3

Hobbes on the Authority of Scripture

THOMAS HOLDEN

Hobbes's treatment of Christian scripture in Part 3 of *Leviathan* is a curious affair. The longest of the four parts of *Leviathan*, 'Of a Christian Common-Wealth' presents, if not 'a *Rapsody* of as strange Divinity, as since the dayes of the *Gnosticks*, and their several *Progenies*, the Sun ever saw',[1] at the very least an unconventional reading of the revealed word of God as presented in the Bible. In elaborate detail, and without any obvious trace of irony, Hobbes discovers a holy book populated by corporeal angels, a terrestrial Heaven, a Hell that lasts forever but in which the damned are mortal and can expect a second and final death, a deity that is perfectly relaxed about our offering public displays of worship to graven images and foreign gods, and a messiah who bears the person of God merely by speaking authoritatively for Him in the same unmysterious way that a lawyer bears the person of his client in court.

Existing interpretations of Hobbes's treatment of Christian scripture divide into two main camps. According to one group of commentators, Hobbes genuinely believes that he has discerned the true meaning of the revealed word of God. He holds that the Christian scriptures are authentic revelations from the deity, and that his proposed exegeses do at least plausibly capture the meaning of the various texts that he examines. Call this 'the sincere belief interpretation'.[2] According to

[1] This is the contemporary assessment of the Anglican churchman Henry Hammond in *A letter of resolution to six quaeres* (London: J. Flesher, 1653), 384.

[2] J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language, and Time* (New York: Atheneum, 1971; repr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 148–201; Peter Geach, 'The Religion of Thomas Hobbes', *Religious Studies*, 17 (1981), 549–58; F. C. Hood, *The Divine Politics of Thomas Hobbes: An Interpretation of Leviathan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964); A. P. Martinich, *The Two Gods of Leviathan* [*Two Gods*] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Martinich, 'On the Proper Interpretation of Hobbes's Philosophy', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 34 (1996), 273–83; and Martinich, 'On Thomas Hobbes's English Calvinism: Necessity, Omnipotence, and Goodness', *Philosophical Readings*, 4 (2012), 18–30.

a second group of commentators, Hobbes is engaged in a form of faux-pious performance or theological lying. His apparent regard for scripture is merely an act, a cover for some underlying non-religious agenda. Perhaps his scriptural exegeses are an attempt to lay smoke around a scandalously irreligious esoteric philosophy, or a sly burlesque of theology, or simply an ad hominem effort to persuade godly readers that his materialist metaphysics and ultra-statist ecclesiology need not contradict their favorite holy books. Call this 'the irreligious interpretation'.[3]

Each of these readings faces serious problems, and I want to make the case for a different way of understanding Hobbes's treatment of Christian scripture in *Leviathan* and other works such as *De Cive* and *De Corpore*. The key point to appreciate is that Hobbes's philosophical account of religious language applies reflexively to his own religious pronouncements. By his own lights, religious pronouncements made in public—which would certainly include his own published remarks on the meaning of scripture—are properly part of a wider system of religious practice whose controlling purpose is not the expression of belief in particular doctrines, but the expression of awe and reverence before a humanly incomprehensible deity. The norms of assertion that ultimately govern this form of speech are not belief and truth, but—like the norms governing ritual, liturgy, communal prayer, and other forms of public devotion—the expression of reverence before God: a matter of displaying the appropriate worshipful attitude, not of

[3] Edwin Curley, '"I durst not write so boldly", or, How to Read Hobbes' theological-political treatise', in Daniela Bostrenghi (ed.), *Hobbes e Spinoza, Scienza e politica* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1992), 497–593; Curley, 'Calvin and Hobbes, or, Hobbes as an Orthodox Christian', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 34 (1996), 257–71; and Curley, 'Religion and Morality in Hobbes', in Jules L. Coleman and Christopher W. Morris (eds.), *Rational Commitment and Social Justice: Essays for Gregory Kavka* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 90–121; Paul Cooke, *Hobbes and Christianity* (Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 203–32; Douglas Jesseph, 'Hobbes's Atheism', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 26 (2002), 140–66, at 148–9, 157–60; Patricia Springborg, 'Calvin and Hobbes: A Reply to Curley, Martinich and Wright', *Philosophical Readings*, 4 (2012), 3–17; Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes: Its Basis and Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 76. Compare also Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 405, 412, 420–1, 422. On the phenomenon of 'theological lying' in early modern authors, see David Berman, 'Deism, Immortality, and the Art of Theological Lying', in J. A. Leo Lemay (ed.), *Deism, Masonry, and the Enlightenment* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1987), 61–78.

asserting this or that belief. Moreover, as Hobbes sees it, all but the most basic ways of expressing reverence for the deity are *properly* shaped by local human conventions, so that a display of religious veneration in one culture might properly invoke Christian scripture, while a display of religious veneration in another culture might properly invoke Qu'ranic or Vedic texts. It is not simply that all religious speech is rightly constrained by the local religious law, be it Christian, Islamic, or whatever. It is also that, for Hobbes, the appropriate ways of honoring God are *constituted by* the religious practices, however arbitrary or conventional, that are regarded as pious and honorific in the local culture, for words and actions can only give honor if they are regarded as giving honor. Proper reverence for God itself demands this embrace of local religious forms as we display our inner regard for the deity through outwardly recognizable signs of devotion. At the same time, recognizing the social power of religion, and regarding all culturally specific religious practices as matters of human convention, Hobbes hopes that his writings might help to shape the practices of his own Anglo-Protestant culture in ways that promote his own moral and political ideals, particularly if he can gain the ear of the authorities inculcating the official state religion. Working within the limits imposed by a realistic and respectful deference to the settled religious forms and the existing religious laws, he therefore offers us readings of scripture that 'manifestly tend to Peace and Loyalty' (*Lev.* 'Review and Conclusion' 14: 1139)—and indeed toward other Hobbesian ideals, including the independence of philosophy from religion, the suppression of superstition, and his ultra-statist ecclesiology.[4] But none of this means that Hobbes is not sincere in treating Christian scripture as dictating the appropriate framework for an English subject's religious life, or that there is not a genuine piety animating his own public embrace of the established religion. There is no reason to doubt that Hobbes's reverence for the deity is authentic, or that he sincerely holds that that reverence is best expressed, in a Christian commonwealth,

[4] References to *Lev.* are given by chapter and paragraph number, then page number; 'Latin version' indicates an alteration made in the 1668 Latin edition of the text. Translations of *DCi* are taken from Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (eds. and trans.), *On the Citizen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Translations of *DH* are taken from Thomas Hobbes, *Man and Citizen*, ed. Bernard Gert (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1972). Translations of *DCo* are taken from the contemporary English translation in *EW* i. 1–532. For each of these works, references are given by chapter and section number.

through traditional Christian observances and a genuine respect, however creative in interpretation, for Christian holy texts.[5]

1. AGAINST THE SINCERE BELIEF AND IRRELIGIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

First, however: what are the shortcomings of the sincere belief interpretation and the irreligious interpretation of Hobbes's treatment of Christian scripture? The main lines of objection against each are familiar enough, both from the original back-and-forth between Hobbes and contemporary critics of his theological liberties and from the more recent literature. Here I simply summarize what I take to be the major challenges facing each of these interpretations, together with my own reasons for thinking these objections cumulatively fatal.

