

Hobbes and the meaning of Religion: a study in methodology*

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Abstract

Hobbes's methodological concern about the correct use of speech in science leads to a problem in Philosophy of Religion about how modern concepts can obfuscate "ancient" realities if we do not use them with caution. What we currently call by the name "religion" used to have an unbreakable link with morality, manners, and even laws, so that it is a kind of naivety to consider it as mere superstition and spiritual belief. It was only after the modern and Christian rupture between "the political world" and "the spiritual world" that the word "religion" began to be used as such. In this paper, I discuss the concept of religion regarding Hobbes' singular way of thinking about human nature and its particularity called "Seed of Religion".

Resumo

A preocupação metodológica de Hobbes sobre o uso correto da linguagem na ciência, nos leva ao problema que pode ocorrer no âmbito da Filosofia da Religião, de como conceitos modernos podem ofuscar realidades

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"antigas" se não os usarmos com cautela. O que atualmente chamamos de religião, costumava ser algo inseparável da moralidade, boas maneiras e até mesmo leis. Portanto, pode ser uma forma de ingenuidade considerá-la como mera superstição e crença espiritual. Foi somente após a ruptura moderna e cristã entre "o mundo político" e "o mundo espiritual" que a palavra "religião" começou a ser usada como tal. Neste artigo, discuto o conceito de religião dentro do modo singular do pensamento de Hobbes sobre a natureza humana e sua particularidade chamada "Semente da Religião".

Introduction

The Cognitive Science of Religion aim is to give us reasons why we humans are inclined to form religious beliefs. It is made by the investigation of the link between human nature and the theological position or beliefs. Considering the nature of religion as a main subject of research of this field, we should first, discusses what are we calling by the name of "religion".

Hobbes' s methodological concern about the correct use of speech in science leads to a problem in Philosophy about how modern concepts can obfuscate "ancient" realities if we do not use them with caution. It seems that what we currently call by the name "religion" is incomplete and not easily applied over non-Christian or ancient cultures. The spiritual or gods beliefs used to have an unbreakable link with morality, manners, and even laws, in a way that it is a kind of naivety and unfairness to consider it as mere superstition and spiritual belief. If we look at history, we will find that only after the modern and Christian rupture between "the political world" and "the spiritual world" the word "religion" began to be used as we use today.

Firstly, I will discuss the problem of the current meaning of the concept "religion" using Nongbry's (2013) work. Secondly I will bring Hobbes' definition of the word, regarding his singular way of thinking human nature and its particularity called "Seed of Religion".

1. The concept of religion

From Latin, *religio*, meaning "bond or obligation", the word "religion" today bears a meaning related to faith and the belief in God or supernatural powers, it is discussed by Brent Nongbri¹ (2013), as a modern and European

¹ Brent Nongbri is a specialist in the study of early Christian manuscripts, ancient Mediterranean cultures and methodological problems in the study of religion. Member of the Ancient History department at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia.

way of interpretation that is not easily placed over ancient or different cultures. During the past thirty years, various experts have observed that no ancient language has a term that corresponds to what modern people understand by "religion" because the concept corresponding to religion do not have risen in non-Christian cultures.

"They have pointed out that the names of supposedly venerable old religions can often be traced back only to relatively recent past ("hinduism," for example, to 1787 and "Buddhism" to 1801). And when the names do derive from ancient words, we find that the early occurrences of those words are best understood as verbal activities rather than conceptual entities; thus the ancient Greek term *ioudaismos* was not "the religion of Judaism" but the activity of Judaizing, that is, following the practices associated with the Judean ethnicity" (NONGBRI, 2013 p.2).

The isolation of the name "religion" as a sphere of life separated from politics or manners is a new particular notion. In the ancient world, the gods were involved in all aspects of life, *"The very idea of "being religious" requires a companion notion of what it would mean to be "not religious" and this dichotomy was not part of the ancient world"* (NONGBRI, 2013 p.4). Thus, so far, it is reasonable to have in mind that, to study religion, is very important to consider that:

"The idea of religion as a sphere of life separate from politics, economics, and Science is a recent development in European history, one that has been projected outward in space and backward in time with the result that religion appears now to be a natural and necessary part of our world" (NONGBRI, 2013 p.7).

What do we mean by religion? The historians are pointing out that the separation between the political world and the spiritual world took place along the birth of the concept of religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In that way, I'd like to bring forward the theory of religion that arose in England by the light of Thomas Hobbes² around 1650. We are going to discuss what Hobbes means when he tried to define "religion" and how this study can help the CSR. Bringing up a question: What could be the cause of the Christian heritage of the category of religion?

