

Hobbes on Public Worship

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I

We usually assume that the difference between Thomas Hobbes and John Locke on the issue of religious toleration is explained by Hobbes's greater concern about the danger to civil peace posed by religious disagreement. Both thinkers agree that there is no point trying to use civil laws to govern personal faith or belief.¹ "Faith," writes Hobbes, "hath no relation to, nor dependence at all upon, Compulsion, or Commandment" (L 42: 342).² It is not under voluntary control and therefore not something that an individual can alter in response to any "promise of rewards or menaces of torture" (L 42: 343).³ But they disagree on the relation between religious views and political disturbance. Though Locke accepts that measures must be taken against any view that teaches that civil law is not to be obeyed, he does not think very many religions will have this consequence:

[N]o Sect can easily arrive to such a degree of madness, as that it should think fit to teach, for Doctrines of Religion, such things as manifestly undermine the Foundations of Society ... because their

¹ For a fine account, see Alan Ryan, "Hobbes, Toleration, and the Inner Life," in David Miller and Larry Siedentop (editors) *The Nature of Political Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 197. See also Richard Tuck, "Hobbes and Locke on toleration," in Mary Dietz, editor, *Thomas Hobbes and Political Theory* (Lawrence: University press of Kansas, 1990), p. 153.

² References of this form—L 00: 000—are to Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited by Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), by chapter and page number. Emphasis is in the original, except where otherwise stated.

³ See also L 32: 256 and L 40: 323. For Locke's version of this, see John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, edited by James H. Tully (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1983), p. 27: "[T]rue and saving Religion consists in the inward perswasion of the Mind, without which nothing can be acceptable to God. And such is the nature of the Understanding, that it cannot be compell'd to the belief of anything by outward force."

own Interest, Peace, Reputation, every Thing, will be thereby endangered.⁴

Hobbes, by contrast, sees the connection between religious belief and subversion as endemic. Since religion is partly about eternal sanctions, it poses a standing danger to the use and effectiveness of civil sanctions to maintain order and peace in society. People quite rightly believe that God's command is to be preferred to the command of anyone else including their sovereign, and so it is of the utmost concern to the sovereign what his subjects believe God's commands to be (L 43: 403). True, the sovereign can not control those beliefs directly. But he can control them indirectly by controlling their sources and in particular by controlling what people are taught to believe by those who hold themselves out as experts on God (L 42: 372). Locke is notoriously equivocal about the possibility and utility of this sort of indirect thought-control.⁵ Mostly he seems to believe that it is unnecessary and that the main source of political disturbance is not a proliferation of uncontrolled views about what God commands but competition for the privilege of establishment and the resentment of those believers whose faith and practice are not accorded full toleration.⁶ We may surmise that, had he known of Locke's view, Hobbes would have thought it naïve and dangerous. A sovereign cannot neglect the supervision of the opinions that are taught in his realm, for "in the wel governing of Opinions, consisteth the well governing of men's Actions, in order to their Peace, and Concord" (L 18: 124). Hobbes thinks it pretty clear that the civil power needs to control the appointment of spiritual pastors, and supervise and license their activities, and this amounts in effect to establishing a national church.

⁴ Locke, *Letter*, op. cit., p. 49.

⁵ See e.g. John Locke, *A Second Letter Concerning Toleration*, in *The Works of John Locke* (London: Thomas Tegg and others, 1823), Vol. VI, at p. 84. See also the discussion in Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations in John Locke's Political Thinks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 210-11.

⁶ Locke, *Letter*, op. cit., p. 52.

II

The argument that derives the sovereign's authority over teachers and doctrines from the need to keep peace and maintain respect for civil law is an important theme in Hobbes. But it is not the only case he makes for religious establishment.

In this chapter I will examine a quite separate line of argument based on the requirements of what Hobbes calls "Publique Worship." This argument has nothing to do with the sovereign's responsibility to keep the peace. It concerns the intrinsic importance of uniformity in religious practice and it is based on some interesting philosophical observations about the role of convention in action and language.

The argument I want to consider has not been discussed very thoroughly in the voluminous literature on Hobbes and religion.⁷ Hobbes devotes a lot of attention to it in *Leviathan* (Chapter 31) and in *De Cive* (Chapter 15) but his commentators have not. I am not sure why this is. Perhaps it is because the argument is difficult to reconcile with the general view that Hobbes does not take religion very seriously. It is often thought that most of Hobbes's political theory can be read as though the rumors are true, that it was written by an atheist.⁸ But not this part of Hobbes's theory. The premise of the argument about public worship is that *God is to be worshipped* by all persons, natural and artificial.⁹ Without uniformity,

⁷ The only discussions I have found that touch on it—and they are mostly quite brief—are the following: Michael Oakeshott, *Hobbes on Civil Association* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1975), at pp. 50 and 56; Ryan, *op. cit.*, at pp. 205-8; S.A. Lloyd, *Ideals as Interests in Hobbes's Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), at pp. 115-119; A.P. Martinich, *The Two Gods of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes on Religion and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), at pp. 299-303; and Richard Tuck, "The Civil Religion of Thomas Hobbes," in Nicholas Phillipson and Quentin Skinner (editors), *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 120 at 122-4.

