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## HOBBS AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

### INTRODUCTION

It is widely supposed that Hobbes cared little or nothing about religious freedom. This view of Hobbes is not confined to the traditional textbooks; it persists even among specialists in early modern political philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Despite its persistence, this view is mistaken in at least two ways. In *Leviathan* Hobbes is clearly concerned to address the charge that the absolute state leaves no room for freedom of conscience and worship. More strikingly, towards the end of *Leviathan* (chap. 47), Hobbes supplements his core argument by a remarkable passage in praise of independent congregations; such a passage must be regarded as a plea for a significant degree of religious toleration.

In this paper I seek to examine Hobbes's credentials as a defender of religious freedom along three dimensions. In the first section I analyze what we might call Hobbes's core position on freedom of conscience and worship; we shall see how, by means of a characteristically reductionist strategy, Hobbes seeks to persuade the reader that the absolute state allows room for freedom of conscience and worship in all ways that they have reason to care about. In the second section I turn to Hobbes's praise of Independency and address the issue whether it is consistent with his core position; I argue that though it supplements this position it does not represent a fundamental departure from it. In the final section I take up the perennially fascinating issue of the rela-

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<sup>1</sup> As Jeffrey Collins has written, "scholars of Locke still typically present Hobbes as a confessional absolutist and apologist for church establishment" and interpret Hobbism, in the ecclesial context, as "coercive, conformist, and deferential to the restored episcopal church"—*In the Shadow of Leviathan: John Locke and the Politics of Conscience* (Cambridge: CUP, 2020), 4.

tionship between Locke's mature defence of religious toleration and the teachings of his great precursor in the social contract tradition. Without seeking to minimize the differences I argue that Locke is able to adapt Hobbesian themes to his own distinctive purposes.

#### HOBBS ON THE NATURE OF BELIEF AND WORSHIP: THE CORE POSITION

It will be helpful to approach the issues by sketching a hostile and mistaken view of Hobbes's teachings that is based, as readings of Hobbes often are, mainly on Parts I and II of *Leviathan*. This view begins with the observation that in the political covenant potential subjects agree to give up their right of private judgment; they undertake to submit not only their wills but their judgments to the judgment of the sovereign (*Lev* II.xvii 109). They further undertake to authorize all the actions of the sovereign, that is, to recognize them as their own actions. So far of course there is no reason to quarrel with such an account of Hobbes. But it is easy to see how, where religion is concerned, it can lead to a fundamental misreading of Hobbes's position. For it is natural to suppose that when subjects surrender their right of private judgment on religious matters they thereby undertake to believe whatever the sovereign commands them to believe: if the sovereign commands them to believe in transubstantiation or the Trinity, then they must do so. And on this reading Hobbes's account of the political covenant leaves no room for freedom of conscience.

This reading of Hobbes is clearly mistaken: it depends on the false assumption that Hobbes, like Descartes, is committed to doxastic voluntarism, that is, the view that belief is under the control of the will. But in fact it is clear that Hobbes opposes this thesis. Consider how in chapter 42 Hobbes confronts an objection concerning the limits of obedience to sovereign authority:

But what (some may object) if a king, or a senate, or other sovereign person forbid us to believe in Christ? To this I answer that such forbidding is of no effect, because belief and unbelief never follow men's commands. Faith is a gift of God, which man can neither give nor take away by promise of rewards or menaces of torture. (*Lev* III.xlii 338)

Hobbes's thesis that belief is not the sort of thing that can be influenced by bribes or threats is clearly rather intuitive, so it seems absurd to say to someone: "I will give you a million dollars if you come to believe in the doctrine of the Trinity." Such a statement sounds like something out of *Alice in Wonderland*. And if belief is not subject to bribes or threats, it is not under (direct) voluntary control.<sup>2</sup> For Hobbes it is clearly incoherent to suppose that in the political covenant potential subjects undertake to believe whatever the sovereign orders them to believe. Whatever is involved in submitting our private judgment to that of the sovereign, it is not belief.

If the submission of our private judgment to the sovereign does not involve belief, what, then, does constitute such submission? In a number of places Hobbes makes it clear that his claim is weaker than one might suppose it to be. One of Hobbes's most important statements on this topic occurs in the chapter "Of Miracles, and their Use", a chapter that has received less attention than it deserves.<sup>3</sup> Here Hobbes discusses the nature of submission of private judgment in connection with claims concerning transubstantiation. When subjects are confronted by a priest's claim that a piece of bread has been converted into the body of Christ, they "must have recourse to God's lieutenant, to whom in all doubtful cases, we have submitted our private judgment," and abide by his judgment as to whether transubstantiation has really taken place. "If he say it is done, then he is not to contradict it" (*Lev* III.xxxvii 300). This passage suggests that submission of our private judgment to the sovereign in these cases involves a refusal to challenge the sovereign's declarations; if such submission does involve anything more, it is a willingness to proclaim in public the sovereign's declaration on the matter. But Hobbes immediately goes on to add that such an undertaking, whether positive or merely negative, in no way detracts from the subject's freedom of belief in this area:

A private man has always the liberty (because thought is free) to believe, or not believe, in his heart, those acts that have been given out for miracles, according as he shall see, what benefit can accrue, by men's belief, to those that pretend or countenance them, and thereby conjecture whether they be miracles or lies. (*Lev* III.xxxvii 300)

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<sup>2</sup> It is possible that belief is under the indirect control of the will. The claim that it is was defended by Jonas Proast in his controversy with Locke. See Richard VERNON, ed., *Locke on Toleration* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), 56.