Considering that what we understand by "religion" is something connected with a natural morality, the moral intuitions we find in Barrett's text "Cognitive science and natural theology" (2011) is an important claim in this investigation,

² Hobbes, in his writings, shows himself as a faithful Christian, according to Milner (1988) Christianity becomes, in Hobbes' hands, "a naturalistic religion, somewhat unnaturally clothed in biblical garments."

(...) such claims have great potential to be substantiated and amplified by cognitive science. What moral intuitions do humans have in common? We might also wonder about the evolution and development of moral intuitions. When did they arise in our ancestry? When do they appear in children? (BARRETT, 2011 pg.162).

2. Hobbes and Human Nature

When we first think about Thomas Hobbes, it comes to mind his great work of Political Philosophy called *Leviathan*. But when we look closer, *Leviathan* has a big amount of epistemology, made by a very unique study about perception and the science of speech and religion. Hobbes, as a firm opponent of Descartes, based all his theory over a materialistic ground, but different from other empiricists, he didn't overlook the world of religion. We can find at all his books a big amount of references about God and the sacred scriptures. As we find in *Leviathan*³ (1909):

Yet is not naturall Reason to be renounced. Neverthelesse, we are not to renounce our Senses, and Experience; nor (that which is the undoubted Word of God) our naturall Reason. For they are the talents which he hath put into our hands to negotiate, till the coming again of our blessed Saviour; and therefore not to be folded up in the Napkin of an Implicite Faith, but employed in the purchase of Justice, Peace, and true Religion. For though there be many things in Gods Word above Reason; that is to say, which cannot by naturall reason be either demonstrated or confuted; yet there is nothing contrary to it; but when it seemeth so, the fault is either in our unskilfull Interpretation or erroneous Ratiocination (HOBBS, 1909 p.140).

Hobbes, a philosopher of the transitional period, is still placed in a medieval culture where religion was completely linked with the political world. For him, the law of the state must be based on divine law, the law of nature. The state and the church are intricate. What makes him a materialist, or using an odd title, an empiricist Christian(NOTA) is the fact that for him, Nature's law, the law of the natural world, and God's law are the same.

2.1. The epistemological approach

³ The passages from *Leviathan* are from a reprinted publication made in 1909 from the original, made in 1651. I have not changed the way it was written, in Archaic English. Note also that, particularly in this passage, I will not analyse the contempt. The aim is just to show how his inclination to a religious way of thinking is clearly present in his texts.

What concerns us here is not Hobbes faith but his study of religion. We will start this investigation by his investigation on man. In the first chapter of *Leviathan* (Of Sense), he says that all thoughts or conceptions of the mind have their origin in sensation. In analyzing man's thought, first individually, he regards it as a representation or appearance of some quality of a body external to us, which we call an object. These objects act on our sensory organs producing a diversity of fancies, or representations. The sensitive quality is in the object, but what I feel of it is not. The object is in one place and its appearance in another, just as the object is one thing and the image of it another. The sensation is therefore an "Original Image" caused by the pressure of external things on my organs.

And though at some certain distance, the reall, and very object seem invested with the fancy it begets in us; Yet still the object is one thing, the image or fancy is another. So that Sense in all cases is nothing els but originall fancy, caused (as I have said) by the pressure, that is, by the motion, of externall things upon our Eyes, Eares, and other organs thereunto ordained (HOBBS,1909 p.14).

According to J. Finn (2010), Hobbes makes a materialistic description of sensation, which consists on the idea that sensation is the very physical movement generated in the mind during experience "our experiences of things, such as colors and sounds, are no more than which movements in the brain." He seems to anticipate what John Locke calls the "primary" and "secondary" qualities of the object (the "primary" as objective qualities, those that belong in fact to the object and "secondary" existing only in the mind.). Hobbes's description of sensation fits into a representational theory of perception in which outer objects, when perceived by our senses, produce a representation or appearance in our mind that is influenced by our experiences and ideas, the immediate object of my experience of a chair, for example, is the collection of my ideas of the qualities of the chair.

Imagination, different from sensation, is like the image of something previously seen. It can be made by any man simply by remembering or in a creative way of combining different objects of sensation to create something new, as a centaur that is the combination of a horse and a man. According to Hobbes, the difference between imagination and sense is a very important matter, because the ignorance of it can be used to trick or abuse people. Here we see his concern about the origin of religious feelings linked with supernatural reasons.