⁸ For the equation of "Hobbist" and "atheist," see Samuel L. Mintz, *The Hunting of Leviathan: seventeenth Century Reactions to the Materialism and Moral Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996), pp. 50-1 and 56-62.

⁹ Whether Hobbes gives a strictly moral, as opposed to a prudential account, of our obligation to worship God is another matter: for helpful discussion, see Thomas

Hobbes argues, without established forms of liturgy and religious practice, God cannot be worshipped by a commonwealth. Such worship as there is will be an unordered and confusing mélange of private individual and sectarian practices and that *in itself* will be an affront to God and a problem for society quite apart from any threat to the peace that it involves.

Commentators know that Hobbes devoted the whole second half of *Leviathan* to scriptural and ecclesiastical matters. And many of them get very excited about this, tracing in detail his views on basic theological doctrine, ancient Israel, early church history, the papacy, and so on.¹⁰ But the general tenor of these discussions is that Hobbes's doctrinal, scriptural, and ecclesiastical theology is primarily defensive: he is combating the claims and pretensions of others (particularly Roman Catholics), which might tend to unsettle the state.¹¹ To put it another way, most of Hobbes's argumentation about religion is perceived as having been premised on the *social* significance of the prevalence of certain religious beliefs. Whether in his view of natural religion in Chapter 12 of *Leviathan*, or his view about religious conflict, or his view of the subversive implications of papism, Hobbes can be read as saying, "Some people believe X (about God or about the mission of the church); this is likely to have effect Y in society; therefore the sovereign has to do Z (pander to credulity, prevent conflict, make sure everyone knows that Roman Catholic orthodoxy is false, etc.)." But his discussion of public worship cannot be read in that way. The argument is not "Some people believe X; therefore the sovereign has to do Z," but rather "X is the case; therefore the sovereign has to do Z." And X, as I have said, is an explicitly religious premise about the necessity of worship, put forward affirmatively by Hobbes in his own voice.

Yet another way of putting this is to say that Hobbes's argument about the requirements of public worship is not an argument about civil religion, if by "civil religion" we mean religion which "is a part of humane Politiques"

Nagel, "Hobbes's Concept of Obligation," *Philosophical Review*, 68 (1959) 68, at pp. 78-9.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Ronald Beiner, "Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau on Civil Religion," *Review of Politics*, 55 (1993), p. 617.

¹¹ For the claim that this is true of all Hobbes's arguments about religion in *Leviathan*, see Paul D. Cooke, *Hobbes and Christianity: Reassessing the Bible in Leviathan* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), pp. 206 ff.

(L 12: 79),¹² religion set up set up by statesmen “with a purpose to make those men who relyed on them, the more apt to Obedience, Peace, Lawes, Charity, and civill Society” (L 12: 79).¹³ Hobbes certainly believes in civil religion and he would have been in favor of a national church even had he not accepted the argument about public worship that I am going to discuss. But there is more to religion than civil religion, i.e. religion established for purposes which independently are purposes of the state. The argument about public worship *adds* to Hobbes’s conception of the functions of the state: the state’s function is not just to keep the peace, but to coordinate worship so that uniform honor to the Almighty can be offered in the name of the whole commonwealth. Maybe non-uniform worship will also be socially inflammatory. But Hobbes’s position is that whether it is socially inflammatory or not, non-uniform worship falls short of what God requires of us as an organized community.

III

The premise of Hobbes’s account of public worship is a premise of natural law. Hobbes’s account of natural law has two parts. The first, set out in Chapters 14 and 15 of *Leviathan*, explains the natural law duties we owe to one another. The second part, set out in Chapter 31, concerns “what Praecepts are dictated to men, by their Naturall Reason onely, without other word of God, touching the Honour and Worship of the Divine Majesty” (L 31: 248).

That humans are required to worship God is, for Hobbes, beyond dispute. God rules over us by virtue of His enormous power: “[t]o those ... whose Power is irresistibile, the dominion of men adhaereth naturally” (L 31: 246-7). He has commanded us to worship Him, but even if He had not commanded it, it would be an overwhelmingly prudent thing to do (which is

¹² Hobbes seems to think that the religions of ancient Greece and Rome are just “part of their policy” and he distinguished the religion of ancient Israel and the Christian religion from them in this regard (L 12: 83).

¹³ So I disagree with Ryan’s assertion, op. cit., p. 207 that Hobbes “makes uniform public worship a political good and not a religious issue.”

more or less what a natural law obligation amounted to in Hobbes's theory):¹⁴

the worship we do him, proceeds from our duty, and is directed according to our capacity, by those rules of Honour, that Reason dictateth to be done by the weak to the more potent men, in hope of benefit, for fear of damage, or in thankfulness for good already received from them. (L 31: 249-50)

Worship is a way of showing that we esteem God, that we think “as Highly of His Power, and Goodnesse, as is possible” (L 31: 248), and that we are ready to obey Him. In our worship, we also indicate our lack of hubris, i.e. our readiness to accept that our own enterprises cannot compete with God's. Worship, says Hobbes, is similar to the way reason requires us to act towards any overwhelming superior, that is, to anyone whose power is so much greater than our own that it makes no sense to test our strength against his. In these circumstances, what reason requires is for us to praise, flatter, and bless the one who is our superior, to supplicate to him, thank him, pay attention to him and obey him, defer to him, speak considerately to him, and so on—all of which “are the honour the inferior giveth to the superior.”¹⁵

