

Thomas Hobbes On Union Of Church And State

Joe Barnhart

Introduction. Seventeenth century England and New England sowed seeds that took root and produced much of what today in the United States is the debate over political philosophy as expressed in particular in the First Amendment to the Constitution. Five Englishmen – John Cotton, John Winthrop, John Milton, Roger Williams, and Thomas Hobbes – stand out as major contributors to the debate. I will focus on the philosopher Thomas Hobbes.

Hobbes and religion. The religious dimension of Hobbes' political philosophy is often overlooked. If Hobbes is, as he is often presumed to be, a materialist, it does on the surface at least appear inconsistent of him to concern himself with religion. In fact, however, over half of his tough-minded *Leviathan* is devoted to religion. It is fruitful to ask, Why is this so? In his own lifetime, was he not labeled by some as an atheist?

First, any attempt to answer these questions should consider the historical fact that in the Christian polemics of Hobbes' century, new ideas that challenged the boundaries of established belief were sometimes labeled as atheistic or at least as the ideas of skeptics and unbelievers. Many Catholic and Protestant writers of that same volatile century were eager to dismiss their opponents from the circle of Christianity. Some of Hobbes' ideas regarding religious authority clearly did challenge the boundaries of the established theology, although it is surprising to learn just how close Hobbes as a Royalist comes to the theology of the Puritans' beloved John Calvin.

Second, religion figures heavily in Hobbes' political philosophy because in part the overwhelming portion of political philosophy of seventeenth century Europe and America was carried out in a religious context and setting. If it is surprising to twentieth-century read-

ers that half of *Leviathan* is hip-deep in religious arguments and language, it was shocking to some seventeenth-century readers that half of *Leviathan* (except for Part I Chapter 12) contains little direct reference to religion. Indeed, Chapter 12 of Part I contains shocking implications for Christianity, implications of which Hobbes might have been unaware when he permitted them to be published.

In trying to unveil Hobbes' personal religious belief, it is perhaps useful to know that he took the last rites when he thought he was at death's door. (He did not in fact die until three decades later.) There are passages, however, in which he defends the practice of adhering to external religious practices to which one does not privately subscribe.¹

The political utility of religion. Hobbes does not conceal his belief in the political utility of religion. Whether the religion of the Gentiles or the religion of Abraham, Moses and Christ, the public service of religion is the same, namely, to undergird "Obedience, Laws, Peace, Charity, and Civil Society."² While Roger Williams in both England and New England expounded the doctrines of liberty of conscience and of a hedge to separate church from state, Hobbes developed a doctrine of an extremely intricate union of church and state. For him, the separation of the two is like separation of the soul from the body. (I will pass over the question of the place of soul, if there is a place, in Hobbes' materialism.) The King or Sovereign is needed to serve as head of church and state for the plain reason that there is no better way on earth to maintain the stability or peace and safety of the commonwealth. Even though not denying that an Assembly might serve effectively, Hobbes appears throughout *Leviathan* to hold that Monarchy is the most effective form of all its rivals.

Rejecting the argument of divine right of kingship, Hobbes advances the utility argument and the contract argument, both of which had gained strong support in seventeenth-century England. The utility of religion continued to be debated for over two centuries after Hobbes. John Stuart Mill in his essay "Utility of Religion" writes,

“We propose to inquire whether belief in religion, considered as a mere persuasion apart from the question of its truth, is really indispensable to the temporal welfare of mankind....”³

The monarch as the commonwealth's soul. Early in the Introduction to *Leviathan*, Hobbes contends that the commonwealth or state is a great Leviathan or Artificial Man of greater strength and stature than any natural man. As the *soul* of this organism of invention, the Sovereignty gives life and motion. There appears to be an almost platonic view of the soul in Hobbes' political philosophy, for the nation's soul is not only the source of motion, but the driver of the commonwealth. The Monarch sits in this “seat of authority” to guide the people.

