

## Religion in Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*

### Discussion Outline

1. *The Origins of Religion (XII)*
  - a. Where does religion come from? (anxiety about causes)
  - b. What does Hobbes mean by 'superstition?' (false causality)
  - c. What are the "four seeds" of religion?
    - i. belief in immaterial forces
    - ii. ignorance about effective causality
    - iii. devotion to objects of fear
    - iv. false prognostication
  - d. How can those seeds be cultivated? (human-gentile v divine-scriptural)
  - e. What can go wrong in that cultivation? (contradiction, hypocrisy, no miracles)
2. *Political Theology & the Use of Scripture (XXX)*
  - a. Does Hobbes draw his arguments for sovereignty from reason alone? (no)
  - b. How does Hobbes recommend using Scripture? (instructing the weak in civil power)
  - c. What strategies does he recommend? (appropriating the ten commandments)
  - d. Bonus: What's a "good law?" (necessary & perspicuous)
3. *Christian Liberty & Civil Authority*
  - a. Was Jesus a King? (yes—but king of a future kingdom) (XLI)
  - b. Can a Christian serve both Jesus and a human king? (yes—no contradiction)
  - c. Is the Church like a Kingdom? (no—ideally, it lacks coercive power) (XLII)
  - d. Then what is the Church for? (teaching only)
  - e. What is religious faith? (internal conviction; argument; not coercion by authority)
  - f. Does faith preclude obedience to civil power? (no—it demands it!) (XLIII)
  - g. What kind of faith gets you into heaven? ('Jesus is the Christ'—and obey kings!)
  - h. Can faithful Christians be loyal to a non-Christian sovereign? (they must!)
  - i. What, then, is Christian liberty? (freedom to obey the temporal authority) (XLVII)
  - j. How was this vision of liberty lost? (the rise of the church-institution as 'sovereign')
  - k. How can it be restored? (untying the knots)
    - i. reject the pope (Anglicanism)
    - ii. dethrone the bishops (Presbyterianism)
    - iii. make the churches independent (Independency)

### General Questions

1. How does Hobbes' materialism affect his view of religion?
2. What kind of historical narrative does Hobbes weave to support his religious polemic? And what are the major points of that polemic?
3. How does 'eschatology'—e.g., Christian teachings about the end-times—affect Hobbes' characterization of the relationship between civil power and the church?
4. Is Hobbes' limitation of ecclesiastical power anti-religious or anti-Christian in any way? Or does his version of Christianity undergird what he's saying about the division of powers?
5. How does Hobbes' original definition of liberty—as the lack of any impediment to self-preservation—relate to his take on Christian liberty?

The Origins of Religion  
(XII: “Of Religion”)

For Hobbes, religion comes out of the human hunger for discovering causes, even if those causes are not evident in any way. The seemingly random distribution of good and bad fortune has proven especially troubling for most people. If profitable results are to be pursued and detrimental outcomes avoided, then we would have to uncover some logic to the way those results and outcomes are handed out. Since, however, we’re often unable to discover such a causal logic in nature, the best we can do is to posit causes for which we have no empirical evidence. The positing of those unverifiable causes is the first step towards religion.

“... man observeth how one event hath been produced by another,  
and remembereth in them antecedence and consequence,  
and *when he cannot assure himself of the true causes of things*  
(for the *causes of good and evil fortune for the most part are invisible*)  
*he supposes causes of them*, either such as his own fancy suggesteth,  
or trusteth to the authority of other men,  
such as he thinks to be his friends, and wiser than himself.” (XII.iv)

The possibility that this kind of causality is illegible makes planning for the future extremely difficult. If we can’t discern the reasons behind good and bad fortune, then how can we effectively work towards good fortune as our goal? Are we then doomed to wander blindly into the future, hoping that the next roll of the dice benefits us and not someone else? For Hobbes, it’s this kind of anxiety that lends the human pursuit of religion its intensity. (XII.v) He further argues that such fear lies at the origins of both polytheistic and monotheistic religions. Polytheistic religion comes out of humanity’s desire to posit these unseen causes for a variety of occasional events (thus producing a multiplicity of gods), while monotheistic religion proceeds from a more considered reflection on causality as such, where the need for everything to be caused leads back to the idea of a unified first cause (the god of the philosophers). (XII.vi)

