

Hobbes's Paradoxical Toleration: *Inter regentes tolerantia, tolerans intolerantia inter plebem*

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Abstract: The source of Hobbes's liberal view of toleration is a recognized paradox within his absolutist political sovereign. This article argues that Hobbes's view of toleration is consistent with his overall political theory based upon his broader religious teaching, which leads to an epistemological skepticism on the veracity of religion, and as such among rulers toleration is not only allowed, but necessary. Further, this article argues that the inability of the sovereign to punish the private conscience of the citizen derives from natural right and the inherent limitation of law. Finally, this article examines Hobbes's use of religious argumentation to support the inability of a believer to challenge or deviate from the religious commands of the sovereign.

INTRODUCTION

Toleration is an essential part of a liberal society, and is perhaps its marquee test (Mill 1978, 21). While Hobbes is considered one of the primary founders of modern liberalism (Strauss 1952; MacPherson 1962),¹ there is a tension between such an assertion and Hobbes's support of an absolute sovereign; particularly evident in the area of religious toleration. The current view of religious toleration is premised upon a legal recognition that the spiritual life and the civil life of an individual have distinct spheres in which they operate, and that those two spheres should rarely, if ever meet (Walzer 1984; United States Constitution, Amendment 1, Kuyper 1998) leading to an absence of

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legal sanctions on people's religious belief (Murphy 1997). However, Hobbes's political project of uniting both spiritual and civil power in the hand of a single sovereign (L Frontis Piece, L XXXIII.24; L XLII.63)² seemingly rejects the modern premise of toleration leading some scholars to argue that the Hobbesian political state is incompatible with the modern understanding of religious toleration (Pabel 1993, Tralau 2011).

Yet, Hobbes's teaching on toleration may be more murky; Schmitt (2008, 56) argues that Hobbes creates a distinction between faith and confession which limits the authority of the sovereign and grants the individual liberty of conscience. This distinction between thought, a private and wholly unregulated individual right, and action, a public and communal effect, arguably serves as the philosophical basis of a Hobbesian minimal form of toleration (Curley 2006; Owen 2001; Remer 1992). Yet the private/public distinction has exacerbated the perception of tension, for as Abizadeh (2013, 263) notes, this view presupposes that the "primary function of toleration, and the public/private distinction on which it draws, has been to serve the cause of religious freedom and pluralism". It is clear that Hobbes does not promote individual religious freedom. Reconciling these ideas has led one scholar to argue that Hobbes presents a view of intolerant toleration (Newey 2008, 220).

To solve this tension it is important to realize that, for Hobbes, toleration is not an end of political life, rather it is a means to the broader goal of civil peace; and as such toleration is limited in application by its (perceived) ability to achieve peace. This argument of religious toleration as a means rather than an end, has led many Hobbesian scholars to defend a pragmatic view of toleration within Hobbes (Remer 1992; Ryan 1983; 1988; Murphy 1997; Abizadeh 2013). They argue that the imposition of complete uniformity in beliefs is impractical in application and that individuals may find toleration in the sovereign pretermittting of religious belief (L XXI.6) as unnecessary to regulate for civil peace. Yet this pragmatic defense, on its own, appears unsatisfying to contemporary accounts of toleration because it implicitly accepts the legal authority of the state to regulate, and even forbid, religious belief in certain events, no matter how rare.

This article seeks to bridge the divergent positions above that have occurred by confusing the basic unit of analysis. By disaggregating the private role of religious belief of the individual from the public expressions of religious worship, the dichotomy can be solved. Thus, the most appropriate view is one which recognizes Hobbes consistently argues

for philosophic tolerance with practical intolerance, more accurately termed: *inter regentes tolerantia, tolerans intolerantia inter plebem*; i.e., among rulers tolerance, among citizens tolerant intolerance.

To establish this, this article will address three major components of Hobbes's argument. First, it will show how Hobbes establishes an internal privatization of an individual's conscience. Second, it offers a novel interpretation of agency and authorization which Hobbes's uses to disassociates belief from action, so that individual belief cannot impede the right of the sovereign "to decide which opinions and doctrines are inimical to peace and to *forbid their being taught*" (emphasis added. L XVIII.9; see also DC VI.11), making single codified system of worship practices. Finally, Hobbes provides the foundation for future intra-regime toleration by arguing all religions are philosophically equal, and therefore there is no such thing as a "true" religion. This leaves the choice of which religious teaching to establish within a regime to the pragmatic choice of the sovereign. In this sense, it is appropriate to view Hobbes as a founder of religious toleration because his religious teaching presupposes the philosophical basis which under later authors evolved into the contemporary view of religious toleration.

INTERNAL PRIVATIZED CONSCIENCE AS OPINION

Because Hobbes desired to provide a religious interpretation of Christianity consistent with his political goal, he recognized the necessity to address a popular Christian doctrine that "*whatsoever a man does against his conscience is sin*" (L XXIX.7; see also DC XII.2). Christianity's, especially post-reformation Protestantism's, view of conscience presented a significant challenge to Hobbes's view of the absolute sovereign. For Protestant Christianity, the idea of conscience represented an individual's hearing of the *vox Dei* and was a remnant of man's prelapsarian state in which God imprinted upon man's soul the moral knowledge of right and wrong (Romans 2:14–16; Calvin 1960). It followed that it was a great sin to violate one's conscience as it meant directly disregarding the moral dictates and voice of God (Romans 14:5; 23; L VII.4). Hobbes recognized that this belief made conscience a source of individual law, for it "dependent on the presumption of making himself (i.e., the individual) judge of good and evil" (L XXIX.7; see also Calvin 1960, III.XIX.16). Rather than rejecting conscience, Hobbes, based upon his individualistic

epistemology (Ryan 1988), sought to present it as a wholly internal private opinion such that it would have no actionable consequence.