The people strike a covenant or contract with one another to give themselves in obedience to the Monarch for the purpose of gaining for themselves safety and security.* A.D. Lindsay has argued that Hobbes' political theory breaks down for two reasons: (1) Hobbes stresses too much the goal of safety, and (2) he in self-contradiction permits the people to resist a Sovereign who breaks the contract by his inability to maintain peace.⁴

The necessity of security. Against Lindsay, I would argue that Hobbes' primary point is that without safety and security, the other human desires and moral concerns suffer a reduced likelihood of fulfillment. Without political stability, life would indeed be solitary, nasty, brutish, and short. It is a mistake to think that Hobbes intends to sacrifice all other human ends and interests to security and safety. Lindsay's contention that the state has a *moral* foundation and that Hobbes fails to understand this is itself a failure to grasp Hobbes' crucial point that without elementary safety and security among the

* In speaking favorably of Queen Elizabeth and her rule, Hobbes indicates that he does not intend to limit monarchy to males alone. Indeed, Queen Elizabeth and her rule would appear to embody Hobbes' ideal Monarch.

people, morality itself breaks down. In brief, I interpret Hobbes to mean that the security that the people *demand* of their government is absolutely essential for human life in any moral and meaningful sense.

Lindsay is in error to suppose that for Hobbes safety is desired above all thing. If my interpretation is correct, safety in Hobbes' political philosophy is a means to human social life or at least is a part of the end-means continuum of that life. Hobbes writes:

By Safety here, is not meant bare Preservation, but all other Contentments of life, which every man by lawful Industry, without danger or hurt to the Commonwealth, shall acquire to himself.⁵

It is consistent of Hobbes to argue that if the Sovereignty (whether Monarch or Assembly) cannot maintain security, then some replacement is required to do the job. If the elementary security breaks down and the Sovereignty in power cannot restore it, then the people are once again in a state of nature or worse and, therefore, are justified in seeking another Sovereign who can maintain the peace and the good life that depends on it.

Hobbes' basic error. I contend that the fundamental flaw in Hobbes' political philosophy lies not in his stress on safety, peace or security, but in his failure to grasp what Roger Williams grasped early in the seventeenth century and what Milton eventually came to understand, namely, that under some conditions, the rise of liberty and of diversity of expression can *increase* the stability and safety of the people. In Opposing Roger Williams and banishing him and pluralism from Massachusetts, John Cotton and John Winthrop would appear to stand close to Hobbes in political theory. In many ways, Hobbes' error is an empirical or factual one. He proved to be a product of his time, whereas Williams proved to be the bearer of a genuinely new political philosophy. In the seventeenth century, political philosophy in England, in New England, and on the Continent flour-

ished in the soil of church-state union. The King James Version (or Authorized Version) of the Bible, coming out early in the seventeenth century, extols King James as the Defender of the Faith. During England's civil war that began in 1642, many of the Puritans and Presbyterians regarded Parliament as the true defender of the faith in England. In 1644, the year that witnessed the publication of both Williams' *Bloody Tenent of Persecution* and Milton's *Areopagitica*, Parliament ordered the burning of Williams' work because it made abundantly clear that neither Crown nor Parliament had justifiable reason to become officially concerned with religious doctrine or belief.

I suggest that Hobbes defended the union of church and state under one head, the King, because he believed that security and safety of the people could be maintained only by rigorous central control of not only public religious doctrine but religious practice and ritual in the churches.⁶ Hobbes' long and elaborate arguments for the absolute authority of the Sovereign in both state and church can scarcely be comprehended until seen against the background of his fear that without centralized control, the nation of England would fall into chaos and mayhem. For him, the foremost lesson of the civil war during his lifetime was clear: when left to themselves, the various religious bodies will leave England in perpetual civil war.

If my interpretation is a correct reading of Hobbes, then his concern for a uniform and publicly established body of theological doctrines or Articles of Faith can be seen more clearly as not motivated by a strictly religious interest in establishing the body of theological truth. Indeed, he goes to great length to argue that the *only* requirement for the attainment of salvation and membership in the church is the single belief in Jesus as the Christ.

