

# interpretation

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# interpretation

Volume 10 number 1

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# The Theology of Leviathan: Hobbes on Religion

RICHARD SHERLOCK

*University of Tennessee*

In 1666, some fifteen years after the appearance of *Leviathan*, Sir Charles Wolseley published a scathing attack on Hobbes especially with regard to his alleged atheism. At the conclusion of Wolseley's diatribe he appended an "atheist's catechism" which expressed his understanding of Hobbes' atheism and Hobbes' view of religion and its place in human society.

Q. Do you believe there is a God?

A. No: I believe there is none.

Q. What is the true ground of your belief?

A. Because I have no mind there should be one.

Q. What other reason do you give for it?

A. Because I never saw him.

Q. If there be no God, how came this world to be?

A. It made itself by meer chance.

Q. After what manner was it first pieced together?

A. By a casual hit of Atoms one against another.

Q. How came those Atoms so to hit one against another?

A. As they were eternally dancing about, in an infinite space.

Q. Whence came the reason of mankind; and all that order and regularity we find in the world?

A. From the meer accidental conjunction of those Atoms.

Q. What is it that men call Religion?

A. A politick cheat put upon the world.

Q. Who were the first contrivers of this cheat?

A. Some cunning men that designed to keep the world in subjection and awe.<sup>1</sup>

Wolseley's charges were not new. He merely repeated the most significant strictures that Hobbes faced from a number of his most important critics: Cudworth, More, Ross, Wallis, and several others. They all held that Hobbes was in fact an atheist and that this was the most unpalatable aspect of his teachings. In recent years the interest in Hobbes' religious convictions has not noticeably abated. Rather, there has been a steady flow of books and articles in which the "theism" of Hobbes is treated extensively.<sup>2</sup> The majority of this

1. Sir Charles Wolseley, *The Unreasonableness of Atheism Made Manifest* (London, 1866) quoted in Samuel Mintz, *The Hunting of Leviathan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 39.

2. Cf. esp. Ronald Hepburn, "Hobbes on the Knowledge of God" in R. S. Peters and Maurice Cranston, eds. *Hobbes and Rousseau: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972) pp. 85–108; Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952); D. P. Gauthier, *The Logic of Leviathan* (London: Oxford University Press,

literature has concentrated on two questions that have been taken to be central to the understanding of his overall system: (1) are there reasonable grounds for belief in God in Hobbes' works<sup>3</sup> and (2) does the mature system of Hobbes, especially as it is presented in *Leviathan*, require theistic premises to make it work.<sup>4</sup>

Both of these issues are important in understanding the full range of Hobbes' work and its broader implications. It seems to me, however, that a fascination with these questions can lead us to overlook some really important aspects of Hobbes's understanding of religion and its relationship to politics and society.

The question of religion as a set of human opinions about God and his relationship to man interested Hobbes immensely and was an issue of crucial importance in his mature political philosophy; the question of the truth of theism was not nearly so important. Roughly half of *Leviathan* discusses obviously theological subjects. Yet in none of his English works is there any comparable treatment of the reasonableness of theism *per se*. In light of this obvious indication of Hobbes' interests, it seems to me that a new departure is needed. This new departure will start not with the question of the reasonableness of theism but with the question of Hobbes's understanding of human religiousness and the opinions that mankind has come to hold about God and his dealings with men. Theology, not theism, is what interested Hobbes and it is where any proper interpretation of his analysis of religious questions should begin.<sup>5</sup> What follows is a preliminary attempt to unravel the place of religion in *Leviathan* and more particularly the place of Book III in that teaching.<sup>6</sup>

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1969); F. C. Hood, *The Divine Politics of Thomas Hobbes* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964); Howard Warrender, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: His Theory of Obligation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957); A. E. Taylor, "The Ethical Doctrine of Hobbes" in Keith Brown, ed., *Hobbes Studies* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1965); Willis Glover, "God and Thomas Hobbes" in Brown, ed., *Hobbes*, pp. 141–168.

3. On this point see especially Hepburn, *Hobbes*, and Keith Brown, "Hobbes' Grounds for Belief in God," *Philosophy* 37 (1962) pp. 336–344.

4. This issue has been raised most forcefully in the substantial debate over the Warrender thesis.

5. One of the few who have taken seriously the teachings concerning religion in *Leviathan* is Leo Strauss. His insights are highly important and I have used them in this paper. However, within the limits of a more broadly conceived essay Strauss could not offer a comprehensive view of the topic that might be needed in order to see clearly the nature of Hobbes's teaching. Also he does not indicate the relation of Hobbes's views to his predecessors and he specifically omits any discussion of the precise reformulation of Christian theology which Hobbes found himself compelled to offer. Cf. Strauss, "On the Basis of Hobbes's Political Philosophy," *What is Political Philosophy?* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1959) pp. 170–196.

6. The rationale for concentrating on *Leviathan* in this fashion is primarily that, as Strauss has shown, this work is the most complete statement of Hobbes's mature political teaching. Strauss, *Pol. Phil. of Hobbes*, pp. 71–78. On the genesis of this problem in Hobbes, see Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953) pp. 198–199.