Hobbes's view of conscience as a protected private intellectual arena is a consequence of Hobbes's nominalist view of language (Krook 1956; Bell 1969; Whiteside 1988; Hull 2006). It is noteworthy that Hobbes's first discussion of conscience arises in his discussion of science and opinion (L VII.4). For Hobbes, science and opinion are two different conclusions of the syllogistic connection of words: science, if the process begins from clear definitions and is properly joined together, and opinion, if the syllogisms are incorrect or if imprecise, absurd, or senseless words are used (L VII.4). Hobbes then takes an apparent detour, first discussing what it means to be *conscious* of something. In this, Hobbes alludes the inter-subjectivity of fact, noting that men are conscious of something if "two or more men know of the one and same fact" (L VII.4). Hobbes then links the intersubjective agreement of fact between men with the literal Latin meaning of conscience, indicating that conscience is when two or more men are in agreement with (*con*) one another on the conditional knowledge of words (L VII.4). This social normative basis leads Hobbes to conclude that, "it was and ever will be reputed a very evil act for any man to speak against his *conscience*" (L VII.4), not because conscience is a morally protected area, but rather because doing so rejects "the fittest witnesses of facts of one another" (L VII.4) and thus undermines speech, knowledge, and science. For Hobbes, the violation of conscience is a violation of the foundation of the language constructs, rendering the words meaningless.

The problem, Hobbes notes, was that people used "conscience" as a metaphor (L VII.4), transforming it into an abuse of speech which attempted to deceive by placing an individual subjective interpretation in place of the conventional meaning of the word (L IV.4). This was exacerbated by "men vehemently in love with their own new opinions" who "gave those their opinions also that revered name of conscience" (L VII.4). This transformation of conscience from a communal good to a mere individual private opinion is both its corruption but also its protection.

Private vs Public Application of Conscience

The regulation of conscience to the realm of opinion places it in a protected sphere. Despite the sovereign's authority within the regime, Hobbes recognized that the teleological purpose of the regime places certain

limitations upon the sovereign's power. Since the individual gave authority to the sovereign in order to establish peace and protect their life (L XIV.14), the sovereign has all means to reach that end, as long as those means are not destructive to the goal. Hobbes explains this limitation, when he states that no man can enter a covenant which undermines the right of nature (L XIV.29–30) and once in such a covenant, the sovereign cannot command an individual to do that which violates such natural right, e.g., commit suicide (L XXI.12), self-incriminate (L XXI.13), or any other action which undermines the end for which sovereignty was established (L XXI.15). The right to privately-held opinions is, for Hobbes, one area where the sovereign's power does not extend, for the sovereign cannot "extend the power of the law, which is the rule of actions only, to the very thoughts and consciences of men...notwithstanding the conformity of their speech and actions...But to force him to accuse himself of opinions, when his actions are not by law forbidden, is against the law of nature..." (L XLVI.37). This is crucial to understand for the authority of the sovereign "to decide which opinions and doctrines are inimical to peace and to *forbid their being taught*" (L XVIII.9; see also DC VI.11, emphasis added) is not the power over thoughts and opinions. Rather, it is the authority to judge which thoughts and opinions support the broader political goal of public peace, and declare opinions, which are destructive to that end as anathema and unable to be made public. Conversely, so long as opinion remains an internal and has no outward impact upon an individual's action, it is outside the power of the sovereign."

Hobbes's interest in distinguishing between the private and public components of conscience had practical consequences; between 1666 and 1680 the House of Commons considered multiple bills to make heresy a crime with specific references to Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Such vehemence against Hobbes's own work culminated in the 1683 public burnings of Hobbes's works (Sommerville 1992; Springborg 1994). In response to this action and those bills, Hobbes wrote three works defining and explaining the concept of heresy, two of which were published posthumously (EW IV.387ff; L Appendix II; Mintz 1968). Hobbes's primary argument against the punishment of heresy is that all religious belief is an individual choice, and ultimately the validity of the choice is between that person and any god that may reward or punish the individual's choice (L Appendix II.31). The argument is based upon the proposition that religious identities, unlike other forms of identity, are "chosen," or *sumitur* as it originally appeared in the Latin. The selection of such a term in relation to religious

adherence, however, has Hobbes taking sides in a fervent and ongoing debate in Christianity.

The assertion that man “chooses” to believe his religion, is a rejection of the post-reformation Protestant doctrines of predestination and irresistible grace, which were supported in both the 39 Articles of 1562 and Westminster Confession of Faith of 1646 (39 Articles X, XVIII; Westminster Confession of Faith X.2). Yet, Hobbes argues that such a choice, even if the belief is erroneous or evil, must be tolerated because error “is not, by its nature, a crime” (L Appendix II.32). “Nor can error *become* a crime, so long as it is kept with the breast” (L Appendix II.32, emphasis added). While there clearly are practical limitations of law, i.e., it is impossible to know what someone thinks unless they express it externally, creating the public/private distinction, Hobbes also uniquely offers a natural law defense of this distinction. Not only is it a violation of the natural law for an individual, in capital cases, to reveal his private thoughts and self-incriminate (L XXI.13) the sovereign himself may violate the law of nature, because “to force him to accuse himself of opinions, when his actions are not by law forbidden, is against the law of nature” (L XLVI.37). The reach of the law is limited to only those expressions which have been made public, either through word or action, but a belief that is solely private is unable to be regulated because the law can never know whether an individual’s belief conforms to the public proclamations without violating an individual’s natural right.