There are several potential problems plaguing the development of religion, as Hobbes points out. First of all, it proves quite difficult for the human mind to conceive of anything immaterial. This is a problem, since those unseen causes that make up a religious worldview are usually held to be immaterial. Hobbes chalks this up to a linguistic mistake: we use words like ‘spirit’ and ‘bodiless,’ but we don’t really know what we’re talking about. ‘Spirit,’ for its part, should just mean breath or air—a thin, light body, but a body nonetheless. Words like ‘incorporeal,’ meanwhile, are basically meaningless, since—according to Hobbes’ fairly stringent materialism—there simply isn’t much of anything that doesn’t have at least some kind of material form.

“... though men may put together words of contradictory signification,  
as spirit and incorporeal,  
yet *they can never have the imagination of anything answering to them...*” (XII.vii)

The other major problem plaguing religion is the human tendency to confuse succession with causality. When two things happen one after another, we often suppose that the first thing caused the second. But our mere observation of their succession is not itself proof of a causal link between them. Still, of course, we make this leap all the time. In Hobbes’ opinion, such a leap should be

characterized as ‘superstitious.’ And whenever we make a decision or forge a plan on the basis of such faux-causality, we’re looking at things in a superstitious way.

“... men that know not what it is that we call *causing* (that is, almost all men) have no other rule to guess by but by observing and remembering what they have seen to precede the like effect at some other time or times before, without seeing between the antecedent and subsequent event any dependence or connexion at all; and therefore *from the like things past they expect the like things to come*, and hope for good or evil luck *superstitiously*, from things that have no part at all in the causing of it...” (XII.viii)

Hobbes then sorts these rotten roots of religion into four “natural seeds.” (XII.xi) They are:

- (1) the belief in ghosts and spirits
- (2) ignorance concerning effective causality
- (3) devotion to objects of fear
- (4) false prognostication (i.e. taking neutral coincidences as predictive)

All of these seeds reflect the ill-considered or superstitious aspects of religious thought: the empty claims concerning invisibility; the inability to discern actual causes from mere succession; the misplaced attention rooted in anxiety; and the application of this misguided worldview to future possibilities. But we might ask: if all religion grows out of these same four seeds, how are we to account for the great diversity in religious thought? According to Hobbes, different kinds of “culture” cultivate the seeds in different ways. (XII.xii)

Although we could in principle discern many such cultures, the two main approaches outlined by Hobbes are the “human” and “divine.” The human mode of cultivation characterizes “gentile” religion. By “gentile,” Hobbes means every religious tradition except Judaism and Christianity. This approach takes the four aforementioned seeds and waters them with the fantasies of the human imagination. In the Greek and Roman traditions, this led to a proliferation of minor gods and spirits, with almost one invisible cause for every visible event, no matter how minute. The mature phase of this mode of cultivation is a highly complex system of ritual, which is aimed at manipulating the mechanics of unseen causality by any means necessary (including reading animal organs, etc.). (XII.xiii-xx)

The other mode of cultivation, which Hobbes clearly prefers, is the “divine.” This is the Judeo-Christian tradition of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and—for the Christians, anyway—Jesus. While the four seeds still lie at the root of this kind of religion, they are now cultivated with the help of some force that transcends the vagaries of the human imagination. For all of Hobbes’ suspicion of received religion, he does leave plenty of room for a committed Christian stance here.

As he sketches out these two modes of cultivation, Hobbes also hints at how the theologies of each mode could become political. Whereas “*the religion of the Gentiles was a part of their policy*,” (XII.xxi) things are different in the divine kingdom of heaven, where “*the policy and laws civil are a part of religion*.” (XII.xxii) The religious practices of the Greeks and Romans were part of the overall political organization of the state: fidelity to the gods was an aspect of loyalty to the sovereign

powers. According to divine religion, however, all politics would have to be derived from the absolute power of God as a transcendent sovereign. Still, the kingdom of heaven has not yet appeared on earth, and so divine religion can currently make no claim on civil politics. (This is a crucial point to which Hobbes will return later on.)