## I. HUMAN RELIGIOUSNESS

It will be recalled that Wolseley's "Atheists Catechism" had accused Hobbes of maintaining the view that religion is nothing more than a "politic cheat put upon the world" by "cunning men" who maintain themselves in positions of political power with its aid. Wolseley obviously thought that such a view of religion and its origin was false. Whether such a view is false may be debated, but it certainly is false to ascribe this view to Hobbes.

The view that is ascribed to Hobbes here is perhaps closer to that held by Machiavelli. For Machiavelli man does not seem to be naturally religious in the sense that he is for Hobbes. Machiavelli's prince, full of the striving eros of Renaissance "virtu," has no need of religious convictions that would only hinder his striving. Like a reincarnated Prometheus the prince overturns the Gods in pursuit of his own glory and then finds that he must reinstitute religion as a source of public order. The Prince's transcendence of religion allows him to refound it as an artifact of will in the service of that other great artifact: civil society.<sup>7</sup>

This, however, is not quite Hobbes's view. For him man is religious as a result of his nature, not his training at the hands of the prince. Social upbringing and human imagination would account for a person's holding certain specific religious beliefs, but the fact of his holding some such opinions is rooted in the nature of all men, not in their socialization. Hobbes argues explicitly that religion is the fundamental human response to fear in the face of the unknown. Anxiety in the face of an unknown and largely hostile natural world gives rise

7. Machiavelli's views are scattered throughout *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. In *the Prince* we are explicitly told that the prince must maintain the fear of God in his soldiers as a means of keeping them obedient. The implication is strong that this is true for citizens as well (Chap. 12). In the *Discourses* the argument is even more explicit. There he discusses at length the role of religion in the founding of Rome and by extension its role in the founding of any regime. The argument of this section is that Numa, the successor of Romulus, has to instill a fear of the Gods in the people as a means of taming them and making them governable. Religion, he says, is the "most necessary and assuring support of any civil society." It is precisely because of his role as a religious founder that Machiavelli believes that the Romans should honor Numa, not Romulus, as their true founder (book I, chaps. 11–15). In these passages the explicit argument is that religion is a necessary adjunct to any political regime. Fear of God's wrath will do more than anything else to induce obedience to the law. This fear must be induced where it does not exist already. In this sense Hobbes's position is different. He does not argue that religion is a necessary adjunct to political power. In Book III he will attempt to show that Christian beliefs can support absolute sovereignty, but this is demonstrated only after considerable effort. Hobbes nowhere argues that a ruler would have to create a fear of the Gods as Machiavelli's Numa did. Such a reaction was natural in man, not artificial. The one point on which they both agree was that Christianity was a species of religious belief that was disastrous in its political implications, at least as it was usually interpreted. Cf. Machiavelli, *The Prince and the Discourses* (New York: Random House, 1950); see also the penetrating comments on these matters in Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1958) esp. pp. 105–110.

to religious convictions concerning a providential ordering of that natural world. As human beings are confronted with a threatening and unpredictable nature, they turn to religious beliefs for psychological aid and comfort.

The natural cause of religion, the anxiety of the time to come . . . For being assured that there be causes of all things that have arrived hitherto, or shall arrive hereafter; it [is] impossible for a man who continually endeavoreth to secure himself against the evil he fears, and procure the good he desireth, not to be in a perpetual solicitude of the time to come; so that every man, especially those that are over provident, are in a state like to that of Prometheus. For as Prometheus, which interpreted is, the prudent man, was bound to the hill Caucasus, a place of large prospect where an eagle feeding on his liver, devoured in the day as much as was repaired in the night; so that man, which looks too far before him, in the care of the future time hath his heart all the day long gnawed on by fear of death, poverty or other calamity; and has no repose or pause of his anxiety, but in sleep.

This perpetual fear, always accompanying mankind in the ignorance of causes, as it were in the dark, must needs have for object something. And therefore when there is nothing to be seen, there is nothing to accuse, either of their good, or evil fortune, but some power or agent, invisible; in which sense perhaps it was that some of the old poets said that the Gods were at first created by human fear.<sup>8</sup>

In Hobbes, fear is the engine that drives men toward political regimes and religious beliefs. The fear of bodily harms at the hands of other men gives rise to man's imposing political order on himself and his fellows. The fear of the unknown natural world gives rise to his imposing a divine order on nature and cosmos. As in Hume, "The natural history of religion" is the history of man's propensity to imaginatively impose providential meaning on an otherwise hostile world.<sup>9</sup>

Machiavelli saw both religiousness and religions themselves as artifacts of the political design of the prince who himself transcended both religion and politics and was thus free to refound both. For Hobbes religions are artifacts, but religiousness, or what he calls "the natural seed of religion" is not. Religions themselves are created in the interplay between this "natural seed" (that is, fear) and the different "fancies, judgements and passions of several men."<sup>10</sup> These differences in passions and imagination account for the different religious convictions of mankind, but they do not account for the most fundamental fact, that man is a *homo religiosus*.

8. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Michael Oakeshott (New York: Collier Books, 1962) 1:12, pp. 87–88; all references to *Leviathan* are to this edition.

9. The similarity to the views of Hume is striking. In fact most of Hume's argument on the origin of religious belief could have been lifted directly from *Leviathan*. Cf. David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1957).

