

A Political Theology of an Absent God¹

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Whereas some men have pretended for their disobedience to their sovereign, a new covenant made, not with men, but with God; this also is unjust. For there is no covenant with God, but by mediation of somebody that representeth God's person; which none doth but God's lieutenant, who hath the sovereignty under God. But this pretence of covenant with God, is so evident a lie, (this is it that angered you), even in the pretender's own consciences, that it is not only an act of an unjust, but also of a vile and unmanly disposition.

(Thomas Hobbes 1811: 434)

Introduction

Political theology, in the traditions of ancient and Christian thought, marks the domain in which political order relates to the transcendent, i.e. the divine order.² The first time in history the term theology appears in a text is in Plato's *Politeia*, in which it occurs in the plural: types of theologies (379a). In this text, the interlocutors criticize the way in which poets portray the gods. Plato discusses these myths in a political context: the stories people tell about the gods should be true and beneficial for social and political life. Most traditional stories (those found in Homer, Hesiod) do not fit this standard. In order to build a just

¹ I would like to thank my colleagues Evert van der Zweerde and Cees Leijenhorst for their comments.

² Political theology is one of three kinds of theology distinguished by ancient writers, the other two being mythical and natural theology, theology of the poets and theology of the philosophers. See Lieberg 1984.

society, new theologies have to be designed, giving poets the models according to which they can write their stories, poems, and plays. Representation of the gods by human beings in this world is a political issue, assuming the gods have a power of their own, transcending human power, and assuming that the way people deal with this power is crucial for the prosperity and “eternity” of political order.

Premodern and Modern Theories of (Political) Representation

Dealing with “transcendence” is part of Western political discourse and therefore a central issue in political philosophy. Political theology is the “discipline” that reflects practices and speeches, deeds and words, concerning the consequences of the distinction between immanence and transcendence, between what belongs to the tangible world of the *polis* and what belongs to the “foundation” of the *polis*. In this essay, I will discuss the political theology of Thomas Hobbes. He is an intriguing figure in the transformation from ancient and medieval theories of representation to modern ones, which can be described as a transition from “immanent” to “radical” transcendence.³ I will focus on the problem of (political) *representation* because it is especially in this theoretical realm that the theme of transcendence is fully elaborated in political philosophy.⁴

Representation has at least two important features that reflect the essence of “the political”: representation as political *speech* regarding the transcendent foundation of political order, and representation as the *embodiment* of this transcendent ground of the political order. Ancient and medieval political philosophy, by reflecting—critically or not—the justificatory discourse of the political order itself, thought of political power as a *monopoly* of interpretation and embodiment. In political order, *auctoritas* defines the “physical” presence of its tradition in a king, a political class, or an institution. Tradition, in turn, con-

³ An overview of this development, focusing on the central role of Christianity as “a religion for departing from religion,” is given in Gauchet 1997.

⁴ See in particular Lefort 1981.

tains the basic outlines of obligatory speech: showing due respect to the gods, the founding fathers of the state, great lawgivers, the canon, the history of the country, and so on. Medieval political theology established the church as a *potestas spiritualis* and final authority.

Modern theories of political representation have a propensity to reject any monopolizing, authorization, or apotheosis of the transcendent foundation, either by focusing on the mutation of the symbolic order leading to modern democracy (Lefort's idea of a *lieu vide*, the absence of a representation of the transcendent ground of political order), or by focusing on free deliberation by free citizens on the basic principles of the political order (from Rawls' political liberalism to Habermas' deliberative democracy). Because all these political philosophers develop their ideas in a more or less polemical opposition to "premodern" concepts of political representation, which they always expect to return in a variety of shapes (fundamentalism, totalitarianism, nationalism, racism and so on), it is of particular importance to address the transition to these modern concepts.

The Crisis of Representation

Reading Thomas Hobbes throws us back into the midst of the crisis of representation that occurred after the Christian unity in the Western world imploded. I am not suggesting that this unity existed in an unproblematic way before that. Political conflicts of all kinds and various struggles between "church" and "state" made medieval times no less a turbulent period than that following the Reformation. Nevertheless, one can say that, in contrast to the modern crisis of representation, at least the status of the "transcendent" was unchallenged in the medieval world. God ruled the world, and therefore representatives of this rule in the human world could be taken for granted. No one questioned the connection between the divine (the "transcendent") and the specific domains of human social and political order (immanent representations of the transcendent). The crisis of representation in the modern world turns this obvious fact of life into a *casus belli*, perfectly depicted as "wars of truth" (Herschel Baker) or "hermeneutical wars" (Odo Marquard).