Hobbes ends his first account of religion by listing the ways that religions can undermine themselves and so become susceptible to historical changes. (XII.xxv-xxviii) A religion can render itself suspect by: (1) teaching contradictory propositions; (2) not practicing what it preaches; and (3) lacking effective miracles or true prophecies. Hobbes then takes us from the abstract to the historically specific by listing the three main factors leading to the English rejection of Catholicism: (1) the prevalence of Aristotelian ‘contradictions’ in its teachings; (2) the hypocritical conduct of its preachers; and (3) the usurpation of worldly sovereignty by the Roman pope. (XII.xxxi-xxxii)

Ending on this polemical note, Hobbes leaves us with the sense that religion is a tricky business. It’s rooted in four corrupt seeds and it can easily grow into a decrepit organism. Yet, for all that, he doesn’t throw out the very idea of religion. Instead, he suggests that it’s something to be approached cautiously, in a way that appreciates the limits of what religion can do, especially relative to the rest of civil society.

### Reason & Scripture

(XXX: “Of the Office of the Sovereign Representative”)

Hobbes doesn’t always come at religion as directly as he did in Chapter XII. Quite often, he’s instead drawing on the tradition of religious debate in order to enliven his own arguments about civil power. This can be seen quite clearly in his defense of the duties of the sovereign in Chapter XXX.

“The office of the sovereign (be it a monarch or an assembly) consisteth in the end for which he was trusted with the sovereign power, namely, *the procuration of the safety of the people*, to which he is obliged by the law of nature, and to render an account thereof to God, the author of that law, and to none but him. But by safety here is not meant a bare preservation, but also all other *contentments of life*, which every man by lawful industry, without danger or hurt to the commonwealth, shall acquire to himself.” (XXX.i)

This is quite a strong claim about the prerogatives of the sovereign, and so Hobbes feels he has to provide us with some justification to back it up. He begins by telling us that the two main tools the sovereign can use to promote such “safety” are general instruction of the people and a delineated set of laws to govern them.

Those strategies in themselves, however, do not count as a justification. When Hobbes does move on to a defense of his position, though, he makes a curious move. There are some, he says, who still find his strong argument for sovereignty to be not firmly founded in rational argumentation. But, he adds, he has already used up a good chunk of his work going over those kinds of reasons. If his opponents refuse to be convinced by such clear arguments, he concludes, they might be more receptive to the words of Scripture.

“But supposing that these of mine  
are not such principles of reason,  
yet I am sure they are *principles from authority of Scripture...*” (XXX.v)

Scripture is useful not only as an extra source for principles of civil governance, but also as a resource to be used in the *instruction* of the populace and the writing of *good laws*. It's possible, Hobbes concedes, that the vast majority of the population will not appreciate the high-flying rational arguments he uses to justify absolute sovereignty. All the same, it will remain necessary to inculcate in them an appreciation for such power. Popular religion should be used here to achieve what rational argumentation cannot.

Hobbes recommends the formation of a kind of *political theology*, which would use the rudiments of the Christian faith to reinforce the sovereign right of the king (or assembly). To that end, he starts us off with what we might call the ‘ten commandments of political theology:’ thou shalt have no other [king] before me; thou shalt set apart days to work on your duties to your king; and so on. (XXX.vii-xiii) The Decalogue provides a useful foundation for civil law in at least two ways: (1) it contains generally applicable advice concerning social cohesion [e.g., no killing, stealing, etc.]; and (2) it spells out oaths of loyalty, provided that we draw a parallel between submission to God and fealty to a king.