Worship, then, is “an outward act, the sign of inward honour; and whom we endeavour by our homage to appease, if they be angry or howsoever to make them favourable to us, we are said to worship.”¹⁶ The internal aspect of worship is just the attitude of esteem, humility, and readiness to serve that the action is ultimately supposed to convey. The external aspect, however, consists of words, actions and gestures. Acts of worship often involve describing God, attributing to Him various properties and attributes, such as “infinite,” “eternal,” “most high,” “good,” “just,” “holy,” etc. These terms—vague (like “good”), superlative (like “most

¹⁴ L 16: 111. See Nagel, op. cit., but see also Howard Warrender, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), p. 212.

¹⁵ Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic*, Ch. 8, sect. 6 in Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature and De Corpore Politico*, edited by J.G.A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 49.

¹⁶ Thomas Hobbes *De Cive: The English Version*, ed. Howard Warrender (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), Ch 15, § 9, p. 188. In the remainder of this chapter, references of the form “DC 15: ix: 188)” are to *De Cive* (in this edition), by chapter number, section number, and page.

high”), and negative (like “infinite”)—really do not express much determinate meaning. But that is not a problem, says Hobbes, for their aim is to convey admiration and humility (L 31: 251). They are to be understood as speech acts of prostration not description, “for in the Attributes which we give to God, we are not to consider the signification of Philosophicall Truth, but the signification of Pious Intention, to do Him the greatest Honour we are able” (L 31: 252).¹⁷ By the same token, it is appropriate for our words or worship to be embellished with music and other forms of ornamentation (L 31: 252); we should not complain that such embellishment distracts from the propositional content of our speech, because the words of worship are, as Hobbes puts it in an early work, “rather oblations than propositions.”¹⁸ Their propositional content is secondary to what we should think of as the prostrative illocutionary force of our utterances.¹⁹ Non-verbal actions can also be signs of worship, and Hobbes offers, as examples of actions that naturally conveyed the sort of respect that worship requires, things like standing rather than sitting, kneeling, lying prostrate, and so on (DC 15: xi: 189).

The examples just given are of things which naturally convey honor.²⁰ But there are also things that fulfill this function in non-natural ways. These are drawn from among the “infinite number of Actions, and Gestures, of an indifferent nature” (L 31: 253), things which in themselves do not convey any unequivocal meaning so far as honor is concerned.²¹ Hobbes calls

¹⁷ Ryan, op. cit., p. 209 offers a useful analogy: “[W]hen we shout ‘may the king live for ever’ at his coronation, we know that he can do no such thing, but the wish is neither insincere nor absurd.”

¹⁸ This phrase is from a Hobbes manuscript dated 1643 cited by Tuck, “The Civil Religion of Thomas Hobbes,” op. cit., at p. 123.

¹⁹ For these aspects of speech act theory, see J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1975), 98-132. (“Prostrative,” by the way, is my term, not Hobbes’s or Austin’s.)

²⁰ Some of these might be obvious to reason; others might require close reasoning, which means that ordinary people will have to “rely on those they believe to be wiser than themselves” (L 12: 78).

²¹ Hobbes also includes words whose evaluative meaning may be equivocal or controversial: these are words which “signify honour, but with some, and scorne with others, or else neither; such as in *Attributes*, are those words which according to the diversity of opinions, are diversly referred to vertues or vices, to honest or

worship expressed in this way “Arbitrary Worship” (L 31: 249). The first category of arbitrary worship comprises forms “such as hee requireth, who is Worshipped” (L 31: 249): God might instruct us to worship Him in a way that would not count as a form of worship if He had not specifically required it. The others are actions and practices established as a result of human decision. We might decide that it is proper for men to remove their hats while in church, even though hat-wearing or hat-doffing have no inherent significance, and even though the contrary rule could as easily have been adopted. Hobbes’s general position with regard to this category is that anything which is *taken to be* a form of worship *is* a form of worship, unless it has a natural significance that indicates the contrary (DC 15-xviii: 197).

But taken to be a form of worship *by whom?* Here Hobbes is a little ambiguous (and, as we shall see in the next section, this ambiguity has some consequences for his theory). Sometimes he talks of signs of worship “such as the Worshipper thinks fit” (L 31: 249). But he quickly moves to a more social and spectatorial perspective:

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; because no signes of honour; and no signes of Honour; because a signe is not a signe to him that giveth it, but to him to whom it is makes; that is, to the spectator. (L 31: 249)

In response to this, we might say that the signs used by the individual worshipper are intended for the benefit of God, not for the benefit of the on-lookers. But Hobbes’s account of worship is continuous with his account of honor (L 10: 63-9), and he sometimes toys with lines of thought that suggest that honor is not a two-person relation between honorer and honoree, but essentially a three-person relation between A (the person doing the honoring), B (the person who is honored), and C (an onlooker, who is supposed to be impressed by the honoring). Honor, Hobbes implies, is a matter of A offering to B signs which any other person, C, looking on will

dishonest things; As that a man slew his enemy, that he fled, that he is a Philosopher, or an Orator, and the like, which with some are has in honour, with others in contempt” (DC 15: xi: 189). (That being a philosopher is an attribute of honor for some and scorn for others is a nice touch!)