Pastors that teach this Foundation the *Jesus is the Christ*, though they draw from it false consequences (which all men are sometimes subject to), they may nevertheless be saved; much more

that they may be saved, who being no Pastors, but Hearers, believe that which is by their lawful Pastor taught them.⁷

The question of private conscience. Both John Cotton and John Winthrop stood in the first half of the seventeenth century as the two most influential voices of New England. Cotton in addition carried considerable weight among the increasingly influential Puritans in England. In opposing their fellow Protestant Roger Williams, Cotton and Winthrop attacked his notion of liberty of conscience by contending that conscience is mere license if it is not informed and guided by proper theological doctrine. Cotton charged Williams with having a "false conscience."

Hobbes' position is more complex. He appears to side with those like Roger Williams who have a strong view of private conscience. Unlike Williams, however, he gives to the Monarch the power not only to establish public theological doctrines, but to compel the subjects to submit publicly to them and to profess them openly.

How, it must be asked, can Hobbes consistently hold to this form of tyranny (which he acknowledges to be tyranny)⁸ while at the same time hold that private conscience is essential to religion? Williams had earlier argued that religion that is cut off from liberty of conscience is mere hypocrisy. Hobbes' attempt to solve the apparent contradiction in his political philosophy indicates the weight he gives to the safety and security of the people. His resolution of the contradiction lies in distinguishing *will* from overt or *public deed*. Like Cotton and Winthrop, Hobbes contends that God has not only instituted rulers to punish evil doers, but commanded all subjects, including Christians, to obey their commands. For Hobbes, evil doing is external deeds or acts that the earthly rulers can observe and control. Religious Faith, for Hobbes, is a combination of *internal will* and *private belief*, on the one hand, and *external obedience* to the earthly Sovereign, on the other hand.

In short, Hobbes contends that a person can in good faith both

profess doctrines and perform deeds to which he does not privately subscribe provided those doctrines and deeds are commanded by his earthly civil Sovereign. Hobbes does not neglect to point out that Christ and the Apostles did not seek to overthrow the heathen Roman Sovereign. Some Apostles and Christians, Hobbes concedes, chose not to profess publicly what they could not privately believe. Hobbes seems to recommend martyrdom as the supreme manifestation of Faith, although he holds out for those less drawn to martyrdom the generalization that "if God should requite perfect Innocence, there could no flesh be saved."⁹

With a touch of casuistry, Hobbes tries to make this particular view more digestible by arguing that the *will* or *endeavor* behind overt obedience to the Sovereign's commands and laws is the true fulfillment of righteousness. He even argues that it is a loving thing to do to give the earthly Sovereign the due obedience that God commands even when the overt deeds commanded by the earthly Sovereign seem contrary to other divine laws. Obedience to the earthly Sovereign is an act of love toward God. And since "our Savior himself makes our Love to God, and to one another, a Fulfilling of the Whole Law," then obeying the Christian Sovereign and following his teaching is Fulfilling the Whole Law of God.¹⁰

Conscience and the challenge of Roger Williams. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* appeared at about the time of Roger Williams' birth somewhere around 1600. The word "conscience" is used more often in this play than in any of Shakespeare's other tragedies.¹¹ The word appears a surprising number of times in Williams' two treatises on political philosophy. Williams' view of conscience is not that of an invisible homunculus residing inside like a pristine noble savage possessing epistemological innocence that exempts it from error. As a Protestant, Williams assumed that conscience needed to be informed by Scripture, the Book of Nature, reason, and experience. The overall drift of his defense of liberty of conscience is that *no person can substitute his or her thinking and believing for another's*. In the year

of his banishment from Massachusetts, Mary and Roger Williams gave to their newly born daughter the name *Freeborn*, which symbolizes the uniqueness of the individual.