Hobbes then concludes Chapter XXX with some practical advice about how to put this political theology into action. First and foremost, the universities will have to be restructured so as to serve the needs of the king. In Hobbes' eyes, they had historically served as agents of both Aristotelian obfuscation and Papal espionage. (XXX.xiv) Once the churches and universities are teaching the right topics, it will become easier to enforce a set of laws that unifies the people under their sovereign. Such laws would include: a just system of taxation; state-funded aid for the needy; and public works for the able-bodied. (XXX.xv-xix) In sum, what are needed are “good laws.”

“But what is a good law?  
By a good law I mean not a just law,  
for no law can be unjust. ...  
A good law is that which is *needful*  
for the *good of the people*, and withal *perspicuous*.” (XXX.xx)

When such clear-minded and clearly formulated laws are put in place, and complemented by the aforementioned system of education, the king will be able to modulate the ups and downs of social life by handing out rewards and punishments as he—and he alone—sees fit. By doing so, he will be able to minimize unrest among the subjects, while also ensuring that no one subject becomes so powerful that he or she can challenge the absolute right of the sovereign. (XXX.xxiii-xxiv)

### What Did Jesus Do?

(XLI: “Of the Office of our Blessed Saviour”)

Part of Hobbes' approach to religion, then, is to build up a political theology that would be distinct from a church-run theocracy. The sovereign can be established using the language of religion, but he or she or they must also be kept distinct from actual religious institutions. One hiccup that might trouble this sovereign appropriation of religious language is the tendency to regard Christ as a ‘king’

of some kind or another. If Christ is the true king, then how can he fail to come into conflict with the kings who hold supposedly absolute power in civil society?

To clarify Christ's role in the landscape of civil and ecclesiastical power, Hobbes writes of three 'offices of the saviour:' (1) as redeemer of humankind; (2) as renewer and extender of God's covenant; and (3) as the king of the heavenly kingdom to come. What's most important for us here is Hobbes' emphasis on the *eschatological* or even otherworldly constitution of this 'kingdom of God.' He is at pains to show that this kingdom did not come into being with the arrival of Christ in the flesh. The Jesus who walked around Galilee and Jerusalem was not yet a king. In making this argument, Hobbes is taking John 18:36 very seriously: "My kingdom is *not of this world*." (XLI.iii)

Christ's messianic mission on earth was not meant to create a kingdom then and there, but to announce the impending arrival of a heavenly kingdom at some *future* time: "the kingdom of Christ is not to begin till the general resurrection." (XLI.iii) This assertion pushes the effective sovereignty of Christ off to the end of the world—the *eschaton*, the last times, when (according to Christianity) everyone will be brought back from the dead and subjected to judgment. For the time being, though, we are to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's. That is: we are to honor and obey temporal authority, rather than jumping ahead to the kingdom of God, as if the end-times were already here. Finally, Hobbes even adds that there is *no contradiction involved in calling oneself a Christian while fully subjecting oneself to an earthly sovereign*. "[I]here is nothing done or taught by Christ," he writes, "that tendeth to the diminution of the civil right of the Jews or of Caesar." (XLI.v)

#### The Church Is Not The Kingdom of God

(XLII: "Of Power Ecclesiastical")

If Christ did not in fact found the kingdom of God when he came in the flesh, then what are we to make of the church? It can't be identified with that kingdom, since it's at work in the *present* age, whereas the true kingdom won't arrive until some absolute *future*. The church, it turns out, is not much like a kingdom at all. For Hobbes, it's clear that Christ left the church *no coercive power*. Instead, he empowered the apostles and their successors with the task of *teaching* about faith in him. And faith, for Hobbes, was a matter of conviction, not coercion. Stripped of any claim to coercive power, the church is clearly no rival for the absolute power of sovereign authority.