This distinction is most clearly seen in Hobbes’s discussion of public and private worship:

Again, there is a public and a private worship. Public is the worship that a commonwealth performeth as one person. Private is that which a private person exhibiteth. Public, in respect of the whole commonwealth is free, but in respect of particular men is not so. Private is in secret free; but in the sight of the multitude, it is never without some restraint (L XXXI.12).

Private worship, in so far as it is in secret, i.e., never brought into visible display, is free.³ Punishment for violations of law can only take place when it can be shown that something transgressed the requirement of law. However, that “something” must be known to another, so that it can be compared to the dictates of law. As long as that something is truly private, known only by oneself, that area of knowledge or belief cannot be judged by another and the law is incapable of regulating

them. Hobbes does present a minute area of individual sovereignty created by the natural law because it is inaccessible to positive law.

External Limits of Conscience

The distinction between private and public worship also indicates the second part of Hobbes's view, which may be termed the "intolerant" part of Hobbes's toleration. While there is freedom in the internal private belief, once those beliefs become expressed, either in word or deed, they are no longer private but become public, and thus under the authority of the law. Hobbes argued that the sovereign is God's representative on earth, having the same religious authority as Moses did for Israel (L XL.7). Thus, it is within the power and authority of the sovereign to determine what is or is not the word of God (L XXXIII.21–22; L XLII.43), appoint religious leaders and pastors (L XLII.67), and to establish the form, content, and actions of public worship (L XXXI.37). Each action permitted relates to the public expression and practice of religious belief, not the private conscience. By creating these distinct spheres, Hobbes recognizes the necessity of severing the connection between personal belief and public action.

DISASSOCIATING ACTION FROM BELIEF

To disassociate one's private belief from required action, Hobbes argues there will never be something that is commanded of the sovereign that jeopardizes one's spiritual salvation. Hobbes presents two arguments to support this; first that belief does not require action and second, that the commands of the sovereign do not undermine private belief due to the transfer of authorship.

Obedience to Man Does Not Undermine Obedience to God

Hobbes argues there will never be something that is commanded of the sovereign that jeopardizes one's spiritual salvation. Hobbes presents two arguments to support this; first that belief does not require action and second, that the commands of the sovereign do not undermine private belief. As Hobbes notes "if the command of the prince or city be such, that he can obey it without hazard of his eternal salvation, it is unjust not to obey them..." (DC XVIII.1). While Christian scholars often

discussed “the primary points of our articles of faith, man is bound to believe them...” (Aquinas 2006, 2a2ae q2 a5); there was little agreement on constituted the bare minimum belief that is necessary in order to obtain salvation. For Aquinas (2006, 2a2ae q2 a7-8), the most basic doctrine of belief was Jesus’ incarnation and the Trinity. Later authors proposed different fundamentals, but the effort was a continual reduction of the explicit theological content of the beliefs, thereby widening the acceptable variations of dogma (Sommerville 1992, 146–147). Hobbes recognized the need to redefine the content of doctrines necessary for salvation in order to remove the tension between the city of God and the city of man (DC XVIII.1).

Hobbes notes that most Christian doctrines are superfluous or exist merely to enhance worship and the honor of God (L XXXI.8–34) and not necessary for salvation. The only beliefs that are necessary for salvation, and thus the only ones Christians must follow, are “two virtues: faith in Christ and obedience to the laws” (L XLIII.3 see also DC XVIII.2). Hobbes is careful to distinguish between faith and profession for “faith is internal, profession external” making the latter under the command of the civil authority (DC XVIII.6). Faith for Hobbes is merely a belief in Jesus’s identity: “That Jesus is the Christ” (L XLIII.11). The term “Christ” is the Greek variation of the Hebrew “Messiah” which was used to describe both priests and kings through Israel (as well as one Gentile king)⁴ who are given a position of authority. Arguably, Hobbesian “faith” in Jesus is merely identifying that he IS the Christ which acknowledges his authority within the Jewish people. What is critical is that such acknowledgement does not require any assertion or acceptance of Jesus’s deity. Taking Hobbes’s definition, this would mean that according to the Bible, demons would be saved for they knew and declared the identity of Jesus as Christ (Luke 4:41).

Further, Hobbes’s position argues that man must “believe” that Jesus is the Christ (DC XVIII.10), but the reader should remember that “belief” and “knowledge” are distinct (L XLIII.8, 10). Belief in Jesus as the Christ would be similar to the belief man has that the Scriptures are the word of God (DC XVIII.11) and ought to alert the reader to the weakness of Hobbes’s proposition. Hobbes has already shown that there is no way for man to know that scripture is the word of God, and belief of scripture is really only in the preachers (who use religion for their advantage). It would seem that belief in Jesus as the Christ, just as the belief that the Scripture is the word of God (L XLIII.8), can only be derived from an appeal to authority, i.e., parents, pastors, or others whom “the law

allowed and appointed to teach us" (L XLIII.8). Faith in Christ is a societal norm on the identity of Jesus, but such faith is merely the internal persuasion of the mind on Jesus identity and not his deity or the veracity of his, and his supporters, claims.

