Hobbes and the Cause of Religious Toleration

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Even the careful reader of *Leviathan* is apt to be surprised by the suggestion that Hobbes might have been – in intention and in act – a friend of religious toleration. Who could be further removed, on this issue, from that "saint of liberalism,"[1] John Locke? Locke's *Letter on Toleration* sought a kind of separation of church and state,[2] arguing that each of these institutions has its own areas of legitimate concern, that the state exists to protect our temporal interests, and is entitled to use force to do so, but that it is not its business to advance our spiritual interests. These are the province of the churches, which cannot use force to achieve their ends; since a saving faith must be uncoerced, they must rely on persuasion. Hobbes is certainly not a saint of that kind of liberalism. He advocates, not a separation of church and state, but a subordination of the church to the state.

On Hobbes' view it is an essential prerogative of the sovereign to determine what books may be published and what doctrines may be taught, in public gatherings generally, but especially in the universities and the churches.[3] He thinks the sovereign must not only see that doctrines harmful to the peace *are not* taught, but also ensure, by whatever means necessary, that doctrines promoting his absolute authority *are* taught. The Hobbesian sovereign is meant to exercise a very broad control of public discourse, in philosophy, in science, in politics and morals, and especially in religion. The fundamental purpose of his control is to prevent sedition.

Among the doctrines Hobbes regards as particularly seditious are two which many Christians in his day would have thought fundamental to their faith: that "whatsoever a man does against his conscience is sin" (xxix, 7) and that "faith and sanctity are not to be attained by study and reason, but by supernatural inspiration or infusion" (xxix, 8).[4] The sovereign's many rights include the

[1] The phrase is Alan Ryan's from the second of the two articles cited below.
[2] Only "a kind of separation" because Locke has no objection to the state's using persuasion to achieve religious uniformity. His objection is only to the use of force.
[3] L xviii, 9; xxix, 6-8; xxx, 2-14. References to *Leviathan* are to chapter and paragraph numbers, as given in my edition of *Leviathan*, Hackett, 1994. But since the paragraphing is fairly standard in the various editions of Hobbes, this style of reference should permit the passages cited to be located in any edition, with relatively little inconvenience.
[4] In each case Hobbes seems to reject the teaching of St. Paul: "When the Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law unto themselves. They show that

right to determine which books of scripture are canonical (xxxiii, 1), the right to decide how we should interpret passages in those books (xxxiii, 25), and the right to give legal force to the teachings of scripture (xxvi, 41; xxxiii, 24).

So it was a pleasant paradox, about twenty years ago, when Alan Ryan published two papers[5] arguing that Hobbes was more friendly to toleration than we generally give him credit for being. What Ryan argued, essentially, was that Hobbes' position leaves room for a large measure of toleration because his argument for imposing uniformity is essentially a pragmatic, political one. There are certain opinions in religion which are dangerous to the peace and order of society, either because they may encourage subjects to rebel against their sovereign, or because they may cause conflict among the subjects themselves. The sovereign should vigorously repress the expression of those opinions. But he need not care much what people think privately, so long as they keep it to themselves and do not act anti-socially. Unlike the true believer, who is eager to impose his own beliefs and standards of conduct on others, with a view to saving their souls, the hobbesian sovereign looks only to temporal ends, and can justify imposing uniformity just to the extent that doing so helps him to achieve those temporal ends.

Moreover, not only does the pragmatic nature of Hobbes' argument leave room for a large measure of toleration, it also leads Hobbes to endorse leaving people alone when it is not necessary, for political reasons, to interfere with them. The duty of the sovereign is to seek the well-being of his people. One aspect of that well-being is what Hobbes calls, in *The Elements of Law*, "commodity of living." Part of commodity of living is liberty, by which Hobbes there means

> That there be no prohibition without necessity of any thing to any man which was lawful to him in the law of nature, that is…, that there be no restraint of natural liberty, but what is necessary for the good of the commonwealth. (*Elements of Law* II, ix, 4)

He advocates essentially the same view in *Leviathan*, when he argues that the sovereign has a duty to make only good laws, where the goodness of a law is measured by its necessity for the

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what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all." Romans 2:14-16. "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not the result of works, so that no one may boast." Ephesians 2:8

[5] "Hobbes, toleration and the inner life," in *The Nature of Political Theory* (ed. by David Miller and Larry Seidentop, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983) and "A more tolerant Hobbes," in *Justifying Toleration* (ed. by Susan Mendus, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988)

good of the people.[6] Repression of thought and expression beyond what is necessary for political purposes is not only an abrogation of the sovereign's duty, it is counter-productive, provoking bitterness and resentment, and undermining the loyalty of his subjects.[7]

