Judeo-Christian religion in order to preserve the appearance of orthodoxy, but this distinction soon proves illusory. The former teaches “the duty which earthly kings require of their subjects,” while the latter gives precepts for the subjects of the kingdom of God (either the specific period of Judaic history or Christ’s future kingdom). In the first case, religion is part of politics; in the second, politics part of religion. Hobbes makes this latter point more emphatically a few paragraphs later: “[God] gave laws, not only of behavior towards himself, but also towards one another; and thereby in the kingdom of God, the policy and laws civil are a part of religion; and therefore the distinction of

¹¹ For a description of the “natural state” of man for Hobbes, see chapter 13.

temporal and spiritual domination hath here no place" (12.22). Hobbes here conflates temporal and spiritual rule in the kingdom of God by making politics part of religion, an order that he later inverts.

Hobbes blurs the distinction between the two types of religion even further in his discussion of revelation. Concerning the pagan lawgivers, Hobbes argues that they used deceits and fabrications to secure the belief of their subjects:

The first founders and legislators of commonwealths among the Gentiles, whose ends were only to keep the people in obedience and peace, have in all places taken care: first, to imprint in their minds a belief that those precepts which they gave concerning religion might not be thought to proceed from their own device, but from the dictates of some god or other spirit... Secondly, they have had a care to make it believed that the same things were displeasing to the gods which were forbidden by the laws. (12.20)

These rulers not only feign divine inspiration for their religious doctrines but also exploit people's fear of divine retribution to make them obedient to the civil laws. Hobbes states these claims as if to distinguish pagan religions from Judeo-Christian religion. Yet these practices—claiming divine sanction for doctrines and divine laws as the source for civil laws—are precisely what Hobbes elsewhere ascribes to Abraham and Moses and prescribes for every Christian sovereign. At the same time, Hobbes attempts to dismantle both inspiration and fear of divine retribution in the *Leviathan*, calling even their possibility into question on a number of occasions,¹² since, like doctrine, they tend to lessen the dependence of subjects on their sovereign.

Hobbes's Abraham is a perfect example of one who claims divine inspiration to procure belief and, with belief, obedience. Hobbes states that Abraham had the authority to make dreams and private revelations binding on subjects who had not experienced them, despite his earlier dismissal of apparitions and visions as mere fancies of the mind (12.7; see also 32.6). Thus when Hobbes says that "the covenant which Abraham made with God was to take for the commandment of God that which in the name of God was commanded him in a dream or vision, and to deliver it to his family, and cause them to observe the same" (40.1), his very language indicates the skepticism with which he views such revelations: Abraham made a covenant with God to treat as a commandment what he believed he had been commanded by God in his dream (or, following 32.6, what he dreamed God had commanded him). The reality of the dream or the commandment is irrelevant—all that matters is that Abraham treated it as real, and that he bound his descendants to do likewise. Hobbes also attributes to Abraham the right to punish anyone who claimed to have received revelations contrary to his own, thus removing the possibility that anyone could effectively challenge the truth of his declarations (40.3).

¹² See, for instance, his treatment of inspiration at 32.5–7, and his discussion of eternal punishment at 38.6–14.

The Christian sovereign, like Abraham, has the power to make private revelations binding and to punish contrary revelations. Hobbes says, "as none but Abraham in his family, so none but the sovereign in a Christian commonwealth, can take notice what is or what is not the word of God... [and] they that have the place of Abraham in a commonwealth are the only interpreters of what God hath spoken" (40, 4). This idea recurs almost verbatim in Hobbes's account of Moses: "[W]hosoever in a Christian commonwealth holds the place of Moses is the sole messenger of God, and interpreter of his commandments" (40.7). Thus Hobbes's civil sovereign has complete authority to define God's commandments for his subjects, since he can claim to speak with divine sanction and without fear of contradiction.