Representative sovereignty. Hobbes imagines that he has proved that "Sovereigns are supreme Teachers (in general) by their Office."¹² In some passages he appears to believe that the Sovereign is not only the soul but the *mind* of the commonwealth. This view is tempered somewhat by the fact that the official doctrine—i.e., what today would be called the official Party Line—will be mediated through university teachers and pastors. When John Milton and Roger Williams were students at Cambridge, King Charles installed his beloved Buckingham as Chancellor in order to bring pressure on the faculty to teach the official doctrine of the King and his appointed bishops. Hobbes thought it necessary to teach the official position in the universities in order to maintain social and political stability in England. Ironically, Hobbes' keen interest in the cosmology of Galileo might not have been tolerated at Cambridge if Hobbes' political philosophy had been fully adopted. Presumably debate would continue in a Hobbesian state, but only under very severe limitations. Milton in his *Areopagitica* argues that no book or pamphlet should be censored by a government agency before publication.

Williams and Hobbes appear to stand poles apart on the question of *representative* government. Hobbes differs with republicanism primarily on the question of *who* represents the people. Williams moves steadily to the position that representation itself is severely limited. This fits with his view of liberty of conscience. No one person can literally substitute for another in matters of religion, thought, and feeling. Representative government therefore can go only so far before it becomes *repressive* government.

The utility of limited government. Williams' position seems to be that the magistrates do not so much represent the wishes and will of the people as serve a necessary force (1) to prevent neighbors from physically and forcefully encroaching on the person and prop-

erty of one another and (2) to prevent foreign powers from using force to invade or steal. The power of vote, then, is that of removing those who use this power beyond a certain limit. The rhapsodic words that people like Hobbes sent out in the attempt to portray the Monarch as the true representative or soul of the people struck Williams as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.

Milton as early as 1641 in his treatise "Of Prelatical Episcopacy" expressed serious reservations regarding the ability of bishops to represent either the deity or the people. Later, he came to believe that presbyterianism in Parliament was but another name for episcopacy.

While thinkers like Hobbes kept debating the question of *who* best represents the people, Milton and in particular Williams seem to say that the more basic question is that of the limits of representative government regardless of who holds office. It is in that light that Williams the Baptist-Separatist-Seeker can argue that whether the magistrate is a Christian, Turk, or Jew is of no consequence. We ask of the magistrates what we ask of carpenters or ship captains. Can they do the job for which they are appointed and can they be fired if they fail to do it?

Notes

1. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Edwin Curley, Ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1994), pp. 338-339; ch. xlii, sect. 1.
2. *Leviathan* 67; xii, 12.
3. John Stuart Mill, *Nature and Utility of Religion* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1958), p. 48.
4. See A.D. Lindsay's introductory essay to Everyman's Library edition of *Leviathan* (New York, 1950), pp. xxvif.

5. *Leviathan* 219; xxx, 1.

6. "[T]he *Sovereignty* is an Artificial Soul, as giving life and motion to the whole body; the *Magistrates*, and other *Officers* of Judicature and Execution, artificial *Joints*; *Rewards* and *Punishments* (by which fastened to the seat of the sovereignty, and every joint and member is moved to perform his duty) are the *Nerves*... The *Wealth* and *Riches* of all the particular members, are the *Strength*; *Salus Populi* (the *people's safety*) its *Business*; *Counsellors*, by whom all things needful for it to know, are suggested to it, as are the *Memory*; *Equity* and *Laws*, and artificial *Reason* and *Will*; *Concord*, *Health*; *Sedition*, *Sickness*; and *Civil War*, *Death*. Lastly, the *Pacts* and *Covenants*, by which the parts of this Body Politique were first made...resemble the *Fiat*, or the *Let us make man*, pronounced by God in the Creation" (*Leviathan* The Introduction).

7. *Leviathan* 405; xliii, 16.

8. *Leviathan* 492; Review and Conclusion, 9.

9. *Leviathan* 399; xliii, 4.

10. *Leviathan* 399; xliii, 4, 8, 21, 23.

11. Roland Mushat Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet; Issues and Responses in 1600* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 180.

12. *Leviathan* 380, xlii, 92.