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The Fear of God in Early Modern Political Theory

DAVID WOOTTON

The belief of a deity is . . . the foundation of all morality and that which influences the whole life and actions of men without which a man is to be considered no other than one of the most dangerous sorts of wild beasts and so incapable of all society.

John Locke, *Essay Concerning Toleration*¹

The past can be studied only in so far as it has survived. But there are two distinct ways in which the past can survive into the present. It can survive as the dead past — mouldy documents and unread books — but also as the living past — continuing traditions, practices, rights and obligations. Only in so far as the dead past in some way touches upon the living present — if only by analogy or contrast — is it of more than antiquarian interest. But the historian cannot take the living past at face value either; he must replace the living tradition in its original context before he can understand it or make use of it.

This paper is concerned with a tradition that has been a long time dying, and that retains some life yet. On 26 April 1983, for example, the *Globe and Mail* reported the case of a man who had been found not guilty on two charges of sexually assaulting his twelve year old granddaughter. An Ontario judge had refused to allow the girl to testify under oath because he felt she did not understand the religious significance of doing so. She had not, he felt, an adequate fear of divine retribution if she lied under oath. As a consequence, the prosecution had to withdraw its case. A few days earlier the same newspaper reported that there are seven states in the USA where atheists may not hold elective office.² Unbelievers thus continue, within contemporary society, to be denied certain fundamental civic rights.

The classic case which established the rights of unbelievers in England was that of Charles Bradlaugh (1880-85). Bradlaugh, an atheist, was repeatedly elected to the House of Commons, but prevented each time from sitting on the grounds that he was incapable of taking the oath required of members of parliament. When he eventually took the oath — against the wishes of the speaker — he was prosecuted and convicted of breach of the law requiring members to take the oath. At appeal, the Court of Queen's Bench upheld the precedent established in *Omichund v. Barker* in 1744: that an oath could only be taken by someone who believed in the prospect of divine retribution in this life or the next. *Omichund v. Barker* had itself been a landmark case because it had extended the right to take an oath to theists in general — Omichund was

1. J. Locke, *Scritti editi e inediti sulla tolleranza*, ed. C.A. Viano (Turin, 1961), p. 86.

2. *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 26 April 1983, pp. 1-2; the judgement in the case was in line with earlier Ontario decisions, although there is some question as to whether they are well-founded; see the *Canadian Encyclopaedia Digest (Ontario)*, 3rd. ed., XI, para. 807. *Globe and Mail*, 4 April 1983, p. 2.

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a Hindu — where Coke in the *Institutes*, for example, had confined it to Christians.³ Bradlaugh's case was, however, already something of an anachronism. Mill in *On Liberty* (1859) had argued strongly for the rights of those who deny the existence of God and a future state, citing two 1857 cases when

at the Old Bailey, two persons, on two separate occasions were rejected as jurymen, and one of them grossly insulted by the judge and by one of the counsel, because they honestly declared that they had no theological belief; and a third, a foreigner, for the same reason, was denied justice against a thief. This refusal of redress took place in virtue of the legal doctrine, that no person can be allowed to give evidence in a court of justice who does not profess belief in a God (any God is sufficient) and in a future state; which is equivalent to declaring such persons to be outlaws, excluded from the protection of the tribunals; who may not only be robbed or assaulted with impunity, if no one but themselves, or persons of similar opinions, be present, but any one else may be robbed or assaulted with impunity, if the proof of the fact depends upon their evidence.⁴

Mill was slightly misstating the legal issue — which depended upon fear of divine retribution, not belief in a future life — but he was arguing a case which increasingly gained acceptance. In 1867 Marx claimed that atheism was now *culpa levis*. In 1874 the *Spectator* commented, when the President of the British Association of Scientists almost directly denied creation, that “Professor Tyndal will be much less persecuted for denying the existence of God than he would be for denying the value of monarchy.” In the wake of Bradlaugh's case the law itself was changed, the act of 1888 being the first both to guarantee the validity of the oaths of unbelievers and at the same time to give adult unbelievers the right to affirm rather than swear an oath — the right to affirmation being previously restricted to Christians who believed that the taking of oaths was contrary to the biblical text “let your yay be yay and your nay nay”. By 1892 Engels could see the previous half century as being one in which agnosticism had come to be regarded as being as socially respectable as Baptism.⁵

The year 1888 may have seen the rights of adult English unbelievers clearly established for the first time — the test of belief continued to be applied to children — but not everyone has been willing to abandon the view succinctly expressed in the *Tablet* in 1883: “When religion goes the protection of all civilized society is a hempen rope.” It is not so long since the venerable principle established in Omichund's case

3. On Bradlaugh, see E. Royle, *The Infidel Tradition from Paine to Bradlaugh* (London, 1976) and W.L. Arnstein, *The Bradlaugh Case* (Oxford, 1965); also A.G. v. Bradlaugh (1885), 14 Q.B.D. 667; Omichund v. Barker (1774), 1 Atk. 21.

4. J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism, Liberty, Representative Government* (London, 1910), pp. 90-1. A case involving Bradlaugh led to the passing of the Evidence Amendment Act (1869), which allowed atheists to affirm in criminal cases.

5. K. Marx, *Capital* I, preface to first ed.; S. Letwin, *The Pursuit of Certainty* (Cambridge, 1965), p. 322 (Bradlaugh, of course, had been advocating republicanism as well as atheism); F. Engels, introduction to the English edition of *Socialism Utopian and Scientific* (in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works* [New York, 1968], p. 384).

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was articulated by President Eisenhower, who said "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply held religious faith, and I don't care what it is."⁶

The theory that only those who fear God can be trusted is, we have seen, alive today, but few would now endorse it without reservation (although, in more nuanced versions, it seems to be making something of a comeback in moral philosophy). It is a theory with a lengthy history. Plato in the *Laws* argued that atheists should be incarcerated for denying the divine foundations of the law. Moreover he extended the definition of atheism to include those who portray the gods as immoral or open to persuasion, for they undermine belief in a just and implacable system of divine retribution. Polybius argued that Romans were more trustworthy than Greeks because the Romans were sufficiently superstitious to fear breaking their oaths. And Cicero presented the issue squarely in the opening pages of *De Natura Deorum*:

For there are and have been philosophers who hold that the gods exercise no control over human affairs whatever. But if their opinion is a true one, how can piety, reverence or religion exist? . . . And when these are gone, life soon becomes a welter of disorder and confusion; and in all probability the disappearance of piety towards the gods will entail the disappearance of loyalty and social union among men as well, and of justice itself, the queen of all the virtues.⁷

Nevertheless, this view was far from being generally established. Implicit in the arguments of Plato and Polybius is a recognition that Greek civilisation was not in practice founded in the fear of divine justice. And Cicero himself, when it came to discussing oaths in *De Officiis*, is quite happy to accept that the wrath of the gods does not exist, and that an oath is consequently simply a solemn promise, a violation of which is a violation of good faith.⁸ Philosophers, then, had no need for fear as a motive to virtue. Polybius himself had stressed that a society of wise men would have no need for superstition.

The Renaissance thus inherited from classical culture the view — powerfully expressed by Plutarch in his biography of Numa — that religion had a central role to play in the maintenance of social and political order, a view which was however in tension with the contrasting claim that this was in some measure a peculiarity of

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6. Quotations from G. Campbell, *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion* (London, 1971), p. 98; A. MacIntyre, *Secularisation and Moral Change* (Oxford, 1967), p. 33. For some early modern expressions of this view, see J. Bodin, *Colloquium of the Seven about Secrets of the Sublime*, ed. M.L.D. Kuntz (Princeton, 1975) p. xix; J.D. du Perron, *An Oration* (St. Omer, 1616), p. 9; R. Descartes, *Oeuvres Philosophiques*, ed. F. Alquié (2 vols., Paris, 1963-67), II, p. 383.
 7. On Plato, see in particular E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, 1971), pp. 219-24; Polybius, *The Histories*, ed. E. Badian (New York, 1966), p. 264; Cicero, *De Natura Deorum: Academica*, ed. H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass., 1933), p. 5. For modern discussions of the question, see in particular G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy", *Philosophy*, XXXIII (1958), pp. 1-19, and A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, 1981).
 8. Cicero, *De Officiis*, III, c. xxix.

