

Making Religion Safe for Democracy: Transformation from Hobbes to Tocqueville

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In this book, Owen offers a very insightful and careful reconstruction of the Early Modern view of religion and its place in a liberal state, as articulated by Isaac Backus, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Alexis de Tocqueville. While Owen's reconstructions of each philosopher's arguments are very insightful and valuable, there are organizational and methodological issues with this book that limit its ability to (a) support Owen's claim to have identified a common Early Modern view of the religious transformation that liberalism requires, and (b) support his larger and more ambitious project in the book, namely, to persuade readers that the Early Modern approach to religion is superior to that of contemporary (particularly, Rawlsian) liberalism.¹

Owen argues that, despite the differences between these philosophers' views, there is a common core that makes up the Early Modern liberal view of religion and its place in the state. According to the core view, liberalism cannot "be neutral to religion," and must demand that religions accept certain premises to make them safe for a liberal democratic state (xii). Proponents of the core liberal view consider supernatural and superstitious religious beliefs—beliefs not grounded in reason, especially those concerning paths to eternal bliss or damnation—as potential threats to a liberal state because it is difficult to keep people who endorse such supernatural beliefs in order using reason and the stately tools of mere earthly punishment and reward.² To undermine this threat, Early Modern liberals deploy skeptical arguments to whittle supernatural religion down to 'natural' or 'true' religion. They argue that reason governs belief, and is needed to assess and interpret revelation. And reason cannot approve of those religious claims that rely exclusively on others' claims to revelation (including scripture) because humans are fallible and ambitious, and to put our faith in such claims is to put our faith in other fallible and corrupt humans, not divine beings. Proponents of the core view argue that we can have no religious reasons to disobey those liberal moral and political conclusions to which reason leads us, re-orienting us toward earthly goods and cementing our obedience to liberal states.

The organization of this book, however, makes it challenging to assemble this 'core' view. The book is organized so that each philosopher gets his own chapter, with the exception of Backus and Jefferson, who share one chapter between them. While Owen does a fair job comparing and contrasting the views as he proceeds, his efforts are insufficient to make it clear what the shared Early Modern view is, if there is one. This problem is aggravated by the thin four-page conclusion, which does little to reassemble any core view. Indeed, the conclusion suggests that Backus and Tocqueville, who view supernatural religion as a positive force both for individuals and for the state, maintain a fundamental disagreement with

¹ Because I think that the organization of the book is problematic, I do not attempt to mirror that organization in this review.

² Though this claim does not fit well with the views of Backus or Tocqueville, both of whom supported the separation of church and state on the grounds that the latter corrupted the former.

Jefferson, Hobbes, and Locke, who seek to undermine supernatural religion and to re-orient our concern towards earthly goods (147-148). In the conclusion, it seems that Owen has an affinity for Tocqueville's view that supernatural religion is useful, yet Owen does not address the concern that, if Locke and Hobbes are right, then we cannot justify our supernatural beliefs, no matter how useful they may be.³ While the absence of one shared view is not a problem for a book primarily interested in investigating Early Modern views of religion, the more ambitious project motivating this book seems to call for one.

In his more ambitious argument, which he articulates in the Preface but does not develop in this book, Owen contends that the Early Modern liberals offered a stronger response to the challenge that religion poses to liberal society than do most contemporary liberals (particularly Rawlsians, who address only "'reasonable pluralism,' not pluralism as such" (xi)). Because this religious challenge is currently a pressing obstacle facing liberal societies, contemporary liberals would do well to re-examine and re-incorporate the Early Modern liberal approach to religious transformation and toleration. This book is a contribution to the larger project, carefully reconstructing the Early Modern view, which can then be refined and defended for the sake of supporting normative claims about the way we ought to structure our liberal societies today.

In light of (a) the ambitious argument, (b) the unreconciled deep disagreements between the philosophers examined, and (c) the sparse attempts to assemble any coherent view, I think that the reader is left justifiably puzzled over precisely what view of religious transformation Owen thinks is so valuable. Moreover, the method of close textual analysis that Owen employs in this book limits the role that the book can play in advancing the ambitious project. While reconstructing the Early Modern view(s) of religious transformation is certainly an important step in the argument, and while the book does that quite well, the normative project of refining and defending this view remains unaddressed. This may be considered a virtue of the book and not a weakness: the arguments are intriguing and compelling, which may encourage readers to engage in the project of refining and defending some of these arguments for contemporary application.

³ Owen comments that Tocqueville may be taken to support the claim that "almost any religion, even a false one, is preferable to no religion" (140).

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Cosmic Pessimism

EUGENE THACKER, Artwork by Keith Tilford

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Eugene Thacker, professor of Media Studies at the New School for Social Research and enemy of Glenn Beck, has been writing about the philosophical consequences of horror, pessimism, and nihilism for several years. *Cosmic Pessimism* is his most recent publication in this area, following on the heels of his three-volume work, *Horror of Philosophy*, which includes *In the Dust of This Planet* (2011), *Starry Speculative Corpse* (2015), and *Tentacles Longer Than Night* (2015), each published by Zero Books.