There are four main points to be made against the sincere belief interpretation. First, Hobbes tells us that, as part of our general duty of obedience required by the social contract, we ought to go along with whatever public religious practices the state requires and outwardly accept whatever scriptures the state declares to be God's revealed word (*Lev.* 26.41: 444; 32.5: 578, 40.2: 738; *DH* 14.4; *AW* 26.5). This outward conformity is required not only if the established religion is Christian or Protestant, but equally under 'Heathen Princes, or Princes . . . that authorize the teaching of an Errour' (*Lev.* 42.131: 922). At the same time, Hobbes is clear that we have no duty to inwardly believe in the claims made by the established religion (*Lev.* 32.5: 578; *Lev.* 40.2: 738).[6] So the sincere belief interpretation requires us to accept a certain coincidence: it tells us that, as it happens, Hobbes privately believes in the divinely revealed character of just those texts that he is already obliged to outwardly accept as if they were divinely revealed, namely

[5] On the central point that Hobbes regards Christian scripture as dictating the proper framework for expressing reverence for God in a Christian commonwealth, but does not regard it as conveying an authentic revelation from the deity, I am in agreement with Tuck, at least in his reading of *Leviathan*. See Richard Tuck, 'The "Christian Atheism" of Thomas Hobbes', in Michael Hunter and David Wootton (eds.), *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 113–30, at 128–9. Tuck's interpretation emphasizes Hobbes's ecclesiology in *Leviathan*; my own argument focuses on the underlying philosophical account of religious language in this and other works, along with Hobbes's analysis of the publicly performative nature of honoring and worship.

[6] I examine Hobbes's case for this thesis in section 2 below.

'those which have been commanded to be acknowledged for such, by the Authority of the Church of *England*' (*Lev.* 33.1: 586). Hobbes got lucky. In another life, he might have been a subject of pagan or Muslim kings, and been obliged to outwardly accept holy books that he did not privately believe in. To be clear: my point is not that Hobbes's insistence on outward conformity to the established religion explains away all the various passages in which he appears to endorse Christian scripture. It does not. After all, he did not have to bring up scripture in his writings at all, or at any rate not as often and extensively as he in fact does. My point is simply that the sincere belief interpretation does require a rather fortunate coincidence, and that it is naïve to assume that Hobbes's outward embrace of Christian scripture provides unambiguous evidence of his inner convictions. By his own admission, if the laws had mandated acknowledgment of some other non-Christian revelation or even the explicit renunciation of belief in Christ, his own public professions should have followed suit (*Lev.* 42.11: 784).

Second, Hobbes's epistemology of human testimony makes it next to impossible to have any warranted belief that any purported divine revelation is in fact authentic. As we just saw, he does hold that we ought to *act as if* we believe in any revelation that the state tells us is authentic. But, quite explicitly, that is a matter of external behavior not inward belief. Hobbes does also grant the possibility of a genuine supernatural revelation from God: a case where the deity directly communicates with some authentic prophet or supernaturally inspired scribe. But the question for the rest of us, relying simply on our natural human reason, is whether we can responsibly believe in testimonial reports that such-and-such a supposed case of divine revelation is indeed authentic. And here, as Hobbes sees it, responsible, properly warranted belief is next to impossible. Given the human tendency toward credulity, wishful thinking, and even outright deception and pious fraud (*Lev.* 8.21–25: 112–20, 32.6: 580), we ought not believe that any purported revelation actually comes from God unless it is substantiated by miracles (*Lev.* 32.7: 580–82; *DH* 14.3; compare also *B* 176). But further, Hobbes insists, human nature being what it is, testimonial reports of miracles substantiating a revelation are just as doubtful as the original testimonial reports of the supernatural revelation itself. The result is that we ought only believe that a purported revelation is genuine if it is substantiated by *current* miracles, miracles

that the responsible believer cannot take on trust but must witness first-hand for him- or herself.[7] The requirement is surely intended to be as good as prohibitive, particularly since Hobbes expects his readers to agree that 'Miracles now cease' (*Lev.* 32.9: 584; see also *Lev.* 26.40 Latin version: 445; *DH* 14.4)—a position that was indeed common among seventeenth-century English Protestants. So we can see why he says that 'men can neuer by their own wisdome come to the knowledge of what God hath spoken and commanded to be obserued' (*B* 136): it is practically impossible to have the kind of evidence we would need to substantiate any supposed divine revelation. By Hobbes's own lights, natural human reason cannot justify our believing that any particular putative divine revelation is in fact authentic; and if he sincerely believes that some particular putative divine revelation is in fact the authentic word of God, then he is violating his own epistemological strictures.

Third, Hobbes's particular interpretations of Christian scripture are often strained and tendentious—so much so that it is difficult to believe that he seriously takes himself to be discovering the true, original, or intended meaning of the text. It is not simply the material angels, the this-worldly character of the Kingdom of Heaven, or the peculiar economy of Hobbes's mortalist Hell. The moral teachings of Hobbes's scripture are no less surprising than the metaphysical. In his hands, the Old and New Testament each urge us to shun any prophet who challenges a legally established religion, to reject martyrdom and worship false gods as required, and to take our earthly sovereigns as the final authority in matters of right and wrong. Most Christians would surely be surprised to learn that

> . . . what [Christ] was teaching by the laws: *You shall not Kill*, *you shall not commit Adultery*, *you shall not Steal*, *you shall honour your Parents*, was simply that citizens and subjects should absolutely obey their Princes and sovereigns in all questions of *mine*, *thine*, *his*, and *other's*. (*DCi* 17.10)

[7] '[H]ow can someone be believed who saith that the things that he saith or teacheth are confirmed by miracles unless he himself hath performed miracles? For if a private person is to be believed without a miracle, why should the various teachings of one man be any better than those of another?' (*DH* 14.3; see also *Lev.* 37.13: 694–6, and the requirement of 'a present Miracle' at *Lev.* 32.8: 584).

The effective result of Hobbes's various exegeses is to neutralize Christian scripture as any sort of independent authority or practical guide that might conflict with our duty of obedience to the civil sovereign. At least where Hobbes examines it, God's revealed word emerges not as an other-worldly call to lift our eyes beyond the passions and preoccupations of the Kingdom of Nature, but as a seamless confirmation of his own decidedly this-worldly philosophy.[8] And quite apart from the sheer convenience of his particular proposed readings of scripture, we might also find Hobbes's relentless confidence in the accuracy of his exegeses itself suspicious, for it is quite out of line with his usual cautions about the indeterminacy of meaning in written texts and the difficulty of interpreting ancient books.[9]

Fourth, were Christian scripture the authentic word of God, we might hope to learn truths from it, at least from those passages that seem to present us with truth-apt assertions. We might hope to appeal to this divine revelation, as we appeal to human testimony, when shaping our theories and beliefs about the nature of the created world, the facts of sacred history, and perhaps even the nature and intentions of the deity. This at least is the traditional view, and on the face of it Hobbes himself

[8] The convenience of Hobbes's interpretations of scripture for his political philosophy is widely appreciated. See especially David Johnston, *The Rhetoric of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes and the Politics of Cultural Transformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), and Sharon Lloyd, *Ideals as Interests in Hobbes's Leviathan: The Power of Mind over Matter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). In defense of the sincere belief interpretation, Martinich points out that '[m]any of Hobbes's views which may have been nonstandard were at least not unprecedented' and can be found in one or another scriptural exegete whose sincerity is quite uncontroversial (Martinich, *Two Gods*, 4; see also 345–6, 388 n. 10). But it is not just that Hobbes endorses this or that nonstandard position, which might perhaps be found in one or another perfectly sincere Christian theologian—Milton holding that angels are corporeal, Luther that humans are not conscious after death, and so on (4–5). It is that Hobbes's whole fabric of exegetical positions is *collectively* so implausible, yet at the same time convenient, and therefore suspicious.