Yet, in Hobbes continued discussion of these two virtues, he frequently links the word "obedience" to "justice" or "repentance" (L XLIII.19, 20). There seems to be an inherent ambiguity in the term obedience, in relation to its object. While those versed in Hobbes's thought will rightly assume that Hobbes is speaking about the civil laws by the sovereign, many religious readers may first think this refers to the laws of God. To address this possible interpretation, Hobbes links religious obedience with the idea of repentance (L XLIII.4, 19, 20) which he argues does not require any action.

The alteration of a Christian principle, from one calling believers to an active obedience, into a principle of inaction is a common strategy of Hobbes (e.g., altering the golden rule (Matthew 7:12) to a command of inaction (L XV.35)).⁵ For Hobbes, repentance is "a turning away from sin, which is the same as the return of the will to obedience" (L XLIII.4). Importantly, repentance does not require an act of obedience — it merely means willing to obey (XLIII.19); or the last act of deliberation in the contemplation of obedience (L VI.63). Ultimately the will, or thought, to obey is a sufficient to satisfy the command of obedience for "With Christ, the will to obey is obedience" (DC XVIII.12). This negates any need, particularly if it were to be contrary to the command of the sovereign, for the Christian to *do* something because "God...accepteth in all our actions the will for the deed" (L XLIII.4). The obedience necessary for salvation is not following the commands or laws of God; rather it is merely wanting to obey those commands.

In this way, Hobbes solves the perceived tension of conflicting claims of authority to man's obedience (L XLIII.1) by arguing the requirements for salvation do not create a conflicting claim to obedience. Thus, when Hobbes states elsewhere that "The subjects owe their sovereigns simple obedience in all things wherein their obedience is not repugnant to the laws of God" (L XXXI.1) it ought to be understood that man always owes obedience to the sovereign, because there are no commands which jeopardize the individuals' salvation (L XLIII.22). This interpretation allows Hobbes to replace Christian obedience to God with faithful obedience to the sovereign and thus the intent to obey god is fulfilled in the devotion and obedience to the sovereign.

Obedience to God Does Not Undermine Obedience to Man

Having established religion as a purely private belief which requires no outward action, it is necessary to see whether an appeal to religious conscience can prevent action.

Hobbes notes the argument for a religious exemption from the law is derived from the doctrine “whatsoever a man does against his conscience is sin” (L XXIX.7), which was widely espoused by Protestant reformers in support of their disobedience to authority. As Luther stated “To act against conscience is neither right nor safe” (Luther 1958, vol. 32, 112–113; see also Calvin 1960, IV.X.5) because the conscience as the moral voice of God to an individual (Romans 2:14–16, Calvin 1960, III.XIX.15). In response Hobbes shows first, that such position to be against reason and the goal of society, and second showing that scriptures support the opposing view.

Hobbes argues that the idea that violation of conscience is sin is the first disease of a commonwealth (L XXIX.6) because it is rooted in a fundamental “presumption of [an individual citizen] making himself judge of good and evil” (L XXIX.7). For Hobbes, no individual within a commonwealth can possess this ability, as not only is there no “*sumum bonum*” (L XI.1) nor is anything just or unjust unless the law declares it so (L XIII.13). While in the state of nature the individual may use terms “good” and “evil,” they are mere descriptors of an individual’s passions, his desires or aversions (L VI.7). When men seek peace through covenant (L XIV.5), they transfer all means necessary to achieve the goal of peace (L XIV.21). This particularly means giving up one’s own private judgments as it affects action. Thus, *e pluribus unum* is established in the unity of the sovereign (L XVI.13) who makes “the rules of propriety (or meum and tuum) and of good, evil, lawful, and unlawful...” (L XVIII.10). This means, rationally, that the presumption that any individual in civil society has the ability, of himself, to determine what is good or evil, is a violation of the very nature and structure of civil society. It is therefore nonsensical to say that one has authored the definition of good and evil, as established in the law, and then argue that one holds exemptions or different opinions.

Further, it is clear that any command by a sovereign to “not believe in Christ” is irrelevant, because belief is wholly private and has “no relation to, or dependence at all, upon compulsion or commandment” (L XLII.9) and can “never follow men’s commands” (L XLII.11). Hobbes notes that the pure realm of belief is a right reserved to the liberty of the subject

(L XXI.1-2). The question then is what if a sovereign commands the external form of worship counter to one's internal belief, causing one to deny their religious conscience.

Hobbes argues "that under the sovereign power of a Christian commonwealth, there is no danger of damnation from simple obedience to human laws" (EL XXV.11) because no Christian sovereign will ever command a citizen to deny the fundamental virtue that Jesus is the messiah (L XLIII.11; EL XXV.11). All additional religious commands are inconsequential as it does not undermine one's path to salvation. Further, obedience to those commands are rightly considered "part of that obedience which must concur to our salvation" (EL XXV.11) because such obedience is the second virtue of salvation (L XLIII.11; see also EL XXV.11).

The Biblical commands to obey one's rulers (Romans 13:1-6; 1 Peter 2:13-18) is not merely for Christian rulers, but also applies to "infidels" (L XLV.23) so Hobbes attempts to show that there is no Biblical reason for an individual to disobey a sovereign, even in the most extreme scenario. While Hobbes' argument offers a Biblical hermeneutic which appears consistent with interpretive principle of *Sola Scriptura* (Curley 1996; Brandon 2007), he does not concur with the doctrine because he explicitly denies its foundational premise of divine inspiration (L XLV.25) and presents skepticism of its authors (L XXXIII.4-8). Yet, his use of this principal is in order that those who do hold to such a view may still be convinced of the truth of his arguments.

