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Title: The Role of Christianity in Hobbes's Political Project

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Abstract: For Hobbes, religion is not inherently beneficial for society. Instead, good theology is required in order to make religion useful.

Alexis de Tocqueville famously suggested in *Democracy in America* that religion facilitated the use of liberty and was thus “the first of [our] political institutions.” For Tocqueville, however, religion in America aided democracy organically and without any involvement between religious institutions and political leaders. Several centuries before this observation, Thomas Hobbes similarly concluded that religion could benefit the state, but only if it was tamed of its liberty-inducing properties. In contrast with Tocqueville, Hobbes argued that the natural inclination of religion was to undermine the political order, and thus it needed to be directed and shaped by the sovereign.

Leviathan is most commonly understood as a political text justifying the absolute authority of the sovereign. Certainly, Hobbes’s primary aim is precisely this. He fears what he sees as the debilitating effects of a “state of nature” and worries about the violent and dangerous repercussions of a weakened state. When used improperly, Hobbes argues that religion can serve to undermine the sovereign by empowering individuals to feel above the law, and inspiring a loyalty and commitment in citizens that can compete with their loyalty and commitment to the sovereign. Because of these concerns, Hobbes takes great pains to provide a religious rationale for his political project, and to re-define Christianity in a way that supports the power of the sovereign. Hobbes’s scheme involves a devaluation of traditional sources of religious authority. In the process, Hobbes creates something novel, a form of Christianity devoid of spiritual forms of authority – rooted instead entirely in the will of the sovereign.

From the outset in *Leviathan*, Hobbes clearly expresses his concern for the potential dangers of a religion whose power is left unchecked. In particular, Hobbes worries about ambitious individuals who claim to be divinely inspired. These individuals, Hobbes worries, will use religion to promote their personal agendas, and bring about instability to the commonwealth. “Evil men,” Hobbes says, “under the pretext that God can do anything, are so bold as to say anything when it serves their turn, though they think it untrue” (Hobbes 1994, 11). Such men “abuse the simple people” and in the process deceive them into disobeying their sovereign (Hobbes 1994, 11). Hobbes is skeptical of anyone who claims to have a special connection to the divine and to be above the law.

Hobbes is also fearful of personalized religion. That every individual is able to have a personal relationship with God means that every individual can make “himself judge of good and evil” (Hobbes 1994, 212). Such a “doctrine [is] repugnant to civil society” since it gives the individual the freedom to determine what is just independent of the sovereign (Hobbes 1994, 212). Hobbes’s social contract is built on the idea that individuals trade the liberties they have in the state of nature for the security that only the state can provide. However, to make oneself the “judge of good and evil” is akin to a return to the state of nature. The extent to which Christianity allows the individual to be the “judge of good and evil,” is a faith that effectively promotes a return to the horrors of the state of nature.

Given the danger that religion posed, Hobbes might have concluded that religion needed to be eradicated as a potential foil to the sovereign. However, Hobbes chooses instead to retain religion, but at the same time to offer a theological argument for a particular form of religion. In order to condition people to obey the sovereign, Hobbes must also convince them that Christianity requires them to obey authorities.

While one might be inclined to believe that Hobbes only kept Christianity in order to appeal to his overwhelmingly Christian audience, the text suggests that Hobbes believed a certain kind of religion is uniquely able to promote obedience. For example, Hobbes commends the “first founders and legislators of commonwealths among the Gentiles” who created religious institutions with the mind of “keep[ing] the people in obedience and peace” (Hobbes 1994, 69). These men, Hobbes continues, “by these and such other institutions ... obtained ... their end (which was the peace of the commonwealth) that the common people in their misfortunes, laying the fault on the neglect or error in their ceremonies, or on their own disobedience to the laws, were the less apt to mutiny against their governors.” (Hobbes 1994, 70). Hobbes’s theological project for Christianity is to offer a similar interpretation of Christian tradition that would mirror the religion of the Gentiles that he so admired.

