



Article

Religion as a Means of Political Conformity and Obedience: From Critias to Thomas Hobbes

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Abstract: This study identifies common perceptions between Thomas Hobbes' approach to religion with that of Critias the sophist. Despite the distance that separates the social environments within which each of these authors lived and wrote, in their political philosophy we can spot a shared set of concerns, whose importance transcend the historical and political contexts in which the authors lived and wrote: in the state of nature, where no organized commonwealth (or civil society) exists, capable of repressing the innate greed of men and women, savagery and conflict reign supreme; life is threatened by violence and extreme aggression. It is only the state of society that guarantees stability and good life. For both thinkers, belief in immaterial spirits protects the state of society; belief in God promotes obedience to civil law and guarantees human co-existence. In Critias' mind, religion is a necessary means to avert aggression, even when the State's executive powers are unable to punish offenders, using all necessary tools to prevent hostility and conflict. While civil law is the hallmark of peace and stability, belief in a transcendent entity that influences collective and individual modes of living, is an important addition to the pursuit of social peace. A few centuries later, Hobbes (influenced by the misery of the English Civil War) developed viewpoints that also highlight the role of religion in defending social peace. Nonetheless, in Hobbes' mind religion could safeguard stability only (A) when ecclesiastical authorities submit to the judgment of an omnipotent Sovereign and (B) when the coercive mechanisms of the State suppress religious pluralism, prohibiting different interpretations of the Bible, which Hobbes himself considered one of the main causes of conflict.

Keywords: Hobbes; Critias; religion; order; society; God; pluralism; factions



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“Must we resist Princes when we cannot obey them? Truly no; for this is contrary to our civill Covenant. What must we doe then? Goe to Christ by Martyrdome. Which if it seem to any man to be an hard saying, most certain it is that he believes not with his whole heart THAT JESUS IS THE CHRIST the Sonne of the living God”
(Hobbes 1998, *De Cive*, XVIII).

1. Introduction

This article intends to demonstrate the political role of religion in the philosophy of two thinkers, Critias (c. 460–403 BC) and Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). Certainly, there is a long line of research (presented in articles and monographs) dedicated to the philosophy of these authors. However, their ideas (especially on the political implications of religion) have not been comparatively studied. In this article, we identify a good deal of similarities in their views concerning the role of religion in politics. For both thinkers, belief in transcendent entities could guarantee peaceful coexistence. More importantly, religion inspires fear of law breaking; it is an effective tool of obedience; and it is the hallmark of political stability, peace, and security.

Of course, we value hermeneutical contextualism, which highlights the importance of interpreting sources by considering the influences they may have received from the socio-historical environment within which their authors lived (Skinner 1988, pp. 3–6). Or as Patton (2002) argued, hermeneutic philosophy insists that the interpretation of a text requires knowledge of the historical and cultural context “in which it was originally created as well as the cultural context within which it is subsequently interpreted”, and at the same time of “the conditions under which a human act took place” (p. 113). Contextualism insists on interpreting ideas and/or philosophical concepts by acknowledging “all the occasions and activities in which a given agent might have used the relevant forms of words” (Skinner 1988, p. 57); that is, in what sort of society the given author was writing? Those who claim that the autonomy of the text itself is sufficient for understanding what the author conveys focus exclusively on the universality of ideas deriving from the particular theoretical approach which is under examination (p. 29) and on its “dateless wisdom” (p. 30). However, quite often terms and words acquire different meanings in different societies and/or cultures. Thus, by neglecting the socio-historical elements attributed to a term within a given text interpreters risk crediting the author with the meaning he/she would not intend to convey, as Skinner claimed (p. 33).¹ Thus, we must acknowledge that Hobbes and Critias lived and wrote in different historical periods; they were influenced by dissimilar social values, norms, and modes of being. As Furedi (2013) argued, Hobbes’ influential works, especially his notorious *Leviathan*, “should be read as an attempt to contain and transcend the religious divisions of its time”, which (in Hobbes’ mind) are the most serious threats to social cohesion and peace (p. 183). He lived and wrote during the English Civil War. He experienced the collapse of social order and the subsequent chaotic violence unleashed in England by revolutionary groups and factions. This fear of anarchy and disorder prompted him to develop a theory that emphasizes the need for authoritarian control; in short, human beings must submit to the demands of a coercive government, which represses their insatiable desire for pride, possession of power, and property.

Critias occupies a peculiar position in the field of the sophistic movement. He was an enthusiastic and devoted listener to Socrates, and part of a solid political circle. He ascended into the higher ranks of Athenian society and usurped the State, imposing a tyrannical constitution, committing heinous political crimes. Critias’ main objective is to explain that political leaders, in their attempts to defend civil law, protecting societies from the immoral deeds of those who are possessed by greed, must sometimes act “immorally”; that is, they must impose tyrannical rule (if necessary), suppressing ancient liberties, in the pursuit of peace and security. Religion plays a crucial role in this attempt. As we understand, Critias engages with questions of timely importance. He invites us to think of leadership in relation to effectiveness, rather than in relation to ethics. There exist, in this regard, kernels of truth in most critics of contextualism, who insist that texts sometimes contain “transhistorical . . . enduring philosophical truths” (Demetriou 2022, pp. 151–52). Historical contexts do provide “useful supplementary material to a proper political philosophy” (Kelly 2012, p. 15). However, they “must be subordinate to the demands of philosophical justification” (ibid.). As Demetriou (2022) put it, texts are not always “inextricably bound to (and contingent upon) the historical situation” in which they had emerged (p. 153). Thus, while the social and historical context within which Critias and Hobbes lived and wrote is echoed in their viewpoints, there is no indication that common philosophical concerns of trans-historical significance cannot be identified in texts produced by these authors. The convergences (and divergences) we have identified in their approaches will allow us to answer questions that exist in classical and contemporary horizons of political thought.