In scripture, Abraham was appointed by God to hold sovereign power over his descendents. Hobbes does not mention this. He states instead that Abraham as "father, and Lord, and civil sovereign" made God's revelation and commandments binding on his descendants, though they had no access to the revelation he had received nor any way of verifying its truth (26.41). In the case of Moses he speaks plainly—Moses's authority depended on the opinion of the people, not on God's power. Moses himself, by his civil power and not by any divine power, made the commands of God binding on the Israelites, "for it could not be the commandment of God that could oblige them" to obey the Decalogue (40.6; 42.37). This notion that the civil sovereign's right to rule derives from the people, not from God, recurs throughout the *Leviathan*; for example, where Hobbes defines the term "sovereign": "[The people] confer all their power and strength upon one man, or upon one assembly of men, that may reduce all their wills, by plurality of voices, unto one will, which is as much as to say, to appoint one man or assembly of men to bear their person... And he that carrieth that person is called Sovereign" (17.13–14). So in the passage on Moses Hobbes says of him: "His authority, therefore, as the authority of all other princes, must be grounded on the consent of the people and their promise to obey him" (40.6). The most specific instance of this principle is his definition of sovereignty, where Hobbes says explicitly that "covenants, being but words and breath, have no force to oblige, contain, constrain, or protect any man, but what it has from the public sword," which is popular consent (18.1–2, 4).

In Hobbes's account, divine rule ultimately reduces to human authority. People ought to obey God because of his "irresistible power"—power, and not his nature as Creator, gives him the right to rule and punish (31.5). Nevertheless, God lacks the power to command that obedience. Conversely, the civil sovereign, whose authority derives from the people, has the power to judge the word of God and impose obligations in his name, with no divine sanction besides what the sovereign claims for himself. Hobbes in effect coerces God to give the authority to interpret divine commands to whomever the people invest with sovereignty. Considering that Hobbes reduces apparitions and visions to mere fancy, questions the possibility of verifying private revelations, and gives the power to command obedience

and interpret God's word to the sovereign, the "truth" of "true religion" itself becomes subject to the absolute authority of the sovereign.

IV.

In his account of the kingdom of God, Hobbes undermines his earlier distinction between Christianity and pagan religion. At first glance, Hobbes's treatment of the kingdom of God seems reasonable enough. The phrase has three meanings in the text: God rules all creation by nature (or, by his "irresistible power"); he rules over "a peculiar people" (Israel) by covenant (35.5); and Christ came to prepare mankind for the reinstating of that covenantal kingdom after his second coming. However, God's rule by nature is ineffectual—it results in the nasty and brutish state of war, to escape from which man forms civil society; his covenantal rule reduces to the authority of the sovereign; rule by Christ represents a future promise and commands no present authority.

Hobbes states that "the laws of God... are none but the laws of nature" (43.5), but the force of this assertion only appears in light of his discussion of the state of nature, where he says that "the desires and other passions of man are in themselves no sin. No more are the actions that proceed from those passions, till they know a law that forbids them—which till laws be made they cannot know" (13.10). Apparently, without civil law nothing is culpable, and therefore "the laws of nature... are not properly laws" (26.8). Neither, then, are the laws of God. Nor would it seem that God has the ability to enforce them—Hobbes makes a specious argument regarding God's power in punishing, but in the process suggests that God's retributions are neither consistent, fitting, nor effective (31.5–6).

If, for Hobbes, God's rule by nature is ineffectual, his covenantal rule over the Israelites was little better. Hobbes presents the first covenantal kingdom of God as "a commonwealth, instituted... for their civil government and the regulating of their behavior" (35.7). Though it would be reasonable to suppose that God was the civil sovereign over his own kingdom, Hobbes explicitly gives that power to human beings: "But Moses, and Aaron, and the succeeding high priests were the civil sovereigns" (42.37). So, for example, Hobbes recounts the story of the seditious princes whom God killed to defend Moses's authority, but he immediately repeats that Moses alone heard the word of God and was able to relay God's commands to the people (40.7). He also says that God gave the seventy elders "a mind conformable and subordinate to that of Moses, that they might prophesy... (as ministers of Moses and by his authority) such doctrine as was agreeable to Moses his doctrine" (40.8): the emphasis on Moses as the source of authority and doctrine is striking. Thus, without the sovereign's support and proclamation, God's authority in the covenantal kingdom was no more effective than his rule by nature, and this ineffectiveness ultimately casts into doubt whether God can ever hold sovereignty over men.

The dependence of God's authority on the sovereign's support is not the only complicating factor in Hobbes's account of God's rule by compact. If it was a civil government, Hobbes suggests, it was a government odious enough to the Israelites that they deposed it, and established an

earthly kingdom in its place (40.11). By suggesting that God consented to being deposed, Hobbes avoids the difficulty of reconciling the claim that the Israelites deposed God with his earlier statement that “they that are subjects to a monarch cannot *without his leave* cast off monarchy and return to the confusion of a disunited multitude, nor transfer their person from him that beareth it to another man, or other assembly of men” (28.3, emphasis mine). Yet Hobbes also states that it is against the duty of the sovereign “to transfer to another or to lay from himself any of [his rights]” (30.3)—so for Hobbes to say that God consented to being deposed is as much as to say he failed in his duty as a sovereign. Hobbes in either case makes God appear as an incompetent sovereign, either ruling so poorly that he was forcibly deposed, or abdicating his rights contrary to his duty and letting his people be ruled by another.