"But our Saviour was sent to persuade the Jews to return to,  
and to invite the Gentiles to receive, the kingdom of his Father,  
and not to reign in majesty,  
no not, as his Father's lieutenant, *till the day of Judgment*." (XLII.vi)

"Again, the office of Christ's ministers in this world  
is to make men believe and have faith in Christ;  
but *faith hath no relation to, nor dependence at all, upon compulsion or commandment,*  
*but only upon certainty or probability of arguments* drawn from reason  
or from something men believe already.  
Therefore, the ministers of Christ in this world have no power  
by that title to punish any man for not believing  
or for contradicting what they say." (XLII.ix)

Hobbes then reiterates his claim that Christ left lawful civil authority to kings and sovereigns, not to the church (i.e., his disciples and their successors). Far from undermining what we might call ‘secular’ powers, he strengthened our submission to them, while also pointing beyond them to the eschatological arrival of some other kind of world. Hobbes goes so far in this direction that he even claims it acceptable to deny Christ if it’s demanded by sovereign authority; in that case, the fault for apostasy lies with the coercive power, not with the subject who rightfully submits to it. (XLII.xi)

### Faith & Obedience

(XLIII: “Of What Is Necessary for Reception into Heaven”)

“All that is necessary to salvation is contained in two virtues:  
*faith in Christ and obedience to laws.*  
The latter of these, if it were perfect, were enough to us.” (XLIII.iii)

For Hobbes, submission to sovereign authority should not be seen as something in conflict with fidelity to God. It is always possible to keep one’s faith while at the same time obeying the laws of the land. This, he admits, is easier at some times than at others. Obedience to a Christian king is always a sign of faith. Even if the version of Christianity espoused by the king might seem suspect at first, it’s up to the subjects to realize their inferiority to the sovereign, and so to refrain from questioning their ruler. (XLIII.xxii) Hobbes takes his position so far as to say that Christian faith is not incompatible with submission to a non-Christian ruler. In that case, keeping faith internally and obeying the temporal authority is still the ‘Christian thing to do.’ In sum, Hobbes thinks that as long as you accept “that Jesus is the Christ” (XLIII.xi) and that the laws are the laws, you are headed for heaven. The “plain” sense of Scripture and its principles, he claims, is that Christian politics demands full obedience to any sovereign worth the name. (XLIII.xxiv)

### The Loss of Christian Liberty

(XLVII: “Of the Benefit that Proceedeth from Such Darkness”)

Hobbes concludes his account of religion with a clarification of what constitutes Christian “liberty.” Contrary to some other interpreters, this liberty did not consist in some God-granted freedom from the civil laws. Rather, it was the freedom to follow those laws and only those laws. Of early Christians, he writes: “Their consciences were free, and *their words and actions subject to none but the civil power.*” (XLVII.xix) As above, it’s clear that Hobbes sees no conflict between scriptural and civil authority here. Christ, in his reading, actually came to affirm submission to civil authority.

This supposed golden age of the early Christians was not to last, of course. Hobbes goes on to narrate how, in his view, the increasing institutionalization of Christianity led to a violation of its original submission to sovereignty. He tells us of three “knots” that complicated the simplicity of Christian liberty: (1) the invention of priestly orthodoxy; (2) the elevation of bishops; and (3) the construction of papal supremacy. (XLVII.xix)

This destructive process culminated in the hierarchy of the Catholic Church—perhaps the “kingdom of darkness”—which erred most by rushing ahead to identify itself with the kingdom of God. (XLVII.xxi) Instead of the simplicity of liberty and submissiveness, then, Christianity wound up entangled by fear and falsehood, sedition and superstition. (XLVII.xxix-xxxiii) Rather than obeying the rightful sovereign, the Church set itself up as a counter-sovereign, preying on the fear and predilection to superstition that categorized those original seeds of religion. Instead of channeling

people's anxiety into the secure peace of sovereign government, the Church built itself up by confusing people further about their allegiances and so threatening the peace.

Luckily, in Hobbes' telling, the story doesn't end there. After the Catholic Church reached the nadir of its knottedness, the Reformation broke out. (XLVII.xx) Skipping over Luther, for the most part, Hobbes divides the Reformation up into three phases, all of which can be said to be an 'untying of the knots:'

- (1) the pope's supremacy was cut off (see: Anglicanism)
- (2) the bishops were disempowered (see: Presbyterianism)
- (3) narrow priestly orthodoxy was broken open (see: Independency)

As we can see, these three stages correspond directly to the three developments earlier said to undermine Christian liberty. By submitting the English Church to the sovereignty of the king, the Anglicans cut the pope-as-counter-sovereign loose. By getting rid of bishops and having individual pastors run each congregation, the Presbyterians removed another remnant of institutional authority that was placing a limit on freedom. But the last knot wasn't really cut until the Independents began to run each congregation on its own terms, thus allowing for many more articulations of the Christian faith. This restored the primitive simplicity of the early Christians, and allowed the civil authorities to retake their position as the supreme sovereign, just as Christ commanded.

