Hobbes and Sacred History: Two Political Covenants and a Covenant for Salvation

Anna Lisa Schino
Sapienza University of Rome, Rome, Italy

Hobbes asserts that political power no longer needs to be founded on religious charisma (as argued by Machiavellians and libertines), because this power can be justified only by covenant, that is by the consent of people deciding voluntarily, on the basis of an utilitarian calculation of benefits, to subject themselves to a sovereign. In the sections of *Elements of law natural and politic*, *De cive* and *Leviathan* dedicated to religion, Hobbes demonstrates that the sacred history corroborates his political theory. He uses skilfully chosen literal quotations to demonstrate that the power of Abraham and Moses, who ruled over their people as divine lieutenants, and even that of Yahweh as king of Israel, were based on a special covenant. In Hobbes’s reading, the figures of Moses and Christ no longer proceed as a pair, as in the cliché of the religious imposture theory: the figure of the prophet Moses is strongly politicised, whereas Christ makes no new laws to administer earthly justice, but teaches the way of salvation. Religion loses the political centrality of a founding element of human society and is referred to an individual, internal and psychological dimension.

*Keywords:* Hobbes, causes of religion, sacred history, unity of religious and civil power, religious imposture theory

The Causes of Religions

Religion and sacred history occupy the central space in the writings of those free thinkers of the 17th century who, from René Pintard onwards, have been identified as «erudite libertines»¹. These authors – such as François La Mothe Le Vayer, Gabriel Naudé, Hector Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac, Pierre Gassendi, or the anonymous compiler of the clandestine treatise *Theophrastus redivivus* –, heirs to the naturalism of Pietro Pomponazzi and the political theories of Niccolò Machiavelli, present religion under two aspects: as a product of the passions and credulity of man, and as a utilisation of this product by astute politicians that have deceived men in order to build new societies and empires on a solid base². The phenomenology of religion delineated by the libertine critique starts from an attentive analysis of belief-formation mechanisms, makes interesting references to mass psychology and reformulates the Averroistic and Renaissance idea of religion as imposture and *instrumentum Regni*. What it constantly reconfirms is the essentially practical, non-theoretical dimension of historic religions, serving as educators of peoples about good conduct and born to satisfy a need for order and stability.

---

¹ Cf. René Pintard (1983). About libertinage, consider the on-line bibliography by J.-P. Cavaillé «Bibliographie: Libertinage, libre pensée, irréligion, athéisme, anticléricalisme». Very useful is also the annual review *Libertinage et philosophie au XVII siècle*.

² At this point, see Schino (2016).
Thomas Hobbes returns to these libertine themes, but with a change of perspective. Firstly, Hobbes is one of the first thinkers to take the Bible story back to being a concrete narration about the history of a specific people, the Jews, who, for a certain period, recognised Yahweh as their political sovereign, governing through a human lieutenant. In the sections of Elements of law natural and politic, De cive and Leviathan dedicated to religion, Hobbes, using skilfully chosen literal quotations, demonstrates that the religious power and the civil power are inseparable and remain in the hands of a single person throughout the entire history of the Hebrew people narrated in the Old Testament. After demonstrating in previous chapters of these works how any political power exercised over men must be based on a covenant, in the chapters on religion he also discusses the power of Abraham and Moses, who ruled over their people as divine lieutenants, and even that of Yahweh as king of Israel. These powers too were based on a special covenant: the sacred history corroborates his political theory.

Secondly, in contrast to a naturalistic and materialistic interpretation of the Old Testament, in Hobbes’ writings we see a spiritualisation of the figure of Christ that paves the way for the radical exegesis of Spinoza. Christ appears no longer as the legislator with political tasks (as in the libertine legend of «the three great impostors», Moses, Christ and Mohammed), but rather as the educator who teaches. Furthermore, Hobbes asserts in a conclusive manner that there is just one dogma of faith which guarantees salvation: the belief that Jesus is the Saviour, the Christ. This act of faith is sufficient to save the soul, as it sums up the essence of the Christian religion and the entire contents of the Old and New Testaments; the rest of religion is public rituals and practices, according to the customs of each people.

In my view, within this argument of Thomas Hobbes there lies a particular development of the libertine idea of religion. During his voluntary exile in Paris in the 1640s, Hobbes had the chance to meet and discuss with several esprits forts (including Samuel Sorbière, author of the French translation of De cive), who, like he, frequented the circle that formed around the Dupuy brothers. In Hobbes, the origin of religion is the same as in the libertine analysis: religious sentiment is born from emotional states and passions and, in particular, from a fear of unknown causes that generates anxiety about the future, and from a belief in ghosts. Religion, in fact, according to Hobbes, is first and foremost a passion. In the list of passions in chapter VI of Leviathan, it comes immediately after curiosity, that is, after the desire to know why and how, and immediately before superstition:

Feare of power invisible, feigned by the mind, or imagined from tales publickly allowed, RELIGION; not allowed, SUPERSTITION. And when the power imagined, is truly such as we imagined, TRUE RELIGION.