<sup>3</sup> For a valuable study of Hobbes on miracles, see John WHIPPLE, "Hobbes on Miracles," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 89 (2008): 117–42.

As a philosopher, Hobbes should not use phrases like “liberty to believe” and “freedom of thought” lightly, and it is worth asking whether his use of them here is consistent with his official definition of liberty in terms of absence of opposition to motion. It seems that Hobbes can be defended on this score. We can say that for Hobbes a private man has liberty to believe, not of course in the sense that he can simply decide to believe, but rather because the course of his beliefs cannot be redirected by any obstacles such as torture or threats of torture on the part of the sovereign.

Hobbes returns to the issue in an important, if over terse, exchange in the controversy with Bishop Bramhall. Here the stimulus for the debate is Hobbes’s thesis that in every state the sovereign is the supreme interpreter of Scripture. Bramhall is understandably concerned that this thesis will lead to contradictions: “if Christian sovereigns of different communions do clash with another in their interpretations (or misinterpretations) of Scripture (as they do daily) then the Word of God is contradictory to itself,... and the same thing may be true and not true at the same time, which is the peculiar privilege of T.H., to make contradictions to be true together”.<sup>4</sup> For example, in France Christ’s words “This is my body” will be interpreted in such a way that the doctrine of transubstantiation is true; in England they will be interpreted in such a way that the doctrine is false. Since both interpretations are equally authoritative, the doctrine is both true and false at the same time.<sup>5</sup>

It is clear that the main focus of the discussion is the relationship between authorization and truth. But Hobbes seizes the opportunity to discuss also the relationship between authorization and belief, which is our concern, and significantly he adopts the same strategy for dealing with both issues. In other words, Hobbes seeks to sever the connection not only between authorization and truth but also between authorization and belief. To say that subjects authorize the sovereign’s interpretation of Scripture does not imply that the interpretation is true; thus no contradiction results from the fact that two equally authoritative interpreters of Scripture interpret Christ’s words “This is my body” in inconsistent ways.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, to say that subjects authorize the sovereign’s interpretation of Scripture is not to say that they believe it or ought to believe it; since belief is not under voluntary control, there can be

<sup>4</sup> John BRAMHALL, *The Works of the Most Reverend Father in God, John Bramhall D.D.*, (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1844), 4:532.

<sup>5</sup> BRAMHALL, *Works*, IV, 4:532.

<sup>6</sup> “Oh, but says [Bramhall], if two kings interpret a place on Scripture in contrary senses, it will follow that both senses are true. It does not follow. For the interpretation, though it be made by just authority, must not therefore always be true” (EW IV 340–41).

no obligation to believe. To say that a sovereign's interpretation is authoritative is to say that it must be obeyed; it is not to be openly challenged by subjects and perhaps must even be endorsed by them on occasion. Hobbes sums up his position with his characteristic terseness: "to obey is one thing, to believe is another" (EW IV 33O).

Hobbes's strategy for answering Bramhall is clear, but there is one apparent internal difficulty for his project of severing authorization and belief. The problem is posed by Hobbes's doctrine of authorization in *Leviathan*. According to Hobbes, to authorize is to own the words and actions of the actor (*Lev* I.xvi 101). Now in the case under discussion the actor is of course the sovereign: in the political covenant the potential subjects agree to authorize all his or her future actions. So according to Hobbes, the subject's interpretations of Scripture are his or her own interpretations. Yet, as we have seen, Hobbes allows that, consistently with such authorization, the subjects may not believe them, and indeed may not come to believe them even if they are subject to coercion, for belief is not the sort of thing that can be (directly) compelled. So Hobbes is in the apparently strange position of saying that it is logically possible for subjects to own an interpretation of Scripture while not believing it.

This does indeed sound strange initially, but perhaps it is not really as strange as it sounds. Consider what is often regarded as a paradigm illustration of an author/actor relationship or, in modern terms, following Jean Hampton, an agent/principal relationship.<sup>7</sup> Suppose that I authorize my attorney to act on my behalf in a complicated civil case. The attorney prepares a brief in defence of my interests that invokes an abstruse interpretation of certain technical points of law. Since the attorney is acting on my behalf—is indeed my agent—it can be said that I authorize the case that he or she makes. But the case is so abstruse and involves so many technical points of law that I do not believe it. The point is not that I believe it to be false—that is, a false interpretation of the law; it is rather that I do not believe it since I do not understand the case made by my attorney; for this reason it does not command my intellectual assent. And this suggests that one can coherently talk of authorizing an interpretation, whether of the law or Scripture, without actually believing it.

