

Making Religion Safe for Democracy: Transformation from Hobbes to Tocqueville. By J. Judd Owen.
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In this concise volume, J. Judd Owen echoes a theme of his earlier work, arguing against the notion that American liberalism takes a neutral and benign position on religion. Whereas *Religion and the Demise of Liberal Rationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) surveyed key thinkers within the American liberal tradition, *Making Religion Safe for Democracy* explores the British roots of American political philosophy and praises the ambivalent liberalism of the French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville. Owen argues that Thomas Jefferson, like many early Americans, inherited a philosophy of religious liberty that radically constrained religious expression as a condition of toleration. Theologies that prioritized a spiritual and eternal realm over temporal self-interest in a civil state had to be moderated to make religious devotion safe in a liberal democracy. In Tocqueville's writings Owen finds a powerful counterargument. Tocqueville urged that democracy requires religious vitality in order to curtail the inevitable excesses of democratic rule. By redirecting self-interested individuals towards spiritual transcendence and self-sacrificial aid, religion helped to save democracy from a narrow materialism and public indifference. Powerfully criticizing the pretensions of Enlightenment-style religious toleration, Owen nevertheless leaves open the question whether Tocqueville's views on religion work their own constraints to make religion safe for democracy.

Owen's argument about Jefferson and Tocqueville hinges on a careful analysis, in the middle sections of this book, of religious freedom in the thought of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. While these two thinkers differed dramatically in their political philosophies, Owen demonstrates how closely their strategies aligned to make religion safe for civil society.

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes denied any right to the free exercise of religion and asserted the sovereign's absolute authority over establishing religion within the realm. Preoccupied with the problem of how people move from a natural state of fear and deprivation to a civil society marked by relative cooperation and peace, Hobbes surmised that strong religious beliefs and allegiances propelled people to breach the social contract. Prioritizing otherworldly interests over self-interest, and even life itself, religious devotion that "fears God more than the sovereign, is a greater obstacle to the establishment of Hobbesian justice than the criminal," Owen summarizes, for no temporal punishment can dissuade the zealot from disrupting civil order (28).

Not every expression of religion posed such a threat, however. To the extent that religion made a virtue of obedience to law, it supported the sovereign's authority. And if religionists' otherworldly zeal could be tempered, Hobbes affirmed that religion could actually benefit the state. Furthermore, for Hobbes "the causes of religion overlap with the causes of the leviathan state" since both were responses to the anxieties produced by a state of nature (55). While Hobbes contended that reasoned deliberation would lead the enlightened few to form the leviathan state, religion could serve as a handy shortcut for the ignorant masses towards the same ends. A Christianity that did not take its theology of the afterlife or self-denial too seriously would then be instrumentally useful to the state. Owen locates the motive for Hobbes's absolutism in religious doubt. Unable to know with certainty what the afterlife has in store, or which combination of doctrines might affect or forfeit heavenly bliss, Hobbes held that the virtue of absolutism "lies not in its correctness but in its decisiveness" to bring about civil peace (25).

Reading Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration*, *Essay on Human Understanding*, and *Reasonableness of Christianity* together, Owen concludes that Locke shared Hobbes's profound doubts but sought their remedy in toleration rather than absolutism. Like Hobbes, Locke argued that the way of salvation, the reliability and clarity of revelation, and the nature of God and the immaterial realm were empirically unknowable. Most religious truths were matters of probability or faith in an authority that, problematically for Locke, stood outside of one's own reason. But Locke did not just doubt the possibility of religious certainty. He also doubted that others felt genuine certainty or would act violently because of religious conviction. Locke thus disagreed with Hobbes over the danger that religion posed for the liberal state. It was the oppression of religion, rather than the content of theology, that motivated religious disobedience and revolt, Locke held. The safest course for civil peace was thus toleration.

Owen argues that, paradoxically, by excluding religion as a source of violence, Locke's theory of religion under toleration overlapped substantially with Hobbes's absolutism. In Locke's scheme, every individual ought to be concerned only with one's own soul as a matter of natural reason—the perdition of one's neighbor, after all, was of no effect to oneself. How to gain eternal life was uncertain, Locke continues, but how to improve and prosper life materially on earth was quite evident to reason. In a tolerant regime, then, religious institutions should be denied powers of coercion, and religious individuals should properly focus on the pursuit of happiness in this life. That is, tolerable religion to Locke was a religion that had abandoned its otherworldly orientation and zeal. Lockean Christianity, Owen concludes, like its Hobbesian counterpart, “is ultimately about the promotion of a peaceable morality, not religious truth” (66).