Religion and superstition are adjacent passions, originating from the fear of the invisible and differing only in that they are recognised by the State sovereign authority as either true religion or false religion. In chapter XII of Leviathan too, religion is reduced to being a fear of unknown powers that brings anguish to a humanity plunged in ignorance about the causes of its good or bad fortune: men give names and faces to these invisible

---


4 Cf. The elements of law natural and politic, part I Human nature, ch. XVIII, part II De corpore politico, ch. VI and ch. VII; De cive, part III Religion (chs. XV-XVIII); Leviathan, part I, ch. XII, part II, ch. XXXI, part III (chs. XXXII-XLIII) and part IV (chs. XLIV-XLVII). The reference texts are: Hobbes (1889), (1983), (1983 bis), and (2012).

5 See De cive, chs. XVII-XVIII; Leviathan, chs. XI-XLI.

6 See ch. XII Of religion in Leviathan.

agents and strive to placate them with rituals and ceremonies.

This perpetual fear, always accompanying mankind in the ignorance of causes, as it were in the Dark, must needs have for object something. And therefore when there is nothing to be seen, there is nothing to accuse, either of their good, or evil fortune, but some Power, or Agent Invisible: In which sense perhaps it was, that some of the old Poets said, that the Gods were at first created by humane Fear: which spoken of the Gods, (that is to say, of the many Gods of the Gentiles) is very true.

Hobbes does of course make a distinction between pagan gods created directly by fear, as in the libertine model, and the one omnipotent and eternal God, originating – more nobly – from a desire for knowledge of causes and from a line of reasoning which, going back through the chain of causes of the great natural phenomena, leads to the first unmoved mover. He stresses, however, that in both cases it is man’s imagination that has given an immaterial body to both the plurality of gods and the one God. It is thus imagination that produces divinities made of the same matter as the soul, dreams and mirror images:

And for the matter, or substance of the Invisible Agents, so fancied; they could not by natural cogitation, fall upon any other concept, but that it was the same with that of the Soule of man; and that the Soule of man, was the same substance, with that which appeareth in a Dream, to one that sleepeth; or in a Looking-glasse, to one that is awake.

Beginning from the recognition of the forms of fear and the powers of the imagination, Hobbes thus identifies the four «natural seeds of religion»: belief in ghosts, ignorance of causes, attempting to placate feared entities and superstitious belief in divination:

And in these four things, Opinion of Ghosts, Ignorance of second causes, Devotion towards what men fear, and Taking of things Casual for Prognostiques, consisteth the Naturall seed of Religion; which by reason of the different Fancies, Judgements, and Passions of several men, hath grown up into ceremonies so different, that those which are used by one man, are for the most part ridiculous to another.

In conclusion, to the reader of this chapter of Leviathan, religion, in all its forms, appears as a fear of invisible powers, either imagined in the mind of man or accepted by tradition. The use of the category of fear radically transforms the debate, moving it from a discussion about the truth of religion on a theological level to a completely different psychological and existential level. In this sphere, Hobbes draws on many common libertine themes: the catalogue of bizarre entities venerated as divinities; the use of myths and tales to educate uncultured peoples and generally to teach citizens their duties; the impossibility of distinguishing a real miracle from a charlatan’s trick, the credulity and superstition of common people, a blind faith in divination, the political use of religion in Antiquity for, in particular, asserting personal charisma and founding new empires, etc. He also exposes the Church’s current practice of exploiting these fears by framing them within a system of hypostatized abstractions: the theological system. This is the instrument through which the Church, not only

---

9 «For he that from any effect hee seeth come to passe, should reason to the next and immediate cause thereof, and from thence to the cause of that cause, and plonge himselfe profoundly in the pursuit of causes; shall at last come to this, that there must be (as even the Heathen Philosophers confessed) one First Mover; that is, a First, and an Eternall cause of all things; which is that which men mean by the name of God» (Hobbes, 2012, vol. 2, XII, p. 166). And in De cive we read «by the word God we understand the Worlds cause» (De cive, ch. XV; 14, Hobbes, 1983, p. 226; Hobbes, 1983 bis, p. 190. Cf. also Hobbes, 1889, I, XI, 1-2). Hobbes’ proof for the existence of God is a rendering of the cosmological argument. Men have no image or idea of God, because he is never the object of a sensation. The belief that God exists is the result of an inference. God is something the existence of which men arrive by a hypothetical and deductive reasoning.
Catholic but also Presbyterian, aims to assert a spiritual power far greater than any earthly, temporal one.