[9] 'Though words be the signs we have of one another's opinions and intentions: because the equivocation of them is so frequent, according to the diversity of contexture, and of the company wherewith they go (which the presence of him that speaketh, our sight of his actions, and conjecture of his intentions, must help to discharge us of): it must be extreme hard to find out the opinions and meaning of those men that are gone from us long ago, and have left us no other signification thereof but their books' (*EL* 13.8). Hobbes also repeatedly appeals to the endlessly contestable ambiguities of positive *and* revealed law when arguing for the sovereign's right to stipulate authoritative interpretations. For discussion of these and other tensions with Hobbes's 'self-proclaimed hermeneutic virtuosity' in the interpretation of scripture, see Hannah Dawson, *Locke, Language and Early Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 141.

can seem to treat scripture as a source of factual information, as when he offers us his account of the nature of Heaven and Hell in the light of the scriptural sources, or when he cites scripture as confirming the existence of an original Adamite language that was subsequently lost at Babel. However, at least when he addresses the question directly, Hobbes is clear that our scientific and metaphysical theorizing about the nature of the world should *not* be informed by scripture, and indeed he vigorously attacks the sort of 'Church-Philosophy' and 'school divinity' that mixes science and metaphysics with scriptural interpretation (*B* 291; *DCo* Epistle dedicatory; compare also *B* 183; *EL* 25.9; *Lev.* 46.15: 1076). Hobbes's methodological remarks at the beginning of *De Corpore* are particularly clear on this point. Here he casts 'school divinity' as an '*Empusa*', the hybrid monster of Greek myth that stumbles along on one donkey's leg and one prosthetic brass leg—representing, in Hobbes's allegorical figure, a pseudoscience grotesquely combining Aristotelian metaphysics and scriptural interpretation. This hobgoblin must of course be driven away—but consider how Hobbes proposes to do it:

> Against this *Empusa* I think there cannot be invented a better exorcism, than to distinguish between the rules of religion, that is, the rules of honouring God, which we have from the laws, and the rules of philosophy, that is, the opinions of private men; and to yield what is due to religion to the Holy Scripture, and what is due to philosophy to natural reason. (*DCo* Epistle dedicatory)

Scripture and philosophy here are oil and water. The former can inform the religious laws and make claims on our outward behavior, but it has no proper claim on private belief. Further, even in matters of outward behavior, its proper sphere of authority is 'the rules of honouring God', not the assertion of philosophical or scientific doctrine. Scripture might properly shape our religious practice and rituals of worship, but not 'philosophy [or] the opinions of private men'—the sphere where 'natural reason' is instead our proper guide.[10] So whatever else scripture might do for us, we ought not to treat it as a compendium of revealed *truths*—a system of true propositions, vouched for by God, that we need to take account of when theorizing

[10] Compare also *Lev.* 8.26 Latin version: 121, and *DH* 14.13.

about the nature of the world or the attributes of the deity. I suppose one might discount the fact-stating appearances of scripture in this way while still believing that it is indeed an authentic revelation from God. Perhaps the deity simply meant to present us with rules for honoring Him, not to teach us any truths about Him or His creation. But in any case, if we consider Hobbes's position that scripture can make no claims on 'philosophy [or] the opinions of private men' alongside our three previous objections, we have a compelling case against the view that his own scriptural exegeses—with their apparently truth-apt accounts of corporeal angels, a terrestrial Heaven and mortalist Hell, and the rest—are animated by a sincere conviction that he has in fact discovered the true meaning of God's revealed word. Moreover, what I offer to explain, as the sincere belief interpretation does not, is just *why* Hobbes views scripture exclusively as a source of rules for honoring God, and in no part or respect as a reliable source of true propositions about the world.

What of the irreligious interpretation of Hobbes's forays into scriptural exegesis? Perhaps the implausibility of the sincere belief interpretation might seem to provide us with an argument for the irreligious reading. After all, if Hobbes does not really believe that his scriptural exegeses plausibly capture the true meaning of authentic revelations from God and yet proceeds to advance these exegeses all the same, then it might seem that he must simply be lying, and moreover treating Christian scripture in such a cavalier fashion that he cannot have any sincere regard for it. He must simply be pretending to defer to scripture for some underlying non-religious or even anti-religious purpose. Perhaps, for instance, Hobbes means to mock or subvert Christianity before an elite audience capable of reading between the lines and detecting his esoteric irreligious message. Or perhaps his scriptural exegeses are simply intended to persuade potentially censorious critics that his materialist and ultra-statist philosophy can pass the test of Christian respectability. Or perhaps he merely intends to pipe the gullible godly toward peace and civil obedience.

But this is too quick. I agree that Hobbes does not actually regard Christian scripture as an authentic revelation from God. I also agree with many irreligious interpreters that Hobbes sees himself, often enough, as crafting entirely new meanings from scripture rather than as uncovering the original or intended meaning of the text before him.

But I do not think that we should characterize Hobbes as *lying to* or otherwise *misleading* his readers. That would be to ignore his own explicit arguments for outward religious conformity, which make it clear that the norms controlling public religious pronouncements are not truth and belief, but rather the expression of reverence for God—an expression of reverence that is properly shaped by the local religious traditions, texts, and laws, whatever they might be. Nor is the respect that Hobbes shows scripture simply a performance motivated by non-religious ends; rather (I will argue) it is an expression, at least in part, of genuine reverence for the deity, albeit an expression that is articulated through religious forms that Hobbes regards as conventional, human, and arbitrary. Finally, as we shall see, Hobbes—a philosopher who repeatedly emphasizes the distinction between inward belief and outward conformity—never actually says that he *believes in* the divine authenticity of Christian scripture, and indeed refuses to engage when challenged on the point by critics. Rather, he simply *accepts* Christian scripture as providing the appropriate framework for expressing reverence for God in the light of England's Christian culture and religious laws. Private belief is in fact never the issue for Hobbes when it comes to a person's religious propriety, but rather obedience to law and conformity with the local traditions of worship. On this point his works are consistent throughout, and his refusal to engage on the question of inner belief exhibits a distinctive kind of integrity that his commentators have not properly appreciated.

The irreligious interpretation fails to do justice to these complexities in Hobbes's philosophy of religion. But pending my own positive account of that philosophy (which follows in sections 2 and 3 below), perhaps the most obvious challenge facing the irreligious interpretation is the question of why Hobbes devotes *so much* sustained and detailed attention to scriptural questions. He seems to go out of his way to engage these issues, at most length in Part 3 of *Leviathan* (chapters 33–43), but also in Part 4 (chapters 44–45) and in the earlier *Elements of Law* (chapters 18, 25–26) and *De Cive* (chapters 16–18). If all this is indeed a case of theological lying—the sort of insincere genuflection before scripture one finds on occasion in a Toland or a Hume—then it is by several orders of magnitude the most extensive, elaborate, and systematic such case in any early modern philosopher. Throughout the whole there is no obvious sign of irony, and for the

most part Hobbes seems to have suspended his usual malicious wit as inappropriate to the topic. Pocock is correct:

> Although esoteric reasons have been suggested why Hobbes should have written what he did not believe, the difficulty remains of imagining why a notoriously arrogant thinker, vehement in his dislike of 'insignificant speech', should have written and afterwards defended sixteen chapters of what he held to be nonsense, and exposed them to the scrutiny of a public which did not consider this kind of thing nonsense at all.[11]

The sheer level of detailed engagement that Hobbes brings to the specifics of scriptural interpretation, together with his apparent seriousness of purpose and respectful manner in handling his scriptural sources, remains something of a mystery on the irreligious reading. What is needed is an account that can explain both the sustained and to all appearances pious attention that Hobbes shows scripture *and* the creative liberties that he takes in its interpretation.