It is clear, then, that Hobbes's claims concerning the submission of our private judgment to the sovereign and our authorization of his readings of Scripture are weaker than they might be supposed to be; they do not imply

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<sup>7</sup> Jean HAMPTON, *Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition* (Cambridge: CUP, 1986), 124–25.

that subjects have any obligation to believe as the sovereign dictates. As Hobbes says, subjects have a liberty to believe. But it is natural to object that even if such freedom of belief is acknowledged, it has little or nothing to do with religious toleration. For, it may be said, what is at issue in discussions of freedom of religion is whether subjects have a right to worship as their consciences dictate. And Hobbes surely denies that subjects have such a right; they do not have a natural right (that is, a natural claim-right) to worship as they see fit, and they have no basis for claiming that they should have an artificially created legal right. Rather, subjects have an obligation grounded in the political covenant to worship in any way the sovereign dictates. Hobbes's claims regarding freedom of belief do not make him any sort of advocate of religious liberty.

Such an objection is understandable, but where Hobbes is concerned it goes too fast, for it overlooks his distinctive conception of the nature of religious worship. Bramhall acutely puts his finger on the key point when he observes that "it seemeth T.[homas] H.[obbes] thinketh there is no divine worship but internal."<sup>8</sup> Genuine worship of God consists in belief, and belief is internal and invisible (*Lev* III.xliii 410). It is this view of the nature of religious worship that allows Hobbes to claim in *Leviathan* that, consistently with worshipping the Christian God, Christians are permitted to obey an infidel sovereign who forbids them to believe in Christ.<sup>9</sup> On two occasions Hobbes significantly seeks scriptural support for his position by citing the example of Naaman: Naaman was a genuine convert to the God of Israel, but was permitted to do outward homage in the house of Rimmon (2. Kings 5.17; *Lev* III.xlii 338–39; xliii 410). The fact that a Christian denies Christ or outwardly worships alien gods in no way detracts from his genuine worship of God if he sincerely believes that Jesus is the Messiah. Thus, for Hobbes, there is a sense in which Christians do have a right to worship as conscience dictates; for worship is nothing but genuine internal belief. More accurately, Christians always have the power to worship as they see fit, for no sovereign can control the belief of subjects in which true worship consists. Hobbes can consistently claim that subjects do have freedom in religion; indeed, they have all the freedom they need for the purposes of salvation. Such a conclusion is very much in line with Hobbes's position in Chapter 21 of *Leviathan*

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in COLLINS, *In the Shadow of Leviathan*, 114.

<sup>9</sup> A. P. Martinich observes that Hobbes's position on this issue in *Leviathan* represents a change from his view in *De Cive* (chap. XVIII, article XIII), where he recognizes that Christian subjects are under no obligation to obey such a sovereign. See A.P. MARTINICH, *The Two Gods of Leviathan* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), 301.

regarding the liberty of subjects in general; even in the absolute state subjects have all the freedom they have reason to care about.

We are now in a position to see that Hobbes's core teaching regarding religious freedom conforms to a familiar pattern. In the first place, Hobbes is committed to two kinds of minimalism. We know from elsewhere in *Leviathan* that Hobbes subscribes to the Latitudinarian doctrine of the minimal creed; the one essential article of the Christian faith is that Jesus is the Christ or Messiah (*Lev* III.xliii 402). And as we have seen, he is further committed to what we might call worship or *cultus* minimalism: worship is nothing but internal belief. On the basis of these two forms of minimalism Hobbes can argue for the striking thesis that a person who believes that Jesus is the Christ in no way falls short in terms of divine worship. To offer such an account of worship is not of course to state a sufficient condition for salvation; in addition, obedience is required to the laws of God which are "none but the laws of nature, whereof the principal is that we should not violate our faith, that is, a commandment to obey our civil sovereigns" (*Lev* III.xliii 399).

#### HOBBS'S PRAISE OF INDEPENDENCY

Hobbes's core position regarding freedom of religion is characteristically brilliant and provocative; it shows that he takes seriously the objection that there is no room for such freedom in the absolute state, and that he is able to offer an answer to it. But if this were all that Hobbes had to say on the issue of religious liberty, it would be natural to feel that he admits it in name but denies it in reality: Hobbes's conception of such liberty is so minimal and austere. But in fact Hobbes has significantly more to say on the subject: in a passage in chapter 47 of *Leviathan* that has received some attention in recent years, Hobbes praises the system of Independent congregations that developed during the Interregnum.<sup>10</sup> Such a system, which allows subjects to choose their own ministers, is "perhaps the best":

And so we are reduced to the independency of the primitive Christians to follow Paul, or Cephas, or Apollos, every man as he liketh best. Which, if it be without contention, and without measuring the doctrine of Christ by our affection to the

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<sup>10</sup> For a helpful explanation of how the system worked see COLLINS, *In the Shadow of Leviathan*, 24.

person of his minster (the fault which the apostle reprehended in the Corinthians) is perhaps the best. (*Lev IV.xvii* 482)<sup>11</sup>

Thus here Hobbes seems to be recommending a system that allows for a degree of freedom of worship according to the dictates of conscience that has no parallel elsewhere in *Leviathan*. The question naturally arises, then, whether Hobbes is radically departing from his core teaching in a way that involves him in an inconsistency with his basic commitments. The view that I shall defend here is that Hobbes supplements his other teachings by offering prudent advice to sovereigns, but does not say anything inconsistent with those teachings.

