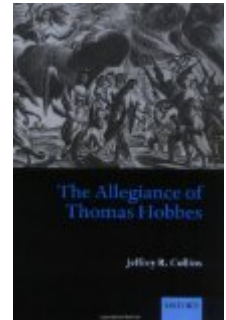




Jeffrey R. Collins. *The Allegiance of Thomas Hobbes.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. xi + 404 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-926847-4.



Reviewed by David Martin Jones

Published on H-Albion (April, 2007)

Jeffrey Collins's interpretation of the allegiance of Thomas Hobbes significantly revises the prevailing understanding of Hobbes as a fairly consistent Royalist and a supporter, if a somewhat lukewarm one, of the Tudor-Stuart settlement of the English church. Focusing upon Hobbes's understanding of religion and, more importantly, his evolving understanding of the relationship between state and church, Collins, by contrast, seeks to reassess the moral and political vision contained in his masterwork *Leviathan* (1651). This emphasis upon the centrality of the place of religion and the government of the church to Hobbes's conception of allegiance affords some provocative and controversial insights.

As Collins explains in his introduction, the "persistent" tendency in Hobbes scholarship "to separate the religious implications of his work from the political has obscured the central position that Erastian ecclesiology enjoyed in Hobbes's political theory" (p. 5). By contrast, revealing both the Erastianism and the Machiavelian humanism and skepticism that informs Hobbes's religion leads to a radical reassessment

of Hobbes's role and political allegiance in the Interregnum and explains his neglected, but "surprisingly favourable assessment of Oliver Cromwell, and his main faction, the Independents" (p. 7). Hobbes's political conduct during the Interregnum, often overlooked by Hobbes scholars, now becomes central to the understanding of his political philosophy and the reception of his ideas in both the 1650s and at the Restoration. In order to explore this context, Collins draws attention to the religious and political character of lesser known and neglected writings in Hobbes's *oeuvre* like his bitter controversy during the 1650s with the Oxford mathematician and Presbyterian, John Wallis, ostensibly about geometry, but extending into a politically charged debate about the teaching and purpose of the universities. In this recuperation of the Erastian Hobbes, Collins gives particular prominence to *Behemoth* (1682), Hobbes's unjustly neglected account, unpublished during his lifetime, of the causes of the Civil War in general and the perverse consequences resulting from a dualist structure in church and state.

Comprehending Hobbes's allegiance, therefore, requires both historical context and close attention to the text. In this Collins is, as he acknowledges, influenced by Leo Strauss's view of the genesis of Hobbes's political philosophy. For Strauss, Hobbes played a critical role in defining the modern political understanding of natural right, the rational conception of both the state and the citizen and, as a consequence, the radical revision of the classical and Christian understanding of human nature and political obligation. Because of the radicalism and atheism that permeated the Hobbesian project, Strauss claimed Hobbes deliberately cultivated an esoteric language that revealed his message only to a cognoscenti aware of its terms of reference. This rhetorical strategy, Collins contends, was particularly evident in the scriptural hermeneutics Hobbes's deployed in the third part of *Leviathan* to support his view of the church. As Collins explains, "the task of undermining Christianity while preserving its instrumental value ... explains the esoteric qualities of Hobbes" (p. 33).

Moreover it was recognized as such, in the 1650s, by both Cromwellian advocates of *de facto* obedience to the power in physical occupation of the realm like Francis Osborne, Marchamont Nedham, and John Hall as well as those magisterially inclined Independent clergy like Oxford Vice Chancellor John Owen and free thinking advocates of Independency like Henry Stubbe. Conversely, his Anglican and Presbyterian critics, both during the Interregnum and at the Restoration, found Hobbism disturbing precisely because of its implicit attack on Christianity. Central to this debate, and to the character of the revolution more generally, Collins avers, "was less a battle over theology than a struggle over the location of religious power within the emerging modern state" (p. 58). In this struggle, therefore, Hobbes's doctrine is central for those innovators in church and state who advocated that the place of religion

had to be one of service to and dependence upon an abstract sovereign power.

It was, furthermore, this radical solution to authority and allegiance that those who hunted Leviathan after 1651 sought to neutralize. Here, Collins's scrupulous attention to the Erastian character of Hobbes's thought pays dividends in his elucidation and evaluation of the critical response of the exiled church. Whilst there is a well-established literature on the polemical assault on Hobbes and Hobbism from those seeking preferment in the restored church after 1660, Collins rightly emphasizes instead the more insightful response of the moral and political leadership of the Anglican church in the 1650s promulgated by Henry Hammond, Brian Duppa, and Gilbert Sheldon. In particular, Collins draws attention to Herbert Thorndike's neglected *Epilogue to the Tragedy of the Church of England* (1659), which recognized that "Hobbes's 'dissolution of Ecclesiastical Power into the Secular' was aimed at creating a godless civil religion" (pp. 251-252). For Thorndike, as for Leo Strauss, Hobbes had elevated rationality and natural law "into an idol" (p. 252).

