**Keeping the Commonwealth Safe from Dangerous Salvation-Seekers: Thomas Hobbes, religious obligation and the quest for civil peace.**

by

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How should sincere Christian subjects pursuing *eternal life* understand their temporal and spiritual obligations? I offer Thomas Hobbes’s answer to this question, as presented in the *De Cive,* a text first circulated during the English Reformation shortly before the commencement of the English civil wars of religion (1642).[[1]](#footnote-1) I also rely on *Of Liberty and Necessity* (first circulated in 1646)and *An Answer to a Book Published by Dr. Bramhall* (first circulated in 1668)for clarification and support.[[2]](#footnote-2) Using these primary sources, I explore three obligations that Hobbes identifies as relevant to the Christian quest for eternal life. First, I explore the obligation to the natural laws, that is, how a sincere Christian salvation-seeker conceptualizes his or her binding relationship to reason’s proscriptive principle to avoid death and to the deductions generated from this principle (i.e., God’s natural laws). Second, I explore the obligation to faith, that is, how a sincere Christian salvation-seeker conceptualizes his or her obligation to the faith-based proposition that Jesus is the Christ. Third, I explore civil obligation, that is, how a sincere Christian subject conceptualizes his or her obligation to the civil sovereign.

I argue that Hobbes describes salvation as a journey, and he uses the journey-narrative to account for a Christian subject’s evolving obligations to the natural laws, to Christ, and to the civil sovereign. Reformed Englishmen and women would recognize this narrative. But I argue that what begins as a typical Reformation story of a Christian subject’s private relationship with God becomes a counter-Reformation narrative where the quest for salvation requires an external human authority for support. I therefore claim that Hobbes’s civil sovereign (as head of the church) intervenes, orchestrates and directs the Christian quest for eternal life. Hobbes’s salvation narrative therefore fortifies a deep relationship of necessity between salvation-seekers and the civil sovereign. I maintain that this relationship serves to better secure sovereign authority and civil peace. It also challenges the claim that Hobbes has commitments to the liberty of conscience doctrine.

My focus on Hobbes’s account of Christian obligation in the context of the quest for *eternal life* is (obviously) religious in nature. But my interest in religious obligation is fundamentally secular and political. Sincere Christian salvation-seekers pose a threat to Hobbes’s primary objective of securing civil peace (*DC*, 78, 299). I therefore seek to articulate how Hobbes conceptualizes the proper way to pursue eternal life from within Christianity because improper conceptualizations can undermine this end.

**II. Standard interpretations of the way Hobbes confronts sincere salvation-seekers whose religious speeches and deeds may destabilize civil peace**

1. **The secularization argument**

Many scholars argue that Hobbes offers a secularizing political philosophy in order to secure civil peace from the destabilizing threats posed by sincere Christian salvation-seekers.[[3]](#footnote-3) This philosophy advances the trudge to a secular world-order by undermining Christian premises and conclusions. I agree that Hobbes uses worldly, materialist, naturalist and rationalist argumentation to confront and challenge a Christian world-view. I also agree that it is hard to imagine his works as somehow not having a secularizing trajectory. But I maintain that Hobbes’s secular arguments could not adequately secure civil peace because they would not convince sincere Christian salvation-seekers living in the mid-seventeenth-Reformation context, nor could they convince some descendants of the Reformation living in the USA today.

Many Reformed Englishmen and women of faith living during Hobbes’s historical period would interpret his secular challenges to faith in the manner that St. Paul instructed: as tests of true faith (1 Cor. 15:46–48). For the Reformed, faith’s ultimate ground was spiritual grace, not reason, not nature, not Scripture. The trails undergone by the Reformed while slogging through Hobbes’s writings would not lead them to religious skepticism, agnosticism, or atheism. Instead, they would serve to *strengthen* a faith rooted in arbitrary grace. Perhaps perversely, the Reformed could easily interpret the fact that their faith survived Hobbes’s tests as a sign of their true election!