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Roman civilisation, and that, even amongst the Romans, it was the common people, not philosophers and statesmen, who were guided by superstition. Valla was able to argue that the Roman élite had believed neither in the poetic fiction of an afterlife nor in divine justice: they had acted well because they hoped for glory. Nevertheless in doing so they were acting irrationally — no sensible man would sacrifice his life for the sake of his reputation after death. Christians on the other hand had the prospect of pleasure and pain in the next life to underwrite their moral code: Valla thus contrasts Romans to Christians on the same terms as Polybius had contrasted Greeks to Romans, and in doing so he similarly admitted the possibility of an ordered society of unbelievers, while arguing for the superiority of a society of believers. Others identified with the Roman viewpoint; Etienne Dolet, the greatest of the Ciceronians, insisted that properly speaking (*i.e.* following Cicero) the soul was merely the breath of life, the heavens merely the sky, the gods merely great men (such as Erasmus). He took pride in admitting that he had never feared the terrors of the next world. The Ciceronian conception of a virtue founded in human reason rather than divine law was thus alive even in the early days of the Reformation.⁹

For Valla and Dolet the key to Roman patriotism lay in the pursuit of honour and glory. The competition to excel thus stood as an alternative explanation for civic virtue, in contrast to the claim that virtue must in general be founded in the fear of God. These two structures of explanation naturally lie at the heart of Machiavelli's analysis of politics. On the one hand the Prince is an individual who pursues glory. On the other the foundation of Republican virtue is a system of law rooted in religion, and the Romans, Machiavelli argues, owed more to Numa than to Romulus. For Machiavelli religion is, as it was for Polybius, Cicero and Plutarch, something to be employed to bind the mass of mankind, an essential political tool, to be manipulated with cynicism and detachment. What form the religion takes is of secondary importance: Machiavelli seems clearly to take it for granted that the religion of the Romans was concerned with punishments and rewards in this world, not the next.¹⁰

9. L. Valla, *On Pleasure*, ed. M. de P. Lorch (New York, 1977), pp. 156-9. There is a useful account of Valla in C. Trinkhaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought* (2 vols., Chicago, 1970), I, pp. 103-70. E. Dolet, *Commentariorum Linguae Latinae* (2 vols., Lyons, 1536-38) sub. v. *deus, homo, pneuma, pulmonum*, etc. On Dolet, see in particular L. Febvre, "Un cas désespéré: Dolet propagateur de l'Évangile", in Febvre, *Au coeur religieux du XVI^e siècle* (Paris, 1957), pp. 172-224, and chapter vi of D.R. Kelley, *The Beginning of Ideology: Consciousness and Society in the French Reformation* (Cambridge, 1981). The linked questions of the legitimacy of suicide and the nobility of death in the service of one's country are of central importance in the history of irreligion; see, for example, apart from Valla, Pomponazzi (below, n. 11); the *Ars Moriendi* (below, n. 15), Pascal, *Pensées*, no. 425; K. Digby, *Two Treatises* (Paris, 1644), p. 421, and the chapter on suicide in J. McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 1982). I am grateful to E. Hundert for bringing this issue, which is closely linked to that of immortality through fame (below, n. 10), to my attention.
10. For Machiavelli's view of religion, see the *Discourses*, I, ch. xi-xv, and J.A. Mazzeo, *Renaissance and Revolution: The Remaking of European Thought* (New York, 1965), pp. 107-15. On fame in the Renaissance, see H. Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (rev. ed., Princeton, 1966), pp. 114-9 and A. Tenenti, *Il senso della morte e l'amore della vita nel Rinascimento* (Turin, 1957), pp. 21-47.

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In this respect Machiavelli's treatment of religion differs markedly from that of the theorists who wrote within an Averroist tradition. For the Averroists the question of the immortality of the soul was the central issue. They held that philosophers and statesmen had no reason to believe in the soul's immortality, but they must inculcate belief in eternal rewards and punishments in the mass of mankind, who would thus be dissuaded from vice and crime even in circumstances where they might hope to escape justice in this world. For Averroes, and, following him, Marsilius and Pomponazzi, the social function of religion depended upon its teaching regarding justice in the next world (the absence of justice in this world being all too obvious). They therefore implicitly assimilated Judaism and pagan religions to Islam and Christianity, while maintaining that it was not religion in general, but a particular religious doctrine which represented a necessary foundation for social order.¹¹

This very brief survey of classical and Renaissance accounts of the social role of religion enables us to place the doctrine established in *Omichund v. Barker* in perspective. What distinguishes modern versions of the claim that religion is a necessary prerequisite of civic virtue from the greater part of their classical and Renaissance precursors is the claim that each and every individual has to believe, that an exception cannot be made for philosophers or statesmen. In this respect the modern theory is in a narrowly Platonist tradition, a tradition best represented in the Renaissance by More's *Utopia*, where all those who deny the immortality of the soul are excluded from political office.¹²

In both the classical and the Renaissance periods the question of the social role of religion was a matter of open debate, the tendency being to give it an important role, but to recognise the right of an élite of philosophers or statesmen to a private unbelief. For the Renaissance there could of course be no question of a public declaration of unbelief and it was taken for granted that all members of society, with the exception of Jews, would be members of the same church. The universality of the taking of Christian oaths as a practice is thus distinct from the question of whether the fear of God is seen to be the only possible foundation of reliable truth-telling and civic virtue. Within the political philosophy of Aquinas, for example, the foundation of society lies in the recognition of the law of nature, a recognition that depends upon reason, not faith. Reason is seen as imposing itself upon both God and man, and someone who rejected Christian doctrine would still be thought capable of identifying the law of nature and recognising it as morally binding, of making and keeping a promise, if not of taking an oath.¹³

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11. For Averroes' view of religion, see in particular *On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy*, ed. G.F. Hourani (London, 1961). For Marsilius' Averroism, see A. Gewirth, *Marsilius of Padua, the Defender of Peace* (2 vols., New York, 1951-56), II, p. 19. For P. Pomponazzi's see ch. xiv of *De Immortalitate Animae* (1516), and B. Nardi, "Filosofia e religione", in Nardi, *Studi su Pietro Pomponazzi* (Florence, 1965), pp. 122-48.
 12. T. More, *Utopia*, ed. E. Surtz and J.H. Hexter (New Haven, 1965), pp. 221-3. There is a valuable account of Utopia in B. Bradshaw, "More on Utopia", *Historical Journal*, XXIV (1981), pp. 1-28.
 13. F.C. Coplestone, *Aquinas* (Harmondsworth, 1955), pp. 211-8.

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Ullman has written eloquently of the secularizing implications of the thirteenth century assimilation of Aristotle, and it would be wrong to think that the elements of a secular view of society were not available to the middle ages.¹⁴ What the middle ages did lack, however, was any ability to conceive of a secular society, a society of people who were not god-fearing, and so they were unable to isolate the problem of whether or not the fear of God was crucial for the maintenance of social order. Marsilius, for example, unlike Dolet, regards pagan religion as similar to, not different in kind from, Christianity. Without any conception of a society in which the fear of God had been commonly absent, the whole question of the civic capacities and rights of unbelievers could scarcely be posed. For Marsilius, unbelievers are necessarily a small minority of philosophers and statesmen, of men like himself. For Dolet on the other hand unbelief is a concomitant of the proper use of the Latin language, a necessary consequence of true education in a society where education was becoming increasingly widespread.

By the early sixteenth century, then, humanist scholarship had made it possible to place a new emphasis on the question of the social implications of unbelief by portraying the Romans as men who, like Cicero, were commonly unable to distinguish an oath from a mere promise. But the early sixteenth century was in a privileged position in at least two other respects. In the first place it inherited a relatively new emphasis upon the fear of God. One measure of this is to be seen in the iconography of death. The fourteenth century had seen the personification of death for the first time, and the fifteenth century had seen the widespread dissemination of the *Ars Moriendi*, in which the Christian was shown as being in constant danger of damnation right up until the moment of his death, as protected neither by the prayers of others nor by the sacraments, but only by his own faith. It is not surprising then that the temptation of unbelief, which is identified with a pagan denial of divine justice, is the first of the temptations portrayed in the *Ars Moriendi*. Unbelief — in the sense of an identification with pagan culture — was thus now seen as an option that was generally available to the literate, and the fear of death and of divine judgment was now held to be alone sufficient to motivate good behaviour.¹⁵

The new stress upon death as the moment of judgment was thus part and parcel of a new stress upon the need to believe in and fear God. We find Comines, for example, in the late fifteenth century, insisting that whenever men act wickedly it is because they lack an adequate faith in God and in divine justice. It is this fear of God which is above all, in Comines' view, the only possible check upon wicked rulers, who are exempt from secular justice. Where the classical and Renaissance tradition had argued that superstition was particularly to be encouraged in the common people, for Comines

14. W. Ullmann, *A History of Political Thought in the Middle Ages* (rev. ed., Harmondsworth, 1970), pp. 164-73 and 184; see also M. Wilks, *The Problem of Sovereignty in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1963), esp. p. 85.