2. OUTWARD CONFORMITY AND THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

To understand Hobbes's handling of Christian scripture, we must see it in the light of his own account of the norms controlling religious practice and speech. First, in a commonwealth a person's religious propriety is a matter of his outward behavior rather than inner belief. Nothing is required from a subject's inner psychological life, save perhaps the bare belief in and a general attitude of reverence toward the first cause of all.[12] In particular, there is no requirement of inner belief in the more specific claims of any particular religious tradition. We must obey the laws regulating external religious practice, including public religious speech and the outward acceptance of mandated religious texts as authentic revelations. But a proper religious life carries

[11] Pocock, *Politics, Language, and Time*, 162. Pocock's figure of 'sixteen' chapters includes the whole of *Leviathan* Part 4 as well as Part 3.

[12] Or at least, the bare belief in and attitude of reverence toward the cause of the *humanly comprehensible* universe, a being that Hobbes holds is properly dignified with the honorific title 'the first cause of all' and the name 'God'. For this latter reading, see Thomas Holden, 'Hobbes's First Cause', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 53 (2015), 647–67.

no requirement of inner belief in any specific holy books, points of doctrine, or articles of faith.

We have already seen Hobbes's injunction at the start of *De Corpore* that 'the rules of religion, that is, the rules of honouring God' are to be taken 'from the laws', and must be distinguished from 'the rules of philosophy, that is the opinions of private men', where natural reason is our proper guide (*DCo* Epistle dedicatory). Hobbes's equation of the rules of religion with the rules of honoring God is important, and I will return to it. But begin by considering his claim that these rules are to be taken from the laws, and do not speak to inner belief. As Hobbes sees it, once we have left the state of nature for a commonwealth, we are obliged to obey the sovereign in matters of public religious practice, including public religious speech. At the same time, inner belief remains our own private affair:

> [A sovereign] may oblige me to obedience, so, as not by act or word to declare I beleeve him not; but not to think any otherwise than my reason perswades me. (*Lev.* 32.5: 578)

> [B]y [the King's] authority, I say, it ought to be decided, not what men shall think, but what they shall say in . . . questions [concerning 'the ordering of religion']. (*CR* 428)

Why does a subject's duty of obedience not extend to the regulation of his private religious beliefs? Because beliefs are not subject to voluntary control, and one cannot simply believe as commanded:

> [I]n every Common-wealth, they who have no supernaturall Revelation to the contrary, ought to obey the laws of their own Soveraign, in the externall acts and profession of Religion. As for the inward *thought*, and *beleef* of men, which humane Governours can take no notice of, . . . they are not voluntary, nor the effect of the laws, . . . and consequently fall not under obligation. (*Lev.* 40.2: 738; see also *Lev.* 42.43: 822; *EL* 25.3)

Thus while public religious practice and speech ought to conform with the religious laws,[13] inner belief is involuntary and hence cannot be

[13] What about Hobbes's qualification at the start of this extract from *Lev.* 40.2: 738, where he seems to imply that those who *do* have a 'supernaturall Revelation to the contrary' might not be obliged to obey the laws regarding outward religious practice? There is no reason to doubt that Hobbes sincerely intends this qualification, but it is (for Hobbes) extremely hypothetical, a theoretical concession with little real world purchase. The 'supernaturall

required of any subject. At the very start of *Leviathan* Part 3, Hobbes does assert that we should 'captivate our understanding' to the word of God as presented in scripture (*Lev.* 32.3: 578). But this duty to 'captivate our understanding' is *not* a duty to believe:

> [B]y the captivity of our Understanding, is not meant a Submission of our Intellectuall faculty, to the Opinion of any other man; but of the Will to Obedience, where Obedience is due. For Sense, Memory, Understanding, and Opinion are not in our power to change; but always, 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. We then Captivate our Understanding and Reason, when we forbear contradiction; when we so speak, as (by lawfull Authority) we are commanded; and when we live accordingly (*Lev.* 32.4: 578).

Indeed, not only do we have no duty to obey *the state* in matters of private religious belief, we have no duty to obey *God* in this matter either. Hobbes applies the same basic argument in each case, emphasizing the involuntary character of belief as against the voluntary character of external behavior. Thus a subject of a commonwealth is 'bound by his own act' (in virtue of his general covenant of obedience to the sovereign) to obey the law in matters of external religious practice and public professions; but

> bound I say to obey it, . . . not bound to believe it: for mens beliefe and interiour cogitations, are not subject to the commands, but only to the operations of God, ordinary and extraordinary. Faith of Supernaturall Law, is . . . not a duty that we exhibite to God, but a gift that God freely giveth to whom he pleaseth. (*Lev.* 26.41: 444)

The final clause of this passage sounds a familiar Protestant note with its invocation of faith as an unearned gift from God. But Hobbes's underlying message is potentially more unorthodox: we will believe

Revelation' that Hobbes requires for this qualification to take effect is not simply an indirect revelation mediated by prophets, apostles, or a holy book, but—much more demanding—a *personal* and *incorrigible* revelation received *immediately* from God. Thus, for instance, he writes that 'in a Common-wealth, a subject that has no *certain* and *assured* Revelation *particularly to himself* concerning the Will of God, is to obey for such, the Command of the Common-wealth' (*Lev.* 25.41: 446, emphases added); compare also *B* 176. Given Hobbes's deep skepticism about claims to this sort of direct personal revelation, his qualification in *Lev.* 40.2: 738 ought to be regarded as simply a theoretical concession. It is not likely that any *actual* subjects will qualify for this exemption.

or not according to God's 'ordinary and extraordinary' operations—that is, through natural or supernatural causes—but violate no duty if we do not believe.

Hobbes can even seem to go so far as to *identify* religion with a certain kind of law in his polemical apologias of the 1660s. In *An Apology for Himself and His Writings* (which prefaced his *Seven Philosophical Problems*, delivered to the Royal Society in 1662) he abruptly declares that 'religion is not philosophy, but law' (*SPP* 5). In *Mr. Hobbes Considered in his Loyalty, Religion, Reputation, and Manners* (1662) he assures us that, unlike his adversary, the Presbyterian divine John Wallis who was recently in 'actual rebellion' against the Royal Supremacy, 'Mr. Hobbes . . . holds religion to be a law' (*CR* 425). And in the dialogue *Behemoth* (1682, posthumously) he suggests that even when religion is considered not as a public institution but as a character trait and personal moral virtue, it can also be comprehended under the same basic account, being reducible to a disposition to obey the relevant legal statutes. Consider this exchange between 'A', the Hobbesian master, and 'B', the eager and tractable Hobbesian student:

> A: . . . [I]nasmuch as I told you, that all vertue is comprehended in obedience to the Laws of the Common wealth, whereof Religion is one, I have placed Religion among the Vertues.
> B: Is Religion then a Law of a Common wealth?
> B: There is no Nation in the world whose Religion is not established, and receius not its Authority from the Laws of that Nation. (*B* 167)

So one has the virtue of religion—'the greatest Vertue of all others' as B calls it (*B* 166)—just in case one is disposed to obey the laws controlling religious practice, whatever those laws might be.[14]