Secular political philosophies remained (and remain) fundamentally vulnerable to St. Paul’s challenge, and Hobbes was aware of it. He wrote explicitly about the gulf between those with carnal and with spiritual orientations, and identified St. Paul as one of the originators of this gulf (*DC* 271). He asserted firmly that spiritual questions (like how to achieve salvation) could not be undermined or arrived at by natural reason (*DC* 273, 293). If confronted with spiritual matters, Hobbes predicted that natural reason would interpret them exactly in the manner St. Paul anticipated: natural reason would maintain that the spiritual matter was absurd because contradictory, senseless because immaterial, and thus meaningless (2 Cor. 2:14). But here is the catch: spiritual matters are meaningless only from the standpoint of natural reason. This says nothing about their meaningfulness from the standpoint of a faith that Hobbes ultimately grounds in God’s grace (*LN,* 248-249).

To more fully complete his objective of securing civil peace, Hobbes had to address salvation-seekers on their own terms. He could not undermine their faith-based commitment to eternal life by secular, rational, materialist, or naturalist argumentation. These methods of argumentation were simply irrelevant from the standpoint of faith.

1. **The hypocrisy argument**

Other scholars claim that Hobbes secures civil peace from destabilizing Christian salvation-seekers by offering a political philosophy that exposes the insincerity and hypocrisy of Christians.[[4]](#footnote-4) That is to say, Hobbes peeks under their pious garb and reveals their worldly undergarments. This reading of Hobbes is persuasive in so far as it advances the claim that the civil threat posed by sincere Christian salvation-seekers is not very large, at least from the perspective of numbers. Most self-professed salvation-seekers are frauds, according to Hobbes. This assertion is commonplace in the Reformation context. However, not all of them are. A few Christians genuinely seek salvation above all, and they can pose a real threat to civil peace *on account of* their religious sincerity.

Hobbes relies on a familiar Reformation world-view to support the idea that a few Christians actually seek salvation sincerely. According to this view, all Christian commonwealths contain a “promiscuous” mix of God’s subjects (who are few in number) and God’s enemies (who comprise “the multitude”) (*DC* 256). It is difficult for mortals to properly identify who belongs to which group, and no individual can ever be certain about where he or she belongs. But these difficulties do not undermine the Reformation classification system itself.

Hobbes maintains that earnest Christians seeking salvation are rare (*DC* 256). They are rare because becoming a sincere subject of God requires extraordinary and supra- or irrational faith. First, individuals must consent inwardly to (i.e. they must have faith in) the proposition that God exists and has power and dominion over them. Second, they must consent inwardly to the propositions that God is the author of particular commands (natural laws), that He authorizes their use, and that He uses them (instead of naked power) to govern His peculiar subjects. Third, they must consent inwardly to the proposition that although God is unbound, and thus unaccountable, He is nevertheless likely to reward eternal life to earnest salvation-seekers who possess the appropriate orientation to His rational laws, to His doctrine of faith (i.e., that Jesus is the Christ), and to the civil sovereign. Fourth, they must consent inwardly to the proposition that eternal life is more important than mere life, or that eternal death is worse than mere death (*DC* 197-199). Finally, they must consent inwardly to the proposition that although Christ will only acknowledge the terms of their new covenant at His Second Coming (and thereby transform their unilateral profession of faith into a bilateral covenant) Christian subjects must nevertheless “persevere [today] in the[] faith and obedience promised by that [future, bilateral] covenant” (*DC* 256).

Hobbes reasons that the vast multitude of men and women who dwell in a Christian commonwealth will not sincerely grant these propositions. Nor will they enter unilaterally today into a (promised, but future) bilateral covenant with Christ who will reveal Himself someday in the future. This is because the multitude is comprised of a vast number of worldlings who spend their lives pursuing honor, wealth and political power They grow “impatient” with meditation and never rest for long enough to reflect on anything concerning the life hereafter (*LN*, 235). Even when they manage to meditate on God or salvation their earthly concerns inevitably return. And when they do-----they “forg[e]t God” (*ABB,* 294).