10. Lev. 1:12, p. 90, also 1:14, p. 110–111.

## II. THE REFOUNDING OF CHRISTIANITY: *LEVIATHAN* BOOK III

This dialectic of nature and convention forms the presuppositional framework within which we can understand the place of book III in the mature system of *Leviathan* and its unique structure and content as well. Briefly, in book III Hobbes tries to reshape Christian teaching in order to make it an acceptable, even a necessary part of a commonwealth founded on the Hobbesian principle of absolute sovereignty. Since he cannot dismiss religious opinions as something to be outgrown he tries to give an account of the fundamental religious opinions of his age that will allow those beliefs to be placed in the service of sovereign power.

Thus we must examine book III on two separate levels. On the level of convention Hobbes reinterprets specific Christian doctrines in order to render them less disruptive to his overall political intention. At a deeper level the fact that Hobbes discusses theological issues at such length at all is dictated by the naturalness of religion.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the precise way in which religion is natural to man gives rise to particular political problems and determines the specific theological doctrines which he must address in book III.

As we have noted Hobbes sees religious belief as the response of human beings to the fearful world around them. Seen in this light, in order to be efficacious in providing an answer to this fear, religious beliefs would need to provide a comprehensive view of a providential relationship between man and God. More specifically, this necessity for a certain kind of teaching can be divided into two fundamental sorts of religious opinions. First, to answer effectively to the fear of death there would need to be a teaching about the divinely grounded continuity of the individual through time, including a view of the future life situation of the person. Secondly, religions must provide for a revelatory mediation between God and man, so that man may know of God's providence on his behalf. God must both pacify the future for man and reveal His activities to man so that man may order his life in accordance with God's will.

However, it is precisely these two sets of opinions that are the most disruptive to the power of an absolute sovereign. Belief in a divinely ordained afterlife mitigates against the fear of death at the hands of an earthly sovereign and undercuts the power of the political regime to compel obedience in this manner. Similarly, belief in the accessibility of the divine will to man renders

11. It has been argued both by Mintz and by Glover (see notes 1 and 2) that Hobbes must have believed the religious views found in his works because no other reasonable explanation can be found for his publishing such obvious heretical teachings. I think that this explanation overlooks his understanding of the naturalness of religion per se. Seen in this light Hobbes could not ignore religious questions in his overall teaching, especially if he was to convince his audience; however, he could hardly remain content with Christian orthodoxy and its disastrous implications for any doctrine of absolute sovereignty.

problematic any human obedience to lesser sources of authority. If the sovereign cannot compel absolute obedience to his will then he is hardly sovereign in the sense required by Hobbes's political teaching. Yet Hobbes's own view of human religiousness leads to the conclusion that this very religious "fancy" is the source of the greatest difficulties for political sovereignty. In essence both religious belief and political sovereignty derive from man's fearful condition in the world. But their separate answers to the most elemental human fears are fundamentally in tension, a tension that must be overcome if political regimes of the necessary type are to survive. Hobbes himself clearly points to this conclusion in what is perhaps the central passage in book III:

The maintenance of civil society depending on justice and justice on the power of life and death, and other less rewards and punishments, residing in them that have the sovereignty of the commonwealth; it is impossible a commonwealth should stand where any other than the sovereign hath a power of giving greater rewards than life and of inflicting greater punishments than death. Now seeing eternal life is a greater reward than the life present; an eternal torment a greater punishment than the death of nature; it is a thing worthy to be well considered of all men that desire, by obeying authority to avoid the calamities of confusion an civil war what is meant in Holy Scripture, by life eternal and torment eternal.<sup>12</sup>

Given this necessity, the explicit content of book III is formed by an attempt to creatively reinterpret those two strands of Christian teaching that deal with the future life and with the accessibility of the divine will to man. In a sense the latter is more fundamental than the former since in Hobbes's epistemology whatever knowledge we have of the future life is dependent on divine revelation. Hence, Hobbes spends most of book III discussing the various sources by which the will of God is known in Christian teaching. With a mixture of penetrating subtlety, brilliant insight and clever elision Hobbes turns Christianity into a civil religion and the political sovereign into God's lieutenant on earth.

On a closer examination of the argument in book III we may single out three fundamental ways in which God reveals Himself to man in Christian doctrine, each of which Hobbes treats at length: (1) the immediate revelation of his will in Prophecy, (2) the mediate revelation in scripture and (3) in the person and work of Christ.

In the case of the immediate revelation of the will of God in prophecy, Hobbes flatly denied what many of his contemporaries affirmed; God simply did not speak to man in this fashion any longer. In reaching this conclusion, he makes two moves that are crucial to his approach to prophecy. The first move renders the classical Christian notion of prophecy harmless from a political point of view. The second move renders it obsolete.<sup>13</sup>

12. III:38, p. 325; II:29, pp. 342-343.

13. III:36, *passim*. The reverse of this denial of immediate contact between the believer and God is the lengthy attack on demonology in book IV. At the level of popular opinion this subject

The starting point for this discussion is Hobbes's belief that revelation is not self-justifying. It does not carry with it an immediately recognizable sign of its own authority. Since this is the case Hobbes does what most of his contemporaries did—he turns to scripture to discover “by what marks prophets are known.”<sup>14</sup> There he finds two fundamental criteria: First, the prophet must perform miracles and, second, the prophet must not teach any other religion than “that which is already established.” Hobbes treats the second of these “marks” first and at greater length; with its help he renders any prophetic teaching politically harmless in a crucial sense. If there is an established *modus vivendi* between church and state a true prophet could not upset that arrangement.<sup>15</sup>

Later on Hobbes reinforces the politically harmless nature of Prophecy with an argument designed to demonstrate from scripture that in the Old Testament the prophet was a minister of the king and acted at his behest and under his authority.