This transfer of power ended the kingdom of God as a particular nation, with only the promise that Christ would restore it in a future age. Hobbes’s greatest concern about Christ’s kingdom is that it not be understood to mean any institution currently existing on earth. He repeatedly emphasizes that it is a kingdom in promise—a kingdom in which Christ will rule as civil sovereign over those who have attained eternal life (38.5). For instance, Hobbes states that “our Savior came into this world that he might be a king, and a judge in the world to come,” but he says further that during his life he “had no kingdom in this world” (40.3–4). If the second kingdom of God is a kingdom only in promise, Christ must be a sovereign only in promise. And while his primary mission was to prepare men for the kingdom to come, he also “taught all men to obey, in the meantime, them that sat in Moses’ seat” (41.5). Taken in isolation, this argument is unremarkable in light of the Christian tradition regarding civil obedience. However, the full implication of Hobbes’s argument appears in the following chapter, where he states that obedience is owed “*in all things*” to civil sovereigns, and to no one else—certainly not to ministers who oppose the sovereign (42.10).

To take these statements together, Christ is not a civil sovereign, but it is only to a civil sovereign that obedience is owed, since “they that have no kingdom can make no laws” (42.45). Is Christ, then, not to be obeyed? While Hobbes states that “Christ came to call to his obedience such as should believe in him” by means of persuasion and wonders, the resulting obligation must be understood as one of future obedience, “whensoever [Christ] should be pleased to take the kingdom upon him” (41.3–4). Obedience is not owed to someone who has no lawful right to command it. Hobbes states that he has already shown “that the kingdom of Christ is not of this world; therefore, *neither* can his ministers (unless they be kings) require obedience in his name” (42.6)—which implies that Christ himself cannot require obedience. Indeed, the only authority that Hobbes says Christ gave his apostles was the power to “proclaim the kingdom of Christ,” making them our “schoolmasters, and not our commanders” (42.5). This would comport with what Hobbes states elsewhere, quoting scripture, that “no man can obey two masters” (20.4). To Christ, then, and to his ministers no obedience is owed—unless those ministers are also civil sovereigns.

This argument has profound implications for Hobbes's understanding of sovereignty and the role of Christianity in the commonwealth. Since Christianity exists within the limbo between the first covenantal kingdom of God and the second, its spiritual ministers lack the power to command anything or impose any obligations of belief on the universal body of believers. Christians are not yet "subjects of the kingdom of God," and Christianity is made effectively equivalent to the religion of the Gentiles, which teaches merely civil obedience. Hobbes implies as much in Part III, where he states that "the right of judging what doctrines are fit for peace, and to be taught the subjects, is in all commonwealths inseparably annexed... to the sovereign power civil" (42.67). He then carries the point even further: "All that is NECESSARY to salvation is contained in two virtues: *faith in Christ*, and *obedience to laws*" (43.3, emphasis in original). Thus—private belief aside (40.2)—Christianity becomes merely a civil institution requiring civil obedience.

The civil sovereign thus assumes the full range of temporal and spiritual power, quite literally acting as prophet, priest, and king, and reigning over both church and state with absolute authority, since "the church, if it be one person, is the same thing with a commonwealth of Christians" (33.24). Although Hobbes wishes to deny the Roman pontiff the power to define doctrine and morals by virtue of his office, he has no qualms about giving that breadth of power to every civil sovereign. The sovereign could give the pope custody of these matters, but, like any other religious minister, the pope would be acting as "his" (that is, the sovereign's) minister (42.70, 80). Hobbes states that, "from this consolidation of the right politic and ecclesiastic in Christian sovereigns, it is evident they have all manner of power over their subjects... both in policy and religion" (42.79). Thus "the policy and laws civil" are no longer "a part of religion" (12.22), but rather religion has become subservient to politics, in the Christian commonwealth just as in the pagan commonwealths of antiquity (12.12).

V.