Hobbes also acknowledges that strict rationalists, theists, and atheists are members of this “multitude.” They are not God’s subjects; they are His “enemies” (*ABB* 291). Their secular and rational commitments make it impossible for them to inwardly consent to the supra- or irrational propositions sketched above (*DC* 197-199). Therefore, they refuse to acknowledge God as their sovereign. They will not conceive of the laws of nature “for any thing but their own natural reason, they were but theorems, tending to peace, and those uncertain, as being but conclusions of particular men and therefore not properly laws (*ABB* 284-285).”

But by exposing the fact that most people are God’s enemies who live lives determined by His power (as first cause) alone, Hobbes does not extinguish the threat posed by the sincere Christian salvation-seeking few who see themselves as His peculiar subjects and imagine that they are accountable to Him in particular ways. Hobbes must confront the threat posed by this small band of Christian elect who seek salvation in a hostile world. He cannot confront them with secular arguments. The latter method is only fitting for “the multitude.” Nor can he secure civil peace by exposing the insincerity of sincerely religious Christians. A more comprehensive commitment to civil peace requires Hobbes to use a Christian method of argumentation. Only this method has the potential to persuade sincerely religious Christians to obey the sovereign and to keep civil peace.

**II. Hobbes’s Reformation Argument: How salvation seekers find their way to eternal life without threatening the sovereign and civil peace.**

Hobbes uses a Reformation narrative out of which he crafts two arguments that aim to protect civil peace from destabilizing challenges mounted on the basis of a Christian’s obligation to the natural laws (*DC* 50). The laws of nature might challenge civil peace in instances where a Christian believes: that the laws embody his or her duty to God; that this duty trumps political obligation; and that the duty mandates some kind of external action in violation of civil laws, or executive decrees.

The first argument quickly accomplishes its end by internalizing the religious obligation to the natural laws, withdrawing it from the domain of external action (*DC* 302). Hobbes claims that acting in the external world in accordance with the laws of nature is not relevant to eternal life. This means that the sovereign need not act according to the natural laws to secure his or her salvation. It also means that publicly accusing the civil sovereign of failing to act in accordance with the natural laws is not relevant for salvation: a public accusation is an external act. Resisting civil authorities actively or passively in other external ways is not relevant, either. In short, any and all external work performed by the sovereign or by subjects that serves to vindicate the natural laws has no purpose for a sincere Christian seeking eternal life.

The second argument Hobbes makes to secure civil peace from destabilizing Christian salvation-seekers who appeal to the natural laws takes into account the entire salvation journey. It secures its end by gradually minimizing---and perhaps eventually overcoming—the inner obligation a Christian salvation-seeker has to the natural laws. As the inner obligation to the natural laws recedes into the background, faith in the proposition that Jesus is the Messiah takes center stage. Once this faith becomes central to salvation it no longer makes sense for salvation-seekers to destabilize the peace by calling into question their sovereign’s internal commitment to the natural laws. Developing this argument requires me to unfold Hobbes’s entire salvation journey.

Hobbes begins his account of the inward journey to salvation by stating that a religious subjects’ *internal* orientation to the natural laws is significant. For Hobbes, “The law [of nature] regardeth the will (*LN* 252).” That is to say, “The obedience…which is necessarily required to salvation, is *nothing else but the will or endeavor to obey*…the laws of God, that is, the moral laws” (*DC* 302, emphasis mine). The internal activity of “willing or endeavoring” is equivalent to the activity of “desiring” to be rational, or “will[ing] to live righteously,” or justly (*DC* 300, 306).

Hobbes proceeds by claiming it is not sufficient to engage in this internal activity of the will in an intermittent fashion. Salvation requires individuals to possess a “constant will” (*DC* 300). This means that Christians seeking salvation must acquire the right disposition of mind (*DC* 300; 306 footnote). They need to acquire a “patient continuance in well doing” (ABB 351). Their endeavoring to obey the natural laws must become an Aristotlean habit of mind. An “irregular” disposition reflects a spotty commitment to the natural laws, and amounts to a sinful disposition (LN 250). Those with sinful dispositions should not expect salvation.