Of prophets that were so by perpetual calling in the Old Testament some were supreme and some were subordinate; supreme were first Moses and after him the high priests, every one for his time as long as the priesthood was royal; and after the people of the Jews had rejected God, that he should no longer reign over them those kings which submitted themselves to God's government were also his chief prophets; and the high priest's office became ministerial. And when God was to be consulted, they put on the Holy Testaments and enquired of the Lord, as the King commanded them, and were deprived of their office when the king thought fit.<sup>16</sup>

Having thus made prophecy in the classical Christian sense politically irrelevant, Hobbes proceeds to turn the category of Prophecy into one of supreme political relevance by making the king the “sovereign prophet” in his regime. Since the truth of Prophecy is marked by its congruence with established theological opinions it is an easy move to view the king as having assumed the “mantle of the prophet” since he is charged with the duty of maintaining the established beliefs of the subject.<sup>17</sup>

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may have been more important than the subject of prophecy. Certainly the fears associated with demonology were substantial and if permitted to remain would surely be more significant than anything that could be manipulated by the sovereign authority. IV:45, pp. 460–469. Cf. “Pretense of Inspiration,” II:29, p. 239.

14. III:32, p. 272. This is an interesting move given his later comments concerning the authority of scripture. Cf. Strauss “On the Basis . . .” p. 185.

15. III:32, pp. 273–274.

16. III:36, p. 311.

17. III:36, pp. 315–317. This teaching concerning “sovereign prophets” is central to the Hobbesian presentation of Christianity. Once the supremacy of civil over strictly ecclesiastical power has been established in religious matters then the most essential reformulation of Christian teaching has been accomplished. The necessity of this teaching resides in the fact that while religion teaches of power greater than that held by any sovereign the fears associated with it are not necessarily as great as those associated with an earthly sovereign (I:14). This follows because of the immediacy of sovereign power and its punishments. This dilemma for religion can be solved

The prophetic mantle of the king is reinforced by Hobbes's view that Prophecy in the Biblical sense has ceased in the modern era. The argument for this conclusion follows directly from the second "mark" of true prophecy that Hobbes found in scripture: the performance of miracles by the prophet. Since miracles have ceased then ipso facto prophecy has now ceased.<sup>18</sup> If this argument is true then Hobbes is left with the one mark of Prophecy that is still relevant in modern times, that is, maintaining the established religious order. Since this latter task is one that Hobbes reserves for the sovereign authority, we are in effect left with the teaching that the only mark of Prophecy that is relevant in the postbiblical period is one that leads directly to the sovereign authority as God's messenger on earth today.

This role of the sovereign authority is strengthened by Hobbes' understanding of Jesus and the claims about him which are central in Christian theology. In a very subtle way Hobbes reduces the status of Christ as a unique mediator between God and man; the reverse of this reduction is a subtle and silent elevation of the sovereign as a current mediator between God and man.

The central symbolic figure in both the reduction of the status of Christ and the elevation of royal authority is that of Moses. As early as the second century A.D., Christian apologists had made Moses into an archetype of Christ and had analogized between the activities and roles of the two figures in the economy of salvation.<sup>19</sup> However, this argument could cut two ways. It could just as easily be turned from an orthodox apologetic into an Arian argument that aimed to deny the special uniqueness of Jesus and his mission.<sup>20</sup> If Moses and Jesus were so similar, it was an easy move to view Jesus as simply filling a Mosaic role at a new point in the history of salvation.

The radical nature of Hobbes's teaching at this point must be appreciated to see his intentions clearly. The early Christian apologetic had viewed several activities of Moses as "precursors" of works Jesus would later perform. The activities of Moses were similar to but not the same as those that Jesus per-

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through the use of human mediators such as the papacy, a fact of which Hobbes was well aware (III:42). It is precisely in order to render illegitimate the supposed powers of these authorities "of giving greater rewards than life and of inflicting greater punishments than death" (III 38) that Hobbes finds his teaching on the sovereign prophets to be the necessary core of his whole "theological project."

18. III:32, p. 275; III:36, pp. 318-324.

19. Cf. J. E. Burns, "The Agreement of Moses and Jesus in the *Demonstratio Evangelica* of Eusebius," *Vigiliae Christianae* 31 (1977) pp. 117-125; T. Glasson, *Moses in the Fourth Gospel* (London: Allenson, 1963).

20. The Arian doctrines of the fourth century were taken over by the emperors as a political ideology that lent support to imperial power. The Arian reduction of the status of Christ and the uses of such views by those seeking to support increased imperial power bear striking similarity to the politically motivated Christological views one finds in Hobbes. On the political uses of Arianism see George Williams, "Christology and Church-State Relations in the Fourth Century," *Church History* 20:3 (Sept. 1951), pp. 3-33, continued in *Church History* 20:4 (Dec. 1951), pp. 3-26; also see Erik Peterson, *Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem* (Leipzig, 1935).

formed. Neither did Moses perform the most special task of Jesus which was to mediate God to man. Hobbes, however, takes the decisive step of arguing that Jesus and Moses stand as equals in the most fundamental role of “representing” God to man.