The full implications of the sovereign's religious authority become evident on examining the way Hobbes appropriates to him the traditionally independent and distinctively religious roles of prophet and priest. Hobbes offers two different definitions of a prophet in Part III of the *Leviathan*, the first to preclude private persons from claiming prophetic power and the second to allow the civil sovereign to be considered a "true prophet." Hobbes states that a prophet claims to speak for God and that a true prophet is known by working miracles and not teaching a foreign religion (32.5, 7). Both characteristics are made indispensable, since "asunder... neither of these is sufficient" to mark a true prophet (*ibid.*). The importance of miracles for faith Hobbes discusses in the chapter on religion, noting that, in the time of Moses, "miracles failing, faith also failed" (12.29). But Hobbes also claims that after the Ascension, "miracles now cease" (32.9); that Christian faith must share the fate of faith in Moses's time, Hobbes only insinuates. He does have reason for making such a suggestion, since it allows him to deny the truth of private revelations and inspirations that do not conform to the

public teaching (32.9) and especially to deny what one might call seditious miracles, making them equivalent to revolting against God:

Yet if [the miracle] tend to stir up revolt against the king, or him that governeth by the king's authority, he that doth such miracle is not to be considered otherwise than as sent to make trial of their allegiance. For these words, *revolt from the Lord your God*, are in this place equivalent to *revolt from your king*. (32.8, emphasis in original)

According to this initial definition of "prophet," then, no private person living after the Ascension can claim to speak for God, since prophecy requires miracles, but there is no longer any need for miracles.

Since this definition of a prophet denies the possibility of prophecy not only to private persons but also to the sovereign, Hobbes later introduces a new definition that will still deny prophecy to the former but allow it for the latter. In chapter 36 he characterizes a "true prophet" simply as someone who teaches that "Jesus is the Christ," who in a Christian commonwealth is none other than the sovereign (36.20). Although Hobbes has suggested that if one were to receive "a certain and sure revelation concerning the will of God," one could heed it (26.40–1), he here denounces following such prophecy as radically subversive:

Every man, therefore, ought to consider who is the sovereign prophet (that is to say, who it is that is God's viceregent on earth, and hath next under God the authority of governing Christian men), and to observe for a rule that doctrine which, in the name of God, he hath commanded to be taught... For when Christian men take not their Christian sovereign for God's prophet, they must either take their own dreams for the prophecy they mean to be governed by... or they must suffer themselves to be led by some strange prince... by slander of the government, into rebellion (without other miracle to confirm their calling than sometimes an extraordinary success and impunity), and by this means destroying all laws, both divine and human, reduce all order, government, and society to the first chaos of violence and civil war. (36.20)

Not only is it subversive to follow any doctrine besides what the sovereign teaches, it is also "evidently impossible" for a person to establish the truth of a revelation that he himself did not receive. Even the *immediate* recipient of a revelation cannot judge its validity, since "to say [God] hath spoken to him in a dream is no more than to say he dreamed that God spake to him" (32.6). But what the sovereign declares to be a miracle or a revelation, though this also is beyond the private subject's ability to verify, is made binding by the sovereign's judgment (26.40–1), and "private reason must submit to the public" (37.13).

The impossibility of verifying revelation in turn feeds into Hobbes's broader understanding of the sovereign's authority to define and promulgate doctrine—his priestly role as "supreme pastor" (42.69–70). Since

the sovereign is the final judge concerning the authenticity of miracles and the veracity of revelation, he is also the only one who can define and interpret the word of God. Hobbes states that "it is not the writer, but the authority of the church, that maketh a book canonical," and that whoever "hath a lawful power over any writing, to make it law, hath the power also to approve or disapprove the interpretation of the same" (33.20, 25). This "lawful power" belongs to the sovereign, since the church, as he repeatedly says, "is the same thing with a commonwealth of Christians" (33.24; 39.5). So the supreme pastor of the church—the civil sovereign of the commonwealth—has the authority to define what belongs canonically to scripture and to impose his interpretation of it on his subjects as the law of God. The scriptures thus become the Mount Sinai of the Christian world, which the sovereign may approach and interpret for his subjects, but which they must only behold in wonder.