15. On the iconography of death, see A. Tenenti, *La vie et la mort à travers l'art du quinzième siècle* (Paris, 1952), and his *Morte e vita*, pp. 428-503. The fact that the fear of death is not a historical constant is brought out well in P. Ariès, *L'homme devant la mort* (Paris, 1977), although Ariès' account scarcely squares with the treatment of death in, for example, Bede's *History*.

fear alone can restrain each and every member of society from crime — fear either of the hempen rope or of God.¹⁶

Comines' view was, I think, new. Certainly it was a view which was far from receiving universal assent. Within a few decades, however, it was to become a view which no one dared reject in public. What led to near universal acceptance of the claim that no man who lacked the fear of God could be a trustworthy member of society? I have already mentioned the development of humanist scholarship and of a new attitude to death and divine judgment. But although these were important preconditions they were not the triggering factor. The crucial role in the establishment of the new orthodoxy was played by the Reformation.

The importance of the Reformation lies first of all in the new stress it placed upon belief. There had, as we have seen, been some development in this direction already. But now each and every Christian was required consciously to commit himself to a particular version of Christianity. Thus with the Reformation came, in both Protestant and Catholic Europe, a massive campaign of education in Christian doctrine, and with this campaign came, of course, a new recognition of the extent of ignorance and unbelief amongst the unlettered mass of the population.¹⁷

It is thus not surprising that the Reformation and Counter-Reformation required a new terminology with which to discuss unbelief, as opposed to mere heresy. The 1540s saw the emergence in Latin and the vernacular languages of new words: libertine, deist, and above all atheist.¹⁸ It is important to recognise that this terminology was directed at precisely the problem with which we are concerned here. Atheist, throughout the early modern period, meant primarily not someone who denied God's existence, but someone who denied His justice, someone who denied the existence of divine retribution, whether in this world or the next.¹⁹

The assault upon atheism which began in the 1540s was founded upon the claim that no atheist could be a law-abiding member of society, and, conversely, that any

16. P. de Comines, *Memoirs*, ed. A.R. Scoble (2 vols., London, 1900), I, pp. 389-90. This is discussed in Tenenti, *Morte e vita*, pp. 186-9.

17. See in particular, J. Delumeau, *Le Catholicisme entre Luther et Voltaire* (Paris, 1971), pp. 256-92, and G. Strauss, "Success and Failure in the German Reformation", *Past and Present*, 67 (1975), pp. 30-63.

18. H. Busson, "Les noms des incrédules au seizième siècle", *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, XVI (1954), pp. 273-80.

19. D. Wootton, *Paolo Sarpi: Between Renaissance and Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 5. According to P. Du Plessis-Mornay, "as much an atheist is he that denies God's providence, as he that denies the Godhead itself" (*A Woorke Concerning the Trewnesse of the Christian Religion* [London, 1587], pp. 171-2). Bayle thus writes of Epicurus as a "pious atheist", and Hume of polytheists as "superstitious atheists", a phrase coined by Milton in *Areopagitica*. There is a useful discussion of early modern views of atheism in E.A. Strathman, *Sir Walter Raleigh: A Study in Elizabethan Skepticism* (New York, 1951).

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wicked person must lack the fear of God. There were thus two different categories of atheists: those who directly denied God's justice in theory, and those who implicitly denied it in practice. The orthodox view is neatly summarised by Pufendorf:

atheists [are those] who deny either the existence of God or his divine providence, and to whom those persons who deny the immortality of the soul are closely related. For the only justice these last know is that which is based on advantage, measured by their own judgment. With them you may class those whose manner of life is an open profession of villainy, such as pirates, thieves, murderers, pimps, courtesans, and others of their kind who take a pleasure in perjury.

The atheist was thus the epitome of evil, assimilated, above all after the Massacre of St. Bartholomew, to Machiavelli, in whose honour the English renamed the devil Old Nick.²⁰

The new orthodoxy required that unbelief be rooted out wherever it be encountered. Its emergence marks a new epoch in the history of ideas, an epoch in which fear is held to be not simply an important but the sole foundation of social order. There is a simple way of testing the duration of this epoch by searching for attacks upon the idea that atheists must necessarily be anti-social and should therefore be denied all civic rights. Locke is generally taken to have given this idea its classic expression:

Lastly, those are not at all to be tolerated who deny the being of a God. Promises, covenants, and oaths which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist. The taking away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all.²¹

But who, prior to Locke, had dared to question it? In his monumental history of *Toleration and the Reformation* Lecler suggests that only two of the authors he considers (for the period 1520-1660) would have been willing to tolerate atheists: Coornhert and Williams. In the case of Coornhert this is a claim which may be well

20. S. Pufendorf, *De Iure Naturae et Gentium Libri Octo*, trans. C.H. and W.A. Oldfather (2 vols., Oxford, 1934), II, p. 251; see also p. 259. On anti-Machiavellism see especially F. Meinecke, *Machiavellianism: The Doctrine of Raison d'Etat and its Place in Modern History* (New Haven, 1957), and F. Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli* (London, 1964). The derivation of Old Nick from Niccolo Machiavelli was first suggested by Butler in *Hudibras*. It was rejected by Johnson in his *Dictionary*, and Johnson has recently been followed by Partridge in his *Dictionary of Slang*. But the *OED* finds Johnson's derivation (from O.E. *nicker*) improbable, which leaves, I think, Butler's as the most likely. Milton's Satan is, strikingly, both a Machiavellian and an atheist: see S.P. Revard, *The War in Heaven: Paradise Lost and the Traditions of Satan's Rebellion* (Ithaca, 1980), pp. 60-6 and *Paradise Lost*, VI, l. 370.

21. J. Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. J.W. Gough (rev. ed., Oxford, 1966), p. 158. On this passage, see the fine article by D. Gauthier, "Why ought one obey God? Reflections on Hobbes and Locke", *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, VII (1977), pp. 425-46.

founded, although Coornhert's position on this question needs clarification. In the case of Williams the issue is clearer. Williams talks only in terms of toleration for Catholics, Turks and pagans, i.e. for non-Protestant believers. He held that an atheist was a man without a conscience, and that

Worse are than Indians such as hold
The soul's mortality.²²

It is impossible to be sure whether Williams intended to tolerate atheists or not; he certainly did not expect them to make good citizens, for the good citizen was, by a nearly universally accepted definition, a man of faith.

So far in this paper I have tried to make two points. The first is that the idea that religion is the foundation of social order has as long a history as almost any idea one can think of. The second point is a very different one. It is that at a certain point this idea took on a new form: it became the theory that no individual who is not a believer can be trusted, no matter what other characteristics he may appear to have. And this developed theory, which made fear of God and the hangman the sole foundations of social order, became at some point (between approximately 1540 and 1570) so firmly established that thereafter for a hundred years it went virtually unchallenged.²³

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22. J. Lecler, *Toleration and the Reformation* (2 vols., New York, 1960), II, p. 486. Lecler's claim is accepted by G.E. Aylmer, "Unbelief in Seventeenth Century England", in D. Pennington and K. Thomas, eds., *Puritans and Revolutionaries* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 22-46. I have been unable to check the evidence Lecler cites in support of his interpretation of Coornhert, and it is striking that Coornhert's views on the question of toleration for atheists escaped, for example, Bayle (*Dictionnaire*, art. Coornhert). Williams is said to have been willing to tolerate atheists not only by Lecler, but also by W.K. Jordan, *The Development of Religious Toleration in England: From the Convocation of the Long Parliament to the Restoration, 1640-60* (Cambridge, Mass., 1938), pp. 484-5 and 504. But Williams attacks intolerance on the grounds that it "renders men, when they sin against their conscience, not only hypocrites, but atheists, and so fit for the practice of any evil murders, adulteries, treasons, etc." (*The Bloody Tenant Yet More Bloody* [1647] in the *Complete Writings of Roger Williams* [7 vols., New York, 1963], III, p. 203; also p. 208). The verse comes from *A Key into the Language of America* (1643) in *Complete Writings*, I, pp. 147-62. On Williams, see in particular P. Miller, *Roger Williams: His Contribution to the American Tradition* (Indianapolis, 1953).
23. The claim that the fear of God was the foundation of social order was maintained despite the fact that it was in conflict with the widespread belief that the populace had little genuine interest in religion (see, for example, P. Collinson, "Popular and unpopular religion", *The Religion of Protestants* [Oxford, 1982], ch. v). I have however come across one example of the claim that religion was ineffectual in comparison to fear of the rope. According to Aubrey, Sir Henry Blount "was wont to say that he did not care to have his servants goe to Church, for there servants infected one another to goe to the Alehouse and learne debauchery; but he did bid them goe to see the executions at Tyeburne, which worke more upon them than all the oratory in the Sermons" (*Brief Lives*, ed. O.L. Dick [Harmondsworth, 1962], p. 133). The standard argument, of course, was that one might well hope to escape judgement in this world, but was bound to face it in the next.

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We have seen some of the reasons why conditions were right in the mid-sixteenth century for the establishment of this idea in the legacy of humanism and the *Arts Moriendi*, and in the impact of the Reformation and, one might add, the rise of princely absolutism, which gave new significance to the idea of fear of a single absolute authority as the foundation of social order.