If Christian salvation-seekers could perform the disposition-shaping work that God requires of them on their own, then they could secure salvation for themselves and by themselves (*DC* 300). But Hobbes, a child of the Reformation, flatly rejects the idea that Reformed subjects can save themselves by their own merit through their own works. In his and other Reformation narratives, “ought” does ***not*** imply “can” (*DC* 300). When crafting obligations, God is not bound by anything. He can prescribe obligations that humans cannot possibly meet (*LN* 254). He “can so order the world, as a sin may be necessarily caused thereby in man (*LN* 251).” The fact that humans cannot meet their obligations does not make human failure any less sinful. Hobbes asserts that their failure to obey God’s impossible commands can “without injustice be blamed and punished” (*LN* 251).

To successfully acquire a constant habit of mind one would have to be capable of orienting and then binding one’s will in a rational direction. This is impossible for a few reasons. First, because by nature humans possess wills attuned to the moment and endeavors attuned to immediate gratification (*DC* xv, *LN* 269). Second, success is impossible because strong passions from nature such as “desire, fear, [and] anger” undermine the attempt to develop a steady and rational orientation toward the natural laws (*DC* xv). These passions move men and women to violate the proscription against performing self-destructive activities (*LN* 261). They work as forcibly against the natural laws as the fear of violent death works in its favor (*LN* 262).

Finally, success is impossible because Hobbes, in classic Reformation style, does not subscribe to the doctrine of free will, as Catholics did and do (*LN* 237). Reformed salvation-seekers are not sovereign over their own wills; they cannot direct their wills in whatever rational or irrational orientation they wish. Hobbes declares, “The will itself be not voluntary…[it] falls least of all under deliberation and compact” (*DC* 68, *LN* 248-249). He states, “To say I can will if I will I take to be an absurd speech (*LN* 240).” He concludes, It “be not in” a Christian’s “will or power to choose…his election and will” (*LN* 247). External causes shape a Christian’s inner will: “Nothing taketh beginning from itself, but from the action of some other immediate agent without itself…The cause of his will, is not the will itself, but something else not in his own disposing…the will is cause by other things whereof it disposeth not (LN 274).” In the final analysis the external cause that originates everything, including a Christian’s inner will, is God (as first cause).

The next stage in Hobbes’s internalized salvation narrative begins when the salvation-seeker reflects upon the fact that it is impossible for him or her to self-constitute and sustain the internal disposition requisite for salvation (DC 227). The salvation-seeker now becomes “conscience of [humankind’s] own weakness.” He or she is made aware of “the imperfect use [humans] had of their reason, the violence of their passions.” He or she grasps metaphysical un-freedom and determinateness (*LN* 251). Hobbes encourages this form of self-reflection, and claims that “no other proof” can be offered or is required except “man’s own experience” with himself or herself (*LN* 275).

Awareness of human weakness and resulting sin triggers the repentance phase of the internalized salvation narrative. At this stage in the story, God no longer commands His religious subjects to obey the laws by actually possessing that constant will that they cannot possibly possess. He now lowers His standard and commands them to repent for their inconstant will. Hobbes writes, “There is no need of other virtues for our entrance into the kingdom of God, excepting ….repentance”(*DC* 302). Now what God requires is for salvation-seekers to acknowledge and regret the inconstancy of their past endeavors to obey natural laws (*DC* 287, 301). Hobbes explains, “A true acknowledgement of sin is repentance. For he that knows he hath sinned, knows he hath erred; but to will an error is impossible; therefore he that knows he hath sinned, wishes he had not done it; which is to repent (*DC* 285).” Hobbes here underscores the claim that sinners are not free to choose a righteous over a sinful will. All they can do is regret their sinfulness: “As for repentance...though the cause that made him go astray were necessary, yet there is no reason why he should not grieve (LN 257).” And humans are not free to feel or not to feel this grief: “sorrow for sin is not voluntary….repentance proceedeth from causes” (LN 269).

The salvation narrative does not stop at the sorrowful stage of repentance, however. The next step in the narrative involves reform and re-commitment. God commands the Christian salvation-seeker to recommit to the natural laws by promising to endeavor to obey them in the future. Hobbes states, “The word obedience [to the natural laws] is equivalent to repentance; for the virtue of repentance consists not in the sorrow which accompanies the remembrance of sin; but in our conversion into the way, and full purpose to sin no more; without which that sorrow is said to be the sorrow not of a penitent, but a desperate person” (*DC* 300). He writes, “Repentance…is nothing else but a glad returning into the right way, after the grief of being out of the way (*LN* 257).”