One and the same God is the person represented by Moses and Christ. Our savior, therefore, both in teaching and reigning, representeth, as Moses did the person of God; which God from that time forward, but not before, is called the Father; and being still one and the same substance, is one person as represented by Moses and another person as represented by his son Christ. For person being a relative to representer, it is consequent to a plurality of represented that there be a plurality of persons, though of one and the same substance.<sup>21</sup>

This analogy between Jesus and Moses appears as a subtle thread running throughout book III of *Leviathan*. Jesus and Moses are alike in the most special role that Christians have usually reserved for Jesus, that of a representer of the “person of God” to man. But, if Jesus is now seen to represent God not uniquely, but as one of a group of others who have the same role in other historical periods, might there not be a different “representer” in the contemporary historical setting? Hobbes opens up this question very guardedly but I think that he does so sufficiently for us to see his deeper intention.

In the early sections of book III Hobbes first states the Jesus/Moses analogy in the following fashion:

For these three at several times did represent the person of God; Moses, and his successors the High Priests and Kings of Judah, in the Old Testament: Christ Himself, in the time he lived on earth; and the apostles and their successors from the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Ghost descended on them down to this day.<sup>22</sup>

Here the representational theme is expanded to include a line of later “representers,” that is, the Apostles “and their successors . . .” down to the present. Who these successors in the role of Jesus might be is suggested later in the argument. There the analogy is explicitly made between the status and function of Moses and the status and function of present Kings. As Moses was God’s “viceregent” or his “sovereign prophet” so too is the person in whom present political sovereignty resides.<sup>23</sup> Given what we have already seen, however, the unspoken teaching may be much more radical in its inclusion of Jesus in the analogical framework that includes Moses and the sovereign authority.

These first two sources of the mediation between God and man were certainly crucial in any fully developed Christian theology but they were not as

21. III:41, p. 358.

22. III:33, p. 283. In chapter 26 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli specifically analogized the role of Moses and that of Lorenzo de’ Medici.

23. III:36, pp. 315–316; III:42, p. 378. Actually the function of Moses as a ruler in the political sense is a recurrent theme in Book III.

immediately relevant and politically explosive as was the revelation of God's will in scripture. Hence, if Hobbes's program is to be successful he must find some way around the appeals of his puritan contemporaries to the *sola scriptura* principle as a test of obedience to the acts of the sovereign authority.

Hobbes's first criticism of the *sola scriptura* tradition is that scripture cannot be interpreted as literally true in the way that this position has always demanded. Essentially he argues that a careful analysis of the biblical text itself shows the inconsistencies and inaccuracies of the record of Old Testament history that is contained therein. Time and time again Hobbes points out the insuperable difficulties inherent in the received view of an errorless biblical text; the books of the Old and New Testaments were mostly not written down by the authors traditionally credited with the task and in many cases only long after the events recorded was the material finally collected into its present form. For example the book of Joshua assumed its present form only "long after the time of Joshua;" the pentateuch itself was not authored by Moses, even though Moses may have begun the process that would eventually lead to the special content and form of our pentateuch.<sup>24</sup>

Seen in this light the revelatory position of the Old Testament is considerably weakened. If the text cannot be interpreted as it literally appears and if, further, it was not written down by the prophetic authors traditionally given credit for it, how can it be assumed to be God's direct word to man? The truth that Hobbes is working toward at this point is bluntly stated in his next argument concerning the canonization of the New Testament. The canon of the New Testament was established not by an arbitrary act of Divine fiat but through a historical process occurring within the Christian community. The authority and witness of that community marked some early Christian writings as having a unique revelatory status and some writings as lacking that same authority. "It is not the writer but the authority of the Church that maketh the book canonical."<sup>25</sup>

If the canon of the New Testament is the product of a historical process occurring within the witnessing community, what has become of the Divine word that has been claimed to be represented in scripture? The understanding of canonization as a historical process places the authority of the church between the believer and the word of God. It mediates the supposed Divine word through a human institution and in a sense makes human authority the arbiter of divine revelation. We no longer have a self-justifying complete text that carries with it the marks of its own Divine authority. The Bible has become merely a selection of writings that a specific human community has deemed authoritative.

This historicizing of the problem of canonization is in some respects merely a prelude to the politicizing of the process. There are two senses of the term

24. III:36, pp. 273-281.

25. III:36, p. 282.

“canon.” One refers to the rendering of a body of writing as an authoritative set of precepts to guide and direct action. In this case the question of canonization would concern the way in which the Bible has become a guide to Christian behavior. However, in this sense the Christian Church cannot compel obedience to its precepts. It can exhort, but it cannot punish. In the second sense of the term “canon” the scriptures are made *law*. “When they are given by one whom he that receiveth them is bound to obey then are those canon not only rules but laws.” The question then becomes one of the power to make the Christian faith into law.<sup>26</sup>