Throughout the history of humankind, political leaders and, later on, the leaders of the church have always tried to

monopolize theology in order to safeguard the existing political or ecclesiastical order. Modernity, however, starts with a crisis of representation, due to several causes of which the sixteenth-century schism in Western Christianity is an important one and the appearance of natural sciences and the development of state bureaucracies are others. A war of truth was going on: Who is the true representative of God in this world? And what represents the truth anyway—science or the Bible? This crisis continues up to our time. In politics, the problem can be solved in one of two ways, depending on whether a state sticks to its own “political theology” or loosens its connection to religion. The restoration of the unity of the church and subjection of secular sovereigns to the spiritual guidance of the bishop of Rome (the “Counterreformation,” led politically by the Spanish crown), as well as the establishment of one “confession” as politically compulsory (*cuius regio eius religio*, each state its own religion), belong to the first response to the crisis. Religious toleration or even freedom of religion belongs to the second response, put in practice only step by step after radical philosophers like John Locke, Benedictus de Spinoza, and Pierre Bayle had formulated its principles in the seventeenth century (Israel 2001, 2006). The problem for states to become truly religiously neutral, a program instigated by the so-called *Politiques* at the end of the sixteenth century, was the presence of a population that was still not ready to adjust their beliefs to a new political constellation, or even to abandon religion altogether. Sovereigns had to keep defining themselves in relation to the divine rule of the world.

In this essay I will focus on the way Thomas Hobbes deals with this crisis of representation. His position constitutes the middle between a fierce defense of a state church and the privatization of religious convictions.⁵ His skeptical or agnostic approach makes the *witness* or *personification* of the divine, i.e. the

⁵ Hobbes took sides in a complex of conflicts going on in his time: the opposition between a hierarchical or democratic organization of the church, between “Roman” rituals or a sober service of God’s Word, and finally between king and Parliament. Hobbes inclined toward absolute monarchy, a state church, and rich rituals. See Martinich 1995: 1-19.

immanent representation of the transcendent, the key feature in the development of a new political theology, a theology of the absent God. Although Thomas Hobbes is often depicted as an atheist (first by orthodox believers and later on by secular thinkers who take over this judgment by people whom they believe to be fundamentally wrong on other issues), I will argue that he develops a theology of his own, anticipating many theologies of more recent times. The “radical transcendence” of God is, for example, derived from a literal interpretation of Christ’s announcement of his return at the end of times, implying that he is absent in the meantime. Hobbes thus sharply rejects “immanent transcendence” without rejecting the existence of God; on the contrary, he develops a theology around worship and disallows any “scientific” theology. God should be worshipped, but he cannot be known. The political conclusion Hobbes draws from his political theology is the radically secular nature of political power. No power in particular can be legitimized or rejected by reference to a divine ground. The justification of this thesis does not run counter to theological reasoning. It is plausible that Hobbes, not unlike Augustine, develops a *negative* political theology—a theological defense of the non-divine character of political order (Maurer 1983: 119-121). Precisely because God is transcendent, no political power can claim an absolute status. As Hobbes says, it is only authority, not truth, that makes laws.

Transcendence and Representation in Hobbes’ Leviathan

As far as I know, transcendence is not a word Hobbes uses, even though it can be seen as a problem that is at the heart of his ideas on the world, on human life, on the social and political order in which people are able to live a decent life. Man is a lonely creature. He (or she) is not an animal driven by instinct and closely connected to its natural environment. Human life is mediated by emotions and by reason. Man lives his life in a world that he must “conquer” by using his physical and mental abilities (power). Nor is he by nature inclined to be a habitual part of a community, living in peace with his fellow human beings according to the customs surrounding him. He is not a po-

litical animal (Hobbes 1996: 17.6ff.).⁶ Man is lost in this world, and his basic emotion is fear (13). It is here that the problem of transcendence and representation starts. Man does not know the world as a whole; he does not know what his fellow human beings are up to and does not have any objective evidence regarding the question of how to live well. Hobbes contends, of course, that science gives us sufficient knowledge of the world, but by this we only know the general qualities of things and the rules of their movements. As far as personal felicity or misery is concerned, man lives in uncertainty. He needs a guide. If he chooses to be his own guide, to make himself his own judge, to follow his emotions and his rational and physical power, he makes a mistake. He ignores his dependence on guarantees transcending his own power. The result of this failure is that life with his fellow human beings ends up in “a war, as is of every man, against every man” (13.8/13), and it will be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (13.9). He can also look for an external guide, transforming an obligation to secure his own life from *in foro interno* into *in foro externo* (15.36). Hobbes does believe that there is an answer to the question of how to live well, yet he contends that, for human beings, the true answer is hidden, although they are not completely in the dark. Reason can find out some basic rules that will lead people in the direction of a more peaceful life—a necessary condition for all other pleasurable things in human existence.