It is difficult to prove a negative, and I do not wish to pursue at length the evidence for the general acceptance of this idea which runs through virtually all early modern discussions of atheism, of toleration and of oath-taking. Rather I want first to look at some types of opposition which the theory *did* encounter (despite its near universal acceptance) during the period of its greatest success, and to turn then to look at the process by which theories of the social role of religion became once more a matter of public debate.

It is easy to identify the most important group of theorists who rejected outright the claim that only believers could make good citizens. A select and persecuted group of men, they argued that fear was the foundation of society as it now exists, but that this should not be the case. If justice were established in this world then there would be no need for other-worldly sanctions to protect an existing, systematic structure of injustice. This is the argument of Uriel Dacosta's *A Kind of Life*, the tragic autobiography of a convert to Judaism who, having discovered there was no reference to immortality in the Old Testament, had lost faith in the doctrine. Subjected to persecution, he eventually committed suicide, leaving behind a defence of his life and his beliefs, in which the doctrine that fear of God is essential to social order is attacked as a mere excuse for the injustices of this world.²⁴ The same argument is made by William Walwyn, the most subversive of the Leveller leaders, in his early and avowedly revolutionary tract, *The Power of Love*. It is also, of course, a central argument of the communist tracts of Gerrard Winstanley.²⁵ But these theorists may be said to have largely agreed with the conventional orthodoxy; for them the fear of God was the foundation of the existing social order, and it was exactly for this reason that they attacked it and advocated either a rejection of the notion of life after death, or else a radical antinomianism.

Second to the political revolutionaries we may place certain radical Reformers, above all the Socinians. According to Socinianism, the central message of Christianity

24. U. Acosta, *A Specimen of Human Life* (New York, 1967). On Dacosta, see in particular L. Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York, 1965), pp. 53-63.

25. W. Walwyn, *The Power of Love* (1643) in W. Haller, *Tracts on Liberty in the Puritan Revolution, 1638-1647* (3 vols., New York, 1934), I, pp. 33-45. On Walwyn, see in particular J. Frank, *The Levellers* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), pp. 29-38, and W. Haller, *Liberty and Reformation in the Puritan Revolution* (New York, 1955), pp. 162-75. I am not entirely convinced by the argument of J.C. Davis, "The Levellers and Christianity", in B.J. Manning, ed., *Politics, Religion and the English Civil War* (London, 1973), pp. 225-50, or by that of L. Mulligan, "The Religious Roots of William Walwyn's Radicalism", *Journal of Religious History*, XII (1982), pp. 162-79. For Winstanley's views see J.E.C. Hill, ed., *The Law of Freedom and Other Writings* (Harmondsworth, 1973), and Hill's *The Religion of Gerrard Winstanley* (*Past and Present* Supplement No. 5, 1978).

was not Christ's death as a sacrifice for our sins, but his resurrection. Natural reason alone, they held, could not give secure knowledge of life after death. The Biblical testimony to the resurrection provided the only certain assurance of immortality. It followed from this view that pre-Christian cultures had not been able to secure themselves upon a morality of eternal reward and punishment. Socinians thus kept alive within the Reformation period the humanist tradition; their viewpoint is closely comparable to that of Valla, for example. But, of course, strict Socinians denied that secular rulers were divinely authorised, and argued that Christians should play no part in government and warfare. Because of this, the Socinian view was easily portrayed as being subversive of all political order.²⁶

Aside from the revolutionaries and some religious radicals, it is impossible to identify any group of people who questioned the notion that faith was the foundation of political order. It is necessary however to make mention of a few famous texts which came close to doing so. The first is Buchanan's *De Iure Regni Apud Scotos*, in which Buchanan follows a Ciceronian tradition in making laws and society a human invention constructed to meet human needs. From this basis he derives a contractualist theory of government, according to which subjects have at any time the right to revolt against a government which dissatisfies them. It is not surprising that Buchanan has been presented as the first modern political theorist, presenting a secular theory of government founded in popular sovereignty and natural rights. Nevertheless, Buchanan's position is not without ambiguity: at one point, for example, he states that the Decalogue is the foundation of all law, a position that the Levellers were later to reject because it required of citizens under the law that they be (at the least) monotheists. Buchanan's position seems in fact to be that law may be the creation of

26. For the Socinian position, see F. Socinus, *An Argument for the Authority of Holy Scripture* (London, 1731), esp. pp. 74-5, 91-2, 96, 107-26 and 154-8; and his *Opera Omnia (Bibliotheca Fratrum Polonorum)* [1656], I, pp. 537-8; J. Crellius, *Ethica Aristotelica . . . Ethica Christiana* (Amsterdam, 1651), 'Ethica Christiana', pp. 231-2 and 639-54; and the attack of R. Bellarmine, *Scritti politici* (Bologna, 1950), esp. p. 13. On Socinianism see Strauss, *Spinoza*, pp. 64-85; D. Cantimori, *Eretici italiani del cinquecento* (Florence, 1939), esp. pp. 420-6; S. Kot, *Socinianism in Poland: the Social and Political Ideas of the Polish Anti-Trinitarians in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Boston, 1957); and D.P. Walker's important book, *The Decline of Hell* (Chicago, 1964), pp. 73-92. Also relevant is R.H. Popkin, 'The Pre-Adamite Theory in the Renaissance', in E.P. Mahoney, ed., *Philosophy and Humanism: Renaissance Essays in Honor of Paul Oskar Kristeller* (New York, 1976), pp. 50-69.

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man, but that nevertheless it should not be secular, but ought to lay claim to a religious foundation.²⁷

Buchanan wrote in a humanist and republican tradition; in him the Renaissance view that the foundation of the state lies not only in fear of the law, but also in cooperation, consent and civic virtue survives. A second author consciously aware of a tension between the humanist tradition and contemporary orthodoxy is Francis Bacon. In his two essays on atheism and superstition he paints a surprisingly favourable portrait of atheism, largely because he wants to place the greatest possible stress upon the dangers of superstition. In Bacon's view superstition provides the basis for the political union of the discontented — he has, perhaps, the Pilgrimage of Grace in mind. Atheism, by contrast, is a solitary doctrine, depriving the individual of any public rhetoric. The atheist is potentially a good citizen, a harmless philosopher; the superstitious man is the greatest possible threat to public order.²⁸

For Bacon religion was both the greatest support and the greatest danger to the state. In the great battle between Catholicism and Protestantism the atheist was merely a neutral observer.²⁹ Bacon thus returns to the notion, generally abandoned, that unbelief is acceptable amongst an educated élite. A similar view was upheld by certain unbelievers. The *Quatrains du Déiste*, for example, seek to demonstrate that the

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27. G. Buchanan, *The Powers of the Crown in Scotland* (Austin, 1949), esp. pp. 45-8. On Buchanan, see the contrasting views of R. Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories: Their Origin and Development* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 32-57, and Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1978); also Skinner, "The Origins of the Calvinist Theory of Revolution", in B.C. Malament, ed., *After the Reformation: Essays in Honor of J.H. Hexter* (Philadelphia, 1980), pp. 309-30. The fundamental problem for Buchanan and other early modern Republican theorists, such as Mariana, Milton, Nedham and Sydney, is that they could give no adequate account of how civic virtue could be maintained (unless by the fear of God). The exception here is Harrington, who carefully founded Oceana on a (primarily economic) self-interest, and was thus able to insist that good government did not require good men. This characteristic of Harrington's thought is well brought out by J.C. Davis, *Utopia and the Ideal Society* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 205-40. However Harrington sees himself as having solved the problem of how to ground society in consent, not fear, by institutional means which he believes are highly practical (the key one being the separation between propounding and choosing, illustrated by his cake-cutting example). He is thus no Utopian; on the contrary, he is trying to attack the idealistic elements in previous Republicanism. For the Leveller viewpoint, see G.E. Aylmer, *The Levellers in the English Revolution* (London, 1975), p. 141.
28. F. Bacon, *Essays*, Nos. 16, 17. I have come across only one other expression of a viewpoint similar to Bacon's: see the "Relazione di Tomaso Contarini", in *Relazioni degli Ambasciatori Veneti al Senato*, ed. A. Ventura (2 vols., Bari, 1976), II, pp. 261-328, especially p. 293.
29. Atheism was held to be a consequence of the religious conflict of the age, not only by Bacon and Williams, but by many others: see Lecler, *Toleration*, II, pp. 48, 52-3, 82, 106, 137, 197, 200 and 471.