Recovering Thomas Hobbes as a revolutionary theorist has further consequences that Collins explores perhaps too briefly in his conclusion. A number of contemporary communitarian and radical democratic theorists, particularly in the Anglo-American world, have since the 1990s become "much enamoured with the ideological axis dividing interest-oriented liberals from communitarian republicans" (p. 278). This contemporary ideology which regularly and selectively raids the historical record to lend credence to its questionable claim that republicanism as a model is more accommodating than classic liberalism to communal goods and moral virtues, is, Collins demonstrates, misconceived. As Collins correctly notes, a properly "historically informed understanding of the period that nurtured both of these traditions

calls into doubt the saliency of any model that places them in dramatic opposition" (p. 278).

Somewhat differently, casting Hobbes as a revolutionary enables the English Revolution more generally to be viewed as a "powerful anticipation of the broader Enlightenment and its pattern of state building that everywhere required centralizing states to dismantle 'often violently' the privileges of rival corporate entities such as aristocratic orders, private armies, guilds and, most traumatically, the church" (p. 280). In this activity, Collins could perhaps have focused his gaze more critically upon Hobbes's radical assault not only upon the authority of the church to promote his Erastian vision, but also upon the traditional manner in which allegiance in church and state was expressed. Central to maintaining the traditional view of authority was the belief that all subjects owed obedience in law and conscience to the settlement in church and state acknowledged by a process of asseverating state oaths. For Collins, Hobbes's understanding of conscience, if not entirely conventional, demonstrated a "rhetorical deference" and valued the "sanctity of internal" or private conscience. This, Hobbes averred, should never be forced, and in this Collins sees once more Hobbes's sympathy for the Independent view of religious faith as a strictly "internal phenomenon" (p. 124).

Such orthodoxy, however, seems strange given that Hobbes viewed conscience and the casuistic mode of political and moral argument it sustained with a high degree of skepticism, especially if we read him in the esoteric manner Collins advocates. Thus, in his discussion of "The Ends or Resolutions of Discourse," Hobbes explains that "when two or more men know of one and the same fact, they are said to be CONSCIOUS of it one to another which is as much to know it together. And because such are fittest witnesses of the facts of one another or of a third it was and ever will be reputed a very evil act for anyone to speak against his Conscience. Afterwards men made use

of the same word metaphorically for knowledge of their own secret facts and therefore it is Rhetorically said that the Conscience is a thousand witnesses. And last of all men vehemently in love with their own new opinions and obstinately bent to maintain them gave these their opinions that revered name of conscience as if they would have it seem unlawfull to change or speak against them and so pretend to they are true when they know at most that they think so." [1] In this radical reevaluation conscience ceases to be the internal guide and moral register emphasized in both Protestant and Catholic theology, and becomes instead something far more provisional, rhetorical, and uncertain.

In an analogous vein, Collins maintains Hobbes justified the change of political allegiance to Cromwell on legalist and defactoist grounds, grounds analogous to those advocated by Cromwellian propagandists like John Hall and Marchamont Nedham to defend submission to the power in present possession regardless of *de jure* right. In unquestioningly following this defactoist theory classically outlined by Quentin Skinner and J. M. Wallace (whose loyalist account of the political theory of Andrew Marvell's "Ode to Cromwell" in *Destiny His Choice* [1968], is curiously ignored), Collins overlooks the fact that Hobbes was not a conventional defactoist at all. For central to Hobbes's understanding of the social contract governing authority and allegiance, subjects owed obedience to the sovereign that protected them. Consequently, when that protection ceased so too did allegiance. Hobbes wrote *Leviathan* precisely to clarify the true character of allegiance rather than engage in outmoded casuistic distinctions between *de facto* and *de jure* authority.

Such caveats notwithstanding, Collins has written a meticulously researched, stimulating, and challenging interpretation of Hobbes's Erastianism. In so doing, he demonstrates once again

what a seminal and profoundly iconoclastic philosopher Hobbes was.

Note

[1]. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 48-49.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: David Martin Jones. Review of Collins, Jeffrey R. *The Allegiance of Thomas Hobbes*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. April, 2007.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13026>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.