Hobbes is then confronted with the problem of religion—for him primarily Christian religion (including those parts of the Jewish Scriptures integrated into the canon of the church, and including Christian religious criticism relating to pagan religions which has become part of its theology). Given that there are only two alternatives and that one alternative is bad from the start, only the other is left. If man needs a guide, who is he to follow? That is the problem. Religion is born out of fear, connected to human reason monitoring the world for dangers and benefits and developing a sense for causality (12.2ff.). People believe that there are invisible powers. They are said to help

⁶ The number in brackets in the text refer to chapters and sections in this edition.

man if he is willing to honor these “gods” or “spirits” in the proper way. Basically, “natural” religion (religion emerging from human nature in the natural human condition) scans what transcends human knowledge in order to find signs of the divine presence and to find ways to gain the favor of the gods. Following Augustine and a long tradition of Christian religious criticism, Hobbes rejects this kind of religion. It is mere superstition and magic. He accepts the Jewish and Christian belief that God has revealed himself in word (to Moses and the prophets), and in person (Jesus, being the Christ or the Messiah). *True religion* (12.22) puts an end to the *uncertainty* of “natural” religion concerning the transcendent realm, bearing the answers to basic human questions, because, in His revelation, God has made himself known to human eyes and ears. Religion that stems from natural causes (not revelation) is unmasked as a mere *human* interpretation of the divine realm, lacking authorization by God himself.⁷

Hobbes’ radical interpretation of Christian theology paves the way for a specific solution of the crisis of representation, the problem of a multitude of more or less uncompromising guides all claiming to represent God’s government in this world. The solution is the establishment of a “mortal God” under the “immortal God” (17.13) who is to be the guide for humans united in the same commonwealth, awaiting the Final Judgment that is to come. Hobbes’ famous formula, *sed auctoritas non veritas facit legem* (cf. 26.22⁸), makes clear that, although we cannot expect any secular or human guide to possess true answers to the questions of (political) life, we cannot live without a guide either. The choice, again, is between war and peace. In addition, peace is only secured when the wars of truth are overcome by a covenant of people who promise to keep the laws commanded by their sovereign. At the same time, people may *privately* cherish what they see as the truth. In those areas of life about which

⁷ According to Augustine (*De civitate Dei*, book VI), this want of divine legitimacy of pagan religion is admitted by the very historian of Roman religion himself, Terentius Varro.

⁸ The phrase itself is from the Latin edition, Hobbes 1961: 202.

the sovereign is silent, people may do as they please, following the guide of their choice.

Most Christians had, and perhaps still have, great trouble with accepting this interpretation of the biblical texts, since it challenges nearly everything Christianity has become, after its transformation from a heretical Jewish sect into a worldwide religious movement, albeit in various separate communities. This is understandable if we realize that Hobbes is reading these texts and analyzing the history of Christianity from a specific point of view. His only interest is to construe the relation between a transcendent truth and its secular representation in such a way that civil war is avoided by the obedience of all to a political guide in a world not fully known by man. I will concentrate on three main points in Hobbes' political theology: (1) the distinction between knowledge and worship of God, (2) his reading of the Bible as an account of types of representation of God's government in this world, and (3) his criticism of the doctrine of *potestas indirecta*.

Knowledge and Worship

Hobbes repeatedly instructs the reader that God cannot be an object of knowledge or comprehension. He can only be the addressee of worship. If Christian religion is reduced to the combination of (the interpretation of) revelation and natural theology (i.e. ancient philosophy), such a doctrine sounds heretical and even atheistic. In fact, Christian theology as a "scientific" theory of God belongs to what Hobbes depicts as the false doctrines arriving from the "kingdom of darkness" (discussed in part 4 of *Leviathan*). In fact, Hobbes reduces religion to a political theology. This is the first sign that, for Hobbes, God has become radically transcendent, i.e. beyond the reach of our senses and our reason. There cannot be a science of God. In fact, Hobbes argues that making God into an object of human knowledge is blasphemy. Knowledge, for Hobbes, is calculating what consequences derive from specific causes or predicates of things and hence knowing how to produce or prevent these effects. Knowledge is power. How can human beings become the masters of God, as they can, within certain limits, become the masters of nature?