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Christian conception of God is incoherent. At the same time the author insists that knowledge of this fact must be confined to a few, for the very foundations of society would be undermined if the common people lose their fear of God. This view was in all probability fairly widespread. According to Charron in *Les trois veritez* there was no point in trying to convert unbelievers to Christianity by seeking to convince them of the social utility of belief: this they recognised, merely arguing that it was useful that others should believe, not necessary that they themselves should. The possibly apocryphal story that the philosopher Cremonini, although an unbeliever, insisted on having pious servants illustrates this viewpoint well.³⁰

Few authors dared express this viewpoint in public. Private acceptance of the Averroist view of religion as a tool of state involved public acceptance of the view that only believers could make good citizens. Apart from Bacon, the only striking exception is Charron himself, for the account of moral virtue he presents in *De la sagesse* is a determinedly secular one, independent of theology and faith. Thus the wise man will make a virtuous citizen no matter what his religious beliefs: one thinks of Polybius' remark that a society of wise men would have no need of religion to sustain it.³¹

Some theorists, then, retained the humanist view that a minority were capable of making good citizens without the assistance of faith, but all agreed that the majority were in need of faith to motivate them to good behaviour. It is in this context that one should approach the famous discussion of atheism in the Prolegomena to Grotius' *Laws of War and Peace*. Grotius' argument is that, since men can only survive through cooperation, the laws of nature would have to be recognised as having some force even by someone who refused to accept them as the commands of God. The question is, what force? For such a person the laws of nature would evidently be what Suarez termed *regula*, a guide, rather than *lex*, a law. An atheist might recognise that mankind would be in general better off for obeying them, but there would be nothing to stop him from setting them aside if they clashed with his own interests. He would lack a powerful motive to obey the law, in that he would have no reason to fear punishment for disobedience.³²

30. The *Quatrains*, originally intended to be kept secret, were incidentally published by M. Mersenne in the course of his rebuttal of them: *De l'impiété des déistes, athées et libertins de ce temps* (2 vols., Paris, 1624). P. Charron, *Les trois veritez* (Bordeaux, 1593). On Cremonini, see Wootton, *Sarpi*, p. 134.

31. P. Charron, *De la sagesse* (4 vols., Dijon, 1801). On Charron as a secular moralist, see E.F. Rice, *The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958) and H. Baron, "Secularization of Wisdom and Political Humanism in the Renaissance", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XXI (1960), pp. 131-50.

32. H. Grotius, *Prolegomena to the Law of War and Peace*, ed. E. Dumbold (New York, 1957). On this see R. Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories*, pp. 58-81, esp. p. 76. Suarez' discussion of the question is in *Tractatus de Legibus ac Deo Legislatore* (1613), lib. II, cc. v, vi. See also W. von Leyden's introduction to J. Locke, *Essays on the Law of Nature* (Oxford, 1954), pp. 51-4.

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Grotius has a particular interest in the situation of the atheist because he is primarily concerned with international relations. There exists no reliable temporal authority able to sit in judgement upon sovereign states. States thus have only limited reasons for obeying international law and the laws of nature; in this respect their position is comparable to that of atheists. Rulers in practice seem to give little consideration to the prospect of eternal damnation. The idea of a society of atheists is thus comparable to that of a society of states; one would expect such a society to honour the laws of nature as much in the breach as in the observance.

I have tried to give, within a limited space, a survey of all the more important strains of opposition to the established orthodoxy of the early modern period, that each and every individual is capable of being a good citizen only in so far as he is a believer. By and large, these opposing lines of thought are not novel, but rather represent attempts to preserve earlier views — the views of Cicero, Polybius, Averroes or Aquinas — in an age which had come to deny that any person could be a law-abiding atheist. And it is important to note that, apart from revolutionaries like Winstanley, none of the thinkers we have looked at dared suggest that citizens in general could be freed from the fear of God. Nowhere have we encountered a willingness to tolerate atheists in general, or to conceive of a stable and peaceable society of atheists.

Recognition of the near universal acceptance of the view that atheists could not be trusted has two important implications that I want to mention at this point. The first is that the establishment of this orthodoxy constituted the most powerful barrier to the spread of unbelief. If unbelief was subversive of all social order, then who could wish not to believe? And even if one was led reluctantly into unbelief, how could one in good conscience urge others to adopt one's own views? From the emergence of the word "atheist" through until the mid-nineteenth century the most powerful argument in favour of religion has been a social one. One has only to read works of apologetics such as Charron's *Trois veritez* or Mersenne's *Impiété des déistes* to see that this is the case. Arguments from science were of secondary importance, and were generally taken, as by the Boyle lecturers and Voltaire, to favour the cause of faith in a providential deity; while the central arguments against faith came not from science but from the universal evidence of injustice in this world, from the experiences of *Candide*, not the physics of Newton.³³

A corollary of this is the recognition that the unbeliever throughout our period was doomed to a life of hypocrisy. Not only were the laws intolerant of atheism, but his own moral code required him to speak in terms that must be incomprehensible to the mass of mankind, to approach his subject indirectly and to make no open avowal of his lack of belief. As a consequence tracing the history of early modern unbelief is like

33. The most famous of the Boyle lectures are those of R. Bentley: see *Eight Sermons preach'd at the Honourable Robert Boyle's Lectures* (5th ed., London, 1724). On the lectures, see M.C. Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution* (Ithaca, 1976) and M. Hunter, *Science and Society in Restoration England* (Cambridge, 1981), ch. vii. Voltaire's views are in the *Dictionnaire philosophique*, art. *athée*.

following an underground stream, a stream which disappears from view, but does not for that reason cease to exist, between the Renaissance and the modern period.³⁴

In the second place I would like to stress that the establishment of a consensus on the danger of atheism took place in spite of the evidence and of the requirements of logic. Where it was inconvenient the evidence was simply brushed aside. Thus in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was generally insisted that all religions taught the doctrines of immortality and divine punishment; where the Renaissance had recognised fundamental differences between Christianity and paganism, those differences were now elided in an attempt to establish that certain truths — those outlined for example in Herbert's *De Veritate* — were universally believed.³⁵

Even more significant, though, was the failure of logic involved. The issue is clearest in the double value given to the law of God in Calvin's *Institutes*. On the one hand the law condemns all men as sinners. What the Christian has to discover is that he is not subject to the condemnation of the law, because Christ's merit is imputed to him. The Christian can do nothing to earn this acquittal; it is granted to him by virtue of God's predestination. On this view of the law the actions of the individual are irrelevant: on the one hand all people without exception are condemned by the law; on the other Christians are acquitted through no virtue of their own. From another point of view though, Calvin insists that the law of God exists to terrorize sinful man into good behaviour. It is fear of God's justice, as well as of that of the state, which turns the sinner into the citizen. Calvin thus underwrites a political and legal theory of divine law which is directly at odds with his own theology.³⁶ It is thus not the theological developments of the Reformation which gave rise to the vision of the atheist as the epitome of vice, but rather its cultural and political impact which created the need for a concept of freedom from the divine and human law, of atheism.

These two conclusions suggest the wide significance of a recognition of the early modern period's stress upon the unique social role of religion. But my present concern is primarily with the implications of this commonly shared assumption for the history of political philosophy. It is, I would suggest, impossible to understand properly the "classic" texts of political theory in the early modern period without taking account of this underlying presupposition. Let me take first the case of Hobbes.

In Hobbes' view one cannot know by natural reason that the soul is immortal. It follows that men in a state of nature do not know that they are subject to the commandments of God; for them the law of nature is merely a prudential maxim, as

34. In *Paolo Sarpi: Between Renaissance and Enlightenment*, I present a detailed study of an unbeliever in a period when some have said unbelief is not to be found. Sarpi is quite exceptional, however, as I hope this paper helps to show, in being able to conceive of a secular society.

35. For example, see Wootton, *Sarpi*, pp. 61 and 71-2.

36. J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Geneva, 1559), bk. II, ch. vii, paras. 6 and 10. On this problem see C. Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (Harmondsworth, 1975), pp. 151-83.

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for Grotius' hypothetical atheist. If man in a state of nature had a sure knowledge of divine rewards and punishments, then the role of the state would be greatly diminished (as it is, for example, in Locke). But man can neither obtain this knowledge through reason, nor through the identification of a consistent historical record through which God has declared his will; in this respect Hobbes rejects Selden's argument that although a law must be adequately promulgated and must carry sanctions before it is properly speaking a law, nevertheless the authority of the law of God is adequately established by the historical record of God's dealings with man.³⁷

Hobbes' response to the problems posed by Grotius' rationalist account of natural law and to Selden's objections to it is to have the sovereign fulfill the role classically assigned to God. It is he who promulgates the law of nature, turning it from a rule of conduct into a sanction-bearing law, and it is he who declares the truth of the Bible, thus announcing the existence of a system of divine as well as human sanctions. It is because Hobbes' sovereign has to fulfill God's role that he must be absolute, a "mortal God". One central reason why Hobbes' argument takes the form it does, therefore, is that he is attempting to retain intact much of the structure of the commonly accepted theory of political order, while replacing the elements of the theory and thus transforming its meaning. For God as the one foundation of order he substitutes the sovereign, for the natural law he substitutes the civil law, and for the power of God he substitutes the combined might of Leviathan's subjects; by these means fear of Leviathan replaces fear of God. In each case the crux of the argument lies in the claim that each and every person must experience this fear. Just as the early modern orthodoxy insisted that no unbeliever could be trusted, so Hobbes insisted that each and every person must fear the ruler. The state of nature is, quite simply, a portrait of a society of atheists, of men without either a God or a mortal God; it is Hobbes' demonstration that without the sanction of fear the law of nature has no force whatsoever.