Locke further agreed with Hobbes on how religion could be instrumentally useful to the civil state. Tolerant religion devoid of doctrinal intensity encouraged a sociable morality that only a few would ever have the leisure to develop through natural reason alone. Locke was thus even more explicit than Hobbes in arguing that religion's chief value was as “a surer and shorter way to the apprehensions of the vulgar” (88, quoting John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity: As Delivered in the Scriptures*, ed. John C. Higgins-Biddle [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999], § 241). This, Owen argues, was what Locke meant by the “reasonableness” of Christianity: the Christianity of the masses was a suitable shortcut to enlightened virtue, if not reason, insofar as it led to approximate forms of civic morality (88–89).

Owen begins and ends his survey of the English Enlightenment with Thomas Jefferson, whose views on religion and religious liberty embodied and advanced Lockean and Hobbesian ideals. Jefferson heartily opposed creeds and metaphysical debates but praised primitive Christianity for its moral teachings. He derided the “heresy of spiritualism” and expected religious zeal in America to subside until every citizen became a rational Unitarian laboring for material prosperity rather than idly speculating about the immaterial realm. Jefferson read Locke and ardently supported toleration in Virginia; Owen suggests we should understand Hobbesian, Lockean, and Jeffersonian views of Christianity and toleration as of a piece (60).

Jefferson's antipathy towards Hobbes is well known, so Owen's conclusion that Jefferson employed an essentially Hobbesian philosophy of religious “freedom” is intriguing. Owen's survey offers one of the clearest and most detailed arguments available on the illiberal foundations of modern liberalism, especially with regard to religion. In their promotion of a denuded form of Christianity, all three thinkers consigned Christianity to a minimal, state-supporting theology that trivialized doctrines of the afterlife and challenged allegiance to spiritual authority. They replaced Christian self-denial with an emphasis on material self-interest. They anticipated and even hoped that religious devotion would decline, but they lauded the instrumental usefulness of religion in the meantime. Through these means, key figures of the Enlightenment made religion safe for

democracy. So long as religion made itself tolerable, it would be tolerated. So long as true believers did not believe they possessed the Truth, they were free to pursue the self-interested material agenda liberalism prescribed for them.

The pretension that such a fundamentally illiberal structure is in fact neutral and benign toward religion has had a long legacy in America. As recently as *Hobby Lobby v. Burwell*, for instance, majority and dissenting opinions of U.S. Supreme Court justices assumed that American liberalism neutrally offered religious freedom to all. The majority affirmed the religious freedom of employers (who sought exemptions from health insurance requirements concerning contraception) while imagining that religious freedom for employees would remain unaffected. The dissenters, reinforcing a Lockean dichotomy between spiritual and material interests, blithely defined commercial activity as having no connection to real religion. Owen's study helps us to see that even our best lawyers struggle to treat religious freedom and state neutrality as the legal fictions that they are, and it locates these failures in longstanding debates among liberalism's chief architects.

In the final third of the book, Owen turns to Alexis de Tocqueville's writings to highlight what is at stake in these academic and legal debates. Tocqueville was largely an outsider to the English Enlightenment thinkers and American founders, which is precisely what Owen finds so valuable in this peripatetic observer of Jacksonian America. Tocqueville was fascinated by the religiosity of a people who were simultaneously building up their churches *and* constructing the world's most advanced liberal democracy. Both an admirer and critic of Enlightenment liberalism, Tocqueville criticized the pervasive but shallow religion of most Americans and worried that it—and the Enlightenment liberalism that had produced it—would ultimately undermine American democracy. Owen thus offers Tocqueville's views as an alternative liberalism that, instead of making religion safe for democracy, relies on religion to save democracy itself.

Tocqueville begins with a radically different anthropology than Hobbes or Locke; and, as Owen notes, Tocqueville was “not a social contract theorist” (149). Hobbes and Locke focused on individuals who feared death and deprivation and thus reluctantly gave up some individual liberties in order to preserve their material wellbeing. Tocqueville argued instead that it was not death that people most despise, but finitude. Transcendence, and not just material security, is what people naturally seek. Thus, paradoxically, “man shows a natural disgust for existence and an immense desire to exist” (124, quoting Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 283–84). Material accumulation on its own did not provide a satisfying existence—a lesson Tocqueville drew from the unending acquisitiveness he observed in the American republic.