This seems to me right, as far as it goes. But I would like to take the argument a bit further. If Hobbes is not a saint of liberalism, he may nevertheless be one of the heroes of "the radical enlightenment." I intend to use this phrase in the sense defined by Jonathan Israel, in his book of that title,[8] as an intellectual movement which,

> whether on an atheistic or deistic basis, rejected all compromise with the past and sought to sweep away existing structures entirely, rejecting the Creation as traditionally understood in Judaeo-Christian civilization, and the intervention of a providential God in human affairs, denying the possibility of miracles, and reward and punishment in an afterlife, scorning all forms of ecclesiastical authority, and refusing to accept that there is any God-ordained social hierarchy, concentration of privilege or land-ownership in noble hands, or religious sanction for monarchy. (pp. 11-12)

Clearly Hobbes cannot be considered a member of this movement without considerable qualifications.[9] Although he was undoubtedly highly unorthodox in his religious views – in my view he was at most a deist, and quite possibly an atheist[10] – he professed loyalty to the Church of England. Though he suggests in *De corpore* that the creation of the world is beyond the comprehension of natural reason, he appears content to affirm it on the basis of faith. Though his interpretation of the doctrine of divine providence offers no comfort to those who are suffering, he does not explicitly deny that doctrine. [11] Though he did much to encourage

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[6] L xxx, 21. In this regard we should remember Hobbes' statement in the Dedicatory Letter to *Leviathan*: that he is seeking a middle course between too much liberty and too much authority. Most readers of *Leviathan* have felt that he tilted too far in the direction of authority, and this is an understandable reaction. But to do Hobbes justice we must acknowledge those aspects of his thought which bring him more to the center.

[7] As Hobbes writes in *Behemoth*, "A state can constrain obedience, but convince no error, nor alter the minds of them that believe they have the better reason. Suppression of doctrine does but unite and exasperate, that is, increase both the malice and power of them that have already believed them." (P. 62 in the edition by Stephen Holmes, University of Chicago Press, 1990)

[8] *Radical Enlightenment, Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750*, Oxford University Press, 2001.

[9] Jonathan Israel tends to downplay Hobbes' role in the radical enlightenment, and to emphasize that of Spinoza. I would agree that Spinoza is a more straightforward case, but insist that Hobbes too played an important role in the movement. There is a reason why their opponents regularly linked their names.

[10] I've argued this first in "'I Durst Not Write So Boldly' – or How to read Hobbes' theological-political treatise," in *Hobbes e Spinoza, Scienza e politica* (ed. by Emilia Giancotti and Daniela Bostrenghi, Naples: Bibliopolis, 1992) and more recently in "Religion and Morality in Hobbes," in *Rational Commitment and Social Justice, Essay for Gregory Kavka* (ed. by Jules Coleman and Christopher Morris, Cambrdige: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[11] As Hobbes reads the book of Job (in L xxxi, 6) God's existence provides no reason to think that there must be a good reason for any suffering which occurs. I've discussed Hobbes' analysis of Job in "The Covenant with God in

skepticism about the evidence for any particular miracle, he did not deny that miracles had occurred. Though he insisted that the wicked are not punished with eternal torment, he consistently allowed for reward and punishment in the afterlife. Hhe may have disliked the social hierarchy, and the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the nobility – I think he did. But he did not directly challenge it. And sometimes – in his earlier political works, not in *Leviathan* – he was prepared to invoke a religious sanction for the monarchy. He did not want to sweep existing structures entirely away. He wanted to retain the monarchy and to give it a more absolute authority than most of his countrymen were willing to allow.

Still, he did "scorn all forms of ecclesiastical authority." For the issue of toleration, that's an important point. Aubrey quotes a perceptive remark made to him by Edmund Waller:

> that what was chiefly to be taken notice of in [Hobbes'] elegy was that he, being but one, and a private person, pulled down all the churches, dispelled the mists of ignorance, and laid open their priestcraft.[12]

No doubt Waller exaggerated Hobbes' actual accomplishments when he said that, but I do not think he much exaggerated Hobbes' goals. As we shall see, Hobbes is not opposed to all churches, in the most general sense of the term "church." But he is opposed to churches which claim to exercise authority over us, churches which make a sharp distinction between the laity and the clergy, and whose clergy, in virtue of their presumed superior knowledge of spiritual matters, claim the right to issue decrees it is unjust to disobey, independently of the decrees of the sovereign.[13] It is these churches which pose a threat to the authority of the sovereign, and it is these churches which must be 'pulled down.'