Hobbes notes that historically, "Many Christians, good Christians, too, even if they were not very brave — renounced the Christian faith when they were faced with death and torture" (L Appendix III.32) and the Church Fathers in the Council of Nicaea establish no penalty for adherents who did this under threat of death. To provide Biblical support, Hobbes reminds the readers that Peter denied Christ, and that was "a sin of weakness, which Christ easily forgave" (L Appendix III.32). Peter's action was a sin, according to Hobbes, not because it is universally wrong to deny Christ, but because Peter held a special office as an apostle and therefore representative (L Appendix III.32). Since no modern person can be an apostle, is not something to be concerned with. Further, Hobbes is dismissive of the severity of the act. In the same sentence, Hobbes goes from describing Peter's act as a "great sin," to that of a "sin of weakness," to one which was "easily forgiven" (L Appendix III.32). Hobbes leads the reader through decreasing severity of the action until it ends at the null position. Ultimately it does not matter if Peter's act was or was not a sin, because Christ forgave him.

However, according to Hobbes the most pertinent Biblical example regarding obedience to infidels has to do with the Syrian Naaman: a general who was healed of leprosy and converted by the prophet Elisha. As Naaman prepared to return to the service of his king, he presented a special request to the Elisha:

please let there be given to your servant two mule loads of earth, for from now on your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god but the Lord. In this matter may the Lord pardon your servant: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, the Lord pardon your servant in this matter. He said to him, 'Go in peace' (II Kings 5:17–19a).

The story of Naaman directly addresses this position for Christians as it involves a proselyte, who believes in the God of Israel having to outwardly conform to the worship of a false god, which is the most extreme example where appeal to conscience would prevent the action.

Appeal to the Naaman story was widely debated in the 16th and 17th centuries due to the division of Protestant and Catholic rulers across Europe (Zagorin 1990). In England, Catholic nobles “asked the Council of Trent whether they could go to church while attending the queen, when they bore the sword of state and the like” (Zagorin 1990, 136). The argument for the legitimacy of conformity found Biblical support in the appeal to the story of Naaman (Zagorin 1990). Religious scholars offered various interpretations; including that applies only to neophytes (Zagorin 1990, 73, 144), or that such action can only be used by officials of the state (Zagorin 1990, 136), or only for the preservation of life and property (Zagorin 1990, 223). On the extremes, some argued that there was no religiously unlawful act being asked (Zagorin 1990, 32, 147), while others opposing conformity argued that Elisha did not approve the request (L Appendix III.31; Zagorin 1990, 136).

Hobbes follows the plain reading of the text, noting that “by bowing before the idol Rimmon, he denied the true God in effect, as much as if he had done it with his lips” (L XLII.11). He presents the action of Naaman as outright idolatry and a violation of his new found religious beliefs. Hobbes notes the statement of the prophet Elisha as approval of the plan (L XLII.11), for “in this passage they cannot be understood otherwise than as a permission” (L Appendix III.32). Yet, Hobbes’s argument for conformity is interesting, for, based upon his conception of authorship

and agency (L XVI; also see Copp 1980; Skinner 1999; Green 2015), Naaman is personally blameless because he is not acting of his own accord, but “compelled to in obedience to his sovereign...[and] to the laws of his country, that action is not his, but his sovereign’s” (L XLII.11). Hobbes argues that responsibility for an external action is transferable because of the concept of agency: since the sovereign is the author of commands to the citizen, the citizen is excused for the actions, even if it was commanded in violation of conscience. Hobbes makes this clear in the later iteration of *De Homine* “For he is called the author, that hath declared himself responsible for the action done by another according to his will... If someone sins at another’s command, both sin, since neither did right; *unless by chance, the state commanded it to be done, so that the actor ought not refuse*” (DH XV.2, emphasis added). While it may appear as if Hobbes is indicating that both author and actor are complicit within the sin, he provides an exception: when it is commanded by the state, specifically in opposition to the individual’s will. When an individual is commanded to sin, he can either obey willingly and be complicit in the act, or he can act against his will. While the individual cannot refuse the legitimate command of his sovereign, because the conscience is a protected individual sphere “No human law is intended to oblige the conscience” (EL 2.VI.3); thus the punishment for the sin is solely the responsibility of the author. As the case of Naaman shows, when an individual is commanded to act against his will, the religious consequence of the action is transferred from the individual to the sovereign.

Hobbes explicitly connects the transfer of responsibility based upon authorship in his discussion of the sovereign’s ecclesiastical power.

[As] a civil sovereign he may make laws suitable to his doctrine, which may oblige men to certain actions, and sometimes to such as they would not otherwise do... And, yet, when they are commanded, they are laws; and the external actions done in obedience to them, without the inward approbation, are the actions of the sovereign, and not of the subject, which is in that case but an instrument (L XLII.106).

There can never be a clash between the private conscience and the external action required at the hand of the sovereign, for if the individual will and the law are in agreement the citizen will obey, and if the individual will and the law are opposed, the citizen is an actor and must comply to the law, but doing so does not undermine his internal belief or conscience since he is merely an instrument and not the author of the action.

It is in this way that Hobbes hopes to alleviate the conscience of individuals who obey the sovereign's commands, by creating a cognitive disassociation between the belief and the action. While this seems to alleviate the individuals' concerns over belief and action, it transfers and seemingly heightens the concern a sovereign would have: for no man would want to suffer eternal punishment for thousands of actions he commanded. It is in response to this that Hobbes provides the third leg to his argument for toleration, all religious doctrine are equally true (or false) and the sovereign's choice of which religion to enforce is a prudential choice.