The peculiarities of Hobbes' argument thus derive in large part from his attempt to find a secular substitute for God as a foundation of social order. Had it been accepted that the foundation of social order lay elsewhere (in common interest, or the pursuit of fame) then Leviathan would have been beside the point. Hobbes' central purpose, however, is to meet the orthodoxy on its own ground, that of fear of a supreme authority. As a consequence, although he stresses honour and glory as motives to socially valuable behaviour, he can give them no specific role within his

37. On Grotius, Selden and Hobbes, see Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories*, pp. 58-142. For a concise secular reading of Hobbes, see Q. Skinner, "Hobbes's *Leviathan*", *Historical Journal*, VII (1964), pp. 321-33.

argument.³⁸ Take away the assumptions of the day which Hobbes decided to build upon, and his argument seems brilliant but arbitrary. Given the assumption that fear of an absolute and inescapable power is the only possible foundation of political order — the assumption that seems to us most questionable, but which contemporaries were willing to grant — and Hobbes' conclusions represent the necessary consequence of an attempt to conceive a secular political order, self-sustaining and independent of religious faith and therefore of the consequences of doctrinal conflict.

Locke, in contrast to Hobbes, gives secure knowledge of the divine law to men in a state of nature. The unspoken assumption of the *Second Treatise* is that men know that each is obliged to recognise the other as a fellow creature, and that they are motivated to act in the light of this obligation by fear of divine justice. Take away this assumption and the Lockean state of nature becomes indistinguishable from the Hobbesian. Given this starting point, men can then construct a political order which embodies God-given rights and liberties, and can claim, when seeking to modify that order, to be defending their rights, not merely pursuing their interests. Locke's theory depends upon the existence of a final arbiter of right and wrong, even if the judgements of that arbiter will only be ultimately declared in the next world:

And, therefore, in such controversies [i.e. where there is no judge on earth to whom appeal can be made], where the question is put, Who shall be judge? it cannot be meant, Who shall decide the controversy? Every one knows . . . that "the Lord the Judge" shall judge. Where there is no judge on earth, the appeal lies to God in heaven. That question, then, cannot mean, Who shall judge whether another hath put himself in a state of war with me, and whether I may, as Jephtha

38. *Leviathan*, ch. xiv: "The force of words, being, as I have formerly noted, too weak to hold men to the performance of their covenants, there are in man's nature, but two imaginable helps to strengthen it. And those are either a fear of the consequence of breaking their word, or pride in appearing not to need to break it. The latter is a generosity too rarely found to be presumed on, especially in the pursuers of wealth, command, or sensual pleasure; which are the greatest part of mankind. The passion to be reckoned upon, is fear." This was the standard argument from which the need for the fear of God was deduced. In preserving the form of the standard argument while changing the content Hobbes necessarily came close to a pastiche. There is some truth, consequently, in Bentley's comment: "For an Atheist to compose a system of politics is as absurd and ridiculous, as Epicurus's sermons were about sanctity and religious worship. But there was hope, that the doctrine of absolute uncontrollable power and the formidable name of Leviathan might flatter and bribe the government into a toleration of infidelity." (*Eight Sermons*, p. 39). Hobbes' interest in honour and glory has been given a social explanation by K. Thomas, "The Social Origins of Hobbes's Political Thought", in *Hobbes Studies*, ed. K.C. Brown (Oxford, 1965), pp. 185-236, but it also suggests an intellectual debt to authors such as Valla, Pomponazzi, Charron and Le Vayer. Similarly Hobbes' claim that "there is almost nothing that has a name, that has not been esteemed amongst the Gentiles, in one place or another, a God or Divell" (*Leviathan*, ch. 12) can be traced back through Le Vayer, Sarpi and Charron, to Garimberto, and forwards, of course, to Hume. In these respects Hobbes is indebted to an existing secular tradition of argument.

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did, appeal to heaven in it? Of that I myself can only be judge in my own conscience, as I will answer it at the great day, to the supreme Judge of all men.³⁹

Locke's argument depends upon the existence, not just of a rule of nature, but of a law of nature, capable of underwriting oaths, "the bonds of society", and establishing that we are answerable in God's high court for breaches of the law of nature. Yet Locke himself came to be convinced that, as he argues in the *Reasonableness of Christianity*, natural reason has not, as a matter of historical fact, given men adequate knowledge of the law of nature; hence the urgent need for revelation as the only sound and sure basis for moral judgement. The attack on the notion of innate knowledge in the *Essay* is designed to show that there is no universally agreed consensus regarding God and his law. And while Locke appears to have believed that one could argue — as he does in the *Second Treatise* — from the existence of a divine creator to the moral principles of equality, liberty and mutual assistance, he also came to recognize that one cannot demonstrate those principles to be enforced by law, for one cannot demonstrate the immortality of the soul (or, consequently, of a system of divine judgment operating after death) by natural reason.⁴⁰

One may well conclude from this that Locke's political philosophy does not have — even in his own eyes — the status he pretends to ascribe to it. Far from being a political theory applicable to men in a state of nature, it is one that can be fully accepted only by Christians, convinced of the truth of Christ's resurrection. Because Locke's theology is in essence Socinian, he has to share with the Socinians the view that political authority in general has been founded not in divine law but in man-made convention.⁴¹ This of course is something he has no need to stress within the *Two Treatises*. Writing for an audience which presumes the immortality of the soul, he quietly evades the question — which he believed to be of central importance — of the limits of natural reason and therefore of any moral judgment or political authority founded upon it.

39. Locke, *Second Treatise*, p. 13; see also p. 121.

40. For an excellent account of Locke's natural law theory, see the first chapter of J. Tully, *A Discourse on Property: John Locke and his Adversaries* (Cambridge, 1980). Locke's refusal to demonstrate the immateriality of the soul in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P.H. Niddich (Oxford, 1975), involves a refusal to demonstrate its immortality (pp. 540-3). His discussion of God's existence (pp. 619-30) fails to establish his necessary concern to punish and reward. The view of natural law expressed in the *Reasonableness* is a consequence of this (see *Works*, 10 vols. [London, 1823], VII, pp. 134-47). On this subject, see the valuable discussion in J. Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke* (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 187-99, and R. Ashcraft, "Faith and knowledge in Locke's philosophy", in J.W. Yolton, ed., *John Locke: Problems and Perspectives* (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 194-223.

41. The attack on Locke as a Socinian is a commonplace of the contemporary debates on the *Essay* and the *Reasonableness*; see, for example, J. Edwards, *Socinianism Unmask'd* (London, 1697), and J.W. Yolton, *John Locke and the Way of Ideas* (Oxford, 1956). This needs to be borne in mind not only when trying to reconstruct the meaning of these works, but also when considering Locke's own attitude to the *Two Treatises*.

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In the *Essay* Locke admits the existence, alongside the true law of nature, of a close facsimile founded not upon men's obligations but their interests. He admits too that most men are governed by the law of opinion and their fear of the judgment of their contemporaries, not the law of nature and their fear of God.⁴² Locke is thus in a position to give a purely secular account of the functioning of actual societies, and to conceive of a society of atheists, ordered by man-made laws, by self-interest and social constraint. Locke does not want to argue from these premises, because he believes that some clear principles of morality — and here some modern moral philosophers would agree — cannot be derived from them. Nevertheless he realises that a functional social order can.

This realization must have been brought home to Locke, not merely by a reading of Hobbes, but just as importantly by a reading of Nicole. Nicole, accepting certain Hobbesian premises and integrating them within a Jansenist theology, argued that men in general (i.e. with the exception of the elect) are governed by selfish and corrupt motives. Nevertheless, enlightened self-interest can produce a perfect facsimile of virtue, especially because the laws of self-interest, working through the market, bind society together more effectively than ever could a disinterested charity. Thus in Nicole's view social order derives not from the fear of God — the lack of which he laments — but from the same passions and interests that give birth to sin and vice.⁴³

Nicole's view might be held to be a logical deduction from an Augustinian theology. Nevertheless, it was not a deduction which had previously been made. Three things clearly contributed to Nicole's theorization of the possibility of a secular, entirely worldly society. The first is evidently the terms of the debate between Jansenists and Jesuits. The Jansenist denial of free will necessarily implied that man, acting in society, was generally governed by forces outside his control. Their attack upon the casuistical notion that the morality of an action is determined by the intentions of the actor necessarily implied that men, when they believed themselves to be governed by pious or virtuous motives, were in general deceiving themselves. Neither of these arguments was peculiar to the Jansenists, but Calvinists, when presenting similar arguments, had tended to assume that the elect could in general be identified with the members of the true Church. The Jansenists, in conflict with fellow

42. *Essay*, pp. 65-84 and 348-60.