This agenda is most evident in Part IV of *Leviathan*, titled "The Kingdom of Darkness." Hobbes defines the kingdom of darkness as

> a confederacy of deceivers that, to obtain dominion over men in this present world, endeavor by dark and erroneous doctrines to extinguish in them the light, both of nature and of the gospel, and so to disprepare them for the kingdom of God to come. (xliv, 1)

Hobbes's *Leviathan*," in *Leviathan after 350 Years* (ed. by Tom Sorell and Luc Foisneau, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).

[12] *Brief Lives, Chiefly of Contemporaries, set down by John Aubrey, between the years 1669 & 1696*, ed. from the author's mss., by Andrew Clark, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898, vol. I, p. 358.

[13] Cf. the Appendix to the Latin *Leviathan*, ch. iii, ¶¶27-28.

Hobbes also refers to the kingdom of darkness as the kingdom of Satan, and says that the darkest part of it consists of those who reject Christ. But he offers no evidence to suggest that non-Christians are conspiring among themselves to obtain dominion over all other men. The members of this confederacy of deceivers whom he thinks most dangerous – if we may judge by the attention he gives them– are the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church, whose Pope claims, as Christ's vicar on earth, the right to the obedience of all Christians (whether Catholic or not – xliv, 9), the right, through his bishops, to crown kings (xliv, 6), and the right to release subjects from their obligation to obey their king, if he is not diligent in purging his country of heretics (ibid.).

Still, it would be a mistake to think that Hobbes' polemic against the kingdom of darkness has only the Catholic Church as its target. Though he devotes what some readers may feel is an inordinate amount of space in Books III and IV of *Leviathan* to his campaign against that church, he also makes it clear that he finds the presbyterian clergy equally obnoxious:

> The presbytery hath challenged [that is, claimed] the power to excommunicate their own kings, and to be the supreme moderators in religion, in the places where they have that form of Church government, no less than the Pope challengeth it universally. (xliv, 17)

Here Hobbes endorses Milton's view that "New Presbyter is but Old Priest writ Large."[14] And as this allusion to Milton may suggest, an attack on presbyterianism was not only an attack on the Church of Scotland. In 1647 the Westminster Assembly had approved and in 1649 Parliament had ratified a common confession, intended to unite the Christian churches of England, Scotland and Ireland. When Hobbes was writing *Leviathan*, the reformation of the Church of England had effectively made it a presbyterian church.[15]

Hobbes' fierce anticlericalism is not news, of course. But I think we have not generally appreciated its relevance to the problem of religious toleration. Hobbes views the clergy as a inherent threat, not only to the authority of the king, but also to society at large. Clerics may be men of God, but they are still men, and one thing Hobbes thinks is common to all men is "a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, which ceaseth only in death." (L xi, 2) If we

[14] "On the new forcers of Conscience under the Long Parliament" (1646), as printed in *The Riverside Milton*, ed. by Roy Flanagan, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998, pp. 265-66.
[15] Not that Hobbes had no objection to the Church of England prior to this 'reformation.' Cf. *Behemoth*, pp. 56-57, where he complains that the clergy of the Church of England claimed that their authority derived, not from the king, but from Christ himself.

consider power in its broadest sense, as the means to obtain some future apparent good (x, 1), there is nothing inherently wrong with the desire for power. It is only rational to desire the means to whatever else you may desire. But people do not differ greatly in their natural ability to get what they want (xiii, 1). Significant differences of power arise only when some men acquire the ability to get others to do their bidding, what Hobbes calls instrumental power (x, 3).

The clergy are particularly well-placed to acquire instrumental power. For another common feature of human nature is our ignorance of natural causes, and in particular, of the causes of our good or ill fortune (xii, 2). This ignorance makes us anxious about the future (xii, 6) and credulous (xi, 23). We are prone to take things which happen accidentally as good or evil omens, and to believe those who claim the power to foresee the future and to assist us in realizing our goals (xii, 10). These human weaknesses are among the 'natural seeds' of religion, which Hobbes defines as a "fear of invisible powers, feigned by the mind, or imagined from tales publicly allowed." (vi, 36) But these natural seeds of religion would not have blossomed into the organized religions we find around us, if there had not been men who cultivated them. (xii, 12) Hobbes allows that some of these men – the founders of the true religion – cultivated the seeds of religion at God's direction. Others – the founders of the pagan religions – were acting on their own. But both sorts of men, he contends, were motivated by a desire to make their fellow men obedient to them.[16] What makes the seeds of religion germinate is the desire some men have for power over others.