From this ignorance of how to distinguish Dreams, and other strong Fancies, from Vision and Sense, did arise the greatest part of the Religion of the Gentiles in time past, that worshipped Satyres, Fawnes, Nymphs, and the like; and now a days the opinion that rude

people have of Fayries, Ghosts, and Goblins; and of the power of Witches (HOBBS, 1909 p.16).

2.2. Man and the Supernatural

The first Rainbow seen was a miracle, but as they are becoming a frequent phenomenon, they are not, neither to those who know their natural causes nor to those who don't,

That which seemeth a Miracle to one man, may seem otherwise to another. Furthermore, seeing Admiration and Wonder, is consequent to the knowledge and experience, wherewith men are endued, some more, some lesse; it followeth, that the same thing, may be a Miracle to one, and not to another. And thence it is, that ignorant, and superstitious men make great Wonders of those works, which other men, knowing to proceed from Nature, (which is not the immediate, but the ordinary work of God,) admire not at all: As when Ecclipses of the Sun and Moon have been taken for supernaturall works, by the common people; when neverthelesse, there were others, could from their naturall causes, have foretold the very hour they should arrive (HOBBS, 1909 p.163).

If we think about witchcraft, for example, it is known today that a lot of the supposed magic potions made by witches are indeed drugs. People who used to know how to manipulate herbs and chemical elements could be called witches. The same for those who were called prophet or guessers for knowing physics laws.

2.3. Reason and body

First, before presenting the proposed concepts, I see the need to clarify another key definition for Hobbes, that of the word "body" or in Latin *corpore*. This word is used by him in the sense of extension or matter. It is important to consider that when Hobbes talks about the body, we should not consider the Cartesian notion of a material structure that opposes the pure and immaterial substance, or the notion of human body. From this concept, we will derive only the notion of matter. In the Hobbesian materialistic conception of the world and of man, everything that is a substance is a body, and by nature, matter. An animal, however, is not a simple body, but an animated body (*corporis animati*), man (*hominem*) is also an animated body, but endowed with reason, therefore, a rational animate body (*corporis animati rationalis*) (HOBBS, 2009).

We will discuss, from now on, what is this “reason” in man. According to Hobbes, children are not endowed with reason until they have attained the use of speech. Reason, then, is not innate as Sense and memory but as a faculty of the mind that is attained, not by experience but by exercise, the same faculty of reckoning:

Reason defined. Out of all which we may define, (that is to say determine,) what that is, which is meant by this word Reason, when wee reckon it amongst the Faculties of the mind. For REASON, in this sense, is nothing but Reckoning (that is, Adding and Subtracting) of the Consequences of generall names agreed upon, for the marking and signifying of our thoughts; I say marking them, when we reckon by our selves; and signifying, when we demonstrate, or approve our reckonings to other men (HOBBS, 1909, p23).

There is a dependence between reasoning and the speech (verbal discourse). From this ability of speech and reasoning, man is capable of scientific reasoning but he also receives the privilege of absurdity, which happens when one uses reason without any method or logic.

2.4. Faith and science

Hobbes was educated through scholastic tradition and his notion of philosophy is different from the one we have today. We note that when speaking of philosophy he does not distinguish it from science. To Hobbes, Philosophy is made by the scientific use of the words and, same as a reckoning and as math, is not a knowledge of fact.

Of all Discourse, governed by desire of Knowledge, there is, at last, an End either by attaining or by giving over. And in the chain of Discourse, wheresoever it be interrupted, there is an End for that time... No Discourse whatsoever, can End in absolute knowledge of Fact, past, or to come. For, as for the knowledge of Fact, it is originally, Sense; and ever after, Memory. And for the knowledge of Consequence, which I have said before is called Science, it is not Absolute, but Conditionall. No man can know by Discourse, that this, or that, is, has been, or will be; which is to know absolutely: but onely, that if This be, That is; if This has been, That has been; if This shall be, That shall be: which is to know conditionally; and that not the consequence of one thing to another; but of one name of a thing, to another name of the same thing (HOBBS, 1909, p.32).

However, Hobbes understands faith as any belief or state of trust. *“To have faith in, or trust to, or beleieve a man, signifies the same thing; namely, an opinion of the veracity of the man: But to beleieve what is said,*

signifieth onely an opinion of the truth of the saying” (HOBBS, 1909 p.32). Any kind of discourse we accept as truth only because we credit the speaker is a matter of faith.