**The Hobbesian Interpretation of the Holy Scriptures**

Things begin to change in this highly libertine picture, however, in the second half of **Leviathan** when Hobbes – as he did previously in the third part of **De cive** – embarks on a thorough historical-critical investigation of the Old Testament and the Gospel. Hobbes’s goal is to demonstrate that, from a study of God’s prophetic word transmitted by the Holy Scriptures, two truths emerge indisputably: Firstly, that the political power exercised by Yahweh is based on a contract and, secondly, that in the covenant made with Abraham and Moses (about the people of Israel) and then renewed through Christ (and applied to the whole of humanity), God very clearly expresses his will that man should be subject not to two distinct powers (spiritual and temporal) but one only, the State’s. In this investigation, Hobbes describes in detail the three covenants with God that constitute sacred history. In the first of these the protagonist is Abraham. On this subject, Hobbes introduces a new argument with regard to the libertine interpretation in the **De tribus impostoribus** treatise, according to which the founder of the Judaic religion is Moses who imposes a new political-religious Lex, as Christ and Mohammed subsequently do. On the contrary, Hobbes stresses that it was Abraham who first made a covenant with God. Abraham, as pater familias, speaks in the name of his whole tribe and his covenant of obedience gives rise to a patriarchal kingdom, which then continues under Isaac and Jacob. This kingdom, in terms of Hobbes’s general political model, is of natural origin. Abraham’s covenant with Yahweh is a vassalage agreement, implying obedience in exchange for a land to live in:

> But it pleased the Divine Majesty (as we read it written in the sacred history) out of all mankind to call forth Abraham, by whose means he might bring men to the true worship of him, and to reveal himselfe supernaturally to him, and to make the most famous Covenant with him and his seed, which is called the old Covenant or Testament; He therefore is the head of true Religion [...] And from him the Kingdom of God by way of Covenant, takes its beginning.

The covenant with Abraham establishes obedience not to moral laws (that is to say, to natural laws, which are rational laws already valid for all men), but to God as the civil sovereign of the Jews. By divine mandate, Abraham has the exclusive power to rule and set rules for his people, also in religious matters.

The second covenant with Yahweh is made via Moses, who, however, is only a mediator, in so far as this time the pact is between God and the people. Unlike the first covenant, in which the head of a tribe makes a

---


13 «I find the KINGDOME OF GOD to signifie in most places of Scriptures, a KINGDOME properly so named, constituted by the Votes of the People of Israel in peculiar manner; wherein they chose God for their King by Covenant made with him, upon Gods promising them the possession of the land of Canaan; and but seldom metaphorically; and then it is taken for Dominion over sinne; (and only in the New Testament). [...] by the Kingdome of God, is properly meant a Common-wealth, instituted (by the consent of those which were to be subject thereto) for their Civill Government, and the regulating of their behaviour, not onely towards God their King, but also towards one another in point of justice, and towards other Nations both in peace and warre» (Hobbes, 2012, vol. 3, XXXV, p. 634 and p. 640).


15 According to their origin, Hobbes distinguishes between sovereignty by acquisition (of natural origin) and sovereignty by institution (of artificial origin). Sovereignty by acquisition results from a relationship between the father and the family (paternal government) or it is acquired by conquest in war (despotical government); sovereignty by institution results from a covenant and it is based on agreement and authorization (also if irrevocable). Cf. **De cive**, V, 12.


17 «For as to the Morall law, they were already obliged, and needed not have been contracted with all, by promise of the Land of Canaan» (Hobbes, 2012, vol. 3, XL, p. 736; on Abraham, cf. *ibidem*, pp. 736-738).
pledge on behalf of both himself and his descendants, this second one, the covenant of Moses, requires the consent of an entire people. Hobbes underlines the participatory action of all the Jews:

Afterward when that People, not only the freest, but also the greatest enemy to humane subjection, by reason of the fresh memory of their Aegyptian bondage, abode in the wilderness near mount Sinai, that ancient Covenant was propounded to them all to be renewed in this manner [...]. And all the People answered together, and said, All that the Lord hath spoken, will we do.\(^\text{18}\)