Thus, for Tocqueville, a liberalism that prized only individuals and their material interests was an ephemeral foundation on which to build civil society. The pursuit of happiness would propel an inward turn as people tended to their own self-interests and ignored social goods and responsibilities. Ultimately, Tocqueville surmised, the democracy that established these liberal aims would founder upon them as private wealth seekers increasingly abandoned civic responsibilities to a despotic administrative state.

Religion, Tocqueville argued, could stave off this disaster. Tocqueville valued most in Christianity what Hobbes, Locke, and Jefferson most scorned: its otherworldly goals and its commands to self-denial. Tocqueville agreed that these traits “inspire wholly contrary instincts” to those of liberal democracy, but that was precisely what made religion so valuable to a liberal democratic state (123). Rather than ignoring human dissatisfaction with finitude, as the social contract theorists did, religion addressed those dissatisfactions directly and offered theologies of transcendence that were not reducible to material interests in the here and now. But neither did religion ignore the here and now. Rather, it built up community-minded groups of people who continued

to pursue material gain while balancing acquisitiveness with self-denying mutual aid. Like his English predecessors, Tocqueville saw religion as instrumentally useful to the state; unlike them, he viewed religion not as a second-rate shortcut to what natural reason could otherwise provide. Instead, religion provided its own values that a self-interested and materialistic liberalism would struggle to generate on its own.

Many commentators have noted Tocqueville's interest in American religion, but Owen emphasizes Tocqueville's ambivalence towards American Christianity. Tocqueville felt the *breadth* of religious devotion proved that religion need not decline for democracy to thrive, as Hobbes and Jefferson might have expected. But he criticized the *depth* of American religiosity. Americans in his observation excelled at performing "the external duties of religion" but this masked "in my opinion . . . nothing but a huge indifference" towards most matters of faith and devotion (142). In Owen's reading, Tocqueville perfectly described a nation that had achieved Lockean toleration—but only for Lockean Christianity. Owen concludes by calling on his readers to recognize, as Tocqueville did, that a religion that goes beyond the Enlightenment minimalism of doctrine and conscience is "a vital good both for society and for the citizen as a human being" (116).

While Owen provides a valuable critique of Jeffersonian liberalism and its pretensions to religious neutrality, his reliance on Tocqueville leaves important issues unresolved. Owen begins the book by considering Jefferson alongside not Tocqueville but Isaac Backus, a revivalist preacher and Calvinist Baptist. Backus, as Owen notes, supported Jeffersonian religious liberty, but not from an affection for Jeffersonian Christianity. Rather, Backus was a religious figure whom Locke would have derisively called "enthusiastic," and whom Hobbes and Jefferson would have scorned. To him, self-determination was "horrid impiety" and religious freedom meant only the liberty to be ruled by the proper authorities, God above all. Backus held human governments in much lower esteem than his liberal contemporaries and rejected the idea that "the kingdoms of *this world* . . . have a right to govern Christ's kingdom which is *not of this world!*" (8).

Although Owen returns to consider Jefferson at several points in his study, he leaves Backus behind. That is an unfortunate choice because Backus helps to make concrete certain issues that become abstract by the time Tocqueville arrives. For Hobbes, the danger of religion was quite tangible. He had witnessed Backus's Calvinist predecessors kill a king and prosecute a civil war. Owen urges us to take seriously religious notions of transcendence and otherworldliness, but he does not fully answer Backus's challenge or Hobbes's fears. Religious transcendence provides powerful motives to devalue the state and hazard the merely temporal good of civil society. The English Enlightenment made religion safe by devaluing its transcendence. Owen indicates that was a mistake, but he does not show how it is possible to welcome transcendent values without risking religious violence.

Instead, Owen takes Tocqueville's observations of a narrow strand of American Christianity and posits they hold true "indeed of almost any religion" (145). Of course, at a high level of generality, almost any religion offers some orientation towards immaterial or social goods, and so might provide the values Owen seeks for democracy. But Tocqueville was much more specific. In his observations, as Owen notes, it was American Catholics who had struck a proper balance between aristocracy and democracy, spirituality and material industry, freedom of conscience and submission to temporal authorities. By asserting, without more, that Tocqueville's scheme applies to any religion, Owen runs into the danger of committing the same sin he charges to Locke and Hobbes: redefining and instrumentalizing religion in service of the liberal state. Religions can have their transcendent doctrines—indeed, *must* have them—but only to the extent they balance, without overthrowing, democratic liberalism.

An alternative is to follow Tocqueville all the way and posit that only a particular religion and perhaps a particular configuration of democracy thrive together without one dominating or inflicting violence on the other. Tocqueville's path certainly would not provide religious neutrality, but it would not pretend to it, either.

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