From whence we may inferre, that when wee believe any saying whatsoever it be, to be true, from arguments taken, not from the thing it selfe, or from the principles of naturall Reason, but from the Authority, and good opinion wee have, of him that hath sayd it; then is the speaker, or person we believe in, or trust in, and whose word we take, the object of our Faith; and the Honour done in Believing, is done to him onely. (...) If Livy say the Gods made once a Cow speak, and we believe it not; wee distrust not God therein, but Livy. So that it is evident, that whatsoever we believe, upon no other reason, then what is drawn from authority of men onely, and their writings; whether they be sent from God or not, is Faith in men onely (HOBBS, 1909, p.32).

The ignorance of natural causes disposes a man to credulity, and if someone is unable to detect the impossibility of something, out of ignorance and without malice, he would be able to share lies and sometimes also to invent them. But, according to Hobbes, by natural reason and science as a method to find the truth, he can go against a false belief.

We can find in Herbert's (2011) reading that humans, in Hobbes' theory, are moved by a "continual and indefatigable generation of knowledge" and "the pursuit of morality is not only inseparable from man's irrepressible concern for his self-interest; it is also inseparable from the pursuit of science (...)".

2.5. The endeavour and the passions

According to Hobbes, there are two types of movements in animals, the vital and the voluntary. Vital movements are continuous, uninterrupted movements that occur throughout life, like the pulse or the breath. Voluntary movements, or animal movements, are movements that are performed by the members on a voluntary basis. Every beginning of movement is an endeavour. When this effort goes toward something that causes it, it is an appetite or desire. When effort is to avoid something, it is an aversion. Hence, aversion is given by avoiding or departing from something and desire by wanting to approach something. We can find here a big contribution to the embodied theories of cognition. His theory of the passions places the movement of the body as cause of the will and action. As a form of embodied will, the voluntary movement is made not by a mind's reckoning but by a passion, an animated process of the body that feels as it approaches or moves away itself.

This Endeavour, when it is toward something which causes it, is called APPETITE, or DESIRE; the later, being the generall name; and the other, often-times restrained to signifie the Desire of Food, namely *Hunger* and *Thirst*. And when the Endeavour is fromward something, it is generally called AVERSION. These words *Appetite*, and *Aversion* we have from the *Latines*; and they both of them signifie the motions, one of approaching, the other of retiring (HOBBS, 1909, p.26).

Herbert (2011) argues that the concept of "conatus", or "endeavour" in Hobbes' theory, allows a new interpretation of his philosophy as a complex philosophical system. According to Herbert, Hobbes' logical, empirical and political theories are not fragmented, but united through this concept, for in analyzing the concepts of space, matter, and body present in his theory, his materialism comes from a natural philosophy, and can be seen as a forerunner of modern phenomenology.

3. The seed of religion

By which means it hath come to passe, that from the innumerable variety of Fancy, men have created in the world innumerable sorts of Gods. And this Feare of things invisible, is the naturall Seed of that, which every one in himself calleth Religion; and in them that worship, or feare that Power otherwise than they do, Superstition (HOBBS, 1909, p.46).

3.1. Religion and superstition

There are no signs of religion in another animal but man. According to Hobbes, there is a peculiar quality in man, not to be found in other living creatures that he calls the "Seed of Religion", which is the singular passion of Curiosity, the first feature of it is the desire of knowing causes. "... it is peculiar to the nature of man, to be inquisitive into the Causes of the Events they see, some more, some lesse; but all men so much, as to be curious in the search of the causes of their own good and evill fortune." , what leads to the consideration of beginning of things. It comes from his observation of how things and animals are born.

Man observeth how one Event hath been produced by another; and remembreth in them Antecedence and Consequence; And when he cannot assure himselfe of the true causes of things (for the causes of good and evill fortune for the most part are invisible,) he supposes causes of them, either such as his own fancy suggesteth; or trusteth to the Authority of other men, such as he thinks to be his friends, and wiser than himselfe (HOBBS, 1909, p. 46).

3.2. Natural religion and curiosity

The natural cause of Religion is the anxiety of the time to come. Such as if someone makes little or no effort to look into the natural causes of things, he is inclined to suppose several kinds of invisible causes, increased by the fear or any passion he feels. However, some have the desire to research endlessly for answers about the causes and consequences of everything that surrounds him.