Hobbes goes on immediately to explain the effects of this. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were tribal heads and the natural leaders of the Jews, whereas the kingdom inaugurated by Moses was an instituted kingdom, founded with the express consent of individuals: “But now by the Covenant made at mount Sinai, the consent of each man being had, there becomes an Institutive Kingdome of God over them”\(^\text{19}\). The Mount Sinai covenant thus establishes political obligation and gives origin to a perfect Civitas: the civil reign of God over the Hebrew people. In this political State, based on a free agreement, Moses is the active viceroy of God; his centrality, therefore, is not that of a founder/legislator, but rather that of the sole holder of a unitary power (both political and religious) delegated to him by the God king and recognised by the people. Hobbes concludes:

for it is written, Let not the Priests and the people break thorough to come up unto the Lord, lest he break forth upon them. So Moyxes went downe unto the people, ans spake unto them. Exod. 19. 24, 25. It is farther manifestly, and expressly declar’d, upon occasion given by the Rebellion of Core, Daithan and Abiram, and the two hundred and fifty Princes of the Assembly, that neither private men, nor the Congregation should pretend that God had spoken by them, and by Consequence that they had the right of interpreting Gods Word; [...]. For the Question was, whether God spake by Moyxes only, or by them also, that is to say, whether Moyxes alone, or whether they also were interpreters of the Word of God [...]. Seeing therefore Moyxes alone was the Messenger of Gods Word, and that the authority of interpreting it pertain’d neither to private men, nor to the Synagogue, nor to the High Priest, nor to other Prophets; it remains, that Moyxes alone was the Interpreter of Gods Word, who also had the supreme power in civill matters; And that the conventions of Corah with the rest of his complices against Moses, and Aaron; and of Aaron with his Sister against Moyxes, were rais’d, not for the salvation of their soules, but by reason of their ambition, and desire of Dominion over the People.\(^\text{20}\)

It is to be noted that this designation by God is in itself insufficient, in that Moses’ authority as viceroy of the sovereign Yahweh is based on a promise by the people to obey him\(^\text{21}\). Moses, in a scenario of intrigue and conflict that is totally political, has both executive and legislative power and is the sole interpreter of the divine word; the high priest Aaron is not the holder of a spiritual and sacerdotal power parallel to that of Moses, but merely the designated successor. Furthermore, according to Hobbes, Moses is not the author of the Pentateuch, as one’s own death and burial cannot be recounted in advance\(^\text{22}\).

Whereas the first and second covenants give origin to an actual theocracy, the characteristics of the third are quite different. Hobbes, after giving a naturalistic and materialistic interpretation of sacred history related to the chosen people, now presents Christ from a very different viewpoint, as guarantor of a non-political covenant, who, in renewing the alliance between God and men, extends it to the whole of the human race. Thus, with Christ, we have a religion that is not localised, but universal. And, above all, unlike Moses, who claims to

\(^\text{21}\) «Here was their promise of obedience; and by this it was they obliged themselves to obey whatsoever he should deliver unto them for the Commandement of God» (Hobbes, 2012, vol. 3, XL, p. 740).
\(^\text{22}\) Cf. Leviathan, XXXIII; at this point see Malcolm (2002) and (2004). See also Bernier (2010).
exercise – in the present – a coercive power derived from the Father, Christ always talks about a political reign that will begin only with his second coming, or rather, after and beyond human history. In the time that separates us from the Last Judgement, the time of the history of man, the task of Christ is not to reign but to teach the way of salvation, and it is to this goal that the new covenant aspires. Moses ruled his people as the lieutenant of God the King, and Jesus too will be viceroy, but in a time yet to come; now he is the good shepherd whose function it is to persuade, to guide the entire human race. The Kingdom of Christ is announced in the Gospel as the Kingdom of heaven that will begin after Christ’s return. Christ, then, can have nothing to do with historical and temporal power exercised on earth in the interval between the first and second coming:

But the Kingdom of God, for restitution whereof CHRIST was sent from God his Father, takes no beginning before his second coming, to wit, from the day of Judgement, when he shall come in Majesty accompanied with his Angels.

Thus, in this reading, the figures of Moses and Christ no longer proceed as a pair (as in the cliché of the religious imposture theory), but have different functions; because they have different roles. Hobbes explains this as follows:

Moses, when he had instituted the Priestly Kingdom, himself though he were no Priest, yet rul’d, and conducted the People all the time of their Peregrination until their entrance into the promis’d Land. In the same manner is it our Saviours office (whom God in this thing would have like unto Moses) as he was sent from his Father, so to govern the future Subjects of his heavenly Kingdom in this life, that they might attain to, and enter into that, altough the Kingdom were not properly his, but his Fathers. But the government whereby CHRIST rules the faithfull ones in this life, is not properly a Kingdome, or Dominion, but a Pastorall charge, or the Right of teaching, that is to say, God the father gave him not a power to judge of Meum and Tuum as he doth to the Kings of the Earth; nor a Coercive power; nor legislative; but shewing to the world, and teaching them the way, and knowledge of Salvation, that is to say, of Preaching, and declaring what they were to doe, who would enter into the Kingdome of Heaven.

