

is to be far more mild than they need to be by right (251–55): the personal freedom of subjects, their commercial activities, criminal punishment, and sexual morality. (One can see Machiavelli’s influence here, too, but Stauffer does not distract the reader with this.) It is the world we now live in, for better or worse, the worse being “the shallow, frenzied ways in which modern men try to distract themselves from their own dissatisfaction” (276). But whence that dissatisfaction?

Stauffer makes the suggestive remark that Hobbes’s attempt to unite politics and philosophy necessarily diminishes both while simultaneously making exaggerated claims for each. This is surely right, but the causality could be reversed. Hobbes systematically built Machiavelli’s antitheological ire into an antimetaphysical ire that has characterized modern philosophy ever since. Yet if theology and metaphysics are impossible and methodical materialism is all we are left with, those shallow, frenzied distractions seem entirely appropriate. But if there is more to life, the way to discover what that might be requires first understanding how we got here. For that project, this remarkable book is indispensable.

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Hobbes’s Secularism: Pragmatic Civil-Theologian or Utopian Atheist?

Paul Franco

Bowdoin College

Let me begin by saying what a good book this is. It offers a comprehensive interpretation of Hobbes’s political philosophy that is both clear and carefully argued. It engages with all of the relevant secondary literature in a thoughtful and critical manner. Finally, the book has an ambitious thesis, which I will begin by trying to encapsulate.

The subtitle of Stauffer’s book is *A Study of the Foundations of Modern Political Philosophy*, and the central claim of the book is that Hobbes is the key thinker who laid those foundations. He did so in two different ways: first, he articulated some of the key features of modern liberalism, specifically its emphasis on the right of self-preservation and consequent narrowing of the end or purpose of the commonwealth; second, he inaugurated a thoroughly secular understanding of modern morality and politics. It is the

latter point that receives the lion's share of Stauffer's attention in his book. And while many scholars have noted Hobbes's contribution to modern secularism, Stauffer's distinctive claim is that Hobbes's secularism is more radical and revolutionary than most of these scholars appreciate. Indeed, Stauffer claims that Hobbes ultimately aims at nothing less than the total abolition of religion or what he calls "the kingdom of darkness." "The central claim of this book," Stauffer writes, "is that Hobbes was offering and trying to promote a new comprehensive outlook—a rational and secular 'Kingdom of Light'—that would dispel the reigning darkness, chasten religion, and bring a new dawn of enlightenment" (7).

The core of Stauffer's radically secular and atheistic interpretation of Hobbes's philosophy—which of course owes a great deal to Leo Strauss's pathbreaking interpretation of Hobbes¹—is contained in the three central chapters of the book devoted to Hobbes's understanding and ultimately critique of religion and theology. Of necessity, he pays considerable attention to Hobbes's rather idiosyncratic interpretations of scripture. Like other scholars before him, he brings out that Hobbes's reinterpretation of scripture is designed to bring the Bible into alignment with his political philosophy, especially regarding the supremacy of the civil sovereign. Where he goes beyond previous scholars—with the exception of Strauss and his followers—is in arguing that this political reinterpretation of scripture reflects only the surface of Hobbes's philosophical intention. Hobbes's deeper intention, revealed in the outlandishness of his interpretations of scripture, is to provide a radical critique of biblical religion.

Stauffer supports his radically secular reading of Hobbes's philosophy with careful and often ingenious analyses of Hobbes's highly idiosyncratic interpretations of the Bible. Nevertheless, I must confess I am not entirely convinced by his argument that there is a deeper, more atheistic intention

¹See, e.g., Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis*, trans. Elsa M. Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 71, where Strauss attributes a double intention to Hobbes's biblical interpretations: first, "to make use of the authority of the Scriptures for his own theory;" and second, "to shake the authority of the Scriptures themselves. Only gradually does the second intention become predominant". See also Strauss's unfinished 1933–34 manuscript "Hobbes's Critique of Religion: A Contribution to Understanding the Enlightenment," in *Hobbes's Critique of Religion and Related Writings*, trans. and ed. Gabriel Bartlett and Svetozar Minkov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), esp. 23–30; *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 198–99; and "On the Basis of Hobbes's Political Philosophy," in *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 182–89. Other scholars who have followed Strauss's lead include Thomas Pangle, "A Critique of Hobbes's Critique of Biblical and Natural Religion in *Leviathan*", *Jewish Political Studies Review* 4, no. 2 (1992): 25–57; and Edwin Curley, "'I Durst not Write So Boldly,' or How to Read Hobbes' Theological-Political Treatise", in *Hobbes e Spinoza, Scienza e Politica*, ed. Daniela Bostrenghi (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1992).