Hobbes's suggestion that religious propriety is simply a matter of obedience to the local religious laws is striking. On this view, subjects who possess the true virtue of religion will profess at public altars whatever the state demands. Their own private doctrinal convictions

[14] In other passages in *Behemoth* the two interlocutors also reaffirm the Hobbesian position that religion in a commonwealth is a kind of law: 'Religion in it selfe admits no controversy. Tis a Law of the Kingdome, and ought not to be disputed' (*B* 225, B speaking). '[T]hough not the same in all Countries, yet in euery Country [religion ought to be] vndisputable' (*B* 163, A speaking).

will be inert in the face of the established religion, having no practical weight against legal mandates regarding the profession of points of faith, oaths, or any other matter of external religious behavior. Still, however outwardly compliant, such subjects need not actually believe in the claims of the established religion, and a lack of inner belief in the doctrines of any particular religious tradition, Protestantism and Christianity not excepted, would not impugn their religious virtue. Considered against the background of religious conflict and coercion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Hobbes's position could serve as a brief for the Spanish converso, for the crypto-Huguenot before the Edict of Nantes, for the crypto-Catholic in Elizabethan and Stuart England, or for the temporizing politique: law-abiding subjects all willing to go along with the state religion while keeping their own private beliefs to themselves. By the same token, it could equally serve as a brief for the closet deist who privately doubts all supposed prophets and revelations, but respects the civil law and is prepared to play his part in public ceremonial. In contrast to these figures of accommodating Hobbesian religious propriety, the defiant recusant or puritan martyr who insists on displaying his inner convictions and publicly rejecting the established religion is not only a threat to civil peace, but also, for Hobbes, lacks the true virtue of religion altogether. The purity and even the truth of this sort of inflexible nonconformist's specific doctrinal convictions (if indeed they are true) are beside the point: so long as one rejects obedience and outward conformity, one is not living a properly religious life.[15]

When Hobbes turns to the interpretation of scripture in Part 3 of *Leviathan*, his approach is explicitly grounded on this conformist understanding of proper religious practice. Before he gets down to his proposed readings of particular passages, he must perforce decide which specific books to treat as presenting the revealed word of God.

[15] Hobbes's contemporary audience found his implied position that the various Protestant martyrs 'needlessly cast away their lives' one of the most scandalous suggestions in all of *Leviathan* (*Lev.* 42.12: 786; see also *Lev.* 42.13–14: 788). See Jon Parkin, *Taming the Leviathan: The Reception of the Political and Religious Ideas of Thomas Hobbes in England 1640–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 115–16. To appreciate the provocative nature of Hobbes's position in its contemporary context, consider that after only the Bible, John Foxe's 1563 sectarian martyrology *Actes and Monuments* (i.e. his 'Book of Martyrs') had been the best-selling book in England in the century since its publication.

And here, Hobbes argues, he must simply accept whatever scriptural canon is mandated by the established religious laws:

> Seeing therefore . . . that Soveraigns in their own Dominions are the sole Legislators; those Books only are Canonicall, that is, Law, in every nation, which are established for such by the Soveraign Authority. It is true, that God is the Soveraign of all Soveraigns; and therefore, when he speaks to any Subject, he ought to be obeyed, whatsoever any earthly Potentate command to the contrary. But the question is not of obedience to God, but of *when*, and *what* God hath said; which to Subjects that have no supernaturall revelation, cannot be known, but by that naturall reason, which guided them, for the obtaining of Peace and Justice, to obey the authority of their severall Common-wealths; that is to say, of their lawfull Soveraigns. According to this obligation, I can acknowledge no other Books of the Old Testament, to be Holy Scripture, but those which have been commanded to be acknowledged for such, by the Authority of the Church of *England*. (*Lev.* 33.1: 586)

Absent a personal and direct supernatural revelation of one's own, all subjects, Hobbes included, must simply 'acknowledge' whatever scriptures are mandated by the official state religion. Given Hobbes's position that we cannot be obliged to believe, this obligation can only be a matter of our outward behavior. What is required is that subjects profess the authority and divine authenticity of whatever scriptures are backed by law, where profession—in keeping with Hobbes's definition in *De Cive*—need not involve any 'internal mental conviction' but only 'external obedience' (*DCi* 18.5).[16] Still, any public discussion of the meaning of God's revealed word must take such a profession for granted, and therefore adopt whatever scriptural canon is mandated by the state as its basic framework.

So Hobbes 'acknowledge[s]' the divine authenticity of Christian scripture. He professes it; he publicly accepts it. But he never tells us that he actually believes in it. Nor does he assume that his fellow

[16] Similarly, '[P]ropositions are allowed for different reasons . . . Sometimes we allow propositions which, however, we do not accept in our own minds, until, in fact, we have examined their truth by seeing what would follow from them, and that is called *assuming*. We may also allow a proposition simply as such, perhaps from fear of the laws, and that is to *profess* or *confess* by external signs [*profiteri*, vel *confiteri* signis externis]; or from the automatic deference, which men give out of politeness to those whom they respect, and to others from love of peace, and this is to *concede* in the simple sense' (*DCi* 18.5).

subjects will all believe in it either, but merely that 'in Christian commonwealths all men either beleeve, *or at least professe* the Scripture to bee the Word of God' (*Lev.* 43.8: 936, emphasis added). Nor does he hold that his proposed interpretations of Christian scripture will only have force and utility for those of his readers who believe that it is in fact an authentic revelation. All that is required is that his readers are prepared to go along with this scripture, outwardly acknowledging it as God's revealed word, whether or not they inwardly believe:

> . . . whether men *Know,* or *Beleeve,* or *Grant* the Scriptures to be the Word of God; if out of such places of them, as are without obscurity, I shall shew what Articles of Faith are necessary, and only necessary for Salvation, those men must needs *Know, Beleeve,* or *Grant* the same. (*Lev.* 43.10: 936)

In sum: Hobbes regards Christian scripture, whether or not it is in fact an authentic revelation, as a text that subjects should publicly acknowledge as if it were God's word, and which properly shapes the communal religious life of his own Christian commonwealth. Given their ratification by the state, the various books of the Bible properly serve as the basis for public preaching and any public examination of God's purposes and commands. But there is no need to suppose that Hobbes actually believes that Christian scripture is more than a human creation, and both the various problems facing the sincere belief interpretation and the caution of his language suggest otherwise.

Consider some further evidence of that caution. As I have noted, for all the attention that Hobbes gives to the difference between outward profession and inward belief, he never specifies that his own attitude to Christian scripture involves an inward belief in its divine authenticity. Instead he seems content to express his own position, however respectfully and deferentially, in more ambiguous terms. Look at Hobbes's closing reflections on his examination of scripture at the very end of *Leviathan* Part 3:

> [T]hus much shall suffice, concerning the Kingdome of God, and Policy Ecclesiasticall. Wherein I pretend not to advance any Position of my own, but onely to shew what are the Consequences that seem to me deducible from the Principles of Christian Politiques, (which are holy Scriptures,) in confirmation of the Power of Civill Soveraigns, and the Duty of their Subjects. (*Lev.* 43.24: 954)

Hobbes presents himself as simply working out readings of the legally established scriptural canon that promote a proper understanding of our civil obligations and the rights of the state. He treats these texts respectfully and as the authoritative source of a distinctively 'Christian Politiques'. But if we are looking for the pulse of inner belief, or a sense of Protestant conviction that he has the inerrant word of God in his hands, the passage could scarcely be more bloodless. Nor does godly conviction shine through in any of Hobbes's other remarks on how his scriptural exegeses ought to be received. Consider this from 1662's *An Apology for Himself and His Writings*:

> That which is in ['my *Leviathan*'] of theology, contrary to the general current of divines, is not put there as my opinion, but propounded with submission to those who have the power ecclesiastical.
>
> I never did after, either in writing or discourse, maintain it. (*SPP* 5)

Granted, this is Hobbes in apologetic mode, emphasizing his willingness to abandon the theology of his Interregnum *Leviathan* wherever it offends the newly restored Crown and Anglican Church. But when Hobbes asserts that he merely 'propound[s]' possible interpretations of scripture without intending to 'maintain' them, this is not a new development. Rather he is simply echoing the language of the 1651 *Leviathan*, where he had already added the following crucial general caveat to his proposed interpretations of scripture (the immediate context here being Hobbes's exegetical proposal that we read scriptural references to the Kingdom of God not as references to an otherworldly spiritual kingdom, but as references to a future terrestrial 'Civil Common-wealth'):

> But because this doctrine (though proved out of Places of Scripture not few, nor obscure) will appear to most men a novelty; I doe but propound it; maintaining nothing in this, or any other paradox of Religion; but attending the end of that dispute of the sword, concerning the Authority, (not yet amongst my Countrey-men decided,) by which all sorts of doctrine are to bee approved, or rejected; and whose commands, both in speech, and writing, (whatsoever be the opinions of private men) must by all men, that mean to be protected by their Laws, be obeyed. (*Lev.* 38.5: 708)

As in *Lev.* 43.24: 594, Hobbes again stresses his interest in the practical political effect of his proposed readings of scripture. And again there

is no sense that he means to testify to his own private religious convictions.

Finally, consider how Hobbes chooses to respond when publicly challenged to confirm his belief in Christian revelation. Such questions were in the air following the publication of *Leviathan*, and were potentially dangerous to Hobbes's reputation. John Wallis explicitly pressed the point in his *Elenchus Geometriae Hobbianae* (1655), wondering out loud whether Hobbes actually believed in the Bible's account of the Fall, or whether he merely saw it as a myth that happened to be endorsed by the civil laws. Here is Hobbes quoting Wallis's provocation in *Elenchus*, and then his own entire reply in *Six Lessons to the Professors of Mathematiques* (1656):

> And at the end of your objections to the eighteenth chapter, '*Perhaps you take the whole history of the fall of Adam for a fable, which is no wonder, when you say the rules of honouring and worshipping of God are to be taken from the laws*.' Down, I say; you bark now at the supreme legislative power. Therefore it is not I, but the laws which must rate you off. (*SL* 350)[17]

For Hobbes, Wallis's remark is impertinent and his resistance to treating the civil law as authoritative in matters of religious practice potentially criminal. But even so, nothing would have been easier than for Hobbes to have added in his reply (whether sincerely or otherwise) that, however impertinent the question might be, he *did* in fact believe in the Bible. Indeed, prudence might have recommended some such clarification. Yet instead Hobbes leaves the question of his own inner belief quite unaddressed—in effect, dismissing it as beside the point. The civil state properly determines our public religious practice, and that is all that needs to be said.[18] To my mind, the fact that Hobbes

[17] Hobbes is in fact translating and paraphrasing Wallis (from John Wallis, *Elenchus Geometriae Hobbianae* [*Elenchus*] [Oxford: H. Hall for John Crooke, 1655], 88) rather than quoting him verbatim. But he does not misrepresent Wallis's basic charge. For a fuller translation of Wallis's objection, see Douglas M. Jesseph, *Squaring the Circle: The War between Hobbes and Wallis* [*Squaring the Circle*] (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), 313.

[18] There is a similar refusal to engage the question of truth and inner belief at another point in Hobbes's exchange with Wallis. Wallis had taken offense at Hobbes's assertion in *De Corpore* that the question of the origin of the world is properly settled 'by those who are lawfully authorized to order the worship of God' (*DCo* 26.1)—'as if', Wallis says in *Elenchus*, 'this were not sufficiently agreed in the Holy Scripture, but should depend entirely on the suffrage of sovereigns whether or not the world ever had a beginning' (Wallis, *Elenchus*, 90; as translated in Jesseph, *Squaring the Circle*, 314). Again, Hobbes simply ignores the issue of the

avoids the issue of truth and inner belief does tend to confirm Wallis's suspicion that he regards the Christian scriptures as a human creation rather than the revealed word of God. But equally this strategy of avoidance exhibits an important form of integrity, as Hobbes resists the easy path of simply claiming to inwardly believe whenever it is convenient to do so.

3. OUTWARD CONFORMITY AND NATURAL PIETY

Thus far I have been arguing that Hobbes's respectful treatment of Christian scripture is dictated by his commitment to outward religious conformity, and that it is not at all likely that he inwardly believes that these texts in fact convey an authentic revelation from God. Hobbes is not in *that* sense a Christian. I now argue that his commitment to outward religious conformity is nevertheless an expression of a genuine religious piety: that Hobbes is sincere in holding that we ought to worship the first cause of all, and sincere in holding that the appropriate way to worship this awesome and incomprehensible divinity is to publicly adopt the local religious forms, including whatever scriptures are regarded as canonical. So on the proposed reading, Hobbes's outward regard for Christian scripture is not simply a cover for some non-religious or anti-religious agenda. Rather, given the religious culture and laws of seventeenth-century England, Anglo-Protestant religious practice is the proper way of expressing reverence for the first cause of all, and a freethinker who refused to go along with this system of worship, or did so merely in a detached or contemptuous way, would thereby show a disregard for the deity that is both impious and irrational. To substantiate this interpretation, I examine Hobbes's case for a duty of outward religious conformity, since the reasoning that

reliability of Christian scripture, and instead reiterates his basic position that the state has the authority to mandate our particular doctrinal religious professions: '[W]hat an absurd question it is to ask me whether it be in the power of the magistrate, whether the world be eternal or not? It were fit you knew it is in the power of the supreme magistrate to make a law for the punishment of them that shall pronounce publicly of that question anything contrary to that which the law hath once pronounced' (*SL* 351–2). For useful discussion of the context of Hobbes's exchange with Wallis, see Jesseph, *Squaring the Circle*, and Siegmund Probst, 'Infinity and Creation: The Origin of the Controversy between Thomas Hobbes and the Savilian Professors Seth Ward and John Wallis', *British Journal for the History of Science*, 26 (1993), 271–9.

he employs confirms an authentic underlying piety, and shows that he sees such outward conformity as the proper way of expressing a perfectly rational reverence for the first cause of all.

At the core of Hobbes's case for outward religious conformity is his conviction that worship of the first cause of all is already 'dictated to men, by their Naturall Reason' prior to any human conventions and independently of any revealed religion (*Lev.* 31.7: 560; see also *DCi* 15.14; *DH* 14.1).[19] However incomprehensible the first cause of all might be, it plainly possesses awesome power, and worship of this unimaginably potent being is therefore 'taught . . . by the light of Nature', following from rational principles that direct the weak to venerate the more powerful (*Lev.* 31.14: 564). For Hobbes there is no deep mystery here, for however different in degree, the reverence that we ought to show the first cause of all is no different in kind from the reverence that we ought to show to a human more powerful than ourselves:

> [T]he worship we do [God], proceeds from our duty, and is directed . . . by those rules of Honour, that Reason [Latin version: natural reason] dictateth to be done by the weak to the more potent men, in hope of benefit, for fear of dammage, or in thankfulnesse for good already received from them. (*Lev.* 31.13: 564)

There is no sign of irony in these passages, nor in Hobbes's subsequent examination of the specific ways in which our natural reason directs us to worship the first cause, according this humanly incomprehensible being various honorific titles and displaying our devotion through humble prayers and thanksgiving (*Lev.* 31.14–39: 564–72; *DCi* 15.14–15; *DH* 14.10). Nor do I see any other reason to doubt that Hobbes is sincere in endorsing this 'natural piety', as he calls it (*DH* 14.4), which does indeed seem to be a plausible consequence of his general view that the weak ought (rationally) to honor the strong. At least, we might note that commentators who deny that Hobbes genuinely holds that we ought to regard the first cause of the universe with awe and reverence are forced to read these several pages as layer upon layer of outright lies, which, all things being equal, seems to me a cost of their reading.