In his exegesis of the Holy Scriptures, Hobbes goes from the theocracy of the Old Testament to the spiritual reign of the New; in the former the sign of recognition was material and it was the circumcision, whereas in the latter the sign is baptism, which is immaterial. In the political kingdom God is sovereign to one people only, and Abraham and Moses enact positive laws as ministers plenipotentiary; in the spiritual kingdom, Christ makes no new laws for humanity but indicates the way of salvation according to the will of the Father. Hobbes stresses this point to great effect. The Father, flanked by the Son, will return to be the political sovereign of men, but in a kingdom that begins after the Last Judgement; before this event, Christ makes no new laws to administer earthly justice, but rather limits himself to teaching the laws of the Father:

From hence, that our Saviour hath prescribed no distributive Lawes, to the Subjects of Princes, and Citizens of Cities, that is to say, hath given no rules whereby a Subject may know, and discerne what is his owne, what another mans, not by what forms, words, or circumstances, a thing must be given, delivered, invaded, possesst, that it may be known by Right to

23 «this office to speak properly, was not that of a King, but of a Vice-roy, such as Moyses his Government was. For the Kingdome was not his, but his Fathers» (De cive, XVII, 4; Hobbes, 1983, p. 252; Hobbes, 1983 bis, p. 219).
26 Cf. De cive, XVII, 7.
27 «he was not sent to make new Lawes, and that therefore by his Office, and mission, he was no Legislatour properly so called, nor Moyses neither, but a bringer and Publisher of his Fathers Lawes (for God only, and neither Moyses nor CHRIST, was a King by Covenant) is collected hence, that he sayed, I came not to destroy […] but to fulfill» (De cive, XVII, 6; Hobbes 1983, p. 255; Hobbes, 1983 bis, p. 223). And also: «Let us now therefore enquire what Laws CHRIST (establisht not himselfe, for he would not take upon him any Legislative authority, as hath been declared above in the sixth Article, but) propounded to us for his Fathers» (De cive, 8; Hobbes, 1983, p. 258; Hobbes, 1983 bis, p. 225).
belong to the *Receiver, Invader, or Possessour*, we must necessarily understand that each single subject (not only with unbelievers, among whom CHRIST himselfe denied himselfe to be a *judge and distributor*, but even with Christians) must take those rules from his City, that is to say, from that Man, or Counsell, which hath the supreme power.28

The laws of the Father, obligatory for all men, include both religious laws written in the Holy Scriptures (prophetic word of God) and natural laws known through right reason (rational word of God). The former, as well as imposing a monotheistic faith, also define the one single dogma required for salvation: acknowledgement of the role of the Saviour. If the Christian has faith in this article, he or she will be saved; if saved, the covenant with God will be fulfilled. The rest of religious life is all collective rituals and ceremonies to honour God, or rather, indifferent conventional acts at the discretion of the political sovereign. Natural and rational laws, on the other hand, being calculations based on reason, define the best way of achieving man’s natural goal, which is self-preservation. They tell us that self-preservation can be assured only within the closed walls of a well-organised State, in which an absolute sovereign guarantees internal order to the citizens in exchange for obedience. So, just as the religious laws proclaimed by God are ultimately reducible to the dogma of Christ the Saviour, natural laws can be reduced to the precept of obedience to the State:

Moreover, because our Saviour hath not shewed Subjects any other Lawes for the government of a City beside those of nature, that is to say beside the Command of obedience, no Subject can privately determine who is a publice friend, who an enemy, when Warre, when Peace, when Truce is to be made; nor yet what Subjects, what authority, and of what men, are commodious, or prejudiciall to the safety of the Common-weale.

According to Hobbes’ interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, then, the laws of God the Father can be summed up in just two commandments: faith that Jesus is the Christ and obedience to the sovereign, that is, to the legitimate holder of the power resulting from the «pactum unionis» and hence from the consensus of future citizens. The rest are not laws, but simply calls to faith directed at humanity by Christ, whose threefold office – Jesus the saviour, the pastor and the king – is illustrated in *Leviathan*. The first office refers to the historical time of his presence on earth, the sacrifice of Jesus the man who pays the price for Adam being guilty of sin. The second is that of pastor, or teacher, and refers to the time, again historical, between the Resurrection and the Second Coming. This office, carried out also by Christ’s successors (the Church), involves preaching to, converting and saving those who believe in him. The third office is that of king, or rather viceroy of the Father; a reign which, while definitely political, is set in the eternal future after the Resurrection of the bodies, the eternal and corporeal life of the righteous and the final death of the damned. In conclusion, the role of Christ, spiritualised and idealised, is that of the good shepherd, with all “political” tasks postponed to a time to come, beyond history.