EQUALITY OF ALL RELIGION AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL SKEPTICISM

Subsequent political theorists overtly rooted their arguments for toleration on the supposition of the equality of all religions (Locke 2010; McKinnon 2007). This view can be derived from either the absolute equality, in that all religious are inherently equal, or it can be rooted in an epistemological skepticism, which argues that knowledge of the comparative truth of one religion over another is not possible, and thus various religious doctrines should be treated as equal. It is this latter skeptical form of equality that Hobbes and subsequent supporter of toleration emphasize. As Locke notes "magistrates of the world cannot know, certainly know, the true religion to be the true religion," then it is necessary to tolerate divergent opinion (Locke 2010, 123).

The issue of religious epistemological skepticism is a key component of Hobbes's religious theory. It is made evident when Hobbes offers his original definition of religion as "Fear of power invisible, feigned by the mind, or imagined from the tales publically allowed, Religion; not allowed Superstition" (L VI.36). Religious ideas arise from an internal or external source: either they are created by the individual to explain unknown phenomenon or they come from the tales or stories of other trusted individuals (L XII.4). Yet the origin alone is not sufficient to determine whether the belief is religion or superstition. Legality is the primary distinguishing fact of whether a teaching is religion or superstition. Reflecting upon this fact for a minute indicates that, in Hobbes's view, the difference between religion and superstition is found in relation to declared law, not to the substance of the teaching. This indicates that, for Hobbes, content of religious teachings are unimportant, particularly for the sovereign in his establishment of one over another. This is the first sign of Hobbes's establishment

of elite toleration. There is no inherent content or even origin of the religious idea that would lead one to be superior to the other, difference is only imposed relativistically by the will of the sovereign.

It may be charged that Hobbes does attempt to distinguish true religious doctrine based upon the content; continuing the previous quote, he states, "[a]nd when the power imagined is truly such as we imagine, True Religion" (L VI.36). Here, Hobbes seemingly indicates that there is a third category, a subsection of religion, that which conforms to reality and that which does not. While this appears to create a distinction based upon content, in reality it does not. Note that "true" is only a subcategory of religion as Hobbes does not acknowledge any "true" superstition. This means that the conformity of the religious doctrine to reality is not itself the mark of whether it is true or not, rather the doctrine must first be publicly allowed if it is to be religion, and then and only then can we determine if it is true. Differentiating between true religion and false religion both permits the various sects of Christianity to rest in their conviction of being correct, while simultaneously allow Hobbes to maintain his appearance of orthodoxy across sects.⁶

To support Hobbes's use of "true religion" as ironic, one must realize, as Curley notes, there is a linguistic issue with Hobbes's presentation of "true religion" between the English and Latin versions of the *Leviathan*. Originally Hobbes wrote "when the power imagined is truly such as we imagine" changing it in the Latin version to "when those powers are really such as we have allowed" (Curley 1994, footnote 3). While Hobbes's alteration is an attempt to remove the difficulty associated with his concept of imagination, it is worth noting that the original English presentation is consistent with the Hobbesian view of God as a corporeal entity. The object of true religion is the "power invisible" (L VI.36), which is the subject of man's imagination, it must be material (L I.2) and cannot be an infinite power (L III.12), since that is unimaginable. For Hobbes, the key aspect for true religion is not based upon the object of worship, but it is based upon the legitimacy of the fear placed upon the object of worship, which is made explicit in the Latin iteration of the definition: "when those powers are really such as we have allowed, true religion" (L VI.36.footnote 3).⁷

Hobbesian true religion is based upon the legitimacy of the attribution of power to the object of one's fear; this means any religion is true so long as it has sufficient power to secure believers. For Hobbes, power is a "means to obtain some future apparent good" (L X.1) and can arise from legitimate possession of those means, *or* from the mere perception

of the means. Hobbes notes that the source of power is not within the possessing object, but may derived from the attribution of the subjects for “Reputation of power is power” (L X.5), popularity (L X.6) as well as eloquence, regardless of content, is power (L X.12). This raises a question of causal relationship, whether a true religion exists because religious leader or sects have of power that is then recognized, or if a group of people by associating together create and project the power onto the religious beliefs. For Hobbes, either of these are possible, but given our inability to know revelation from God (L XXXVI.3), or trust prophets (L III.7; L XXXVI.15) and revealed scripture (L XXXIII.4) the latter is most likely. This means, that for Hobbes, true religion is any religious doctrine which is legally allowed and is obeyed by a group of individuals which create and project the power to the religion that they then believe it has, thus making it true. This definition is tautological, for it is true if what is feared has power and the power is given through the reputation derived from that fear. This also means that if a religion is true based upon the power derived from popular adherence and sovereign command, then any religion could be “true” depending on time or place. In this sense, the choice of which religion to “make” the true religion is a prudential choice of the sovereign (Remer 1992) combined with the susceptible acceptance of that particular system.⁸

It should not come as a surprise that Hobbes refuses to use the content of a religion as the basis for judging truth or falsity, for Hobbes’s epistemology of materialism is offered as a rejection of an alternative to the epistemology of revelation (McClure 2011). Hobbes was well aware that much of modern Christian teaching is based upon an Aristotelian foundation (L XII.31; L XLVI.14), and since his first chapters are intended to reground the epistemological teaching of the universities away from its use of Aristotelian physics (L I.5) through the introduction of an epistemology grounded upon sense and the absence of innate ideas (L I), a necessary consequence is an epistemology which rejects revelation (L XLVI.4). This new foundation leads to the equality of religion because it establishes epistemological skepticism in religious knowledge.