[19] Or if not worship of the first cause of all, at least worship of a being properly dignified with the honorific title 'the first cause of all'. See note 12.

But how does this rational mandate for natural piety translate into a case for outward conformity with the local religious practices? Consider Hobbes's two arguments enjoining external conformity. Hobbes's first argument—'the argument from the public nature of honoring'—does not require the existence of a commonwealth, and would equally apply to people living in the state of nature. According to this argument, just as our natural human reason directs us to worship God, so it also 'and especially' directs us to worship God 'in Publique, and in the sight of men', since public acts of veneration give more honor than private (*Lev.* 31.35: 570; compare also *DCi* 15.15). But to worship God in public, we must show our inner reverence for God through outward signs of honor, and *no action or speech can qualify as a sign of honor unless others regard it as such*:

> [W]hen Free [i.e. 'such as the Worshipper thinks fit', rather than as commanded] . . . , Worship consists in the opinion of the beholders: for if to them the words, or actions by which we intend honour, seem ridiculous, and tending to contumely; they are no Worship; and no signes of Honour; because a signe is not a signe to him that giveth it, but to him to whom it is made; that is, to the spectator. (*Lev.* 31.11: 562)

> [If there were a disordered profusion of conflicting sectarian practices], it could not be rightly said of anybody that he was worshipping God, for no one worships God, i.e. offers external honours, unless he is offering something which others accept as honours. (*DCi* 15.17)

Indeed, unfamiliar religious practices may even be seen as a positive affront, a failure to treat most sacred matters in the appropriately respectful way:

> [I]f individuals followed their own reason in worshipping God, worshippers are so different from each other that they would judge each other's worship to be so unseemly or even impious; and would not accept that the others were worshipping God at all. And therefore it would not be worship, because the nature of *worship* is to be a *sign* of *inward honour*, but a thing is only a sign if it makes something known to others; a thing is therefore not a sign of honour, unless others accept it as a sign of honour. (*DCi* 15.17)

It follows that we cannot employ idiosyncratic ways of revering God if we would worship Him in public. Instead, any public worship that goes beyond the very basic natural signs of honor (that is, signs of honor that are universally acknowledged by all humans independently of

convention, such as a humble manner, prayers, and thanks), or would give determinate shape to these signs by enacting them in culturally specific ways, must draw on a common religious culture and a shared system of devotional practices that are understood to be honorific. To show our veneration for the first cause of all in public, as reason demands we must, we need to demonstrate our inner reverence through outwardly recognizable forms, and hence embrace the local religious practices. So it is not as if Hobbes is advocating an outward performance of religious conformity out of some oblique irreligious agenda, but rather, quite explicitly, from a conviction that the deity ought to be venerated, and venerated in a publicly intelligible way.

Hobbes's second argument—his 'argument from the authority of the civil state'—appeals to the obligations of subjects under the social contract. As I have already had occasion to note, for Hobbes, a subject's general duty of obedience to the civil state comprehends a duty to obey legal statutes controlling religious professions and devotional practices. If the law mandates a specific form of worship or doctrinal confession, subjects are bound to obey—*at least in the typical case*. But as we probe the underlying logic of Hobbes's religious position, it is the exceptions to this general rule and the corresponding limits to the state's authority over religious practice that are of particular interest. For Hobbes, the point of religious laws is to ensure that subjects honor God through the sort of coherent and unified civil worship that befits a unified commonwealth—for, 'seeing a Common-wealth is but one Person, it ought also to exhibite to God but one Worship; which then it doth, when it commandeth it to be exhibited by Private men, Publiquely' (*Lev.* 31.37: 570; see also *DCi* 15.15). That is why, if we would honor God properly in a commonwealth, 'those Attributes which the soveraign ordaineth, in the Worship of God, for signes of Honour, ought to be taken and used for such, by private men in their publique Worship' (*Lev.* 31.38: 570). And that is why Hobbes, having identified the rules of religion with the rules of honoring God, can then take both to be fixed by the relevant civil statutes, writing (as we have seen) that 'the rules of religion, that is the rules of honoring God, . . . we have from the laws' (*DCo* Epistle dedicatory; compare also *DH* 14.4, 14.9; *Lev.* 31.38: 570). However, there are limits to the state's authority in determining the rules of honoring God, and corresponding limits to the subject's obligation to follow the law in matters of public worship. In fact the

state can only determine forms of '*Arbitrary* Worship'—that is, points of religious practice that are intrinsically indifferent, being neither signs of honor nor signs of dishonor by the lights of natural reason prior to instruction in human conventions. It cannot dictate or overrule the standards of '*Naturall* . . . Worship' (*Lev.* 31.10: 562; *DCi* 15.11),[20] which reflect those natural signs of honor and dishonor that all humans acknowledge independently of custom and convention:

> [B]ecause not all Actions are signes by Constitution [Latin version: *possunt Honorificae fieri per constitutionem hominum*, i.e. can be made honorific by human constitution]; but some are Naturally signes of Honour, others of Contumely, these later (which are those that men are ashamed to do in the sight of them they reverence) cannot be made by humane power a part of Divine worship; nor the former (such as decent, modest, humble Behaviour) ever be separated from it. But whereas there be an infinite number of Actions, and Gestures, of an indifferent nature; such of them as the Common-wealth shall ordain to be Publiquely and Universally in use, as signes of Honour, and part of God's Worship, are to be taken and used for such by the Subjects. (*Lev.* 31.39: 572; compare also *DCi* 15.16)

Or, similarly:

> Against [Hobbes's own position that the commonwealth can determine the appropriate ways to worship God], one could ask . . . : does it not follow that one must obey the commonwealth if it directly commands one to pour insults upon God or forbids his worship? I say that it does not follow, and that one must not obey; for no one could take a profusion of insults or total absence of worship as a mode of worship. And again before the formation of the commonwealth no one who acknowledged the reign of God had the right to deny the honour due to him, and he could not therefore transfer the right to give such an order to the commonwealth. (*DCi* 15.18)

So the state can require us to pray before this or that altar or idol (*DCi* 15.18), to take instruction from this or that prophet (*Lev.* 32.5: 578; *B* 167), or to acknowledge these scriptures or those (*Lev.* 33.1: 586). It has complete control over this sphere of arbitrary worship. But still, the state cannot require us to violate the standards of natural piety. It cannot make us act immodestly or indecently toward God, or

[20] Or 'Rationall Worship', as Hobbes sometimes calls it (*Lev.* 31.33: 568; see also *DH* 14.9).

perform any other action that natural human reason would already recognize as a sign of dishonor prior to religious instruction and artificial human convention. So we can now see that the texts in which Hobbes seems to bluntly identify religion with a kind of law (cited in section 2 above) involve a form of shorthand. More precisely speaking, religion is 'the external worship [*cultus*] of men who sincerely honour God' (*DH* 14.1), an outward display of inner reverence for the deity. This outward display might occur in or out of a commonwealth, but in a commonwealth it is properly controlled by the laws of the civil state (hence the shorthand identification of religion with a kind of law), at least so long as those laws do not violate natural standards of piety. Hobbes's willingness to limit the state's authority in this way again confirms that he is sincerely committed to the veneration of the first cause. He holds that we ought to revere this awesome and incomprehensible being; that we may do so through arbitrary conventional forms that the state has the authority to determine; and that we are indeed obliged to follow the religious laws of the civil state and thus far exhibit an outward religious conformity—*but* only insofar as those laws do not have us offend against the more fundamental rational requirement that we treat God in accordance with natural standards of honor and respect.