understand as signs of high regard:²² “there is no sign but whereby somewhat becomes known to others, and therefore is there no sign of honour but what seems so to others” (DC 15: xvii: 196). This comes close to implying that there can be no such thing as private (secret) worship. In fact Hobbes does not quite say that; he says there can be private acknowledgement of God’s power using *natural* means of honor.²³ (But certainly there is a strand of Hobbesian thought which, to our ears, sounds almost Wittgenstenian: in respect of arbitrary worship, how can any single individual *in secret* establish that given word or sign conveys honor?)²⁴

So it seems that forms of arbitrary worship other than those established by God’s command are necessarily conventional—that is, they involve the establishment of meanings among groups of persons. The obvious analogy here is the establishment of linguistic meaning generally. We will pursue this in section V, where we will scrutinize Hobbes’s claim that the relevant meanings have to be established by a sovereign in order to

²² There are two possible ways of taking the three-sidedness of the relation.

One is that an expression of honor by A naturally evokes attitudes shared between A and B: “in approving the honour done by others, he acknowledgeth the power which others acknowledge” (L 10: 64).

On the other interpretation A, in honoring B, indicates to C A’s awareness of the greatness of B and of A’s weakness compared to B, and this B ought to regard as a very significant thing for A to do because it is an abasement of A not just in B’s eyes, but in the eyes of C (who is not so manifestly A’s superior). Since B knows that C is A’s equal and potentially A’s enemy, B will regard it as a very big deal that A puts on a display of his (A’s) weakness in the sight of C.

²³ Hobbes, *Elements of Law* 11:12: “To honour God internally in the heart, is the same thing with that we ordinarily call honour amongst men: for it is nothing but the acknowledging of his power; and the signs thereof the same with the signs of the honour due to our superiors, . . . : to praise, to magnify, to bless him, to pray to him, to thank him, to give oblations and sacrifice to him, to give attention to his word, to speak to him in prayer with consideration, to come into his presence with humble gesture, and in decent manner, and to adorn his worship with magnificence and cost. And these are natural signs of our honouring him internally.”

²⁴ See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd edition, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2001), pp. 80^e ff. (§§ 269 ff.).

make public worship possible. Before reaching that, however, we should pause to consider Hobbes's account of the *obligatory* character of public worship.

IV

We have spoken of the human obligation to offer worship to God. Few early modern defenders of toleration question this.²⁵ The striking and distinctive thing about Hobbes's position is that the obligation to worship applies to *all* persons, artificial as well as human individuals. It applies, presumably, to families and businesses.²⁶ It applies in particular to the artificial person formed when people agree to subordinate themselves to a sovereign—this agreement being “more than Consent, or Concord; it is a reall Unitie of them all, in one and the same Person” (L 17: 120).²⁷

The commonwealth considered as a person is bound by the law of nature.²⁸ Though the power of the Sovereign is “as great, as possibly men can be imagined to make it” (L 20: 144), still it pales by comparison with the irresistible power of God. So the premise Hobbes uses for the individual human duty of worship applies here too, only now we are to read the first person plurals of Hobbes's formulation (“we” and “our”) collectively rather than distributively:

²⁵ John Locke, for instance, has no doubts on this score: “Every man has an Immortal Soul, capable of Eternal Happiness or Misery; whose Happiness depend[s] upon his believing and doing those things in this Life which are necessary to the obtaining of God's Favour, and are prescribed by God to that end” (Locke, *Letter*, op. cit., p. 47).

²⁶ For Hobbes's comments on these entities, see L 22: 160-3.

²⁷ The commonwealth is sometimes compared by Hobbes not just to an “Artificiall Man” (L Intro: 9), but to a “*Mortall God*” (L: 17:120), but he is quick to add that it is one “to which we owe under the *Immortal God*, our peace and defence” (L 17: 120).

²⁸ Of course, the natural law's obligation upon a commonwealth is subject to the same condition as its obligation on anyone who is supposed to be bound in his dealings with others: it only applies *in foro interno*, unless and until others also showed their willingness to be bound (L 15:110) or until some overarching earthly power is set up (L 30: 244). However, in the case of natural law duties to God, no such restriction applies: the obligations are unconditional.

the worship *we* do him, proceeds from *our* duty, and is directed according to *our* capacity, by those rules of Honour, that Reason dictateth to be done by the weak to the more potent men, in hope of benefit, for fear of dammage, or in thankfulness for good already received from them. (L 31: 249-50; my emphasis)

Accordingly, Hobbes concludes that there is public worship, as well as private worship: “Publique, is the worship that a Common-wealth performeth, as one Person (L 31: 249).