Hobbes’s epistemological position leads to limited knowledge of religion. Hobbes argues using only natural reason, mankind can make no positive declaration about God (L XXXI.28) except, perhaps, that he exists (L XI.25),⁹ and is a corporal body (L IV.21). God is a word that does not have meaning in itself, but only signifies man’s inability to conceive him (L III.12). For, there can be no knowledge of God because all religious words used to describe him are negative “as *infinite, eternal,*

incomprehensible,” showing man’s inability to conceive of God; are superlatives of honor “as *most high, most great*, and the like,” highlighting man’s own weakness rather than any positive attribute of God; or indefinite declaration of honor such “as *good, just, holy, creator*,” which are not descriptors of God, but signs of admiration (L XXXI.28). These negative words are all that nature dictates in worship (L XXXI.10) and everything else is arbitrary. This means that when religious believers use positive terms in worship they are arbitrary, and when used in a public setting solely subject to the sovereign’s command (L XXXI.12; see also L XLII.6 and L XXIII.6). Consequently, Hobbes’s argument indicates that nature cannot distinguish any positive aspect of religion, and therefore there is no single doctrine which is inherently right or wrong. Rather, all positive statements of religious belief and worship are arbitrary. Since all doctrine is merely positive, the sovereign has legitimate arbitrary authority to establish which ever religious doctrine, whether it be Christianity, Islam, Mormonism, or any other positive content, is equally arbitrary for the sovereign to choose. This would also mean that, if the sovereign so chooses, a religious value of toleration is an acceptable form (Abizadeh 2013).

Hobbes hints at the general equality of all religion in his discussion of the gentile religion. Many of Hobbes’s harshest critiques are softened under the guise of being directed at the “gentile” or non-Christian religion which arise from man’s ignorance and inability to distinguish dreams and fancy from actual vision and sense (L II.8), leading man, out of fear, to create God (LXII.6). It is clear that for Hobbes, all gentile religions, are founded upon the same seeds and thus equal in truth (or falsity) (L XII.20). While this is clear, the question arises whether Hobbes holds Christianity as somehow distinct.

Shortly after leveling these critiques, Hobbes exempts Christianity and emphasizes the critiques are being directed specifically at the gentile version of religion. Despite this apparent exemption, there is great cause to doubt the sincerity of these exemption (Curley 1992; Stauffer 2010), particularly given that many exemptions are little more than saying that God (i.e., the Christian God), could, in fact, do what had just been discounted (L II.8; L XII.6).¹⁰ As discussed above, Hobbes’s definition of a “true” religion is not based upon any specific content, but can be applied to any of the aforementioned gentile religions. Ultimately for Hobbes, Christianity is to be lumped into the same category as gentile religion because it develops in the same way as gentile religion and it is founded upon the same seeds.

Christianity follows the same growth pattern of other religions: for “*all* formed religion is founded at first upon the faith which a multitude hath in one person, whom they believe not only to be a wise man...[but] to whom God himself vouchsafeth to declare his will supernaturally...” (L XII.24, emphasis added). Christianity, like all other religions, is founded upon the word of a man, not knowledge of God. Hobbes has already shown that we should doubt any man as a prophet for no one can know if another speaks for God (L XXVI.40; L XXXII.7) and inspiration from God is not a “supernatural entering of the Holy Ghost into a man,” rather it is merely a “person’s study” (L XLV.25). Hobbes’s particular iteration of Christianity is designed primarily to keep people in peaceful obedience to the sovereign (L XLIII.3–5; Martinich 1992, 5, 15), just like the gentile religions (L XII.20). Christianity, like every other religion, is designed to meet the same goal and grows through the same means as the highly criticized gentile religions.

Finally, Hobbes establishes the equality of religion through an examination of the common foundation or seed of religion. Hobbes is clear that religion is uniquely human (L XII.1). This seed arises in man’s inquisitiveness to causes, thinking either backwards to their origin or forward to their effect (L XII.2–4). It is not the inquisitiveness itself which is the seed of religion, for seeking answers is part of a “train of imagination” (L III.5) and when the inquisitive train reaches the cause, it calls it “science” (L V.17). Religion is when the process of seeking causes fails to find the true source, when man’s inquiry “cannot assure himself of the true causes of things” (L XII.4). This clarifies the distinction between religion and science and means that all religion is ultimately rooted in the seed of ignorance, either one’s own or someone else’s (L XII.5). The genesis of religion seems to be when an individual, still within the state of nature, is incapable of explaining causes and creates an explanation, whether it be monotheistic or polytheistic and takes the form of a great feathered serpent, Greek or Roman deities, or an incorporeal spirit. Within the state of nature, there are likely innumerable religions which seek to explain these causes; but as mankind covenants together and society is created, men begin to trust “those he thinks to be his friends, and wiser than himself” (L XII.4). Some religions will begin to gain a reputation, leading to greater power (L X.5, 7). One may be canonized into the law of that society, and as discussed above, making it a true religion. All religions are fundamentally, in their origin, born of the same seed and as such one may differentiate them based upon what they say, but not why they exist and how they arose.

In light of this, Christians, and all other dogmatic religionists, “do not *know*, but only *believe*” the accuracy of foundational teachings and truths of their religion (L XLIII.8, emphasis added). If no religion can be known, and all religion is merely a belief that arises directly from the permitted teaching of the sovereign (L XLIII.8), then the choice of which religion to establish by the sovereign is a prudential choice of what best supports the peace and harmony of his regime (Remer 1992). Given the rejection of a true religion, that all religions arise from the same seeds and differ only in the cultivation they receive, and that no religion can be known, all religions are equal in that it is fundamentally impossible to compare their truth or falsity.