4. FURTHER INTERPRETIVE PROBLEMS SOLVED

Other peculiar features of Hobbes's religious position now fall into place. First, Hobbes maintains that we owe more reverence and obedience to God than to any earthly sovereign (*Lev.* 33.1: 586; *DCi* 15.18), and he also officially accepts Christianity; but then he also insists that any public allegiance to Christianity should be contingent on the permission of the civil state. This might sound contradictory, but it makes perfect sense on the proposed interpretation: an Englishman ought to embrace the Anglo-Protestant religious system as the proper vehicle for expressing reverence for God, but a Turk living under the Caliphate should not.

Second, the proposed reading also explains the striking contrast between Hobbes's position that one ought not obey the law when it commands a violation of *natural* piety, and his explicit insistence that one must violate *Christian* piety and publicly renounce Christ if the law

so commands. In the latter case, Hobbes tells us that little is really at stake, and that the social contract requires our conformist compliance, for 'Profession with the tongue is but an externall thing, and no more then any other gesture whereby we signifie our obedience' (*Lev.* 42.11: 784). But as we have seen, he allows no such excuse for violations of natural piety. The difference in Hobbes's treatment of the two cases is readily explained by my hypothesis that he accepts the standards of natural piety and the rationality of worshipping the first cause of all through locally sanctioned devotional practices, but that he has no real belief that Christianity is an authentically divinely revealed religion.

Third, we can now understand how Hobbes can have a respectful and even reverential attitude to Christian scripture, to all appearances treating it without irony as a sacred text, while yet also being ready to twist its interpretation to his own ends, not only emphasizing those passages that might plausibly seem to support his own political and philosophical agenda, but also pushing his luck with several highly tendentious scriptural exegeses. Again, this makes sense if Hobbes views Christian practice as an entirely appropriate expression of rational religious piety, a form of worship that he takes seriously and enters into in a spirit of genuine veneration, but also at the same time sees it as a malleable human construct, an artificial convention that, given the ear of the sovereign or the cooperation of the universities, he might hope to shape, if only at the margins, in favor of Hobbesian ideals such as civil obedience, an ultra-statist ecclesiology, and the extirpation of belief in an immaterial spirit-world.[21] And just as one would expect, all of Hobbes's readings of scripture are proposed with 'due submission' to the state authorities in charge of religious law (*Lev.* Epistle dedicatory: 6; compare also *Lev.* 38.5: 708), and conform with episcopacy when advanced under the Stuarts, and with Independency when under the Interregnum Commonwealth.[22] Both the existing religious laws and

[21] Or indeed, as unfolding circumstances require, in favor of this or that more immediate solution to the ongoing political and religious crises roiling mid-seventeenth-century England.

[22] It is sometimes suggested that it is simply calculating self-interest that leads Hobbes to declare in favor of Anglican episcopacy in *De Cive* in 1642, only to reject it in favor of Independency under the new republican regime in the English *Leviathan* of 1651, and then to backtrack again following the Restoration, butchering the 1651 edition's treatment of ecclesiastical government in the Latin re-write of *Leviathan* of 1668 and railing against Independency in *Behemoth*. But with the current interpretation it becomes possible to explain

the more deeply-entrenched aspects of the existing religious culture will affect the ways in which Hobbes might hope to mold the interpretation of scripture and shape religious practice. It is a consequence of my view that if Hobbes had been a Spaniard, his public criticism of Catholic ecclesiology and Catholic superstition would have been modulated accordingly—and not simply out of fear of persecution, but also out of a genuine respect for the local ways of honoring God. However, that does not mean that a Spanish Hobbes might not still have hoped to shape Catholic practices, at the margins, in the direction of a more statist form of church governance and a more sober metaphysics.

Fourth, we can also now appreciate why Hobbes insists on a total separation of scriptural religion and philosophy, and insists that while the former can teach us 'the rules of honouring God', it must not be understood as a source of factual information or philosophical doctrine (*DCo* Epistle dedicatory). Revealed religion is a human creation, a conventional cultural artifact that provides us with publicly intelligible ways of demonstrating our veneration for the first cause of all. It serves an important function and is not to be mocked or made light of. But it is not a reliable source of information about either the nature of God or the world.

5. THE RELIGION OF THUCYDIDES

In a brief biographical sketch 'On the Life and History of Thucydides' prefaced to his 1629 translation *Eight Books of the Peloponnesian Warre*, Hobbes reports that Thucydides was 'by some reputed an atheist' (*LHT* xv). In Hobbes's own assessment, Thucydides did not in fact deserve this label, even if he did most likely regard his own culture's pagan religion as quite fantastical:

these shifts in Hobbes's outward theological posture as a principled expression of his underlying position that public religious pronouncements ought to align with the legally mandated religious settlement, whatever that settlement happens to be. On the 'butcher[ing]' of the 1651 edition's sections on ecclesiology, see Richard Tuck, *Hobbes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 34. More generally, on the shifts in Hobbes's treatment of episcopacy and Independency, see Thomas Hobbes, Noel Malcolm (ed.), *Leviathan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), i. 40–1, 61–4; Jeffrey R. Collins, *The Allegiance of Thomas Hobbes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

For though [Thucydides] were [no atheist], yet it is not improbable, but by the light of natural reason he might see enough in the religion of these heathen, to make him think it vain and superstitious; which was enough to make him an atheist in the opinion of the people. (*LHT* xv)

Given how little internal or external evidence there is for Thucydides's actual religious views, Hobbes's remarks are more speculative than he cares to admit. Still, it seems important to Hobbes to urge that Thucydides was genuinely pious, and to cite his *History* as evidence when it approvingly draws on the predictions of an oracle, or lauds the Athenian general Nicias 'for his worshipping of the gods'. On the other hand, it also seems important to Hobbes to insist that Thucydides had an admirable intellectual detachment from the specific beliefs and practices of the Greek religion, and was prepared, for instance, to criticize Nicias for 'being too punctual in the observation of [religious] ceremonies . . . , when he overthrew himself and his army . . . by it'. The essay on Thucydides's life and character was written many years before Hobbes's philosophical treatment of natural piety and revealed religion in *De Cive*, *Leviathan*, and *De Corpore*. Even so, perhaps there is some projective self-identification in Hobbes's portrait of Thucydides as an authentically pious man who could nevertheless maintain a critical distance when considering his own culture's devotional forms and regard them as simply so many human conventions—'[s]o that in his writings our author appeareth to be, on the one side not superstitious, on the other side not an atheist' (*LHT* xv).[23]

University of California, Santa Barbara

[23] Thanks to Michael Augustin, Robert McIntyre, and the editors and two anonymous referees for *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy*.