Before directly addressing the charge of inconsistency, it is helpful to notice that the supposedly anomalous passage states some familiar Hobbesian themes. Recent scholars, such as Nicholas Jackson and Jeffrey Collins, have emphasized Hobbes's constant opposition to the claim of Anglican bishops to exercise their functions *jure divino*; such opposition is particularly marked in Hobbes's controversy with Bishop Bramhall. Hobbes's opposition to such claims surfaces in the present passage where he prefaces his praise of Independency by charting the course of the Reformation in England, or "the dissolution of the praeterpolitical Church government" (*Lev IV.xlvii* 481–82). Hobbes observes that though in reality the Anglican bishops derived their authority from the sovereign, "by retaining the phrase of *jure divino* they were thought to demand it by immediate right from God" (*Lev IV.xlvii* 481). Hobbes's criticism of the pretensions of the Anglican bishops here is unmistakable. It is true that at various stages of his career, especially after the Restoration, Hobbes made statements in favour of episcopacy,<sup>12</sup> but he was always implacably opposed to any claims that would make bishops and the

<sup>11</sup> For an illuminating discussion of this passage, see Richard TUCK, "Hobbes and Locke on Toleration," *Thomas Hobbes and Political Theory*, ed. Mary G. Dietz (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 153–71.

<sup>12</sup> "The best government in Religion is by Episcopacy, but in the King's right, not in our own"; quoted in COLLINS, *In the Shadow of Leviathan*, 79. Cf. Hobbes's comment to Wallis: "It is true that he [i.e. Hobbes] never wrote against episcopacy, and it is his private opinion, that such an episcopacy as is now in England, is the most commodious that a Christian king can use to the governing of Christ's flock" (EW IV 432). But as Nicholas Jackson points out, in the summer of 1641 Hobbes wrote a letter to the third earl of Devonshire in which he expressly condoned the replacement of an Episcopal by a quasi-Presbyterian church organization of lay commissioners; see Nicholas JACKSON, *Hobbes, Bramhall, and the Politics of Liberty and Necessity: A Quarrel of the Civil Wars and Interregnum* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), 3.



Anglican church a potential rival to the sovereign.<sup>13</sup> Hobbes could thus be expected to welcome a change in the form of church government that dispensed with episcopacy *jure divino*, and removed a potential threat to sovereign authority.

A second Hobbesian theme in the passage surfaces in his observation that the system of Independency marks a return to the practice of the primitive Christians. For a Protestant such as Hobbes, familiar with the tradition of Erasmian humanism, the fact of such a return would count as a recommendation: like the early Reformers Hobbes is interested in, and attracted to, the practices of primitive Christianity. In Hobbes's case such a desire to return *ad fontes* is most marked in his whole approach to scriptural exegesis: in Part III of *Leviathan* Hobbes, like Erasmus and Luther before him, seeks to recover the original meaning of the New Testament before it was corrupted by Greek—especially Aristotelian—philosophy and the doctrines of the Councils of the church: a major motive of his often pioneering biblical criticism is to remove all such doctrinal accretions. Nonetheless, although Hobbes's Renaissance humanist desire to return *ad fontes* is most marked in his biblical criticism, it also finds expression in an attempt to recover the practices of the primitive Christians in forms of worship and church government.

So far, then, there is nothing unHobbesian about a passage that has been considered anomalous; Hobbes restates themes that are frequently found elsewhere in his writings. Why, then, might it be supposed that Hobbes is involved in inconsistency with his fundamental commitments regarding the relationship of church and state? A major part of the answer, I think, is supposed to lie in the two reasons that Hobbes adduces for his claim that Independency is “perhaps the best” system of church government. Let us address each of these in turn.

Hobbes's first reason for praising Independency is “that there ought to be no power over the consciences of men, but of the Word itself, working faith in every one, not always according to the purpose of them that plant and water, but of God himself, that giveth the Increase” (*Lev* IV.xlvii 482). As we have seen, the claim that it is God who works faith in people is again a familiar one; Hobbes has earlier remarked that “Faith is a gift of God, which man can neither give nor take away by promises of rewards or menaces of

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<sup>13</sup> JACKSON, *Hobbes, Bramhall, and the Politics*, 5: “Hobbes's primary concern in denying episcopacy *jure divino* (as opposed to *jure civili*) was to deprive the clergy of the power of making subjects disobey the civil sovereign.”

torture” (*Lev* III.xlii 338). But it is true that we might expect Hobbes to say simply that there *can* be no power over the consciences of men but that of the Word; in other words, as we have seen, belief or faith is not the sort of thing that can be produced in subjects by the sovereign. But instead Hobbes uses the language of obligation; it seems that Hobbes here is imposing moral restrictions on the authority of the sovereign in matters of religion: the sovereign ought not to force subjects to believe or worship in ways that violate their consciences.