### Key Dates

- 1529: Henry VIII first breaks the Church of England off from communion with Rome
- 1558-1559: The *Elizabethan Settlement* (Acts of Supremacy & Uniformity) renews the Church of England's independence from Rome (after Queen Mary had restored communion)
- 1560: The *Scots Confession* signals the rise of Presbyterianism in Scotland
- 1570: Pius V's *Regnans In Excelsis* excommunicates any Catholics who obey Elizabeth
- 1605: the *Gunpowder Plot* to blow up parliament and install a Catholic sovereign fails
- 1642-1651: the English Civil War(s)
- 1646: the *Westminster Confession* mingles Presbyterian Calvinism with Anglicanism
- 1649: execution of Charles I
- 1650-1660: high point of influence for the Independents (non-conformists)
- 1651: Publication of the *Leviathan*
- 1660: *Restoration* of the monarchy under Charles II
- 1685-1688: James II, a Catholic, reigns and promotes religious tolerance
- 1688: William III, aided by British Protestants, deposes James in the *Glorious Revolution*

Biographical Anecdotes

“[Hobbes] had always approved of the government of the Church through bishops before all other forms, and he made this manifest by two signs. First, [in 1647] when he was confined to bed, gravely ill, in Saint Germain, near Paris, [Father Marin] Mersenne came to him, called by some common friend, so that his friend would not suffer death outside the Roman Church. Seated by the bedside, he began with consolations, and then expanded for a whole on the Roman Church’s power to remit sins. To which [Hobbes] replied: ‘Father, I have debated all these things with myself some while ago now. To debate the same things now will be tiresome. You have more pleasant things you can tell me. When did you last see [Pierre] Gassendi?’ Hearing this, Mersenne changed the subject. A few days later, Dr. John Cosins, afterward Bishop of Durham, approached him and offered to pray with him to God. Hobbes thanked him and said: ‘Yes, if you take the lead in prayers according to the rite of our Church.’ This was a great sign of reverence for episcopal discipline.” (p. lxiv-lxv)

“When [Hobbes] returned to England, he indeed found preachers in the churches, but seditious ones; and extemporary prayers, bold, and sometimes blasphemous; but no creed, no Decalogue. And so for the first three months he did not find any service in which he could participate. Finally a friend took him to a church more than a mile from his quarters, where the pastor was a good and learned man, who administered the Lord’s Supper by the right of the church; with him he could participate in the service. This was another sign, not only of a man who favored the episcopal side, but also of a sincere Christian. For at that time neither the laws nor fear compelled anyone to go to church.” (lxv)

“Descartes and [Hobbes] were acquainted and mutually respected one another. He would say that had he kept himself to geometry, he had been the best geometer in the world, but that his head did not lie for philosophy... [Hobbes] could not pardon [Descartes] for his writing in defense of transubstantiation, which he knew was absolutely against his opinion and done merely to put a compliment on the Jesuits.” (lxvii)

“For his being branded with atheism, his writings and virtuous life testify against it. No man hath written better of [God?], perhaps not so well. To prevent such false and malicious reports, I thought fit to insert and affirm as abovesaid. And that he was a Christian ‘tis clear, for he received the sacrament of Dr. Pierson, and in his confession to Dr. John Cosins... on his (as he thought) death-bed, declared that he liked the religion of the Church of England best of all other.” (lxvii-lxviii)

“... [Hobbes], being but one, and a private person, pulled down all the churches, dispelled the mists of ignorance, and laid open their priest craft.” (lxxi)