Two new problems emerge at this stage in the narrative, and they generate the next stage. The first problem attends to the fact that the act of recommitting is an act of promising. But the penitent is already aware that humans can’t freely and successfully bind themselves to endeavor to keep their promises. If left to their own devices, the penitent knows that determined humans cannot control their wills. They are likely to break the very promise they unilaterally made to themselves when they promised to reform their wills. Hobbes writes, “The [de]pravity of human disposition is manifest to all, and by experience too well known how little ..men are kept to their duties through conscience” (*DC* 75). If keeping the promise to endeavor to obey the natural laws is what salvation requires, then the penitent must conclude, as a Reformation subject would, that the obligation to the natural laws foretells the penitent’s doom.

The second problem attends to the fact that repenting for past sins does not entail the remission of those sins. Therefore even if a religious subject remains true to his or her promise to will to obey the natural laws (through no merit of their own), Hobbes maintains that God expects some kind of payment for past inconstancy (*DC* 270).

For these two reasons the salvation-seeker must conclude that the requirements God imposes upon religious subjects through the natural laws foretell the penitent’s eternal death. As Reformation Englishmen would say, the laws of nature amount to the ministries of death. Quoting Scripture, Hobbes writes, “That day that thou [humankind] eatest of the tree of knowledge of good and evil [i.e. understands the natural law doctrine] thou shalt die (*ABB*, 354).”

The doom-riddled obligation to the natural laws leads to the next stage in the salvation narrative. Securing eternal life by self-fashioning a rational and law-abiding will is abandoned. It is replaced by a new pact where salvation requires inner faith in the proposition that Christ is the Messiah (ABB 287). Christians who seek eternal life must now retain a steadfast faith in the proposition that Christ is “the author of their immortality” (*ABB*, 353; see also 324, 350-351). They must inwardly profess their faith that “all the immortality…that shall be…is by Christ, and not by the nature of [humankind, i.e. not by rationality, natural law, and endeavoring to obey it] (*ABB* 353).”

Their profession of faith is an act of submission. It is a way of acknowledging that salvation is beyond the subject’s natural power. To succeed in the journey, the subject cannot depend on his or her internal will, on reason, or the knowledge of and the motivation to obey the natural laws. Salvation comes from something external to the subject. When Christians profess this faith they therefore authorize Christ to save them through His arbitrary grace. They proclaim, “Thy will be done.” In so doing they submit their wills and their judgments to Him and trust in His power to save them (*LN* 258).

At this point in the salvation journey, faith in Christ becomes what Hobbes calls “the foundation or base” of hope for eternal life. Because it is a foundation, Hobbes maintains that faith has “existence and subsistence in itself.” Because it is “a substance” it has the power to “uphold[] that which else would fall” (*ABB* 308). But the inner faith in Christ and the hope of eternal life that it generates does not derive “from” the Christian subject. Ever the determinist, Hobbes insists that individuals cannot will themselves to believe in Christ. Their faith in Him also requires an external cause. In the final analysis, God is the ultimate originator of their self-sustaining faith (*ABB* 308). Salvation is therefore “necessarily determined “ by causes external to the self (*LN* 259). At the end of the day, salvation is a matter of God’s arbitrary grace (*LN* 248-249). It proceeds from “causes not in our own power” (*LN* 276).

This concludes the salvation journey. The conclusion enables Hobbes to claim that Christ “contains” the natural laws. The former contains the latter because believing in the latter is a step in the journey to faith in Christ and salvation through him. The conclusion also enables Hobbes to claim that the natural laws are “not laws, but a calling of us to the faith” (*DC* 265). The natural laws do not oblige. They call or *persuade* religious subjects to Christ by revealing that their hope for salvation requires them to entrust their faith in an external power (*DC* 314, [or 301--check?]).