V

What is public worship supposed to involve? In some cases its requirements are ordained by divine positive law. This is true of the worship of ancient Israel. In other cases, they are established by those who have general charge of the public realm. Worship is a form of honor, and the sovereign controls public honor: “[I]n Commonwealths ... he, or they that have the supreme Authority, can make whatsoever they please, to stand for signes of Honour” (L 10: 65). To honor men, the public power establishes titles, offices, coats of arms, and other ornaments. These have the meaning that the public power determines they should have (L 10: 65). And the same is true, Hobbes says, of the public honoring of God. Of the various actions and gestures that might be used in worship, “such of them as the Common-wealth shall ordain to be Publicly and Universally in use, as signes of Honour, and part of Gods Worship, are to be taken and used for such by the Subjects” (L 31: 253). And subjects are also to follow the lead of the sovereign in choosing the words that are used for public worship: “[T]hose Attributes which the Sovereign 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” (L 31: 253).

This amounts to a pretty “extreme conventionalism in regard to religious practice,”²⁹ and evidently it is a conventionalism that is intended to leave little or no room for individual or sectarian dispute. Objecting to one liturgy or the other, or objecting to use of masculine pronouns in referring to God, or objecting to some rule about whether men cover their heads in church, scarcely makes sense, on Hobbes’s account, because these forms of

²⁹ Ryan, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

word and gesture have just the meaning they are stipulated to have in public worship.

To what extent is Hobbes's conventionalism about worship derived from his general conventionalism about names and language? He presents it as a consequence of the more general conventionalism:

And because words (and consequently the attributes of God) have their signification by agreement and constitution of men, those attributes are to be held significative of honour that men intend shall so be; and whatsoever may be done by the wills of particular men, where there is no law but reason, may be done by the will of the Commonwealth by laws civil. And because a Commonwealth hath no will, nor makes no laws but those that are makes by the will of him or them that have the sovereign power, it followeth that those attributes which the sovereign ordaineth in the worship of God for signs of honour ought to be taken and used for such by private men in their public worship. (L 31: 253)

But the matter is complicated in two ways.

First, elsewhere in his philosophy, Hobbes seems to take a less social view of linguistic conventions. Tom Sorell has suggested that for Hobbes the imposition of names is in the first instance a solitary activity: "A single speaker simply takes a sensible mark and in affixing it to an object, makes it into a reminder for himself of a conception raised by the object."³⁰ This tends to cast doubt on the need for anything like social convention, let alone sovereign prescription, and it corresponds to the suggestion we noted earlier that sometimes Hobbes is prepared to think of honor (and worship) as consisting of whatever the individual worshipper thinks about the words and gestures he is using. In fact, Hobbes vacillates on this at the linguistic level, and sometimes talks about naming and meaning in more social terms: "the remembrance of the names or appellations of things, ... is, in matters of common conversation, a remembrance of pacts and covenants of men made amongst themselves, concerning how to be understood of one another."³¹ If

³⁰ Tom Sorell, *Hobbes* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), p. 38. For further discussion of the possibility of Wittgenstenian objections to Hobbes's strictly individual account of naming, see *ibid.*, p. 86.

³¹ Hobbes, *Elements of Law*, *op. cit.*, Part 2, Ch. 8

we follow Hobbes in that line of thought, we might find it easier to put his theory of language to work in his theory of public worship.

The second difficulty, however, is that even if we focus on the social version of Hobbes's conventionalism, it is not at all clear (from what Hobbes says in other contexts) that the establishment of meanings is to be regarded as a matter of "what the Sovereign ordaineth" (L 31: 253). Hobbes seems to go along with the biblical account of the origins of language. God got the ball rolling and "instructed Adam how to name such creatures as he presented to his sight" and Adam and his posterity took over the process and added more names and different kinds of names (L 4: 24-5).³² After the catastrophe at Babel, men dispersed into various groups and each group reinvented naming and formed its own language. So far, so good. Hobbes then makes the point that if the peoples of the earth had not (re)invented language, civil and political life would have been impossible. That tells us that language is not a product of political life or sovereign stipulation or the social contract; it is a precondition of it, according to Hobbes. Since there cannot be sovereignty without language, linguistic meaning in groups of people cannot depend on sovereign prescription.³³ Language establishes itself from the bottom-up, not from the top down.

So there has to be a *special* reason why the sovereign determines the attributes of publique worship. Hobbes's general conventionalism about language will not do by itself, because it is social not political conventionalism. One possibility is that although languages can come into existence without political stipulation, still political stipulation might be necessary for language to be created specifically *for* a political group. Although a language like English may be spoken all over the place and might have emerged just as a general practice among various people, a language *for England*—that is, for the purposes of public worship by this particular commonwealth—might not be able to be established so casually.

Another possibility (connected with this) has to do with the type of speech act that public worship is supposed to involve. Earlier we noted

³² Genesis 11: 1-9.

³³ Maybe the sovereign can add some meanings to our language, but language as such is not dependent on the sovereign's stipulations. In *The Elements of Law*, op. cit., Ch. 29, sect. 8, p. p. 181, Hobbes suggests that the laws established meanings for all words not already agreed upon, which seems to suggest a supplemantry rather than a constitutive role for the sovereign's stipulations. I owe this reference to Tuck, "The Civil Religion of Thomas Hobbes," op. cit., p. 123.

Hobbes's view that language, as used in worship, is used primarily in a non-constative way.³⁴ Now it is crucial to Hobbes's overall theory that consensus in the evaluative use of language cannot be expected to emerge as an informal social matter (even if descriptive meanings can). Humans are just the sorts of creatures that plunge into dissensus when they start commending or condemning things (L 17: 119). Since worship involves commendation of a sort, it is an area of language-use which requires extraordinary coordination, and that may be the coordination that only sovereign stipulation can provide.³⁵

VI

So—"there is a *Publique*, and a *Private* Worship" (L 31: 249). What is the relation supposed to be between the two in a Hobbesian commonwealth?