In fact, however, Hobbes’s first reason for praising Independency can be read in a way that is consistent with his core commitments. The key to solving the problem, I think, lies in understanding Hobbes’s use of the language of “ought” in a way that is thoroughly characteristic of him: what is at issue is not a categorical but a hypothetical imperative. We can think of Hobbes here as offering prudential advice to the sovereign: if you want to be a stable and successful sovereign, there are certain things that you ought not to do. Since belief is not the sort of thing that “follows men’s commands”, it is both foolish and futile for a sovereign to order subjects to believe, say, the doctrines of the Trinity and transubstantiation. More controversially perhaps, it is foolish for a sovereign to command his subjects to worship in ways they find offensive, as Archbishop Laud did with his fussy micromanagement of forms of worship. Other things being equal, a prudent sovereign will allow subjects to worship as their conscience dictates. The interpretation I am suggesting is in line with Jeffrey Collins’ claim that Hobbes can be read as a *politique* tolerationist: what is at issue is prudent advice to the sovereign, not inalienable rights of subjects.

Hobbes’s second reason for praising the system of Independency can be defended even more easily against the charge of inconsistency. Here is what Hobbes says:

It is unreasonable (in them who teach there is such danger in every little error) to require of a man endued with reason of his own, to follow the reason of any other man, or of the most voices of many other men (which is little better than to venture his salvation at cross and pile). (*Lev* IV.xlvii 482; cf. *Lev* IV.xlvi 466)

Superficially such a passage may seem inconsistent with key Hobbesian theses. Hobbes might seem to be assuming, as Locke sometimes does, that the path to salvation is difficult to discover. Since no one has more interest in his or her own salvation than the individual and since there is no reason to believe in the claims to expertise in religion made by ecclesiastical superi-

ors, it is more rational for the individual, endowed with reason, to trust his own judgment on controversial issues of doctrine and worship. If this were what Hobbes were saying, he could be accused of forgetting his teaching that, where faith is concerned, the path to salvation is easy to discover: there is just one essential article of the Christian faith—namely, that Jesus is the Christ. But this reading of the passage that lays Hobbes open to the charge of inconsistency is mistaken. For Hobbes is simply mounting an *ad hominem* argument against those churchmen and theologians who do believe that there is “danger in every little error”; he is not endorsing this assumption himself. Hobbes then criticizes them for expecting rational individuals to hazard their salvation on dubious claims to expertise. In other words, Hobbes here is suspicious of the claim that they possess the kind of superior expertise in matters of faith and worship that they claim to possess. Hobbes, then, says nothing inconsistent with his fundamental doctrine of the minimal creed.

There is one final point that is perhaps the most important of all. Hobbes does indeed praise a system of independent congregations, but it would be a fundamental mistake to think that such a system is not supposed to operate under the watchful eye of the sovereign; Hobbes is surely far from envisaging a system, as Locke does, in which the church is separate from the state. The prudent sovereign will indeed not interfere needlessly with the practices of independent congregations, but he or she will still hold powers in reserve, ready to intervene, say, if religious disputes get out of hand. As we have seen, toleration is something that the sovereign will grant his subjects as a matter of prudence; it cannot be claimed as of right.

Before we conclude this section, we may note a reason of a different kind that might be given for thinking that this passage is inconsistent with Hobbes’s key commitments. Scholars have observed that the passage was deleted in the Latin edition of *Leviathan* that was published after the Restoration. Thus it might be inferred that Hobbes came to see that he had made statements that he had no right to make if he wishes to preserve the coherence of his system. In fact, however, there is no need to explain Hobbes’s revisions to the text of *Leviathan* in this way. The key point surely is that Hobbes came to see that at this date it was impolitic to challenge the system of Episcopal church government that had been restored in England.

## LOCKE'S ADAPTATION OF HOBBSIAN THEMES

I have argued, then, that even at his most liberal Hobbes is best read as holding that religious toleration should be granted by the sovereign as a matter of prudence; it cannot be claimed by the subjects as of right. It is this view that Jeffrey Collins seeks to capture, I think, in his claim that Hobbes in the English *Leviathan* is a *politique* tolerationist. Thus on this reading there is no danger of collapsing the distinction between Hobbes and the Locke of *Epistola de Tolerantia*. But even if Locke's mature position is not that of Hobbes, it can still be said that Locke makes use of Hobbesian themes and resources, and adapts them for his own distinctive purposes. Whether Locke actually derived these themes from a reading of Hobbes himself is a matter of scholarly controversy. Fortunately, it is not necessary to suppose that he did for the case I have to make.