The first part of Hobbes’s theological project involves tearing down traditional forms of religious authority and replacing those authorities with the sovereign. A primary source of authority that Hobbes contests is scripture. In essence, Hobbes denies any claim about the infallibility of scripture. In his most direct reference to scripture, Hobbes asserts:

“The Scripture was written to shew unto men the kingdom of God, and to prepare their minds to become obedient subjects, leaving the world and the philosophy thereof to the disputation of men for the exercising of their natural reason. Whether the earth’s or sun’s motion make the day and night, or whether the exorbitant actions of men proceed from passion or from the devil ... it is all one as to our obedience and subjection to God almighty, which is the thing for which scripture was written.” (Hobbes 1994, 45)

Here, Hobbes is specifically referencing the sciences, and asserting that as scripture’s primary purpose is to encourage “obedience and subjection to God,” we should not let our reading of scripture form our scientific beliefs. Despite the scientific focus here, this passage still bears significance considering Hobbes’s general take on scripture. Scripture, according to Hobbes, is not to be read literally. As Hobbes points out, those “to whom God hath not supernaturally revealed that [the scriptures] are his, nor that those that published them were sent by him, is not obliged to obey them by any authority but his whose commands have already the force of laws (that is to say ... the sovereign)” (Hobbes 1994, 259). In Hobbes’s interpretive view, “those laws that were given to the Jews by the hand of Moses” as well as Jesus’s “sermon on the mount” are ultimately not God’s laws (Hobbes 1994, 399). “The laws of God” according to Hobbes, “are none but the laws of nature ... that is, a commandment to obey our civil sovereigns” (Hobbes 1994, 399).

In a similar vein, Hobbes goes to great lengths to devalue the idea that individual persons might have experienced some divine inspiration. This leads him to a rejection of prophets, who in many respects are a manifestation of divine inspiration. Hobbes considers authentic prophesy to be nothing “other than the operation of miracles” which “require[s] signs supernatural” (Hobbes 1994, 72). In one stroke, Hobbes severely restricts the possibility of there being a prophet. Given the rarity of supernatural miracles in his day, it seems that the pool for potential prophets is quite small (or non-existent).

Hobbes, of course, recognizes and intends this to be the case. For Hobbes, people claiming religious authority through the gift of prophesy are more often than not deluding the public into harmfully conspiring against their lawful sovereign. Indeed, Hobbes himself observes that “miracles now cease” and that “we have no sign left whereby to acknowledge the pretended revelations or inspirations of any private man” (Hobbes 1994, 249).

Hobbes’s devaluation of traditional forms of religious inspiration cripples religion of its power to challenge the state or the sovereign. Since scripture is fallible, prophets no longer exist, and God does not speak directly to individuals, where do religious authority and truth claims lie? Hobbes’s answer to this question is in the sovereign. In his deconstruction of the traditional forms of religious authority, Hobbes also raises the sovereign to religious as well as political authority.

In terms of scripture, Hobbes asserts that since “sovereigns in their own dominions are the sole legislators, those books only are canonical (that is, law) in every nation which are established for such by the sovereign authority” (Hobbes 1994, 250). Likewise, the sovereign, since he “hath a lawful power over any writing, to make it law, hath the power also to approve or disapprove the interpretation of the same” (Hobbes 1994, 261). In short, the sovereign has the power both to decide which religious texts are canonical and to provide the only genuine interpretations of those texts.

As mentioned, Hobbes’s devaluation of individual inspiration also serves to elevate the sovereign to religious as well as political authority. In particular, Hobbes argues that “they who have no supernatural revelation to the contrary ought to obey the laws of their own sovereign in the external acts and profession of religion” (Hobbes 1994, 318). Hobbes, of course, has already asserted that supernatural revelation no longer happens. Therefore, what Hobbes really means in this statement is that people “ought to obey the laws of their sovereign” in all cases. Clearly, Hobbes’s sovereign is more than just a political figure. In fact, his powers seem almost God-like. To put the sovereign’s status in Hobbes’s words: “the multitude so united in one person is called a Commonwealth, in Latin *Civitas*. This is the generation of that great Leviathan, or rather (to speak more reverently) of that Mortal God” (Hobbes 1994, 109).