43. On "a great many plain duties of morality", see Gauthier, "Why ought one obey God?", pp. 427 and 443. The key essays by Nicole are "De la crainte de Dieu", "De la charité et de l'amour propre", "De la grandeur", "Des moyens de conserver la paix", all in *Oeuvres philosophiques et morales*, ed. C. Jourdain (Paris, 1845). On Nicole, see in particular J. Viner, *The Role of Providence in the Social Order* (Philadelphia, 1972), ch. iii; N.O. Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France* (Princeton, 1980), pp. 293-303. Nicole's view of economic self-interest enables him to give a much surer account of non-Christian virtue than, for example, F. La Mothe Le Vayer, *De la vertu des payens* (*Oeuvres*, 15 vols., [Paris, 1684], v. 5). On Locke's reading of Nicole, see von Leyden, ed., *Essays on the Law of Nature*, pp. 252-4. Locke also, of course, read La Rochefoucauld, whose thought in many ways parallels Nicole's. It is a matter of some interest that Jansenism seems in practice to have acted as a bridge to unbelief: see E. LeRoy Ladurie, "Chaunu, Lebrun, Vovelle: The New History of Death", in *The Territory of the Historian* (Chicago, 1979), pp. 273-84.

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Catholics, denied that the elect had a corporate identity. As a consequence, they were incapable of aspiring to the governance of a god-fearing society of the type shaped by Calvin in Geneva.

Secondly, Jansenists such as Nicole were the heirs of Cartesian scientific philosophy. Descartes' corpuscular physics left no room for divine intervention in the natural world (unlike Newtonian physics, with its conception of a non-physical "action over a distance", dependent upon God's providential care). But Descartes' conception of man also granted only the most limited role to the immortal faculty of reason; man in general was the victim of passions which were only precariously within his conscious control. It was thus easy to extend Descartes' vision of a law-governed natural order to recognize the possibility of a law-governed social order, and Nicole was quite explicit in making this analogy between the physical and social worlds.

The third precondition for the conception of a secular social order was the identification of a natural law at work within society. For Nicole this law was self-interest functioning through the market. Here, it seems to me, it is as yet hard to determine whether Nicole came to a recognition of the economic role of self-interest because he already had the conception of a law-governed social order, or whether he was integrating an existing tradition of economic discourse into a novel theological and philosophical context.⁴⁴ But certainly a conception of self-interest mediated through the market as the chief bond of society was necessary if the early modern insistence on the fear of God as the foundation of social order was to be supplanted.

Locke was familiar with Nicole, but he would not have had to draw out the implications of Nicole's reasoning for himself.⁴⁵ That had been done by Pierre Bayle, in his *Pensées diverses sur la comète*. The argument of Bayle's *Pensées diverses* is that a society of atheists could be law-abiding and, to outward appearance, virtuous. Bayle, in putting forward this argument, was, in my view, attempting a defence of atheism, and not, as some would claim, merely attacking an idolatrous and "pagan" Catholicism as worse than the Calvinism which the Catholics sought to brand as atheistical.⁴⁶ Whatever his motives, Bayle was writing ostensibly as an Augustinian Catholic, and drawing upon a Jansenist tradition of argument to attack the notion of a god-fearing (and intolerantly Catholic) society.

44. Particularly helpful on the theme of economic self-interest are A.O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph* (Princeton, 1977); J.O. Appleby, *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth Century England* (Princeton, 1980), ch. vii; J.R. Jacob, "Restoration, Reformation and the Origins of the Royal Society", *History of Science*, XIII (1975), pp. 155-71. For a French context, see L. Rothkrug, *Opposition to Louis XIV: The Political and Social Origins of the French Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1965).

45. Locke's library contained several works by Bayle, including the *Pensées diverses*: see J. Harrison and P. Laslett, *The Library of John Locke* (2nd ed., Oxford, 1971). The influence of Bayle is to be seen, I think, in the *Essay*, pp. 69 and 353-7.

46. I follow G. Cantelli, *Teologia e ateismo: Saggio sul pensiero filosofico e religioso di Pierre Bayle* (Florence, 1969), rather than, for example, W. Rex, *Essays on Pierre Bayle and Religious Controversy* (The Hague, 1965), pp. 3-74.

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Bayle refused to conclude from his arguments that atheism should be tolerated. Religion, he held, played a valuable, if not logically necessary, role in sustaining social order, and should not be undermined.⁴⁷ Toleration should be extended only to those who claimed a conscientious ground for dissent, while the atheist could reasonably be required to play the hypocrite (as Bayle himself did). But if Bayle would not argue explicitly for toleration for atheists, he did insist that moral judgement had nothing to do with faith, and he made his secular moral code the final arbiter of the truths of Scripture themselves.⁴⁸ Bayle, it must be said, failed to develop a coherent account of morality, but where Locke, despite the logical difficulties involved, insisted on arguing upon the premise of divinely ordained moral law, Bayle made an opposite existential commitment, insisting on arguing from a rule (rather than a law) of morality, and in regarding that rule as universally accessible to natural reason.

Locke writes in the *Letter Concerning Toleration* as if the claim that atheists could not be trusted could be taken for granted. But this was in fact — as he surely knew — no longer the case. In place of a notion of divine law as the basis of social order the Jansenists, and Bayle following them, had pioneered a view of society as united by self-interest. On this view it was the market transaction, not the oath taken upon the word of God, which was the paradigmatic social act. Where Locke believed that market transactions themselves could only be sustained by fear of divine sanctions, the Jansenists heralded them as mutually beneficial and therefore self-sustaining.⁴⁹ It was this view which was to be expanded by Bayle's disciple, Mandeville, in his account of how private vices give rise to public prosperity, and presumed by atheists such as Collins.⁵⁰

What was needed to sustain this view, however, was, as I have indicated, a more developed theory of morality. It was this which it was one of the central projects of the Enlightenment to provide. Shaftesbury was the first to seek to elaborate a moral theory which in no way depended upon fear of divine punishment, a moral theory which would bind atheists as well as believers. Hutcheson advanced this project by finding in the passions a motive to moral action which could replace the fear of God. And with Hume we have at last a purely secular moral philosophy, although one which, in order

47. See, for example, *Dictionnaire*, art. *Socin*.

48. See, for example, *Commentaire philosophique sur ces paroles de Jésus Christ: Contrains les d'entrer*, in Bayle, *Oeuvres diverses*, 4 vols. (The Hague, 1727-31), II, pp. 355-444; *Dictionnaire*, art. *Abraham*.

49. On Locke's existential commitment see J. Dunn, "Individuality and Clientage in the formation of Locke's social imagination", in R. Brandt, ed., *John Locke: Symposium Wolfenbüttel 1979* (Berlin, 1981), pp. 43-73. For Locke's view of the market, see in particular *Some Considerations of the Consequences of the Lowering of Interests in Works*, V, pp. 6-7. Paine's *Rights of Man* provides a striking example of a Lockean political order underpinned by economic self-interest, rather than fear of hell.

50. B. de Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees* (2 vols., Oxford, 1924). On Collins, see in particular D. Berman, "Anthony Collins and the Question of Atheism in the early part of the eighteenth century", *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, LXXV, sect. C (1975), pp. 85-102.

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to root morality in the sentiments, has to identify it with the pleasurable and the useful.⁵¹

In Hume's work the theory that only the God-fearing could be reliable members of society was attacked and overturned on every front. He contested the presumption that there was a universal knowledge of God and of the immortality of the soul; that actions are governed by a rational calculation of long-term interests, not by immediate passions; that promises, contracts and oaths are prior to, rather than the creation of, society; and that society is founded in irreconcilable interests which need to be mediated by divine justice, not by the seamless web of common interests which the rising science of political economy argued was constructed by the market mechanism. In Hume's view, reversing the prejudices of centuries, it was not unbelief but religion which was the greatest threat to moral action and social harmony.⁵²

In Locke's own day the theory that the fear of God alone sustained society was — for the first time in a century — contestable. Lawyers continued to stress the necessity of faith and the importance of oaths because the law courts continued to claim to mete out a human approximation of divine justice. But, as far as social and political theory was concerned, fear of the law, both human and divine, was no longer the chief bond of society. Where nature had been conceived in the seventeenth century as governed by an omnipotent law-giver, society was held by the eighteenth century to be sustained by impersonal natural forces, the passions and the interests. The claim that religion was the fundamental guarantor of social order was now once again, as it had been in the Renaissance, essentially contestable.