We have seen how Hobbes holds the view that belief and unbelief never follow men's commands; they are not subject to bribes and threats, and thus not under voluntary control. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Locke's commitment to the anti-voluntarist thesis concerning belief is hedged about with qualifications. In the *Epistola de Tolerantia*, by contrast, it is much more straightforward and uncompromising. Locke writes in a Hobbesian vein that "to believe this or that to be true is not within the scope of the will".<sup>14</sup> But Locke and Hobbes employ their anti-voluntarism for different purposes. Hobbes invokes his anti-voluntarism about belief chiefly to cope with objections concerning the limits to obedience to the sovereign that his critics are likely to bring; thus he is concerned with such cases as that of an infidel sovereign who commands his subjects to deny Christ (*Lev* III.xlii 338; cf. III.xliii 410). Hobbes then observes that that such a sovereign can have no power over the beliefs of his subjects; he cannot change his subjects' beliefs by threats of punishments. If subjects believe in Christ, then their belief remains intact in spite of threats and bribes, and as we have seen, for Hobbes, it is belief that constitutes genuine worship. Subjects of an infidel sovereign should obey his commands, for their prospects of salvation are not imperiled by such obedience; according to *Leviathan* at least, they are under no obligation to be martyrs by opposing the commands of an infidel sovereign. Locke, by contrast, employs his doxastic anti-voluntarism to expose the futility of attempts to convert dissenters to the Anglican commun-

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<sup>14</sup> Raymond KLIBANSKY and John W. GOUGH, eds., *John Locke: Epistola de Tolerantia/A Letter on Toleration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 121.

ion by threats of penalties. Although, in controversy with Jonas Proast, Locke is prepared to concede that persecution may force people at least to consider the doctrines of the established church, he continues to maintain that it cannot produce the sincere belief necessary for salvation.

This contrast between the two philosophers in terms of their goals in advancing the anti-voluntarist thesis may be a little too stark. As we have seen, Hobbes can on occasion employ the thesis for what we might call liberal purposes. Thus, in the passage in praise of Independency, Hobbes, like Locke, can be read as suggesting the futility of attempts by the sovereign to coerce the consciences of men; this claim may be buttressed by an implicit appeal to the thesis that the sovereign has no power over his subjects' beliefs. But although some qualifications may be necessary, the essential contrast stands: Hobbes primarily seeks to defend Christians' duty of obedience even to infidel sovereigns, and Locke primarily seeks to oppose religious persecution.

A shared commitment to doxastic anti-voluntarism is the most philosophically intriguing link between Hobbes and Locke; in this area, whether or not he was aware of Hobbes's subscription to the doctrine, Locke is able to take over the thesis and employ it for his own distinctive tolerationist purposes. But the most salient doctrine on which they are agreed is not a philosophical thesis at all; it is the theological doctrine of the minimal creed. In *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, though not in the *Epistola de Tolerantia*, Locke argues at length for the thesis that the one essential article of the Christian faith is that Jesus is the Christ or Messiah. Their shared commitment to the doctrine is so striking that it did not escape the attention of Locke's earliest readers: it was noticed from a hostile standpoint by Locke's Calvinist critic John Edwards who accused Locke of "taking Leviathan for the New Testament and the Philosopher of Malmsbury [i.e. Hobbes] for our Saviour."<sup>15</sup> In a more charitable vein the point of agreement was acknowledged, at least in conditional terms, by Locke's friend and defender Samuel Bold. Bold was prepared to say:

if Mr Hobs hath maintained this very same Assertion that is maintained in *the Reasonableness of Christianity*, etc. viz that the believing that Jesus is the Messiah, so as to take him heartily for our Lord and King, is all that Jesus and his Apostles required as absolutely necessary to make Men Christians, who did be-

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Maurice CRANSTON, *John Locke: A Biography* (London: Longmans, 1957), 430.

lieve in the True and Living God, he maintained a very great and important truth.<sup>16</sup>

Recently Collins has argued that Locke may have been directly influenced by Hobbes here despite his well-known protestations of ignorance of Hobbes's writings; certainly, as Collins observes, it is difficult to believe that "as late as 1697 Locke was unaware that his single doctrine Christian theology had been anticipated by Hobbes."<sup>17</sup> But there is no need to suppose that Locke was directly influenced by Hobbes here; their shared commitment to the doctrine of the minimal creed may have a common root in their exposure to the legacy of the Great Tew circle and of the Latitudinarian movement in general.