The figure of the prophet Moses, unlike that of Christ, is, as we have seen, strongly politicised. Hobbes, furthermore, in his interpretation of the Bible, casts great doubt on the actual mission of the prophet, who communicates with God through dreams and visions. A case in point, in fact, is that of Moses, whose meeting with God is self-attested and recounted by Moses himself. Hobbes, very skilfully, uses a phrase of Christ to invalidate «being one’s own witness» and concludes that the power of Moses was authorised not so much by

---


29 Laws of nature are divine laws promulgated through reason. Natural and rational laws are divine laws because their source is the right reason, that is created by God; consequently they are indirectly fixed by God’s will (cf. *De cive*, IV; Hobbes, 1983, pp. 121-129; Hobbes, 1983 bis, pp. 76-84).


God as by the consensus of the Jews putting their trust in him; in other words, by an historical, mundane covenant\textsuperscript{32}. Hobbes applies a sceptical, practically complete, reduction of the human capacity to relate knowingly to God\textsuperscript{33}. Men believe, therefore, not in the word of God, but rather in the word of another man, the prophet, who assures them that God has spoken it; the occasions for doubting this, however, are many\textsuperscript{34}.

A New Perspective

Thus, in Hobbes’s writings, while the libertine theme of the politically oriented prophet is clearly traceable, as is that of credulity, superstition and fear lying at the origins of religion, the theme of deception and religious imposture being essential for every society’s survival is no longer present. Religion is no longer something invented by astute men to curb the rapacious instincts of uncouth, brutal peoples, but corresponds to a need of man born from fear of the inexplicable, curiosity and the desire to understand causes. Men, Hobbes’s argues, began to believe spontaneously, not because they were tricked into it. It was only later that pagan priests and then the Catholic clergy began to use religion as a tool for political affirmation in the Kingdom of Darkness, exploiting human credulity. Hobbes’s empirical approach allows him to discern and appreciate the presence of the “datum” constituted by human religiosity, an anthropological datum that we must consider. Religious sentiment or attitude is a particular quality of human nature and it has to be analysed, because of the great repercussions it can have on a State’s political life. Starting from this anthropological datum, therefore, Hobbes censures the theory that without religion neither human society nor respect for the law would be possible because, without God, everything would be permitted and people would have no restraints. According to the libertines, the fear of God is the only thing that can keep selfish instincts, prevarication and conflicts at bay and allow peaceful coexistence based on kept promises and respect for the law. From this point of view, religion is an indispensable restraint that guarantees orderly coexistence. Hobbes, though, argues for the natural equality of all human beings (denied by the libertines) and bases society on reason and its calculations, and thus on the consensus expressed in the contract. It is thus the contract, an act of will subscribed to by free and equal individuals, on which the State and the obligation to obey its laws are founded. Human beings are bound to political obedience not by fear of infernal punishments but rather by a rational choice to forgo an immense but useless natural liberty in order to live securely in a State. Hobbes demonstrates that the soundest basis for obedience is a selfish interest in having conditions of security that can guarantee survival, constantly endangered by the state of nature’s war of all against all.

\textsuperscript{32} «And our Saviour saith of himself, If I bear witness of myself, my witness is not true; much lesse if Moses bear witness of himselfe (especially in a claim of Kingly power over Gods people) ought his testimony to be received. His authority therefore, as the authority of all other Princes, must be grounded on the Consent of the People, and their Promise to obey him» (Hobbes, 2012, vol. 3, XL, p. 740).


\textsuperscript{34} People believing in what the prophet tells them in the name of God, accept prophet’s word: when he claims God had spoken to him in dream, he is saying that he was dreaming God speaking to him («To say he hath seen a Vision or heard a Voice, is to say that he hath dreamed between sleeping and waking: for in such manner a man doth many times naturally take his dream for a vision, as not having well observed his own slumbering», Hobbes, 2012, XXII, vol. 2, p. 580). God typically spoke to prophets in a dream or a vision. The prophecy is an hallucination originated by the passion of vanity and by a false opinion about himself; prophets are vain enough to believe to deserve a very special privilege (cf. Hobbes, 2012, vol. 2, XXII, pp. 578-580 and vol. 3, XXXVI). At this point, see Schuhmann (2004) and Hoekstra (2004).
This new perspective frees religion from political roles and attributes to Christ an exclusively spiritual role, for which Hobbes finds confirmation in the Gospel; the Church, heir to an idealised Christ, is also heir to his purely spiritual role. The new perspective, therefore, is a first step towards the complete subjection of ecclesiastical power to the State: if the function of Christ’s ministers is only to teach, then the doctrines imparted in this teaching, always potentially subversive, must be subject to the iron-like control of the State. Also on the subject of religion, the citizen is required to conform to State laws guaranteeing order and peace in his or her actions; this obligation, however, binds the external actions only, which must fall into line with the State public religion. Faith remains a private, secret and invisible affair, for which there is no need to be exposed to any danger. The new Hobbesian perspective thus sets the scene for a clear distinction between the forum of actions and the forum of conscience, on the basis of a precise evaluation of the engagement of the legislator, who can intervene only in voluntary acts:

As for the inward thought, and belief of men, which humane Governours can take notice of (for God onely knoweth the heart) they are not voluntary, nor the effect of the laws, but of the unrevealed will [...]; and consequently fall not under obligation.

The inner life - external actions distinction is given two different meanings by Hobbes. Its primary purpose is to set a limit to the demands of the Catholic Inquisition (or civil sovereign) about probing people’s thoughts and reading their hearts. In the second place, it paves the way for removing responsibility from a subject who is compelled to obey – but in the external forum only – even if the sovereign’s orders are offensive to God; apart from in three extreme cases (atheism, idolatry and apostasy), he who sins is the sovereign and not the citizen who honours God in his interior conscience.

A final note: as with the libertines, Hobbes’s biblical exegesis and political project constitute an attempt to achieve the earthly emancipation of man, rejecting the doctrine «omnis potestas a Deo» (S. Paul, Rom. XIII, 1). They thus constitute an attempt to expunge God from history: there is no sacred history, but rather, the entire history of humanity is the mundane history of powers and conflicts. However, no esprit fort (no matter how openly atheist) questioned the fact that political – or even simply social – life would be unable to stay on its feet without faith in God or the deities, fear of eternal punishment and some kind of ritual or religious ceremony. Hobbes, though, while not denying the importance of religious sentiment as an antidote to anxiety about the future, and of religious rituals as bastions against superstition, is the first to expel Divinity from political organisation. Appealing to Divinity, he writes, links the citizen’s bond of obedience to otherworldly punishments and thus, instead of strengthening the power of the sovereign, actually constitutes a potential

35 See ch. XLII Of power ecclesiasticall in Leviathan, where we read: «there is no Coercive Power left them by our Saviour; but onely a Power to proclaim the Kingdom of Christ, and to persuade men to submit themselves thereunto» (Hobbes, 2012, vol. 3, XLII, pp. 778-780). And also: «the Office of Christs Ministers in this world, is to make men Beleeve, and have Faith in Christ: but Faith hath no relation to, nor dependence at all upon Compulsion, or Commandement [...]. Therefore the Ministers of Christ in this world, have no Power by this title, to Punish any man for not Beleeving, or for Contradiceting what they say; they have i say no Power by that title of Christs Ministers, to Punish such» (ibidem, p. 782).
36 «And for their Faith, it is internall, and invisible; They have the licence that Naaman had, and need not put themselves into danger for it» (Hobbes, 2012, vol. 3, XLIII, p. 954). Naaman’s licence is the licence to dissimulate.
38 «There is another Errour in their Civill Philosophy (which they never learned of Aristotle, nor Cicero, nor any other of the Heathen), to extend the power of the Law, which is the Rule of Actions onely, to the very Thoughts, and Consciences of men, by Examination and Inquisition of what they Hold notwithstanding the Conformity of their Speech and Actions» (Hobbes, 2012, vol. 3, LXVI, p. 1096).
39 Cf. De cive, XV, 18.
danger, in that it could severely limit earthly power:

The maintenance of Civill Society, depending on Justice; and Justice on the power of Life and Death, and other lesse Rewards and Punishments, residing in them that have Soveraignty of the Common-wealth; It is impossible a Common-wealth should stand, where any other than the Soveraign, hath a power of giving greater rewards than Life; and of inflicting greater punishments, than Death.  