Hobbes seems torn. On the one hand, he says that private worship is free and that it should not be controlled by the laws so long as it is conducted by individuals "in secret" (L 31: 249). That is consonant with the view of private faith with which we began. On the other hand, he appears to think that any worship that takes place in the sight of others takes on an inherently public aspect: "Private [worship], is in secret Free; but in the sight of the multitude, it is never without some Restraint, either from the Lawes, or from the Opinion of men" (L 31: 249).³⁶

The point here seems to be that a publicly visible diversity of forms of individual worship is liable to detract from the sense that worship is being offered to God *by the commonwealth*. "[S]eeing a Commonwealth is but one person, it ought also to exhibit to God but one worship" (L 31: 252) and Hobbes infers from this that "those actions that are done differently, by different men, cannot be said to be a *Publique* Worship" (L 31: 252-3). Substantively, the problem is that with a diversity of practice, worship cannot be said to be shared:

³⁴ See *supra* section III.

³⁵ I owe this argument to Alan Ryan: see Ryan *op. cit.*, p. 207.

³⁶ As we saw in section III, the sight of the multitude is important because Hobbes thinks worship is a matter of using signs and "a sign is not a sign to him that giveth it, but to him to whom it is makes, that is, to the spectator" (L 31: 249).

if each Man should follow his own reason in the *worshipping* of God, in so great a diversity of worshippers, one will be apt to judge anothers worship uncomely, or impious; neither will the one seem to the other to honour God. (DC 15: xvii: 196)³⁷

It seems to follow then that if public worship does not supersede private worship, we will undercut the impression that we want to give to God that, as a Commonwealth, we are prepared to honor Him. “[W]here many sorts of Worship be allowed ... it cannot be said there is any Publique Worship, nor that the Commonwealth is of any Religion at all” (L 31: 253). The result will be that there is at least one person, the Commonwealth, that is not worshipping God and—since the well-being of the Commonwealth is vulnerable to God’s displeasure and crucial to the well-being of individuals—that is foolhardy and dangerous to the society and everyone in it.

So, to conclude Hobbes’s argument: The commonwealth needs public worship and since people need the commonwealth, they must do what is necessary to make public worship possible. They must give up the use of their private reason, at least so far as publicly visible worship is concerned, and “transferre their Right of judging the manner of Gods worship on him or them who have the Sovereign power” (DC 15: xvii. 196).³⁸ This, then, along with the argument about civil peace that we discussed in section I, is the basis on which Hobbes lays the foundation for a national church.³⁹

³⁷ Similarly he says (DC 15: xvii: 196)” “[A]ll ridiculous ceremonies which have been used by any Nations, will bee seen at once in the same City; whence it will fall out, that every man will beleeve that all the rest doe offer God an affront; so that it cannot be truly said of any that he worships God; for no man worships God, that is to say, honours him outwardly, but he who doth those things, whereby hee appears to others for to honour him.”

³⁸ Hobbes says that anyway the power of sovereign by social contract is as great as possible, whereby it includes this power a fortiori: “[E]very Subject hath transferr'd as much right as he can on him, or them, who has the supreme authority, but he can have transferred his right of judging the manner how God is to be honoured, and therefore also he hath done it” (DC 15: xvii: 195-6).

³⁹ It is interesting that the public worship argument has very little to do with the enforcement of an orthodoxy concerning creedal matters. (In that sense it seems a very Anglican doctrine.) There is some connection with issues of faith. To the extent that the sovereign controls the words that are used in worship, to that extent they control what men believe about God: “The City therefore ... shall judge what

VII

There is one obvious objection to the theory of public worship, to which Hobbes seems very sensitive. He wonders “[w]hether it doth not follow, that the City must be obeyed if it command us directly to affront God, or forbid us to worship him?” (DC 15: xviii: 197). What happens when the demands of individual conscience conflict with the prescriptions of public worship? As we have already seen, part of Hobbes’s answer to this objection is that if the matter is unclear or controversial, then the subject should defer to the sovereign’s stipulation, for what *can* (at a pinch) be stipulated as a mode of honoring God *should* be regarded as such if the sovereign prescribes it (DC 15: xviii: 197).⁴⁰

But what if the subject cannot see how the actions or words prescribed by the sovereign can be anything other than insulting to the Almighty? Is he still required to participate? Hobbes’s answer differs as between *De Cive* and *Leviathan*. In *De Cive* he suggests that disobedience is sometimes appropriate. No one has a natural right to insult God or neglect his worship, and therefore no one can be deemed to have transferred to the sovereign a

names or appellations are more, what lesse honourable for God, that is to say, what doctrines are to be held and profest concerning the nature of God, and his operations. (DC 15: xvi: 194). However, Alan Ryan has observed that Hobbes, in his insistence that people not approach these matters too philosophically, may actually underestimate

the extent to which beliefs about the Deity infect attitudes towards conventions. If God delights not in burnt offerings, will He not delight even less in five-part masses. A man who has read the first in Scripture will find it hard to confine himself to saying that he does not know whether God likes music, and that he is prepared to leave the question for God and the sovereign to settle in due course. (Ryan, op. cit., p. 210.)