Here again a contrast can be drawn between Hobbes and Locke in respect of the uses to which they put the doctrine. Hobbes's main purpose in advancing the doctrine of the minimal creed is clear from the way in which he introduces the discussion in Chapter 43 of *Leviathan*, his main statement of the doctrine. In this chapter Hobbes confronts the traditional difficulty "of obeying at once both God and man, then when their commandments are contrary to the other"; as Hobbes says, this difficulty is the source of "the most frequent pretext of sedition and civil war" (*Lev* III.xliii 397). Hobbes seeks to remove the pretext and resolve the difficulty by arguing that all that is necessary to salvation is contained in two virtues, "*faith in Christ*, and *obedience to laws*" (*Lev* III.xliii 398), and faith in Christ reduces to the article that Jesus is the Christ or Messiah. On this basis Hobbes seeks to argue that there can be no principled case for opposing the sovereign in the name of an overriding duty to obey God. A sovereign, say, who insists on Arminian teachings concerning grace and free will in no way imperils the salvation of subjects since these teachings concern non-essentials.<sup>18</sup>

Whatever Locke's motive for endorsing the doctrine of the minimal creed in his mature writings, it is certainly not this. There is a little difficulty, however, in saying just how Locke's commitment to creedal minimalism ties in with his defence of religious toleration in the *Epistola de Tolerantia*; indeed, there may seem to be a certain tension between the teachings of the *Epistola* and those of *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, the key work in which Locke defends the doctrine. In the *Epistola de Tolerantia* Locke of-

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in COLLINS, *In the Shadow of Leviathan*, 346.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 343.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. A. P. MARTINICH, *Hobbes: A Biography* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 112.

fers one argument for religious toleration that turns on the premise that the way to heaven is difficult to find.<sup>19</sup> Locke further argues that there is no reason to suppose that the magistrate has any expertise that would enable him to discover this way. But of course the doctrine of the minimal creed which Locke advances and defends in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* denies the premise of this argument where belief, as opposed to works, is concerned: all that matters is the article of faith that Jesus is the Christ. Indeed the doctrine of the minimal creed surely supports a policy of comprehension within a broad national church, in which all Christian subjects can find a home, rather than a policy of toleration of dissenting churches. But we can rescue the integrity of Locke's project by supposing that he has a two-part strategy here. In *The Reasonableness of Christianity* Locke seeks to overcome the scruples of Protestant dissenters and Anglican churchmen alike: the dissenters have no real grounds for their scruples about entering the Anglican communion, and the Anglican churchmen have no basis for insisting on doctrinal tests for admitting the dissenters. The second part of the strategy, where Christians are concerned, is to offer the remedy of toleration for those dissenters whose scruples cannot be overcome. And of course the *Epistola* argues for toleration not only for dissenting Christians but for all genuine theists who do not owe allegiance to a foreign power.

Locke's purpose in defending the doctrine of the minimal creed is thus not as straightforward as we might expect; it does not fit neatly into his overall case for religious toleration. The contrast between Hobbes and Locke in this area is complicated by the fact that Hobbes himself may have a genuine interest, at least at one stage of his career, in promoting the policy of comprehension within a broad national church.<sup>20</sup> Thus here too the stark contrast between Hobbes and Locke in respect of the uses to which they put the doctrine of the minimal creed may need to be qualified. But again, the essential contrast stands: whatever Locke's reason for advocating the doctrine of the minimal creed in his late works, it is not to undermine the case for principled resistance to the government.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> KLIBANSKY and GOUGH, *John Locke: Epistola de Tolerantia*, 93.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. John MARSHALL, "The Ecclesiology of the Latitude-Men 1660–1689: Stillingfleet, Tillotson, and 'Hobbism'", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36 (1985): 407–27.

<sup>21</sup> John Higgins-Biddle observes that one of Locke's motives in writing *The Reasonableness of Christianity* was to oppose the deists; see John HIGGINS-BIDDLE, ed., introduction to *John Locke: The Reasonableness of Christianity as Delivered in the Scriptures* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), xxvii.

There is one further, final case in which Locke can adapt Hobbesian resources to his own distinctive purposes. As we have seen, in the passage in praise of Independency in *Leviathan*, Hobbes is critical of the claims to theological expertise made by ecclesiastical authorities (“teachers”). Hobbes is sarcastic at the expense of those teachers who hold that there is danger to the soul in every little error, and who expect subjects blindly to trust their own claims to expertise in this area. In this passage of invective Hobbes comes close to teaching what we might call doxastic individualism: since lay subjects are endowed with rationality as much as their teachers, they should make up their own minds on those issues and not simply defer to the judgment of the teachers. Coming from Hobbes such doxastic individualism may seem surprising, but it is important to see that it in no way contradicts his teachings concerning the submission of our private reason to the public reason of the sovereign; as we have seen in the first section, the latter concerns obedience, not belief. This hint of doxastic individualism in Hobbes remains only a hint; by contrast, in Locke it becomes major theme of his controversial writings in defence of religious toleration. The individual has a greater stake in his own salvation than anyone in authority can have, and there is thus a presumption that by virtue of his rationality he or she is the best judge of the path to salvation. More importantly, Locke holds that God has imposed on individuals the duty to care for their own salvation, and they owe it to God to discharge this duty as conscientiously as possible.<sup>22</sup>

Hobbes and Locke, then, sound the same note but there is surely a difference in the principal targets of their criticism. In the passage in praise of Independency Hobbes’s language is perhaps deliberately vague; he speaks of “teachers” without identifying them. But it is reasonable to suppose that he has in mind Anglican bishops and other churchmen; it is their claims to expertise in religion that he wishes to call into question.<sup>23</sup> By contrast, Locke’s principal target is not churchmen but the “magistrate”; it would indeed be irrational to defer to his or her teachings on religious issues since magistrates clearly have no special expertise in this area and are instituted for purely secular goals. And yet once again we find the same pattern: the contrast is not as stark as it may appear to be, for there is a pronounced

<sup>22</sup> See further Nicolas JOLLEY, *Toleration and Understanding in Locke* (Oxford: OUP, 2016), 73–74.