For Hobbes, this task of interpretation is intrinsically political, since "the right of judging what doctrines are fit for peace, and to be taught the subjects, is in all commonwealths inseparably annexed... to the sovereign power civil" (42.67); this right Hobbes also implicitly ascribes to pagan legislators when he says that their ends in establishing civil religion "were only to keep the people in obedience and peace" (12.20). Shielding scriptures from the prying eyes of the people is also fundamentally political, for it protects the sovereign and the character of his rule from the judgment of his subjects. Hobbes states that "to interpret [the scriptures], that is, to pry into what God saith to him whom he appointeth to govern under him, and make themselves judges whether he govern as God commandeth him or not, is to transgress the bounds God hath set us, and to gaze upon God irreverently" (40.7). But Hobbes's concern over irreverence towards God and the scriptures are clearly secondary to his real intent to guard the sovereign against the impiety to which such private interpretations would expose him; indeed, Hobbes himself does not scruple to devote much of the last part of the *Leviathan* to interpreting the scriptures so as to discredit the Catholic Church. In fact, he is securing for the ruler of the Christian commonwealth the very privilege enjoyed by pagan legislators: "making the same things displeasing to the gods" that are contrary to the laws (12.20). The full practical implications of the sovereign's authority over the definition of doctrines are striking, for Hobbes states that the kingdom of heaven is open to those who "believe all the articles of Christian faith necessary to salvation" (43.3). Since the Hobbesian ruler defines the articles of faith, desire for salvation must impel his subjects to obey his laws and dictates—indeed, their salvation may well hinge on their civil obedience.

Moreover, if a person has not received personal revelation about the content of God's law or scripture, he is bound to rely on the judgment of the sovereign in these matters. Hobbes says, "He, therefore, to whom God hath not supernaturally revealed that they are his [laws]... is not obliged to obey them by any authority but his whose commands have already the force of laws" (33.24). He further states that "the Scripture of the New Testament is there only law where the lawful civil power hath made it

so" (42.44). No one can be blamed for following or not following any of Christ's precepts not made into law by the civil authority (42.43). In fact, Hobbes says that a great danger to the commonwealth is the belief that "whatsoever a man does against his conscience is sin... because the law is the public conscience" (29.7; see also 42.37, 46). In some passages Hobbes seems to imply at least some distinct province for a subject's private judgment, so that when obedience to the sovereign compels him to act against his conscience a subject does not compromise his own integrity, since "that action is not his but his sovereign's" (42.11). But the distinction is ultimately meaningless: when subjects combine in a commonwealth they each authorize and claim as their own whatever the sovereign may one day consider expedient, and thus "every particular man is author of all that his sovereign doth" (18.6). In such passages, Hobbes gives the civil sovereign the power to decide what God's law is for his people and makes disobedience to civil laws, in effect, the only sin.

Elsewhere Hobbes makes an even more brazen argument that the sovereign can define the divine law: "All subjects are bound to obey that for divine law which is declared to be so by the laws of the commonwealth... There is no place in the world where men are permitted to pretend other commandments of God than are declared for such by the commonwealth" (26.41). Furthermore, Hobbes states that "the laws of God... are none but the laws of nature, whereof the principal is that we should not violate our faith, that is, a commandment to obey our civil sovereigns" (43.5). The divine law might be summarized, then, as obedience to earthly rulers. As if these statements were not radical enough, Hobbes then enlarges the sphere of the civil law even further to encompass the totality of law:

He [the sovereign] requireth obedience to all his own (that is, to all the civil) laws, in which also are contained all the laws of nature (that is, all the laws of God). For besides the laws of nature, and the laws of the Church which are part of the civil law (for the Church that can make laws is the commonwealth) there be no other laws divine... Christian kings may err in deducing a consequence, but who shall judge?... There can, therefore, be no contradiction between the laws of God and the laws of a Christian commonwealth. (43.22)

The civil law, then, contains all the laws of nature, God, and the church—so disobedience to the one implies disobedience to the others, and the independence of divine commands from the civil sovereign suggested elsewhere proves illusory. Furthermore, since the sovereign determines and pronounces what are the commands of God, there is no possibility that a private subject would find himself torn between obeying God's commands and the sovereign's. In other words, private conscience is effectively abolished.

Placed into context with each other, these arguments regarding divine and natural law, scripture and doctrine, and the truth of miracles and prophecy, bolster the claim that runs throughout the *Leviathan*: there is no government in this world but the temporal, no independent church

that holds the sword of spiritual rule,¹³ and “no power on earth to which all other commonwealths are subject”—apparently not even the power of God (39.5). Indeed, Hobbes completes the absolute authority of the civil sovereign by attributing to him the godlike power to judge good and evil. In his discussion of the rights of sovereigns, Hobbes gives the civil ruler “the whole power of... propriety,” which contains the rules of “good, evil, lawful and unlawful” (18.10, emphasis in original). Moreover, “the makers of civil laws are not only declarers, but also makers of the justice and injustice of actions, there being nothing in men’s manners that makes them righteous or unrighteous but their conformity with the law of the sovereign” (42.96). The sovereign’s power to define good and evil also confirms the principle that the only real sin is disobedience to civil laws.