The upshot of this is that while Hobbes’s distinction between private faith and “public conventions about *what counts as worship*” (Ryan, op. cit., p. 209, original emphasis) may look superficially plausible, it may end up that “the sovereign must either go farther towards securing uniform belief than Hobbes seems to want or less far towards securing any sort of uniformity” so far as worship is concerned (Ryan, op. cit., p. 210).

⁴⁰ See the discussion in section V, *supra*.

right to command that this be done (DC 15: xviii: 197). Of course taking this line may lead to unjust punishment, and any Hobbesian conclusion that the punishment is unjust may be ineffectual. But that is not an objection to this line of response: as John Locke observed in a similar context,

There are two sorts of Contests amongst men, the one managed by Law, the other by Force.... You will say, then, the Magistrate being the stronger will have his Will, and carry his point. Without doubt. But the Question is not here concerning the doubtfulness of the Event, but the Rule of Right.⁴¹

Leviathan, by contrast, takes a more authoritarian line. The subject should not think he is required to make himself a martyr in this sort of case. Hobbes argues that martyrdom is a very limited vocation, and not required of anyone except a witness to the resurrection (L 42: 344-5). The better policy is for the subject to comply with the sovereign's command and console himself with the thought that he is not personally answerable to God for the insulting nature of the public worship he participates in, because

whatsoever a Subject ... is compelled to in obedience to his Sovereign, and doth it not in order to his own mind, but in order to the laws of his country, that action is not his, but his Sovereigns; nor is it he that in this case denieth Christ before men, but his Governour, and the law of his countrey. (L 42: 344).

Now actually, as A. P. Martinich points out (at the end of one of the few discussions of Hobbes's theory of public worship by a modern commentator), this second line is a little disingenuous, since elsewhere it is Hobbes's position, not that the subject attribute the problematic action required of him to the sovereign, but that the subject adopt *as his own* the view that the sovereign hath commanded: "[E]very subject is by this institution author of all the actions and judgments of the sovereign instituted" (L 18: 124).⁴² If the sovereign says we are to trample the image

⁴¹ Locke, *Letter*, op. cit., p. 49.

⁴² See Martinich, *The Two Gods*, op. cit., p. 303.

of Christ,⁴³ then the gist of Hobbes's general position is that we are to treat that as being done in our name and as our responsibility, not as something we can dissociate ourselves from. In maintaining the contrary in Chapter 31 of *Leviathan*, Hobbes seems to be playing fast and loose with this theory of the proper attribution of actions done in the name of the public, simply to evade the force of the obvious objection.

VIII

The difficulty to which Martinich draws our attention—the difficulty about who the action of worship should be attributed to when the sovereign's commands as to worship are obeyed—also points us to a deeper problem in Hobbes's account. If public worship—worship by the commonwealth—is necessary, why is it not sufficient for this worship to be carried out by the sovereign *on his own* as representative of the whole society. The sovereign, we know, has “the right to present the person of [us] all” (L 18: 121).⁴⁴ So why can't he be our high priest for the purpose of public worship, and attribute his own words and gestures to the whole community, leaving us (as individuals) to their own devices? Why does public worship require any action by the ordinary subject at all? Sure, the sovereign's actions will be attributed to the subject, and that may itself be a burden to sensitive consciences; but to this sort of conscience, it will not be nearly as much of a burden as the subjects' actually having to perform the actions and gestures of worship prescribed by the sovereign.

Hobbes comes close to acknowledging this in *De Cive* when he writes that “the actions done by particular Persons, according to their private Reasons, are not the Cities actions, and therefore not the Cities worship; but what is done by the City, is understood to be done by the command of him, or them who have the Sovereignty” (DC 15: xv: 194). But he goes on immediately to say that the Sovereign's actions are done by him “with the consent of all the subjects, that is to say, Uniformly” (DC 15: xv: 194). And the same question arises: Why is there this connection between consent and

⁴³ Cf. Shusaku Endo, *Silence*, trans. William Johnson (New York: Taplinger, 1979), pp. 170-1.

⁴⁴ I am drawing here on the analysis of Hobbes's theory of representation in “Hobbes and the Purely Artificial Person of the State,” in Quentin Skinner, *Hobbes and Civil Science*, Vol. III of *Visions of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 177.

uniformity? It is not present in other areas where the sovereign acts with the subjects' consent in the name of the whole society. Consent is given generally and in advance in the social contract, and once it is given, the sovereign can act freely in all sorts of ways and in all sorts of matters in the name of the whole commonwealth without requiring anything of his subjects except that they refrain from criticizing or repudiating what he has done.

Another way of putting this is to ask why should Hobbes's theory of sovereign action suddenly become *participatory* at this point. Hobbes's theory does not usually require that subjects actually participate in the actions done in the name of the commonwealth by the sovereign. True, there are one or two actions of the commonwealth that cannot be done without the subjects' participation: the physical defense of the Commonwealth is the most obvious example.⁴⁵ But in most other matters, they can be "authors, of everything their representative saith or doth in their name" (L 16: 114) by attribution rather than by active involvement. I suppose that in public ceremonies participation may be required of one or two citizens as thurifers or whatever, but generally passive acquiescence seems sufficient. I think that this line of argument, if followed through, offers the best chance of answering the conscientious objection—though of course it may not answer it in a way that secures the political outcome Hobbes was driving at.