To this question there can be only one answer on Hobbes’s account, an answer prepared for by the historicist account of the first form of canonization given above. The essence of it is simply put; the Scriptures become law insofar as the sovereign declares them to be so. The Mosaic law became law because Moses was the sovereign—not as a result of divine commandment. The rest of the Old Testament was canonized during the restoration when Esdras, operating as High Priest and sovereign, declared it to be so.<sup>27</sup> Finally the New Testament was canonized under the authority of Christian sovereigns, principally Constantine and his immediate successors.<sup>28</sup>

The transmission of the scriptural text to the believer via historical accident has important consequences for Hobbes’s argument as a whole. Just as in the case of Prophecy, the denial of an immediate “supernatural revelation” concerning biblical authority means that the believer is not obligated to accept that authority unless some human authority makes it imperative that he do so. By mediating scriptural texts through a human institution Hobbes opens up the possibility of placing revelation under the control of the highest human authority. By understanding scripture from a historical point of view he temporalizes the notion of revelation into a merely human convention and renders unjustified any appeal to that revelation beyond the control of the supreme convention of the political regime.

He therefore to whom God hath not supernaturally revealed that they are his, and that those that published them, were sent by him, is not obliged to obey them by any authority but his whose commands already have the force of laws; that is to say, by any other authority than that of commonwealth residing in the sovereign who only has the legislative power.<sup>29</sup>

The authority of interpreting the Bible and making the interpretation binding is thus an aspect of political power. Just as in the case of Prophecy and Christology the reduction of the status of a unique religious mediation between the Divine and the human realms elevates the political mediation that exists in

26. IV:42, p. 376–377.

27. IV:42, pp. 378–379.

28. IV:42, p. 380.

29. III:33, p. 284.

the person of the “sovereign prophet.” Since all religious doctrines and symbols that are derived from the Biblical tradition are conventions of human creation they cannot be appealed to over against the power of the organized political community and its appointed representative.

The Hobbesian reformulation of Christian doctrine not only dealt with the three sources of a relation between God and man that we have just examined (Prophecy, Christology and scripture), it also dealt with the teaching about the life after death which could have important motivational consequences for the willingness of the subjects to obey political authority. As noted already, the necessity of reinterpreting this belief follows from the political intentions of book III. In Hobbes’s political philosophy the fear of violent death is the motivating force behind political obedience. However, he argues, the Christian teaching about the world beyond is incompatible with political obedience based on this fear since death would then cease to be the worst evil that could befall a person. It is in light of this understanding that we must view his attempt to reformulate the “Christian hope” so that it does not conflict with the fear that men must have of the power of the political authority.

Hobbes does not claim that it is merely the Christian teaching about a world beyond that creates the problems for absolute political power which he identified. Rather, it is the precise content of the “world beyond” that is the source of the difficulties. By making this move he leaves open the possibility of not overtly denying a belief in an afterlife (which would have shocked his contemporaries) while remaining free to interpret the conventional formulation of the doctrine such that it will pose no great obstacles to political power. In essence, the Hobbesian claim was that Christian theology posited the existence of a heavenly realm that was a much greater reward than anything that could be obtained on earth and a hell that was much worse than the punishments that could be meted out by an earthly sovereign. Believers in such a universe would be much more disposed to obey those who could assure them of their receipt of the blessings of heaven and their avoidance of the terrors of hell than they would any earthly power who could only threaten them with death for failure to obey.<sup>30</sup>

This may be the weakest part of the argument. Earlier he had argued that fear of death was the crucial motivation that drove human beings out of the state of nature into political regimes. Human beings placed absolute political power in the hands of one authority because they supposedly feared the anarchic, deathly consequences of their failure to do so. However, if Hobbes even maintains that there is life after death, then this motivation is undercut. On the other hand if he argues that there is no life after death he would be denying perhaps the most central belief of the Christianity of his seventeenth century readers.

Even here, however, Hobbes does not pull back from the radical implica-  
30. III:38, p.325.

tions of his project. If he cannot quite bring himself to deny outright that there is life after death he can refashion the content of the belief so that it no longer seems to pose such serious problems for political power. In order to do this he makes three interconnected moves. First, he argues that the place of survival after death, the supposed “Kingdom of God” or “Kingdom of Heaven,” is not a place somewhere up in the sky. Rather, he notes that:

By the kingdom of Heaven is meant the kingdom of the king that dwelleth in heaven; and his kingdom was the people of Israel whom he ruled by the prophets, his lieutenants; First Moses and after him Eleazar, and the sovereign priests till in the days of Samuel they rebelled and would have a mortal man for their king after the manner of the other nations. And when our savior Christ, by the preaching of his ministers shall have persuaded the Jews to return and called the Gentiles to his obedience, then shall there be a new kingdom of heaven; because our king shall then be God, whose throne is heaven: Without any necessity evident in Scripture than man shall ascend to his happiness any higher than God’s footstool, the earth.<sup>31</sup>

The implication of this move, when combined with his views on the successors to Moses, is subtle but apparent. Heaven is radically temporalized into a mere extension of the earthly commonwealth. This move does not flatly deny the Christian doctrines of resurrection but it cleverly eliminates the concomitant notion of a transearthy paradise that is far better than our present mortal lives.