Hobbes’s conclusion also secures the civil sovereign and civil peace from threats posed by sincere salvation-seekers. It does so by minimizing and even overcoming the civil sovereign’s and the salvation-seeking subject’s religious obligation to the natural laws. That is to say, once internal faith in Christ becomes central to salvation it no longer makes sense for salvation-seekers to destabilize the civil peace by calling into question their sovereign’s internal commitment to the natural laws. Confronted with such a challenge, the civil sovereign can easily confess that he or she is a sinner, possibly a humble and repentant one, who has faithfully entrusted his salvation to Christ, “retain[ing] the faith of Christ stedfastly in his heart” (ABB 319-320).

**III. Turning what’s Inside Out: The Counter-Reformation Argument Hobbes makes to Protect Civil Peace from Destabilizing Salvation-Seekers and to Bind Salvation-Seekers to the Civil Sovereign.**

So far I used a Reformed narrative to present Hobbes’s account of the salvation journey. This narrative enabled me to present the journey as a private and internal relationship between the salvation-seeker and God. I will now argue that Hobbes uses a Counter-Reformation narrative that gives the civil sovereign tremendous authority over the salvation-seeker’s quest for eternal life. By giving the civil sovereign this authority, I argue that Hobbes protects the commonwealth from destabilizing religious challenges. Sovereign’s authority in this religious area also exponentially tightens the sovereign’s authoritarian grip over religious subjects and decimates the liberty of conscience doctrine.

Hobbes places the first step in the salvation journey under the authority of the civil sovereign. Recall that the religious subject takes this step when he or she attempts to orient his or her will in the direction of the natural laws, and tries to sustain that rational orientation. The civil sovereign has authority over this step because he or she has authority over the definition of the natural laws (*DC* 267-268). Hobbes writes, “It may be demanded further, whom God would have to be the interpreter of reason, that is to say, of his laws…..The interpretations of all laws, as well sacred as secular…depends on the authority of the city [i.e., the sovereign]….Whatever God commands, he commands by his [the sovereign’s] voice (*DC* 220).[[5]](#footnote-5)

Of course, Christian subjects are free to define the laws of nature for themselves in the privacy of their bedchambers, as Hobbes did. But Hobbes uses various arguments to destabilize the authority of an individual’s private conscience and the laws discovered while inwardly consulting conscience (*DC* xxi). More importantly, if a controversy between a subject’s and the sovereign’s definition of good and evil emerges, the sovereign’s definition is authoritative (*DC* 269). Moreover, because private definitions of the laws of nature are never laws properly speaking (only “theorems…and those uncertain as being but conclusions of particular men and therefore not properly laws”), salvation-seekers are instructed to orient their wills toward the sovereign’s authoritative definition of the natural laws (*ABB* 284-285) The sovereign therefore possesses the authority to direct the first step in a religious subject’s journey to eternal life because the sovereign gives authoritative meaning to the natural laws (to which Christians must orient their wills).

The sovereign plays a second role in the first step of the salvation journey. Hobbes gives the sovereign the authority to use punishment, the threat of punishment and persuasion as a way to forge wills, and to make them constant. He writes, “Punishment…produceth justice [i.e. the appropriate will/orientation to the laws], and maketh sin less frequent” (LN 260). The threat of punishment performs the same function. Hobbes writes, fear of punishment “frame[s] and make[s] wills to justice” (LN 253). He even concludes that, “the intention of the [civil] law is…[to forge] good intentions for the future” (LN 253). The sovereign’s punishments and threats aid in Christian journey to salvation because both serve to steady the will and to dispose it to justice. And the sovereign need not use terror and the threat of terror alone. He or she can deploy praise, dispraise, reward or consultation as he or she pleases in order to conform his or her subjects’s wills to good, and not evil (*LN* 254, 256, 269; *ABB* 285).