It's not surprising, then, that when Hobbes comes to analyze the motivations which underlie the kingdom of darkness, he fixes on the desire for power:

> In those places where the presbytery took that office [of administering the government of religion], though many other doctrines of the Church of Rome were forbidden to be taught, yet this doctrine (that the kingdom of Christ is already come, and that it began at the resuurection of our Saviour) was still retained. But *cui bono*? What profit did they expect from it? The same which the Popes expected: to have a sovereign power over the people. (xlvii, 4)

[16] I follow the Latin version of *Leviathan* in this paraphrase. The English version attributes a more acceptable motive to the founders of religions: "Both sorts have done it with a purpose to make those men that relied on them the more apt to obedience, laws, peace, charity, and civil society."

I said earlier that I didn't think Hobbes wanted to 'pull down' *all* the churches. My evidence for this is a remarkable passage toward the end of the last chapter of *Leviathan*, where Hobbes gives a miniature history of the Christian religion.

In the beginning, he says, the people obeyed the apostles out of reverence for their wisdom, humility, sincerity and other virtues, not out of obligation. "Their consciences were free, and their words and actions were subject to none but the civil power." (xvlii, 19) But as the religion grew, the leaders of the various groups of Christians – presbyters, as they were called – felt the need to settle on a uniform doctrine which they would all agree to teach, and which they would expect their flocks to obey, on pain of excommunication. This, Hobbes says, was "the first knot upon their liberty." Then as the number of presbyters grew, the presbyters in the chief cities persuaded their provincial colleagues to accept their authority, and took for themselves the title of bishop. "This was the second knot on Christian liberty." The final step was for the bishop of Rome, the imperial city, with the assistance of the emperor, to acquire authority over all the bishops of the empire. This "was the third and last knot, and the whole synthesis and construction of the pontifical power."

Hobbes claims that the early history of the church has been replayed in reverse in the history of England since the Reformation:

> First the power of the Popes was dissolved totally by Queen Elizabeth, and the bishops, who before exercised their functions in the right of the Pope, did afterwards exercise the same in right of the Queen and her successors… And so was untied the first knot. After this the presbyterians lately in England obtained the putting down of the episcopacy. And so was the second knot dissolved. And almost at the same time the power was taken also from the presbyterians. And so we are reduced to the independency of the primitive Christians, to follow Paul, or Cephas, or Apollos, every man as he liketh best. Which, if it be without contention, and without measuring the doctrine of Christ by our affection to the person of his minister… is perhaps the best.[17]

[17] L xlvii, 20. For the sake of readability, I omit, in the first ellipsis, a significant parenthetical remark: "though by retaining the phrase of *jure divino*, they were thought to demand it by immediate right from God." Hobbes is being somewhat disingenuous here. Not only were the bishops *thought to* demand their authority 'by immediate right from God,' they *did* so demand it. And Hobbes knew this at least by the time he wrote *Behemoth*. See n. 15.

I think there is some wishful thinking in this history. Though the power of the presbyterians had certainly been reduced by the time Hobbes published *Leviathan*, I don't think it's fair to say that the church had been reduced to the independency of the primitive Christians. But this passage does show, I think, what Hobbes thought the ideal situation would be. The passage just quoted continues by arguing that the independency of the primitive Christians is "perhaps the best" because

> There ought to be no power over the consciences of men but of the Word itself, working faith in every one, not always according to the purpose of them that plant and water, but of God himself, that giveth increase. And… because it is unreasonable (in them who teach there is such danger in every little error) to require of a man endued with reason of his own, to follow the reason of any other man, or of the most voices of many other men (which is little better than to venture his salvation at cross and pile).

Locke could hardly have said it better. At moments like this Hobbes sounds like a saint of liberalism.

Hobbes does not want to 'pull down' *all* the churches, just the ones which seek to dictate to their members what they should believe and how they should act. Part of his way of doing that is to examine at excruciating length the scriptural texts on which they base their claims to authority. But the part of his procedure I've concentrated on here is his debunking analysis of the psychology which leads men to seek that kind of authority, asking *cui bono?* When he is in that mode, Hobbes sounds like a card-carrying member of the radical enlightenment, bent on destroying the influence of a clergy whose access to wealth, honor and power depends on their being widely perceived as godly men, with a special insight into saving truths and only the good of their flocks at heart. To the extent that he succeeded in that project, he served the cause of religious toleration.