The second stage of the reinterpretation of the Christian hope is a denial that men are immediately resurrected at their death. Hobbes denies any doctrine of the immortality of soul and holds instead that authentic Christian teaching makes human survival after death purely a matter of divine fiat.<sup>32</sup> This allows him the freedom to postulate any scripturally plausible interpretation of when this resurrection will occur. Relying heavily on the eschatological and apocalyptic passages of the New Testament, Hobbes claims that the time of the resurrection will be “at the last day,” a time in the future the date or even nearness of which he cleverly avoids stating. Like the previous move, this view also has the effect of reducing an existential commitment of life after death without overtly abandoning the doctrine. By placing the time of survival indefinitely in the future Hobbes reduces its psychic significance vis-a-vis a very real threat of death at the hands of the political authorities. At the very least it can be said that this version of the doctrine of survival does not pose as many obvious problems for sovereign political power as does either the doctrines of the immortality of the soul or an immediate resurrection of the body at the time of death.

Hobbes’s third move here follows from his temporal interpretation of the Christian hope. The antithesis of that hope—hell and its torments—are imaginatively interpreted in psychological and symbolic categories that have the cumu-

31. III:38, p. 327.

32. III:38, p. 328. Cf. IV:44, pp. 438–439.

lative effect of reducing the status of their torment as something that should be avoided at all costs through obedience to Divine will. In passages of superb exegetical and psychological insight Hobbes argues that the biblical description of hell and its terrors is in his words, “metaphorical.” That is, they cannot be viewed as literal descriptions of cosmic geography but must be understood as symbols standing for the psychological reality of mental anguish. This anguish does not result from a perpetual burning in some fiery pit but from the knowledge that one must exist in a state that is less exalted than one might have achieved. The “torments of hell” are the self-imposed torments of one who knows he has failed to do his best and sees above him those who have.

*Torments of Hell.* All of which places design metaphorically a grief and discontent of mind from the sight of that eternal felicity in others, which they themselves, through their own incredulity and disobedience have lost.<sup>33</sup>

This psychological interpretation of hell is combined with a second line of thought in which the duration of this torment for any particular person is severely limited. The metaphor of hell symbolizes an eternal reality that exists as a *possibility* for any particular individual. Though the possibility of the torment is always present it confronts many separate individuals for limited durations. It is eternal as a symbolic reality but not as an actual torment of the individual damned person.

The fire prepared for the wicked is an everlasting fire: that is to say, the estate wherein no man can be without torture, both of body and mind, after the resurrection, shall endure forever; and in that sense the fire shall be unquenchable, and the torments everlasting; but it cannot thence be inferred that he who shall be cast into that fire or be tormented with those torments, shall endure and resist them so as to be eternally burnt and tortured, and yet never destroyed, nor die. And though there be many places that affirm everlasting fire and torments, into which men may be cast successively one after another as long as the world lasts, yet I find none that affirm there shall be an eternal life therein of any individual person; but to the contrary, an everlasting death, which is the second death.<sup>34</sup>

The argument that leads to this position is a curious piece of scriptural exegesis the upshot of which is that for the wicked there will be a second death which will be an actual cessation of physical life. The wicked will be resurrected to a life much like what they now lead except that they will be tormented with the knowledge that they could have done better. At the end of this period they will die, much the same as they have already done. The crucial difference being that there will no longer be any resurrection of the body.

The resourcefulness of this position becomes apparent if we closely consider the whole of Hobbes’s system. The fundamental problem with belief in an afterlife was that by positing an eternal torment worse than death it weakened

33. III:38, p. 333.

34. III:38, p. 333–334; IV:44, pp. 445–459.

the motivation to obey an earthly power that could only mete out death as the greatest punishment. Hobbes's teaching on hell subtly tried to remove this difficulty. For the wicked, those actually inclined to political discord, there will be no permanent torment nor even a permanent life after death. In both ways the significance of the teaching on hell as a source of discord is reduced. On the one hand the "torment" is not necessarily worse than what we might expect from a violent death at the hands of a political sovereign. Secondly, there will be no eternal life for the wicked to suffer in.

Hobbes is much more radical here than in his teaching concerning a heavenly realm for a very good reason. For Hobbes, fear of the future, not hope, is the basis of the human motivation to enter civil society and obey the sovereign authority. This view of the priority of fear over hope in human motivation suggests that the Christian teaching about eternal torment would be a much more likely source of political discord than would the doctrine of a heavenly reward. Through a clever combination of psychological insight and scriptural exegesis Hobbes turns the whole theology of hell into a teaching about mental anguish and permanent death, neither of which would be as politically disruptive as would the vision hell that his contemporaries saw in the works of Breughel, Bosch, or Dürer.

### III. HOBBS AND THE AUGUSTINIAN-CALVINIST TRADITION

In his effort to reshape Christian religious beliefs, Hobbes departed quite markedly from the views of earlier Christian writers on the relation of religion and politics. Certainly the Augustinian-Calvinist tradition that animated many of Hobbes's countrymen had as much of a dismal view of human nature as had Hobbes. From this premise they too had drawn a conclusion about the necessary priority of order over justice as a supreme political end.