Of course, the sovereign will not succeed in forging every will in the Commonwealth in the direction of justice. So Hobbes gives the sovereign the authority over the next stage in the salvation journey. Recall that this stage involves acknowledging sin, and is followed by repentance. In classic Counter-Reformation style, Hobbes claims that the acknowledgement stage only begins when a salvation-seeker publicly confesses what he or she believes to be a sin to an external party. According to Hobbes the confession must be made to the sovereign (or someone authorized by him or her). The sovereign (not the private subject) decides if the confessed inner sin is in fact a sin. Hobbes explains the process briefly: “The judge in judging whether it be sin or no, which is done against the law, looks at no higher cause of the action than the will of the doer” (LN 220). He gives further clarity to the sovereign’s role in the repentance stage through this passage:

Before repentance therefore it is necessary there be an application of the facts unto the law…But surely…every man is not judge of his own fact, whether it be a sin or not. Wherefore the fact, of which we doubt whether it be a sin or not, must be unfolded before some man or men; and the doing of this is confession. Now when the interpreter of the law [i.e., the sovereign] hath judged the fact to be a sin, if the sinner submit to his judgment and resolve within himself not to do so anymore, it is repentance (*DC* 285-286).

Hobbes here flatly rejects the Reformation claim that it is up to the individual’s private conscience to decide upon the sinfulness of his or her soul. In Counter-Reformation style, Hobbes maintains that it is up to an external and mortal authority (i.e., the civil sovereign) to decide if individuals have sinful or sinless internal dispositions.

Hobbes also places the second stage of the repentance phase under the authority of the civil sovereign. He does so when he claims that repentance involves submitting to the sovereign’s judgment regarding sin. If the subject refuses to submit and inwardly “maintain[s] that to be no sin, which [the sovereign] judges to be sin” then Hobbes concludes the subject “repent not” (*DC* 287, 288). Although it is clear from this statement that religious subjects have the freedom to disagree internally with the sovereign’s judgment and refuse to repent, their refusal endangers their quest for salvation and thereby gives tremendous power to the sovereign.

Moreover, Hobbes maintains that the civil sovereign need not tolerate impenitent free thinkers. Hobbes concedes that there is no point in the sovereign trying to command subjects to change their minds, and he encourages the sovereign to use his or her power of persuasion to convert them. But if persuasion does not work, Hobbes gives the sovereign the authority to excommunicate subjects deemed inwardly impenitent. Excommunication is fitting because impenitence is an expression of inward contempt for, or an undervaluing of, sovereign authority (DC 218). Individuals who possess contemptuous minds are not the sovereign’s subjects; they are enemies of state. (*leviathan, X*). Thus, excommunication is in order. The latter takes the form of exile into the state of nature, or extermination (*DC* 287; ABB 346; see also *Behemoth* X).

The final phase of the salvation journey begins when religious subjects turn to faith for salvation. Not surprisingly, this phase is also under the authority of the civil sovereign. Subjects during this phase acknowledge and profess that they believe in the mysterious (i.e., contradictory from the standpoint of reason) proposition that “Jesus is the Christ.” Faith in this proposition comes to subjects by “by hearing,” according to Hobbes (L,X). That is to say, religious subjects do not come to believe that Jesus is the Christ on their own. They do not arrive at this belief by divine infusion, by private inspiration, or by rational reflection. Their faith in Christ “requires teaching” (ABB 339). “Faith and sanctity….[are] brought to pass by [external means such as] education, discipline, correction, and other natural ways. (ABB 335).” Hobbes gives the sovereign the authority to teach (ABB 339). The sovereign has responsibility over “keep[ing] the people in the belief of all the articles of faith necessary to salvation” (*ABB* 284). Subjects therefore depend on the sovereign for the religious education they need for salvation. Hobbes also asserts that the civil sovereign (or those authorized by him or her) is/are the only religious teacher that Christians desperately seeking salvation should trust (*ABB* 339).

Of course, not everyone who receives the “Good News” from the civil sovereign will believe in Christ (ABB 335). In the final instance, faith ultimately depends on the “the providence and guidance of our hearts that are in the hands of God Almighty” (*ABB* 339). But as God’s lieutenant the civil sovereign serves as the necessary intermediary. He or she has the authority to intervene into the subject’s journey to salvation to offer the subject the necessary article of faith. It is up to God to decide if the subject will embody the faith he or she receives from the lips of the civil sovereign.