The most fascinating aspect of Hobbes' distinction between knowledge and worship—although it seems to contradict his overall monistic approach—is his doctrine of *artificial bodies*. Whereas the movements and qualities of natural bodies can be known, artificial bodies like the commonwealth or a church can exist only as long as people remain reverential and faithful to their institutions. Worship or *cultus* (mainly treated in 31.8ff., 45.12ff.) is the outward behavior of people (words and deeds) by which they honor those who have power (*potestas*). But the reverse is also possible: the worship of a person, institution, or a divine instance produces the view that this person, institution, or divine instance has power. Artificial bodies can be established if people confess in their doings that they take these bodies seriously and comply with the authoritative representation of these bodies (i.e. the interpretation by the sovereign of his rule). What people really believe is not even important. They are free in secret (37.13). We should note that, in his reading of Hobbes' political philosophy, Spinoza radicalizes Hobbes' monism (only natural bodies exist) to the extent that a hierarchy of powers, an artificial body, can exist only as long as "real" natural power (*potentia*) supports it.⁹ The way Hobbes treats worship and tries to keep it distinct from knowledge (which is only about natural bodies), makes it clear that religious belief remains a basic assumption of his political philosophy. It also makes clear that politico-religious interests have priority over "philosophical" doctrine (46.18).¹⁰ Without an appropriate the-

⁹ See the opening phrases of chapter 17 and 20 of Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*. Although less clear than in Hobbes, Spinoza equally has difficulties with integrating his political doctrine of *potestas* into a monistic, naturalistic philosophy of *potentia*.

¹⁰ "But to what purpose (may some man say) is such subtlety in a work of this nature, where I pretend to nothing but what is necessary to the doctrine of Government and Obedience? It is to this purpose, that men may no longer suffer themselves to be abused, by them, that by this doctrine of Separated Essences, built on the Vain Philosophy of Aristotle, would fright them from obeying the Laws of their Country, with empty names.... For who will endeavour to obey the Laws, if he expect Obedience to be Poured or Blown into him? Or who will not

ology, i.e. a doctrine of the distinction between “transcendence” and “immanence,” the foundation of the commonwealth, this artificial body, is endangered.

God’s Kingdom

Hobbes does not deny that divine law, i.e. God’s commands, has the highest authority. In fact, in his view, God can only be taken as a power to which humans owe reverence and obedience. Because God can only be the addressee of worship, there is really no difference between a secular and a divine political order, except that, in the first, authority is in human hands, whereas, in the second, it is in the hands of God.¹¹ On all fronts, Hobbes views secular and spiritual (or ecclesiastical) power as identical. *Ecclesias* is a gathering of people united by a leader (39), *holy* and *public* are the same thing (the fact that things belong to a certain domain, that of the sovereign, be it a king or God; 35.14ff.), *law* is common to nature, reason, God’s kingdom, and a secular commonwealth (26), etc.

God creates nature, and in this sense, we can speak of nature as the kingdom of God, albeit in a metaphorical sense (31.2). In nature, the laws of God are irresistible because of the fact that God’s power is irresistible. Hobbes does not seem to take God’s presence in his creation as a representation of God in this world, nor does he seem to say that God is present as part in Nature. As a creator, God is absent from Nature, but what he created is a deterministic system.¹² Therefore, we can-

obey a Priest, that can make God, rather than his Sovereign; nay than God himself? Or who, that is in fear of Ghosts, will not bear great respect to those that can make the Holy Water, that drives them from him?”

¹¹ For God nothing is impossible, but for man—including the sovereign— there are limits to what he can do in this world.

¹² About twenty years later, Spinoza gave a more radical version of this thesis by separating the necessity of the workings of natural creatures (by the identification of God’s power and the power of nature) from the realm of human law. In Spinoza’s view, we cannot place God’s power and the power of kings on the same level—they

not blame God for the existence of evil in this world (31.6). Conversely, if we take law as a rule addressed to the subjects of a sovereign, we must admit that people can violate the laws, and that they can be punished for transgressing the law. This relationship between law and subject is essentially political. Can we speak of a kingdom of God, a *theocracy*, in this real and no longer metaphorical sense of the term kingdom? Yes, we can, provided people take God to be their lawful sovereign. In this case, God must reveal his laws to human beings. If this is the case, God leaves a trace in this world that could be called a representation of divine law.