However, though there are these similarities, Hobbes's departures from the Augustinian tradition are more striking and more fundamental. In both Augustine and Calvin the duty to obey the sovereign power and support the order that it imposes is a duty resulting from the divine command in scripture. Theirs is an explicitly theological argument based on scriptural exegesis. For example, nowhere does Calvin attempt the lengthy, reasoned defense of absolute sovereign power which we find in books I & II of *Leviathan*; in essence Calvin merely repeated to his readers the command of I Peter 2:13; "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution whether it be to the emperor as supreme or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right."<sup>35</sup>

35. Cf. Herbert Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963); Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. F. L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) IV:20, pp. 1485-1520.

In Hobbes this way of justifying political obedience is absent. The doctrine of absolute sovereignty is already established by “natural reason” before we are presented with the theological teaching of book III. In this framework the theological exegesis of book III is offered as a supplement to an already independently established view of the necessity of absolute sovereignty. By thus establishing the priority of natural reason to faith in his political philosophy Hobbes leaves that reason free to do what previous Christian writers could not do in so radical or explicit a fashion: directly reinterpret some of the central theological tenets of Christianity in order to make them less disruptive to the demands of absolute political power. By viewing religion itself as natural to man Hobbes cannot dismiss it as Marx would have done, but by establishing the priority of reason in interpreting the faith, he can move beyond the theological tradition of his predecessors in an effort to give an account of Christianity that will square with the new political universe that Machiavelli created.

Secondly, the priority of reason to faith enables Hobbes to move in the essentially new direction toward a justification of absolute sovereignty, a direction not taken by the Augustinian-Calvinist tradition of political realism. For the theological tradition prior to Hobbes the priority of revelation to reason had generated the many variations that one finds on the “two kingdoms” approach to the problem of the relation of religion and political life. However, this notion of “dual sovereignty” was something that Hobbes and the Hobbesian system could not tolerate and some of his most incisive comments are reserved for those who supported such views.

He is only freed from this tradition, however, once he has radically departed from the explicitly scripture-based argumentative framework that guided medieval Christian reflection on the relation of religion and politics. Once Hobbes had articulated the priority of natural reason and historical accident in making religious beliefs what they are, then he can dispense with the tradition and its fundamental presupposition concerning the priority of revelation to reason in shaping a political teaching. Hobbes’s view of absolute sovereignty will only work if he can maintain the priority of reason to faith and his prior understanding of the origin of religious belief allows him to start with human nature—not with scripture, as his theological predecessors did, in deriving his political teaching.

#### IV HOBBS AND THE MODERN STUDY OF RELIGION

In his book, *The Sociological Tradition*, Robert Nisbet argues that the modern understanding of religion as a world-ordering mythos that gives meaning to political and social life finds its source in de Tocqueville’s examination of religion, chiefly in his *Democracy in America*.<sup>36</sup> Though there is a measure of

truth in this generalization I would argue that in many ways Hobbes is more uniquely and strongly modern in his understanding of religion than is anyone before him or many after him, including de Tocqueville.

Like de Tocqueville, Hobbes's treatment of religion strikingly divorces itself from the theological tradition of his age. While the theological tradition of his predecessors was to study religion as an adjunct to the study of theology, Hobbes' separation of the study of religion from the study of theology in book I of *Leviathan* sets the stage for the modern understanding of religion as an ideology on which men rely to give meaning to their own lives and to the communities in which they live.<sup>37</sup> With Hobbes the study of religion has become the study of human speech about the divine and the study of the continuing human effort to find a language and a myth that can shape a viable human community and give meaning to individual human lives.

De Tocqueville too understood the function of religion as a political and personal ideology, but his fundamental view of religion still looked back to the ancient tradition of political thought in which the role of religion was not only as an ideology of order and meaning but as a mythos that would orient human life toward its proper end. For de Tocqueville religion still elevates a man from a concern for his material welfare and in true classical fashion he regards this as its major benefit.<sup>38</sup>

Hobbes's psychological understanding of the origin of religion in human fear and his consistent adherence to the implications of this view again sets the stage for the modern divorce of the study of religion from the investigation of the philosophic question of the proper ends of human life. For Hobbes, religion does not elevate man; it pacifies him and removes his anxiety in the face of an otherwise hostile world. The meaning that religion brings to human life is thus separated from the study of the ends of man. Religion, for Hobbes, relieves man of fear but it does not at the same time elevate him or orient him toward a "proper" human life, in a manner similar to the function of religion in Plato's *Republic*.

If the modern study of religion in the social sciences is seen to involve both a rejection of the dogmas of theology and the philosophic preoccupation with the good life, then I think that we may fairly say that Hobbes's treatment of religion is much more strikingly modern than anything from de Tocqueville. Hobbes's blunt arguments about the origin of religion in human fear and more

36. Robert Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, 1967).

37. For example, Thomas Aquinas has an extensive discussion of religion as an outward observance that is fraught with political implications. However the discussion itself is placed in a strictly theological context with the distinction between true and false religion always present in the background.

38. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Doubleday, 1966) I:II:9, pp. 290–294; II:I:1–2, pp. 429–436; II:II:1–3, 8–11, pp. 503–509, 525–534.

deeply his whole treatment of Christian doctrine as an ideology of social control looks much more modern once we can see beyond the antiquated theological terminology to the deeper implications of his analysis. In short, though the explicit discussion of religion in *Leviathan* treats primarily Christianity, the method of the treatment begins to open up a whole new way of looking at both religion proper and its relation to human life and society.