beneath the civil theological one that other scholars have noticed. One problem, which Stauffer is aware of, is that there is a tension between Hobbes's intention to provide a civil theology that supports his political philosophy and his putative intention to abolish religion altogether. It seems to me you have to choose one or the other, and I am more persuaded by the interpretation of Hobbes as a hard-nosed civil theologian than as a utopian dreamer of an atheistic society.²

Also problematic from my point of view are some of Stauffer's interpretations of Hobbes, which often go well beyond the surface meaning of the text. I will offer a couple of examples. In his famous chapter on religion in *Leviathan*, Hobbes argues that the natural seeds of religion, above all fear of the unknown, "can never be so abolished out of humane nature, but that new religions may againe be made to spring out of them, by the culture of such men, as for such purpose are in reputation". This would seem to be a pretty straightforward claim about the ineradicable nature of religion, which may explain why Hobbes ends up spending so much time on it in the second half of *Leviathan*. But in keeping with his atheistic reading, Stauffer puts special emphasis on "so" and "may" in the passage and suggests that the hold of religion on the human heart may be less emphatically asserted by Hobbes than it at first appears.

A second example of Stauffer's interpretive liberality is his interpretation of the famous "knots" passage toward the end of *Leviathan*. In this passage, Hobbes argues that the exercise of religious power by popes, bishops, and priests over civil authority has been detrimental to "Christian liberty" and that therefore Independency, in which everyone worships "as he liketh best," may be the most appropriate arrangement for a commonwealth (chapter 47). In such a case, a commonwealth may be said to be "of no religion at all" (chapter 31). This is a much debated passage, and it is not clear how it fits with Hobbes's more typical defense of uniformity of public worship. Nevertheless, it is hard to see how Stauffer gets out of it that Hobbes may be suggesting the possible fading away of religion altogether in society.

Toward the end of his book, Stauffer concludes that "Hobbes's ultimate aim ... was not just to tame and 'rationalize' Christianity ... but to spread a far-reaching enlightenment ... to replace the Kingdom of Darkness with a Kingdom of Light" (272). It is a dramatic image, encapsulating the boldness and provocativeness of Stauffer's interpretation of Hobbes's philosophy. But is it too dramatic in the last analysis, saddling Hobbes with responsibility for secular modernity in its most extreme and spiritually impoverished form? That is the question the book left me

²Scholars who defend this more Erastian, not to say more conventional, interpretation include Michael Oakeshott, *Hobbes on Civil Association* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1975), 73–76; Richard Tuck, "The Civil Religion of Thomas Hobbes", in *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Nicholas Phillipson and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and most recently Jeffrey Collins, *The Allegiance of Thomas Hobbes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

with. Put differently, could it be that Hobbes is both less and more interesting than Stauffer's interpretation suggests?

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Hobbes: Prophet of the Enlightenment or Justice of the Peace?

Ioannis D. Evrigenis

Tufts University

Hobbes's Kingdom of Light is a well-written and thought-provoking book that has much to offer to Hobbes scholars, whether they agree or disagree with its conclusions. I cannot do it justice here, nor address all the ways in which it made me think. In it, Devin Stauffer sees Hobbes as a "thoroughgoing critic of traditional Christianity," who sought to replace the "Kingdom of Darkness" with a "Kingdom of Light" (7). Stauffer identifies four main themes in his argument: "Hobbes's critique of the classical tradition, his natural philosophy, his critique of religion, and his political philosophy" (9), and argues that it is necessary to step back and see Hobbes's system in its totality, in order to assess its parts. Indeed, this approach conforms to Hobbes's own standard as articulated in *Leviathan*:

For it is not the bare Words, but the Scope of the writer that giveth the true light, by which any writing is to bee interpreted; and they that insist upon single Texts, without considering the main Designe, can derive no thing from them cleerly; but rather by casting atomes of Scripture, as dust before mens eyes, make every thing more obscure than it is; an ordinary artifice of those that seek not the truth, but their own advantage. (*L*, 43: 331)¹

Where Stauffer's own scope is concerned, I think that he is both right and persuasive when he argues that Hobbes sought to remove the hold that theologians and clerics had placed on humanity, and that he did so through a multifaceted, complex, and well-thought-out system, in which each part has a role to play towards the attainment of peace. I disagree with Stauffer's interpretation of some of the steps along the way to this conclusion,

¹All references to *Leviathan* are to the 1651 edition, by chapter and page numbers.