<sup>23</sup> Hobbes of course would hold that his strictures apply with at least equal force to Catholic churchmen and theologians. Although they are not the main focus of discussion here, which is concerned with post-Reformation England, they do seem to be the target of Hobbes’s remarks about “the suppression of the natural sciences” (*Lev* IV.xlviii 484).



element of anti-clericalism in both authors. In the case of Locke this anti-clericalism surfaces not only in the tone of bitter, ironic contempt with which he treats a prominent cleric such as Stillingfleet but also, more specifically, in his impatience with Stillingfleet's appeals to what the Church has always taught (for instance, concerning the resurrection of the same body). Locke makes it clear that he neither knows nor cares what the Church has always taught. Such appeals to the traditions of the Church carry little or no weight with either Hobbes or Locke who, as we have seen, are committed to an approach to doctrine pioneered by the Reformers; they seek to go behind the traditions of the church and recover the original meaning of the New Testament before it was corrupted by Greek philosophy.

In an important essay Alan Ryan remarks that "it is easy to feel that, as long as nobody talked about their 'rights', a Hobbesian state would be indistinguishable from a liberal constitutional regime."<sup>24</sup> The present essay tends to bear out the truth of Ryan's observation, at least in the sphere of religion. We have seen that, despite the harshness of Hobbes's core position, his absolute state both can and should accommodate a significant degree of religious freedom for its subjects. This aspect of *Leviathan* puts us in a position to understand the real significance of Locke's eventual emancipation from the Hobbesian framework where freedom of religion is concerned. Locke's essential contribution lay less in envisaging a different model of church-state relations than in placing toleration on a different theoretical foundation.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

- EW *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*. 11 vols. Edited by Sir William Molesworth. London: Bohn, 1839–1845.
- Lev *Thomas Hobbes: Leviathan with Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668*. Edited by Edwin Curley. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994.

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<sup>24</sup> Alan RYAN, "Hobbes's Political Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*, ed. Tom Sorell (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 237.

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## HOBBS AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

### Summary

This paper seeks to examine Hobbes’s credentials as a defender of religious freedom along three dimensions. The first section analyzes what might be called Hobbes’s core position on freedom of conscience and worship; it is shown how, by means of a characteristically reductionist strategy, he seeks to persuade the reader that the absolute state allows room for freedom of conscience and worship in all ways that they have reason to care about. The second section turns to Hobbes’s praise of Independency and addresses the issue whether it is consistent with his core position; it is argued that though it supplements this position it does not represent a fundamental departure from it. The final section takes up the perennially fascinating issue of the relationship between Locke’s mature defence of religious toleration and the teachings of his great precursor in the social contract tradition. Without seeking to minimize the differences I argue that Locke is able to adapt Hobbesian themes to his own distinctive purposes.

**Keywords:** absolute state; authorization; belief; conscience; Independency; minimal creed; private judgment; sovereignty; worship.

## HOBBES A RELIGIJNA WOLNOŚĆ

## Streszczenie

Artykuł omawia trzy aspekty Hobbesowskiej obrony wolności religijnej. Część pierwsza zawiera analizę głównego stanowiska Hobbesa na temat wolności sumienia i praktyk religijnych. Autor pokazuje w niej, w jaki sposób Hobbes, za pomocą charakterystycznej dla niego strategii redukcjonistycznej, stara się przekonać swoich czytelników, że w państwie absolutnym jest nadal miejsce na wolność sumienia i praktyk religijnych – pod każdym względem, który powinien mieć dla nich znaczenie. W części drugiej autor przechodzi do Hobbesowskiej pochwały niezależności i podejmuje zagadnienie, czy jest ona zgodna z jego głównym stanowiskiem. Jak argumentuje, uzupełnia ona to stanowisko i w zasadzie od niego nie odbiega. Ostatnia część dotyczy wciąż fascynującej kwestii relacji między dojrzałą Locke'owską obroną tolerancji religijnej a poglądami jego wielkiego prekursora w ramach tradycji umowy społecznej. Nie próbując pomniejszać różnic między Lockiem a Hobbesem, autor argumentuje, że Locke potrafi zaadoptować wątki Hobbesowskie dla swoich własnych oryginalnych celów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** państwo absolutne; autoryzacja; wiara; sumienie; niezależność; minimalne wyznanie wiary; sąd prywatny; suwerenność; praktyki religijne.