Despite Hobbes’s devaluation of the authority of scripture, his theology is not without any scriptural justifications. Hobbes reads the story of the Israelites as a long history of obedience. In the beginning, God made a covenant with Abraham, and in “the making of this covenant God spoke only to Abraham” (Hobbes 1994, 317). In this covenant, God proclaims that “[Abraham] will command his children and his household,” leading Hobbes to conclude that Abraham was the “civil sovereign” over his people (Hobbes 1994, 317).

For Hobbes, this covenant with Abraham was the beginning of God’s very real kingdom on earth. After Abraham, “the same covenant was renewed with Isaac; and afterwards with Jacob” and later with Moses and Eleazar and Joshua (Hobbes 1994, 318). In each case, Hobbes interprets the covenant not as a compact between God and the people of Israel, but instead as the establishment of kind of dynastic rule under a sovereign leader. After the death of Joshua, however, Hobbes points out that “there was no sovereign power in Israel” (Hobbes 1994: 322). As a result, the Hebrews (in a sort of state of nature without a rightful sovereign) demand

a king in First Samuel, 8:11-17. Hobbes interprets this account as God granting subsequent Kings (or sovereigns) a right to just about everything:

“Concerning the right of kings, God himself, by the mouth of Samuel, saith: ‘This shall be the right of the king ... He shall take your sons, and set them to drive his chariots, and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots ... and gather in his harvest, and to make his engines of war and instruments of his chariots; and shall take your daughters to make perfumes, to be his cooks and bakers. He shall take you fields, your vine-yards, and your olive-yards ... and give them to his servants... and you shall be his servants’.” (Hobbes 1994, 132)

In the New Testament, Hobbes sees Jesus as continuing the message that the kingdom of God is an earthly kingdom in which people unquestionably obey their king. Hobbes claims that Jesus was a man who “taught all men to obey ... them that sat in Moses’ seat; [who] allowed them to give Caesar his tribute, and refused to take upon himself as a judge” (Hobbes 1994, 330). Hobbes refers to many classic New Testament verses that justify earthly rulers and promote the obligation of the believer to follow the laws of the land.

In particular, Hobbes repeatedly cites Paul, who “concerning obedience to princes, exhort[ed us] ‘to be subject to the higher powers’ [saying] that ‘all power is ordained of God’ (Hobbes 1994, 338). Hobbes similarly interprets Jesus’s famous words on whether to pay taxes by asserting that “our Savior himself acknowledges that men ought to pay such taxes as are by kings imposed, where he say ‘give to Caesar that which is Caesar’s’.” (Hobbes 1994, 133)

Hobbes’s reading of scripture is certainly not without its faults, and certainly most theologians both in his own time and beyond do not hold the sovereign to be the “Mortal God” that Hobbes does. From Hobbes’s perspective, where political stability is the highest good, his scriptural justification is legitimate if he has convinced his audience to obey the sovereign. By fundamentally redefining Christianity’s message, however, Hobbes can be seen as a founder of a new religion – a religion that while nominally built on a Christian foundation is actually something fundamentally different. Interestingly, on forging this new religion Hobbes mirrors those persons of whom he is so critical who “under the pretext that God can do anything, are so bold as to say anything when it serves their turn, though they think it untrue” (Hobbes 1994, 11). Hobbes may or may not have believed that religion was untrue, but he very much understood its destabilizing potential to a healthy polity. When taking on the public role of political counselor, therefore, Hobbes abandoned his private doubts about religion and put on a mask in order to do what was best for the preservation of the sovereign and the state.

Hobbes recognizes the positive role that religion can play in providing stability to a commonwealth, but only if religion is properly understood and interpreted. For Hobbes, religion is certainly not inherently beneficial for society. Instead, good theology is required in order to make religion useful.

Given the context in which Hobbes was writing, it is not surprising that he held this view of religion. Hobbes lived through the English Civil War, he witnessed Oliver Cromwell’s religious rule of England, and experienced the rise of various Protestant dissident groups, such as the Levelers and the Diggers. For Hobbes, only a moderate religion backed by a theology that

supports the sovereign can provide stability for political institutions. If Tocqueville is right about religion's beneficial role in America, perhaps the theology he found there was grounded in the needs of America's political institutions. In this way, religion was working to advance the needs of the sovereign, much as Hobbes had imagined it could.

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