Voltaire's essay on religion in his philosophical dictionary begins as follows:

The bishop of Worcester, Warburton, author of one of the most learned works ever written, says this on page 8 of the first volume: "Whatsoever religion and society have no future state for their support, must be supported by an extraordinary Providence. The Jewish religion and society had no future state for their support; therefore the Jewish religion and society were supported by an extraordinary Providence."⁵³

In the eighteenth century it became once more apparent, as it had been in the fifteenth,

51. On Shaftesbury, see Walker, *Decline of Hell*, pp. 167-77; F. Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections* (Gainesville, 1969), pp. 307-39. That Hume's primary concern was with moral philosophy is argued, for example, by Letwin, *Pursuit of Certainty*, p. 35.

52. D. Hume, *Natural History of Religion*, ch. xiv, reprinted in R. Wollheim, ed., *Hume on Religion* (London, 1963). Hume was consciously treading in Bayle's footsteps: see E.C. Mossner, "Hume's early memoranda, 1729-40: The Complete Text", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, IX (1949), pp. 492-518 and N. Kemp Smith, ed., *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (London, 1947), pp. 80-6.

53. Voltaire, *Dictionnaire*, art. *Religion*.

that not all societies had been founded upon the fear of heaven and hell.⁵⁴ Voltaire felt that a belief in divine justice was a necessary element of morality, and that society needed oaths to be sustained by fear of God's vengeance. His answer to Warburton was, in effect, that the Jews had feared divine vengeance in this world, if not in the next.⁵⁵ Voltaire was thus, in accepting the preeminent importance of faith in God for society, in some respects closer to Warburton than to Hume.

What I hope to have shown in this paper is why the question posed by Warburton might seem to be the very starting point for any discussion of religion, even in Voltaire's day. It was here, I have suggested, that the strongest arguments for religion were to be found, here that apologists for Christianity could claim to base their argument upon an incontestable truth. If religion now seems primarily a matter of private conscience rather than public morality, if faith seems to be a choice we make for ourselves rather than an obligation we owe to society, it is because Warburton's argument now seems less convincing to us (or at least many of us) than it did even to Voltaire. But unless we recognize what the social role of religion was taken to be in the early modern period we cannot hope to understand, I would submit, their discussions, not only of faith and morality, but also of social order and political philosophy.

I have sought in this paper to give some suggestion of the fear of God as a central issue in political theory from Machiavelli to Mill. The picture I have drawn is very sketchy — one would need for example to show how the French Revolution and Malthus combined to restore hell to the political stage, undoing the work of Hume and Smith, and leaving the issue unresolved in Mill's own day. My final concern though is to pose a methodological problem: if the issue is of the central importance I have suggested, why has its significance been so rarely acknowledged by historians of political theory?

54. A recognition of this is already apparent in Locke's discussion of Japan in *An Essay Concerning Toleration* (Viano, ed., *Scritti*, p. 102). W. Moyle insisted that the Roman religion was not founded on a belief in immortality in "An Essay" (c. 1699), in C. Robbins, ed., *Two English Republican Tracts* (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 211-2. A copy of this text apparently exists in Locke's handwriting (see H.R.F. Bourne, *The Life of John Locke*, 2 vols. [London, 1878], I, pp. 147-54: Bourne takes the essay to be by Locke and dates it to the 1660s). I have not come across any other examples for the period 1530-1680, when the notion that fear of hell was the foundation of social order was virtually universally accepted, except in the writings of radicals such as Acosta and Socinians such as Crellius. The contrast between pagan religion and a Christianity which offered the promise of immortality was of course to be the crux of Gibbon's treatment of the success of Christianity in the *Decline and Fall*.

55. Voltaire, *Dictionnaire*, art. *Ame*. I know of only one example of a theorist who denied the immortality of the soul, but argued that God effectively punished evil and rewarded good in this life, thus combining mortalism with an attack on atheism as subversive of all order — Jean Bodin, for whose religious views see in particular *Colloquium of the Seven about Secrets of the Sublime* and C.R. Baxter, "Jean Bodin's daemon and his conversion to Judaism", in *Jean Bodin: Verhandlungen der internationalen Bodin Tagung in München* (Munich, 1973), pp. 1-21.

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There are, I think, a number of answers to this question. The first is that professional moral and political philosophers have tended to be convinced that their subject is distinct from religion and theology, and historians have thus been all too prone to read this distinction back into the past. Secondly, though, the methodology of the history of ideas has tended to stress the historian's obligation to follow closely the arguments of his sources. Even the most sophisticated of contemporary history of political theory has sought to claim as its goal the reconstruction of the intentions of theorists as they would have been identifiable by well-informed contemporaries, the author's immediate audience. The problem with this methodology is that it tends to lay insufficient stress on those issues which authors and their audiences so took for granted that they felt they were scarcely in need of discussion. Underpinning assumptions must, however, be of as great importance for the historian of ideas as relatively superficial disagreements and debates.

I would like to end this paper, then, with the suggestion that historians of political theory need to give much more prominence to these underpinning assumptions, which are often extraneous to what we would take to be the subject matter of political theory. Whether these underpinning assumptions are termed unit-ideas, problematics, paradigms or epistemes is not perhaps of primary importance, compared to the fundamental question of whether they are regarded as an essential object of inquiry.⁵⁶ The most historically significant ideas, I would submit, are often those which are taken most generally for granted.

56. For unit ideas, see A.O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, Mass., 1938); for problematics, see L. Althusser, *For Marx* (Harmondsworth, 1969); for epistemes, see M. Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir* (Paris, 1969); for paradigms, see T.S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (rev. ed., Chicago, 1970). Each of these concepts presents certain difficulties, but "problematic" seems best adapted for the analysis of the conviction that "the belief of a deitie is . . . the foundation of all morality". Clearly this is a claim that links natural theology, moral philosophy and social and political theory.

Since I feel that the rejection of this view constituted a crucial step in the establishment of "modern" moral and political philosophy, I am obviously unconvinced by some of the claims made in Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Theory*, since Skinner holds that a modern theory, and indeed a specifically secular theory, is already apparent in the work of Buchanan and Althusius.

There are obviously various senses in which a theorist may be termed secular: if he rejects the divine right of kings; if he argues in secular terms; if he believes the purposes of the state are this-worldly; or if he recognises the possibility of a secular state, a society of atheists. Locke, for example, is secular only in the first and third of these senses of the word.

Skinner, whose paradigm for modernity is Locke, scarcely concerns himself with the second and fourth senses of the term. But even given his own concerns, his treatment of Althusius is thoroughly misleading. Unlike Buchanan, Althusius *does* insist on the existence of a contract between the magistrate, the citizens and God, the magistrate undertaking to ensure obedience to the true religion. As part of this covenant, God promises worldly success: "the profession and practice of orthodox religion are the cause of all public and private happiness".

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Althusius insists that religious faith is essential for social life; the magistrate “should by no means permit atheism, epicureanism, libertinism”. The Decalogue is “the bond of human society”. Moreover, Althusius insists — explicitly rejecting any attempt to found a secular theory — “each and every precept of the Decalogue is political”, for he who does not believe in God cannot recognise his obligations to his neighbour.

Skinner’s account of Althusius is wrong on matters of fact, but where mistakes are made on matters of fact, it is usually because false assumptions have intervened. In part Skinner has been misled by Gierke; more significantly he has been misled by a methodology which concentrates on conscious intentions as they can be established by contextual analysis. Such a methodology enables one, I believe, to show that Hobbes was wilfully secular and Locke wilfully theological in their presuppositions. What it makes it hard to do is to recognise the establishment of the consensus that faith is the bond of society, since no one seems to have actively campaigned to establish this view. As a consequence Skinner is able to portray the post-Reformation political upheavals as leading to the secularisation of political thought, when it would be equally accurate to portray them as leading to the demise of certain flourishing humanist traditions stressing civic virtue and honour, and consequently to the wholesale desecularisation of political theory. Skinner’s second error, it seems to me, lies in his narrowing of the context in which he studies political theory, confining it to the strictly political: “I take it that political life itself sets the main problems for the political theorist, causing a certain range of issues to appear problematic, and a corresponding range of questions to become the leading subjects of debate.” This procedure tends to minimise the impact of developments in theology, philosophy, history and social theory on political theory. I hope that this paper has suggested that one cannot understand the rise and fall of the notion — central to political philosophy — that atheists are “incapable of all societie” without taking account of this wider context; see Skinner, *Foundations*, I, p. xi and II, p. 341; O. von Guericke, *The Development of Political Theory* (New York, 1939), pp. 69-71; J. Althusius, *The Politics*, abridged trans. by S.F. Carney (Boston, 1964), pp. 142, 156-7 and 175, and his *Politica Methodice Digesta* (3rd ed., 1613), preface and chs. 21 and 28; J.H. Tully, “The Pen is a Mighty Sword: Quentin Skinner’s Analysis of Politics”, forthcoming, *British Journal of Political Science*, which brings out the tendency towards political reductionism in Skinner’s work.