In fact, this was only the case at the time of Moses, who was actually more of a lieutenant of God than a representation. This kingdom of God lasted until the Jews elected a secular king. The immediate presence of God in Jesus, his Son, could have been a second kingdom of God (a second covenant as it is called), but it proves to be of a different kind. Jesus explicitly denies that his kingdom is of this world. He only promised those who listened to him that His Kingdom would come. Jesus ascends to heaven, after having announced his future return as a king in this world. This reconstruction of the stories of the Bible shows the point Hobbes wishes to make.¹³ The main thesis is that, between the first and the second coming of Christ, *there is no kingdom of God in this world*. After Christ, God is silent (32.9). No human being and no institution can claim to represent God in this world. Those who pretend to be the true representatives of God in this world are in fact “diabolic” forces, accomplices of the Kingdom of Darkness (47.17).¹⁴ It is too much

are substantially different. See chapters 4 and 16 of his *Theological-Political Treatise*.

¹³ Of course, I will leave aside the question if his reading of the Bible holds.

¹⁴ “And therefore by the aforesaid rule, of *cui bono*, we may justly pronounce for the Authors of all this Spiritual Darkness, the Pope, and Roman Clergy, and all those besides that endeavour to settle in the minds of men this erroneous Doctrine, that the Church now on Earth, is that Kingdome of God mentioned in the Old and New Testament.”

to say that God is dead or that he does not exist. He is simply absent, not represented in this world—until He comes to make his Final Judgment (42.128). This interpretation prepares the ground for Hobbes' central thesis: in this world, there is only secular power. It should, however, be borne in mind that, for Hobbes, this is a *theological* thesis. The apocalyptic framing of the thesis is essential, because otherwise we cannot deny on solid grounds the claim of any secular power to be a true representation of God's government of the world! It is the word of Christ, i.e. the revelation of God's will, that no secular power can be worshipped as a divine representation.¹⁵

Hobbes does not deny the possibility of an "immanent transcendence" of God, although he restricts God's presence to his self-revelation to a single person and to the coming of Christ. Of course, Hobbes argues in an agnostic style and on the sole basis of what is written in the Bible. His reading makes clear that people who have not experienced revelation themselves cannot possibly *know* if such a revelation has taken place in the life of another person—the witnesses to Moses and the prophets or those who lived with Jesus or heard him speak can only believe what they were part of (32). The affirmation of the truth of revelation then depends on the credibility or authority of the person who claims that God has revealed his word to him. Faith and knowledge are two different things. Faith belongs to the sphere of worship, i.e. the discernment of hierarchy. Despite the absence of an immediate experience of God's presence, worship of God is still possible, and does not contradict the subjection to secular power, to the "mortal God" in this world, the sovereign. But this worship of God should comply with what is said in God's revealed words. It should be rever-

¹⁵ Hobbes radicalizes the solemn argument by Pope Gelasius I (in his letter *Duo sunt*) underpinning the distinction between secular and spiritual power, which says that only Christ can be Priest and King at the same time. For Hobbes, the argument shows rather that no secular power, *be it a king, a pope, or a prophet*, can claim to represent the Kingdom of God that only Christ can establish when he decides the time is fit.

ence for an absent God, awaiting the future erection of His Kingdom.

Against Indirect Power

One of the most interesting points in Hobbes' political philosophy is his criticism of the doctrine of *potestas indirecta in temporalibus*, the competence of the pope to intervene in the realm of secular power on spiritual grounds, a doctrine that the Jesuit theologian Bellarminus defended in Hobbes' time (42.121ff.). The Roman church claimed supremacy over the political realms of Europe, pretending that it united *de jure* all Christians within one community. In fact, Hobbes rejects the doctrine of the two powers, "state" and "church," altogether (29.6, 29.15, 39.5). It is easy to see from the previous sections why Hobbes takes this stand. The absence of God in this world undermines any pretention of public representation of the divine in this world. In the public domain there can only be one representation, which is the lawful sovereign power authorized by the people to represent them in the government of the commonwealth. This same sovereign decides what the content of religion is.

The rationality of Hobbes' aversion to this doctrine of indirect power is that if one allows a superior power to overrule the decisions of a sovereign power, people will become subject to both powers. They must be loyal and obedient to powers that might eventually contradict one another. In fact, this undermines all loyalty and obedience. As Hobbes argues, it will lead to a split within society between those who adhere to the first power and those who adhere to the second power. Civil war will be the outcome. The quintessence of peace is the unification of the people under one law.