Hobbes also gives the sovereign the authority over the meaning of this fundamental mystery of faith, and he encourages religious subjects to swallow what the sovereign says whole (i.e. not explore its meaning independently, but take it on implicit faith (Lev, X). If there is a conflict between a subject’s account of the proposition that “Jesus is the Christ” and the sovereign’s account of the proposition, subjects must defer to the sovereign’s judgment regarding its meaning (ABB, 328).

Moreover, Hobbes gives the sovereign authority over what external professions and what outward deeds (i.e., forms of outward worship) follow from the mysterious proposition that “Jesus is the Christ” (*DC* 293, 307). Deeds include ***sacrifices and oblations.*** Speeches include words of prayer and thanksgiving (ABB 284).That is to say, Hobbes gives the sovereign the authority to issue binding commands from a supra-rational or irrational religious foundation that Christians cannot use reason to evaluate (*DC* 273, 293). It would not be unreasonable to conclude that the sovereign’s power over Christians seeking eternal life is terrifying, and possibly absolute.

**IV. Conclusion**

I have shown that Hobbes’s *De Cive* offers a Counter-Reformation salvation narrative that gives the civil sovereign authority over each step in a salvation-seeker’s quest for eternal life. Placing authority over this religious quest into the hands of the civil sovereign has several consequences. First, it makes it impossible for a sincere salvation-seeker to challenge the sovereign, or to destabilize civil peace in the name of salvation. Second, it has the effect of tightening the sovereign’s grip over religious subjects. Third, it renders the liberty of conscience doctrine effectively meaningless because it removes authority from individual consciences and places it into the hands of the civil sovereign. Finally, it makes the case (once again) for interpreting Hobbes as an authoritarian political theorist who concerned himself with civic peace at the expense of individual religious liberty.

I have also tried to show how important it is to place Hobbes’s account of religious obligation into a Reformation narrative. Interpreting religious obligation from within this narrative reveals the way a subject’s obligation to the natural laws and to faith-based propositions can change depending on the subject’s stage of religious or moral development.

Although there is no time to explore the following in any detail here, I believe the Reformation narrative also structures Hobbes’s account of the pursuit for mere life. The self-preservation narrative begins like the salvation narrative by framing the matter of self-preservation in terms of rationality and law. It proceeds to reveal that humans cannot save their bodies if they rely on either of these alone. The narrative of the fool reveals that human kind’s short-term thinking leads them to act irrationally. The account of the natural state reveals that strong passions for glory, greed and power undercut rationality. And Hobbes’s discussion of mutual promise making demonstrates that even humans who commit to reform themselves and who promise to attempt to heed the natural laws from this day forward fail to honor their commitment. If self-preservation is the goal, reason and natural law are not the means. Both foretell death. This conclusion calls men and women who seek self-preservation to faith. They profess a faith when they authorize a sovereign and submit fully to him or her for self-preservation. A faith that overcomes reason and law becomes the foundation of Hobbes’s political philosophy. If the Reformation narrative is doing the kind of work that I am suggesting here, then we will have to rethink if and how Hobbes’s political philosophy is scientific or secular.

1. All *De Cive* (DC) citations in this paper derive from Thomas Hobbes, *Philosophical Rudiments Concerning Government and Society*, ed. Sir William Molesworth. *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*. Volume II (London: Published by John Bohn, 1840 [1642, 1651]). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. All *Of Liberty and Necessity* (*LN)* citations derive from Thomas Hobbes, *Of Liberty and Necessity: A Treatise Wherein All Controversy Concerning Predestination, Election, Free-Will, Grace, Merits, Reprobation, &c. is Fully Decided and Cleared,* ed. Sir William Molesworth. *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury.* Volume IV (London: Published by John Bohn, 1840 [1656], pp.228-278). All *Answer to Bishop Bramhall* citations derive from Thomas Hobbes, *An Answer To a Book Published by Dr. Bramhall, Late Bishop of Derry called ‘The Catching of the Leviathan.”* ed. Sir William Molesworth. *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury.* Volume IV (London: Published by John Bohn, 1840 [1682, 1668]- pp.278-384). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. X. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. X [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The sovereign also has authority over this step because he or she has the power to use terrifying threats (and positive incentives) to sear or forge this constant disposition into religious subjects. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)