Hobbes argues for an epistemological skepticism in the area of religion that, at least on the elite level, allows for each sovereign to establish which ever religious belief they wish (Remer 1992), whether it be an singular exclusive religion, or a multi-faith regime of toleration (Azbidah 2013). Even if it is not a regime of toleration, this foundation of epistemological religious skepticism lays the foundation for subsequent political philosophers to argue that toleration should exist within, and among, societies (Locke 2010; McKinnon 2005). In this sense, Hobbes is a founder of modern liberalism and toleration, despite his presentation of a sovereign who can “decide which opinions and doctrines are inimical to peace and to forbid their being taught” (L XVIII.9; DC VI.11).”

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that Hobbes is rightly considered a founder of religious toleration philosophically; however the citizen's appeal to toleration for exemptions from the law is inconsistent with his political regime. Thus, the division in the literature is best solved by understanding Hobbes's view as *inter regentes tolerantia, tolerans intolerantia inter plebem*. Hobbes presents a practical argument of the freedom of an individual's internal belief, because he recognizes the inherent limitations of the reach of law as well as one rooted in the natural law protection of self-incrimination and forced confession. Since the sovereign cannot know what a person thinks, nor can he force self-incrimination without violating the laws of nature, the sphere of private opinion remains solely under the authority of the individuals.

However, having covenanted into society, the individual gives up any authority for that opinion to affect their actions and thus the sovereign

has full and complete power “to decide which opinions and doctrines are inimical to peace and to forbid their being taught” (L XVIII.9; DC VI.11). Hobbes presents both a rational and biblical argument in support of the disassociation of belief with action. Hobbes shows that the individual’s conscience does not require external action and that, based upon reason and the Bible, no external action commanded by the sovereign violates the conscience. Additionally, through the transfer of agency, the responsibility for any action against one’s own conscience is the sovereign’s for commanding it, not the individual for following it.”

Finally, Hobbes presents an epistemological skepticism in the area of religion, arguing that all religions arise from the same seed, use the same means, and aim at the same goal. This means that no religion’s doctrine is superior to another, there is no ‘true’ religion apart from what the sovereign dictates, and that religion is an arbitrary choice by the sovereign, though regulated by the goal of peace. Through this understanding of Hobbes’s religious teachings, one can realize that Hobbes does, in fact, provide a teaching of toleration, and though it diverges based upon political position, it provides the philosophical foundations for religious toleration within a liberal society that later political theorists use to justify their position of toleration within, not merely among, societies (Locke 2010; McKinnon 2007; Tuck 1990).

NOTES

1. Hume (1983) argues that “Hobbes’s politics are fitted only to promote tyranny” (L VI.153) a position also supported by Wolin (1990) and Tarlton (2001).

2. For succinct citation, I use chapter and paragraph number of Hobbes’s work, designating the source through the following abbreviations: The Elements of Law (Hobbes 1969) as “EL,” De Cive (Hobbes 1991) as “DC,” De Homine (Hobbes 1991) as “DH,” the English Works (Hobbes 1839–45) as “EW,” Leviathan (Hobbes 1994) as “L,” Thomas White’s De Mundo Examined (Hobbes 1976) as “TWDME,” and using page numbers for Thomae Hobbes Malmesburiensis opera philosophica quae Latine scripsit omnia (Hobbes 1939–45) as “OL.”

3. In *De Cive*, Hobbes emphasizes the voluntariness of private worship but denies that public worship must be voluntary (DC XV.12).

4. Cyrus the Great, ruler of Persia, was called God’s anointed (Messiah) in his capacity of restorer of the Jewish Temple (Isaiah 45:1). This helps indicate that someone’s identity as a (the) Messiah relates to religious orthodoxy.

5. For a detailed discussion of Hobbes’s alteration of the golden rule into a passive command in the *Leviathan* and other treatises, see Vaughan (2007, 50ff).

6. This reading is consistent with scholars who argue Hobbes’s teaching on religion is insincere and frequently ironic (Cooke 1996; Curley 1992; Strauss 2011).

7. The passage in Latin is “Quando autem Potentatiae illae revera tales sunt quales accepimus, *Vera Religio*” (OL vol. 3, 45).

8. Few sovereigns are able to create a religious system *ex nihilo*. Rather, they have to work with the material they are presented. This means the sovereign’s prudential choice, will generally, be a variation of a pre-existing system, rather than a wholly new position.

9. The ambiguous “perhaps” is necessary; while Hobbes does express the ability to know God exists (L XXXI.24; DC II.21), it is manifestly clear that the God which exists is not the same as the Christian God (Stauffer 2010, 872–873) and may be nothing more than first energy which initiated the big bang. In *De Cive*, Hobbes notes that knowledge of God’s existence is a consequence that people worship Him, for “there can be no will to honour him, who, we think, hath no being” (DC XV.14). Yet to take the fact that someone believes there is a God to mean there actually is a God would mean men cannot be deceived, which Hobbes repeatedly denies (L III.12; L XXI.9; L XXXVII.11). Further, Hobbes states that God’s existence is not demonstrable and can only be accepted by faith (TWDME XXVI). Thus, Hobbes’s own position seems to provide doubt as to whether one can attribute to god existence.

10. Often these discounted actions involve some “miracle,” which Hobbes seeks to undermine. Hobbes redefines miracles so that they can be explained by natural, rather than supernatural, causes (see Whipple 2008).

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