What about the point made earlier about the incompatibility of private diversity and public worship—the claim that "those actions that are done differently, by different men, cannot be said to be a Publique Worship" (L 31: 252-3)?⁴⁶ What about the claim that "where many sorts of Worship be allowed, proceeding from the different Religions of Private men ... it cannot be said there is any Publique Worship, nor that the Commonwealth is of any Religion at all" (L 31: 253)? Well, now these claims are revealed as question-begging. If public worship is inherently participatory, then these claims are important. But if, like most actions done in the name of the public, they are not inherently participatory, then the claims have no basis. All that needs to be ensured is that it is clear when the sovereign is worshipping in the name of the whole community, and that can be ensured

⁴⁵ See L Rev and Concl: 484): "To the Laws of Nature declared in the 15. Chapter, I will have this added: *That every man is bound by Nature, as much as in him lieth, to protect in Warre, the Authority, by which he is himself protected in time of Peace.*"

⁴⁶ See *supra*, section VI.

in all sorts of ways that do not involve any requirement that the subjects worship in unison with him.

It is true that, in Hobbes's view, subjects have a natural law obligation "not only to worship God in secret, but also, and especially, in public, and in the sight of men: for without that, that which in honour is most acceptable, the procuring others to honour Him is lost" (L 31: 252). But we must not let an equivocation on the word "public" distract us here. Worship can be "public" in the sense of "visible to all," or it can be "public" in the sense of done in the name of the commonwealth. There is no inherent difficulty in separating the two provided that the visible worship done by the sovereign as high priest for the commonwealth is distinguished by certain clear marks and ceremonies from the equally visible but private worship done by citizens or groups of citizens acting on their own account.

IX

Our interest in this collection is toleration and I think that for us the Hobbesian idea of publique worship is unacceptable. We who are opposed to religious establishment need to think what it is about public worship that we find objectionable. Hobbes's argument is an elaborate one, and there are a number of points where we might want to resist its force.

First, we might deny the existence of God, from which it will follow that there are no obligations to worship Him, let alone engage in public worship. But then it is difficult to argue for non-establishment as against believers, and it has generally been thought desirable in the liberal tradition to be able to do so.

Secondly, if we grant the existence of God, we might regard worship as non-obligatory, as a choice that is made by a given person concerning the extent to which he wishes to ingratiate himself to the Almighty. If worship is presented as discretionary, then it will be a matter of prudential decision whether a whole society thinks it necessary or desirable to undertake worship in its own name.

Thirdly if we think there is an obligation to worship God, we may think it incumbent only on natural persons. This can be because the grounds of the obligation to worship might apply only to natural persons. Or it can be because worship itself might be something that makes sense only for natural persons. For Hobbes, the ground of worship is the danger of not appeasing God by acknowledgment of His power. The danger consists in the neglect of a condition for possible aid as well as in undue provocation to the Almighty.

As we have seen, this reason for worship applies to artificial as well as natural persons, because those too can be endangered by God's response to worship (or the lack of it). Moreover, constructing a social entity—a leviathan, a "*mortall God*" (L 17: 120)—does seem unduly provocative if it is not accompanied by an acknowledgment of that entity's low status in comparison with God. (The fall of the Tower of Babel springs to mind.) It is possible, however, that Hobbes misconceives the nature of worship. Maybe worship not just a gesture of self-abasement but a more intensely personal relation between God and the worshipper, something which makes sense only at the level of individual humans.

Fourthly, even if worship is required of the commonwealth, Hobbes may be wrong about what public worship necessitates. In order for a society to be perceived as God-fearing and for its social and political organization not to be convicted of hubris, maybe it is enough that there be a whole array of forms of individual worship and social worship in that society. It may not be necessary or even desirable for this array to be capped off, so to speak, by one unitary form of communal worship organized by the sovereign. (The United States has long been regarded as an intensely religious and God-fearing country on exactly this ground, even though it has set its face against any sort of public religious ceremonies organized by the state.) We have seen that Hobbes is not entitled to resist this on general conventionalist grounds. Not all the social conventions that introduce meaning into our lives and actions need to be orchestrated by a sovereign. Language is a fine example of a social convention which Hobbes acknowledges is not necessarily a politically established convention; it need not even be politically underwritten.

Fifthly, as we saw in the previous section, even if worship explicitly in the name of the commonwealth is required, there is no reason why that should have to engage the actions of private citizens. We could have a form of public worship, conducted purely by officials or by a sovereign acting as the society's high priest. And that might be enough to fulfill the obligation specifically incumbent on the commonwealth, without implicating the beliefs and practices of individual citizens.

I doubt that these five responses will be seen as sufficient by most of Hobbes's readers. There is something just irreducibly weird and offensive about his doctrine of public worship. But I hope I have been able in this chapter to rescue it from its undue neglect and indicate how it fits into contemporary discussions of faith, state practice, and toleration.