Natural Religion is not the opposite of the supernatural species of religions but it seems to be also the cause of them. According to Hobbes, the idea of God can come naturally from the passion called curiosity that is the constant desire in man, to know how and why. The love of the knowledge of causes draws man from consideration of the effect, to seek the cause, and again, the cause of that cause, which leads the ancient scientist to infer about an Eternal God, found as the last cause or a first mover. Curiosity as the passion that inclines humans to ask about causes can use two ways, one by the right reason that creates science or by a weak reason that without method and anchored in faith in authorities of the books culminates in opinion, religion or superstition (HOBBS, 1909).

Considering this, can we argue that religion and science come from that same seed called curiosity? In that way, the cause of religiosity in human beings is their reasoning ability, the skill that makes them search for answers about the causes and consequences of everything that surrounds them (which is not found in irrational creatures). As the speech has a fundamental role in reason, what would be its fundamental role for religion?

3.3. The category of religion in Hobbes

Hobbes distinguishes three concepts: Religion, Superstition, and True Religion. The simple or common use of the word "Religion" is considered to be the fear of invisible powers that is publicly allowed. The name of this exact same fear that is not publicly allowed is Superstition. The True Religion, he says, is considered when the power imagined, is truly such as we imagine (HOBBS, 1909). What culminates that his conception of religion is not as the one we have today, as he calls something "religion" and another thing as a "true religion", it makes us infer that the first one is a kind of false religion. And again, as he makes clear that superstition is the same thing that religion with the only difference of not being publicly allowed, he is stating that religion is superstition. So, is this concept of a "superstitious religion" similar to that one we categorize today as "religion"?

This word, in current common sense, is about someone's spiritual beliefs, not about ethnicity. If someone lives in a Christian country and was born in a Christian family and makes a daily life over a Christian calendar, he/she still can say, I am not a Christian. Then, Religion for us is not about our "people" but a belief or fear of a Christian God, which is indeed a supernatural power that is publicly allowed.

3.3.1. Acquisition

According to Hobbes (1909) there are some ways of acquisition of religious or of theist belief:

- a) By the fear of the unknown and ignorance about natural causes, people create names to invisible powers, (doing a kind of anthropomorphism)⁴;
- b) When looking for answers about own's fortunes and passions, one finds answers believing in an authority, like parents, priests or books;
- c) By their own meditation, by the desire to know the causes of natural bodies, when this investigation persists, he arrives in a first and eternal cause, that people call God. A kind of acknowledgment about something they assume that is unintelligible and divine.

3.3.2. Transmission

Prudence or a technique can be transmitted by observation, yet the transmission of religious beliefs seems to be made only by speech. It is based on a kind of explanation about causes and consequences not only activities or movements. If someone looks at a man praying and imitate him, staying on his knees and laying down his head, he is not making the same thing the prayer is doing, something is happening inside the mind of agent 1 that agent 2 cannot observe.

With both, good or bad intentions, the transmission of religious beliefs is everywhere. To teach people about virtues about respect and used as well as a way to calm down anxiety or fear, in sum, to bring peace of spirit. However, It's used often as an instrument of control, made to demand discipline, since from a parent to a son until by authorities or institutions that have a political interest in keeping obedience or power over people or individuals.

⁴ not his words but my interpretation.

4. Conclusion

Thomas Hobbes was fighting against the darkness he saw over the scholastic teachings in his time that he identified as an excess of superstition and lack of reason in philosophy and religion. Therefore, he consider science and methodology as a way out of this darkness. The concept of religion, that he defines in his writings as superstition is probably one of the origins of the modern and current use of that word. Nevertheless, what differs him from the later moderns was that he did not contrast it with the negative idea of "no religion" but with the concept of "true religion". According to Hobbes, a moral philosophy must be rooted in laws of nature; it must be a persistent search for the True Religion to be discovery by natural reason.

I want to stress that Hobbes's methodological concern about the correct use of speech in science is a genuine and important concern that brings up the problem of the use of the word "religion" in philosophy. That shows how a modern concept can obfuscate ancient realities if we don't use them with caution. What we currently call "religion" used to be something intricate with morality, manners, and even laws, in a way that is hard to consider everything we call by this name as an isolated sphere of life based on spiritual beliefs. The modern rupture between the political world and the spiritual world was one of the reasons the word "religion" emerged as contrast to "secularism". The current secular morality, laws and philosophy are "unreligious" only because it is grounded on man's complete freedom from God and from the laws of nature.

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