

Was It Science, Not Religion?

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Does freedom of conscience, and perhaps freedom of thought generally, have religious roots? Ronald Beiner's *Three Versions of the Politics of Conscience: Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke* traces the idea of conscience as a factor in Western political thought to ideas that crystallized in the seventeenth century. Beiner examines three leading seventeenth century thinkers—Hobbes, Spinoza, and Locke—to explore whether conscience, or rather the idea of freedom of conscience, was specifically a religious imperative for these thinkers: whether their religious commitments or their respect for religious integrity underlay and motivated their ideas about freedom of conscience.

Beiner argues that for Hobbes and Spinoza the answer is no.¹ Beiner claims that it was intellectual freedom, specifically scientific or philosophical freedom, that was important for Hobbes and Spinoza.² Freedom of religious conscience was at best a subset of Spinoza's concern for intellectual freedom;³ religious conscience might not have been Hobbes's concern at all or even the object of much sympathy on his part.⁴ Beiner acknowledges that Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration* really does seem to be specifically about religious freedom, but Beiner tries to suggest that even Locke's argument for toleration was implicitly

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1. See Ronald Beiner, *Three Versions of the Politics of Conscience: Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke*, 47 SAN DIEGO L. REV. 1107, 1109, 1116 (2010).

2. *Id.* at 1109.

3. *Id.* at 1116, 1118.

4. See *id.* at 1109.

broader, whether consciously or not, than purely an argument for religious toleration.⁵

It seems to me that Beiner underestimates—if he does not misunderstand—the importance of religion for these thinkers and anachronistically recasts their concerns in terms of today’s preoccupations and preconceptions.⁶

Beiner begins with Hobbes. Hobbes is famously, or notoriously, a theorist of sovereignty, not of free conscience, so one might expect Hobbes to support the power, and right, of the sovereign to command religious conformity. And indeed, Hobbes says that the State can and should prescribe uniform “Publique Worship.”⁷ But Beiner puts the emphasis on Hobbes’s adjective or qualification—“publique”—rather than on Hobbes’s endorsement of compulsory religious uniformity as such.⁸ “What counts is the imperative of shared participation in political authority—not what people actually believe—so a public display of loyalty to the civil cult suffices; deeper scrutiny of inner convictions is beside the point.”⁹ “Private, is in secret Free,”¹⁰ in Hobbes’s words; “the very Thoughts, and Consciences of Men,” says Hobbes, should not be violated.¹¹ The Spanish Inquisition horrified Hobbes,¹² as it horrifies us today, by trying to do so.

Beiner reads Hobbes as distinguishing intellectual freedom from religious fanaticism. Intellectual freedom, specifically freedom of natural science, should not be intruded on by the state because its exercise is private, or rather, restricted to a responsible elite, and hence no threat to the Commonwealth. Religious fanaticism, on the other hand, is a dangerous perversion of “conscience,” which the state should suppress, at least in its public manifestations.

Beiner is persuasive that Hobbes defended, or at least accepted, freedom of private thought but not freedom of fanatical, divisive, and irrational religion; Hobbes feared the consequences of such religion, having witnessed

5. *See id.* at 1123.

6. *See generally* Richard H. Popkin, *The Religious Background of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, 25 *J. HIST. PHIL.* 35, 47 (1987) (“[I]f one wants to understand the major or minor seventeenth-century thinkers as historical figures struggling with the problems of their time, then I think one has to delve into their context, and not just ours. When one does, one finds a major aspect of their context is the religious issues involved with what we now isolate as philosophical issues.”).

7. THOMAS HOBBS, *LEVIATHAN* 252–53 (Richard Tuck ed., Cambridge Univ. Press Rev. Student Ed. 1996) (1651).

8. *See* Beiner, *supra* note 1, at 1110 (quoting HOBBS, *supra* note 7, at 252–53).

9. Beiner, *supra* note 1, at 1111.

10. HOBBS, *supra* note 7, at 249.

11. *See id.* at 471.

12. *See id.* at 471–72.

and barely survived them in his own time. But after all, the distinction between public and private belief was hardly original to Hobbes. It was a standard Enlightenment and even earlier perception—or misapprehension—of the Greco-Roman attitude toward religion: that the Greco-Roman pagan cults were a matter of public ritual and no doubt believed by the ignorant but privately mocked and disbelieved by the sophisticated members of the elite. It was almost a cliché of Renaissance and Enlightenment thought to admire this classical attitude or alleged attitude.¹³

But as for Beiner's distinction between religion as such, which he suggests Hobbes might have thought a perversion of conscience, and natural science, which Beiner suggests was the real area of conscience about whose freedom Hobbes cared: Beiner offers little or no evidence that Hobbes distinguished scientific knowledge from other kinds of knowledge or thought. Hobbes's contemporary Isaac Newton certainly made no such distinction.¹⁴ It seems to me that Hobbes would have associated legitimate—and rightly free—conscience with all the thinking and research of rational, discrete, classically minded men. This would have included their religious convictions too. The important distinction, for Hobbes, would have been between responsible members of the elite on the one hand and fanatics and enthusiasts on the other. It is no doubt conventional in the twenty-first century to distinguish more or less sharply between religious and scientific ideas. It was not so in the seventeenth century, even for so unorthodox a thinker as Hobbes. Indeed,

13. Gibbon expressed the Enlightenment view elegantly: "The various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher, as equally false; and by the magistrate, as equally useful." EDWARD GIBBON, *THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE* 19 (Hans-Friedrich Mueller ed., Modern Library 2003) (1776). There is a trend in recent scholarship to suggest that the Greeks and Romans, even the elites, took their pagan religions more seriously. See, e.g., ZSUZSANNA VÁRHELYI, *THE RELIGION OF SENATORS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE* 46 (2010).