Hobbes develops the implications of this power in his discussion of the Fall, in which he states that the temptation of Eve to disobey God’s commands demonstrates how “the commands of them that have the right to command are not by their subjects to be censured, nor disputed” (20.17). In the account from Genesis this sort of sovereign immunity belongs to God, but here Hobbes extends it to anyone with the lawful authority to rule—a surprising development, since Hobbes acknowledges that Adam and Eve “did indeed take upon them God’s office, which is judicature of good and evil, but acquired no new ability to distinguish them aright” (20.17, emphasis in original). The “knowledge” that God withholds from Adam and Eve, then, is not merely the ability to distinguish between good and evil according to an objective law, but precisely the power of judicature Hobbes assigns to the sovereign—the power to define one thing as evil and another as good (20.16). Whether the civil sovereign is able to distinguish between good and evil is irrelevant: practically, since his judgments are above censure and disputation; and logically, since he defines the meaning of those words for his subjects. Hobbes’s discussion of the sovereign’s prerogative highlights the ambiguity introduced in his account of the Fall. The Biblical story of the Fall presupposes an objective moral code that Adam and Eve failed to grasp, but the declarations of Hobbes’s sovereign—whatever they may be—indicate what is “good, evil, lawful and unlawful” for his subjects. Indeed, by making God’s rule the model for the sovereign’s ultimately arbitrary power of judicature, Hobbes’s account leaves the moral consistency of God himself an open question.

Sovereigns, by virtue of their sovereignty, are (for their subjects) “as gods, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 1:5), possessing the right and power to define the moral code “in order to the public peace” (18.10). Private subjects, however, like Adam and Eve, and fallen humanity in general, are unable to “distinguish between good and evil aright” and must comply with the commands of some higher authority—hence Hobbes’s affirmation of law as the public conscience and his rejection of the authority of private conscience. But the subject’s inability to recognize any sort of eternal and absolute morality is immaterial, because whatever the sovereign declares to be right or wrong must simply be acknowledged as such, as if it were God’s

13 See, for instance, Pope Boniface VIII’s papal bull *Unam sanctam*.

judgment. There is thus only one government on earth, and, in establishing it, Hobbes has effectively made God and his divine law inconsequential. The sovereign declares the nature of justice, morality, God, and religion for his commonwealth, and his sovereign power "is as great as possibly men can be imagined to make it" (20.17). Only the fool would say in his heart, there is no Justice, there is no God.

VI.

The sovereign assumes the place of God in Hobbes's account of the Christian commonwealth. Hobbes conceals this argument beneath a presentation of Christianity as an authentic religion in which each Christian sovereign is supreme pastor for his commonwealth, making laws that embrace the law of God in order to prepare his subjects for the kingdom of God to come. Yet the underhanded thrust of the argument leaves Christianity as an essentially empty husk, to be filled as the sovereign sees fit, "to keep [his people] in obedience and peace" (12.20). He has the ultimate authority to define for his commonwealth what constitute the commands of God, the inspired scriptures, the necessary doctrines for salvation, the proper modes of worship, even good and evil. By making Christianity subject to the needs and beliefs (or whims) of the sovereign, Hobbes empties it of any substantial meaning or reality that transcends the political demands of the individual commonwealth and makes it precisely and solely a civic institution—an institution designed to serve "that great Leviathan, or rather (to speak more reverently) of that *Mortal God* to which we owe... our peace and defence" (17.13).

This subtle religious argument has had profound implications for political philosophy since Hobbes. Hobbes's method allows him ostensibly to deprive the (Catholic) Church of power within the state, while covertly collapsing all religious authority into civil authority. Hobbes's argument for subjective morality (morality based solely on the laws of individual nations) is not a far step from contemporary moral relativism and the belief that individual conscience has little or no standing in civil society. Other themes necessitated by the subjugation of religious to civil authority that have also had far-reaching effects are the de-emphasis of concern for the afterlife, the concurrent emphasis on concerns of this life, and the suggestion that the sovereign knows best for us in all things. Indeed, considering the full range of the sovereign's absolute power over the natural realm—which Hobbes makes paramount—one might say that, in the Hobbesian scheme, kings are indeed gods (30.7).

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