In Christian Europe, the doctrine of indirect power has strong support because it is deeply rooted, as Hobbes clearly saw, in the belief that there are two worlds, two realms, two kingdoms. Most people believe that laws are not by definition just, and that there is a difference between positive law and justice—whatever one might mean by that concept. In the end, Hobbes does not deny that Final Judgment will indeed show that much of what secular sovereigns have ordered turns out be contrary to divine law. He does not even deny the right of people to evaluate established laws on their own terms. What he

does deny, however, is that any human being or institution is closer to God's judgment than others are. It is precisely because God's transcendent law is, in the final analysis, not represented in this world that we must establish an arbitrary power to decide in case of conflict. This harsh decisionism notwithstanding, Hobbes believed that the civil law does not have to be tyrannical but that it will conform to the laws of nature, which are the laws of reason.

Reason turns out to be another source of divine revelation (31.3). Man is able to properly discern the rules of living on the basis of his experience and his calculation of causal relations. It is easy to see, for example, that showing contempt for someone will make this person angry and could be dangerous for the insulter. Thus, through reason, "nature" (God's creation) teaches us to behave socially (15.20). Reason will show that we should adhere to the establishment of a commonwealth and agree to the covenant, made by all, to authorize one man or an assembly of men (17.13) to make laws for us all, to be our public conscience. This is why it can appear as if Hobbes' rationalist political philosophy can stand on its own feet. Theological arguments need not to support it. Nevertheless, as I explained earlier, human beings cannot be guided merely by their own reason but need a sovereign power (see Hobbes 1999: 136ff.; 2.5.2).¹⁶

Conclusion

Hobbes prepared the ground on which modern theories of political representation could develop, although Hobbes himself seems to be opposed to its basic feature, anti-authoritarianism. The liberal claim that humans are, in principle, worthy and able to be their own guides in life and that political power is only legitimate when individuals are granted basic liberties overruled Hobbes' political philosophy. Nevertheless, two principles of Hobbes' political theory of representation, based on his political theology of an absent God, remain valid even today. First, in case of a conflict between individuals, arbitration that is only decision (*auctoritas*) and not performed in the name of a final

¹⁶ XXIV.2 in this edition.

truth (*non veritas*), is still to be preferred to any form of "final judgment" (in the name of some truth). Judgments by people of other people's conduct remain relative and provisional. Second, the tendency for individuals to adopt their own guides as absolute representations of "transcendent" truth should be avoided, which can be done only by establishing a public religion defending the existence of a transcendent God whose Final Judgment is still to come. This also might preclude the other side of individualism: the belief that people are not in need of any guide whatsoever, because there is no "true" answer to the question of how they are to live a good life.

Does Hobbes anticipate a notion of transcendence as "alterity" in order to prevent a possible consequence of his "secularizing" political philosophy, namely radical immanence? Or, to put the question differently, does a present-day reception of Hobbes need his political theology, or can it do without and rely on the "materialistic" arguments he also gave? To my mind, the real question is why one should be a "materialist" in the first place. The answer is in the final, fourth, part of *Leviathan*. Idealism or dualism leads to "seeing double," and this brings us back to the divisive element of secular and spiritual powers. Against all those who think that Hobbes is a materialistic and atheistic philosopher, I would argue for a more cautious interpretation. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes is not claiming *the* truth (although he is convinced that his argument is true in the light of reason), but he is arguing for a doctrine that enhances public peace and the acceptance of an undivided public power. He is designing a "public theology," i.e. what we should confess in public, professing our allegiance to a regime that protects our physical existence. Like Plato, but with a contrary content, his advice is to tell the citizens only those stories that correspond to a basic theological model. God has created this world, which is the sum of all bodies moving and living within its realm. Thought, speech, and discourse must be viewed as utterances of those bodies we call human. Apart from his creation (Nature, to be known by reason), God revealed himself twice to make clear to humankind that they should not speculate about his essence but obey his commands instead. Man will be judged at the end of time, but, in the meantime, he or she should behave properly and live peacefully. We should think this way as good

citizens, but there is no need to believe it is the truth. Hobbes was God's prophet in a time when people started to imagine that God was truly present in this world in their own conscience. As a prophet of the true God, he warned everyone that representing God in this world—to present oneself as a true guide of humanity—is utter blasphemy. So it seems we still need his or a similar political theology of an absent God ("the Other," not of this world) to prevent new totalitarian ideologies (including the more "secular" ones) to gain absolute power over people.¹⁷

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¹⁷ For a similar idea relating to Spinoza, see Terpstra 2004.

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