Hobbes hugely emphasises the danger of subversive action by ministers of religion urging disobedience to the sovereign and threatening otherworldly punishments and loss of eternal life; hence the need for State control to prevent the formation of a counter-power that endangers public order. Safeguarding life through peace and political stability is the exclusive duty of a sovereign whose power is based on a covenant, the sole function of the Church is to educate and all that remains for the individual to do is to find his or her own path to morality and God. Furthermore, the assertion that a single dogma (Jesus is the Christ) is sufficient for salvation leads to the need to look again at the categories of truth and faith in the Christian religion: these two categories must now be confined to the realm of spiritual experience, without spilling over into verbal and physical violence against those who recognise the same core faith but honour God in different ways externally. Hobbes, certainly no tolerance theorist, stresses several times that the pathways of the mind cannot but be free as they are involuntary. Faith too is incoercible, since believing is not a voluntary act and consequently the magistrate (and thus the legal sphere) cannot reach the interior conscience. Hence the precise distinction between fides (faith in the forum of conscience) and confessio (religion in terms of public worship and external rituals): obedience is required in the public dimension of the religious profession, and the power of the law, which governs external actions alone, extends neither to thoughts nor conscience; this is the error of Catholic Inquisition, which sets out to investigate interiority and opinions. No power but the word of Christ should be exerted on the conscience, because expecting a man to follow not his own reason but that of another or even of the majority, when making choices about his own eternal salvation, is totally unreasonable.

As for the fundamental problem of obeying the laws of the State, if a sovereign orders an action contrary to the Christian faith (apostasy), disobedience is licit. It should be noted, however, that the core of the Christian faith is monotheistic belief and a single dogma. All possible variations on this single article (and hence the different theological positions of different Christian Churches) regard the public profession of faith, a sphere in which disobedience can never be licit.

41 «For Sense, Memory, Understanding, Reason, and Opinion are not in our power to change; but alwayes, and necessarily such, as the things we see, hear, and consider suggest unto us; and therefore are not effects of our Will, but our Will of them» (Hobbes, 2012, vol. 3, XXXII, p. 578). At this point, cf. E. Curley (2007).
42 According to Hobbes, conscience is a private opinion about moral and religious truths («For the conscience being nothing else but a man’s settled judgement and opinion», Hobbes, 1889, II, VI, 12, pp. 157; cf. Hobbes, 2012, vol. 2, VII, p. 100). From a moral point of view, in the state of nature conscience is a judgement about what the natural laws require or forbid. From a religious point of view, conscience is a judgement about the interpretation of Holy Scriptures, which is always free because human laws can oblige only the external behavior of men: «To take away this scruple of conscience concerning obedience to human laws, amongst those that interpret to themselves the word of God in the Holy Scriptures; I propound to their consideration, first: that no human law is intended to oblige the conscience of a man, but the actions only» (Hobbes, 1889, II, VI, 3, pp. 145-146). In the second place, conscience is a private opinion about miracles: «A private man has alwayes the liberty (because thought is free) to beleive, or not beleive in his heart, those acts that have been given out for Miracles» (Hobbes, 2012, vol. 3, XXXVII, p. 696). Conscience is not a faculty of knowing absolute truths: it doesn’t give evidence that the person’s opinion is true, but that it is firm. At this point, see D. Weber (2010), Hanin (2012).
44 Cf. De cive, XVIII, 6 e 11. A citizen can break the sovereign’s laws if he orders actions contrary to faith, but only in three cases: if sovereign orders atheism, idolatry, apostacy.
Thus, in Hobbes, religion no longer appears as the most effective tool for imposing obedience on ungovernable masses dominated by irrational impulses. Religion, for the very reason that it is born from the passions, must be handled with care, controlled by and subordinate to the lay power of the sovereign. Political power is founded and legitimised on the basis not of religious charisma but the covenant – the freely expressed consensus of individuals who benefit from being subject to an authority that guarantees them internal order and external defence. The role and common goal of all religions, which originate from universal passions such as the fear of unknown causes that generate anxiety about the future, is simply to make men calmer, more docile and peaceful. Religion thus loses the political centrality of a founding element and is referred to an individual, internal and psychological dimension. Freedom of conscience is founded on the distinction between public discourses, subject to the authority and control of the State, and private, purely internal and mental ones, which steer clear of authority by not affecting the external and public sphere. In this strictly private dimension (with no room for proselytism or public debate), according to Hobbes, everyone is free to venerate God as they see fit, whereas in the public dimension they must respect the religious observances of the community to which they belong, observances controlled by the State to guarantee the uniformity and, hence, that peaceful coexistence so beneficial to all.

References


In the Latin Appendix to Leviathan (1668) Hobbes explains: «To err, to be deceived, or to have a wrong opinion is not a crime in itself; nor can an error become a crime so long as it is confined to a person’s heart. For who is the informer who will denounce him, and who is the witness on whose testimony will he be convicted? How then will he be judged? But words can be punished without injury with whatever punishments the legislators wish» (Translation of the Appendix ad Leviathan, in Hobbes, 2012, vol. 3, p. 1202). In conscience a person doesn’t a wrong, while thorough words (that is, spreading false teachings) a person does a wrong and can be punished.