14. See James J. Bono, *From Paracelsus to Newton: The Word of God, the Book of Nature, and the Eclipse of the "Emblematic World View,"* in *NEWTON AND RELIGION: CONTEXT, NATURE, AND INFLUENCE* 45, 74–75 (James E. Force & Richard H. Popkin eds., 1999); James E. Force, *Newton, the "Ancients," and the "Moderns,"* in *NEWTON AND RELIGION: CONTEXT, NATURE, AND INFLUENCE*, *supra*, at 237, 241; Sarah Hutton, *The Seven Trumpets and the Seven Vials: Apocalypticism and Christology in Newton's Theological Writings*, in *NEWTON AND RELIGION: CONTEXT, NATURE, AND INFLUENCE*, *supra*, at 165, 165; G.A.J. Rogers, *Newton and the Guaranteeing God*, in *NEWTON AND RELIGION: CONTEXT, NATURE, AND INFLUENCE*, *supra*, at 221, 234.

Hobbes's own thinking might not have been as thoroughly atheistic as Beiner might hope.¹⁵

Turning to Spinoza, Beiner reads Spinoza as saying that it is ultimately impossible to coerce people's inner beliefs and therefore that there is no right to do so, including no right on the part of the state.¹⁶ Beiner argues, rightly I think, that this is consistent with Spinoza's general position that right is really might: that nature—the “is”—and what is right—the “ought”—are one.¹⁷ *Deus sive Natura* in Spinoza's Latin phrase: “God is nature.”¹⁸ Beiner—again rightly I think—adds that Spinoza's emphasis on the futility of coercing private belief is really a pretty weak argument on Spinoza's part.¹⁹ We know today from totalitarian states and totalitarian movements that people's convictions can be extensively altered or manipulated.

But seemingly independent of whether it is possible and hence proper to coerce people's thoughts, Spinoza also writes about the importance of the human “faculty to reason freely and form [one's] own judgment,”²⁰ and Spinoza notes that Amsterdam has prospered by being a tolerant place²¹—which indeed it was, perhaps uniquely so in its time. Spinoza himself was a philosopher, of course, and he was subjected to pressure during his lifetime, not so much by the state as by the Jewish community of Amsterdam, in part because of his ideas.²² Hence Beiner argues that intellectual freedom, especially philosophical freedom, is what Spinoza really cared about; religious freedom might be an important subset of that but still ultimately only a subset.²³ As between Hobbes, Locke, and Spinoza, Beiner's case is perhaps strongest for Spinoza.

Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration* was explicitly a brief for religious toleration. Hence it does not conform to Beiner's thesis that freedom of scientific or philosophical thought—not free exercise of

15. See Criseyda Cox, *Thomas Hobbes—Was He an Atheist?*, HIST. REV., Dec. 1998, at 28; see also A.P. MARTINICH, THE TWO GODS OF *LEVIATHAN*: THOMAS HOBBS ON RELIGION AND POLITICS 1, 14–15, 32–34 (1992) (arguing that Hobbes was an orthodox Calvinist).

16. See Beiner, *supra* note 1, at 1116–17.

17. See *id.* at 1118–19.

18. See Carlos Fraenkel, *Maimonides' God and Spinoza's Deus sive Natura*, 44 J. HIST. PHIL. 169, 170–73, 193–98 (2006) (linking Spinoza with Maimonides's medieval Jewish Aristotelianism); but cf. JOSÉ FAUR, IN THE SHADOW OF HISTORY: JEWS AND *CONVERSOS* AT THE DAWN OF MODERNITY 142–75 (1992) (arguing that Spinoza's thought was implicitly totalitarian and deeply anti-Jewish).

19. See Beiner, *supra* note 1, at 1117.

20. BARUCH SPINOZA, THEOLOGICAL-POLITICAL TREATISE 230 (Samuel Shirley trans., Hackett Publ'g Co. 1998) (1670).

21. See *id.* at 236.

22. See FAUR, *supra* note 18, at 148.

23. See Beiner, *supra* note 1, at 1118.

religion—was the paramount concern for the leading seventeenth century political philosophers. Beiner in effect concedes this, while suggesting, plausibly enough, that some points of Locke's argument would implicitly support freedom of conscience more generally, not merely freedom of religious conscience.²⁴

It seems to me that Beiner underestimates what was special about religion, certainly for Locke but also for Spinoza and perhaps for Hobbes as well: that what is at stake for religious people is unique. Obeying the will of God, salvation of one's eternal soul, is bigger and hence different than whatever is typically at stake for other kinds of thinking, even for natural scientists or intellectuals who care deeply about their work. Religious convictions have unique importance to those who hold them; if coerced to abandon or change their convictions, believers are especially apt to resist, even violently. Coerced religion is no religion at all, says Locke,²⁵ and Spinoza hints at the same by insisting that it is impossible to coerce people's inner religious convictions.²⁶ If religious belief is different and if Locke's, Spinoza's, and even Hobbes's ideas about free thought sprang from the collision of religious convictions in the religious wars of their day, then there is some difficulty for Beiner's thesis that what these thinkers really cared about was freedom of natural science and that what was uniquely at stake in religious conviction for religious people was not after all the inspiration of these thinkers'—and perhaps our own—commitment to freedom of conscience.

24. *See id.* at 1123.

25. *See* JOHN LOCKE, A LETTER CONCERNING TOLERATION 38 (James H. Tully ed., Hackett Publ'g Co. 1983) (1689).

26. *See* SPINOZA, *supra* note 20, at 230 (“But . . . it is impossible for the mind to be completely under another's control . . .”).