We must also acknowledge that Hobbes is widely considered a proto-liberal thinker; the founders of Western liberalism (such as John Locke, Bernard Mandeville, Herbert Spencer, etc.), in spite of their abhorrence of royal absolutism, have borrowed arguments from Hobbes’ philosophy, upon which they built theories in favor of government by consent and individual liberty (Young 1959; Rapaczynski 1987; Lilla 2007; Theodosiadis 2021), laying the foundations of the modern (liberal) nation-state (Herrero 2023, p. 54) Thus,

aspects of Hobbes' thought lie deeply in the underpinning of the contemporary Western world. In other words, the spirit of his thought has remained with us ever since; it gives birth to things that continue to exist and have value for us. More importantly, we must acknowledge that Hobbes is commonly associated with the spread of rationalism in the Western world (Lilla 2007, p. 88); the Bible, he argued, could offer practical answers to timely questions instead of encouraging superstition. In Section 3 we will explain how in Hobbes' mind a "rationalized" version of the Christian religion constitutes the basis of his authoritarianism. More importantly, this "rationalized" Christian dogma reinforces the power of the State, offering strong peace prospects in society. In fact, modern States, as well as ancient political communities, rely (to a degree) on religious propaganda. They consider religion itself an ideological invention that promotes obedience to civil law.

First and foremost, both Critias and Hobbes were concerned with the transition from the anarchic state of nature—where (in Hobbes' terms) no organized commonwealth, common power, or other artificial body exists in order to coerce men and women, directing them towards the common benefit (Hobbes 2006, *Leviathan*, XVII)—to the state of society, whose ultimate concern is security and social peace. In Hobbes' mind, the best solution to the threat of disorder and mass violence of the state of nature (as explicitly explained in his *Leviathan*) is subjection to the unquestionable commands of an omnipotent Sovereign; that is, subjugation to a hereditary absolute monarchy (Strauss 1963, pp. 59–60). The omnipotent Sovereign must direct everyone's actions towards the common benefit (Hobbes 2006, *Leviathan* XIV; Furedi 2013, p. 182). Hobbes' preference for absolutism (over democracy or aristocracy) has been widely discussed.² According to Leo Strauss (1963), Hobbes considered monarchy as the only form of authority that corresponds to nature's original order, as opposed to aristocracy and democracy, which have been artificially produced by human beings (pp. 60, 65). An omnipotent monarch can defend natural order so long as he/she has none to disagree with him/herself "out of envy or greed", whilst a democratic "Assembly may; and that to such a height, as may produce a Civil Warre" (Hobbes 2006, *Leviathan* XIX). Furedi (2013) brought to our attention an aspect of Hobbes' political philosophy that has been downplayed by other scholars on this field: his argument about the devastating consequences of social anarchy (and, subsequently, his support for absolutism) are reflections of real-life experiences, that is, of cases where intense disagreement over Biblical interpretations led to the creation of social divisions, and (in turn) to mass mobilization against governments and institutions. For Hobbes, the English Civil War, was the outcome of the creation of Christian factions in the society, each of which followed its own approach to the Bible, inciting revolt against the established authorities (as we will further explain in Section 3). With this in mind, we will attempt to clarify that for Hobbes (2006), order and security, provided by a "great Leviathan", a "Mortall God" to whom "wee owe . . . our peace and defense" (*Leviathan* XVII), by a State that resorts to coercion, even at the expense of liberty, is coextensive to his insistence that religion is a necessary tool for social obedience, and to his emphasis on the need (on behalf of the Sovereign) to suppress religious pluralism in society, promoting a precise ("rational") Biblical interpretation. (Herrero 2023, p. 55).

Thus, we will focus on Hobbes' *De Cive*, where he "devotes two special chapters to Scriptural proof of his own theories of natural law and of the absolute power of kings" (Strauss 1963, p. 71), as well as on his *Leviathan*, where the thinker develops his view on religion as a means of political conformity, prompting men and women to adopt norms, widely shared beliefs, and modes of being that corroborate allegiance to established institutions. More specifically, the third part of his *De Cive* is entitled *Religion* (followed by *Liberty* and *Dominion*); the second book of his *Leviathan* (*Of A Christian Common-wealth*) is devoted to matters of religious morality and social order. Before shedding light on Hobbes' ideas, we will examine Critias' main argument concerning religion in relation to civil obedience. In his mind, religion developed a morality of respect far stronger than legal enforcement. Religion is more effective in maintaining social peace than civil law. Men and women (he explained) can escape the surveillance of the State, which imposes punishments and

employs all the necessary means to avert injustice and conflict. However, no human being can escape the judgments of gods, so long as the gods are omnipresent.

2. Critias' View on Religion: The Omnipresence of Divinity as a Guarantor of Civil Obedience

According to Critias, in the pre-social state of nature, men and women live in a chaotic world, without any political organization; the only law that applies is the law of the most powerful: "There was a time when human life was disordered and full of cruelty, subject to force" (Plato 2008, *Critias*, B.25, DK 88). The state of nature is the state of perpetual conflict, so long as there is no objective power of law to determine what is good and evil, what is just and unjust. In the state of nature, justice is totally absent and only subjective definitions of law prevail, as determined by innate human selfishness and hedonism. Solid definitions of good and evil were absent in these dark ages where men and women were living outside the state of society; neither the virtuous were praised, nor the wicked punished, for there was no legal system of awarding praise and honor (Kerfrerd 1981, p. 148; Di Bernardo 2008, pp. 118–19): It was "an age when virtuous men were not praised nor corrupt were punished" (Plato 2008, *Critias*, B.25, DK 88).

For Critias, the age of absolute pre-social chaos and the unfettered vindication of individual or collective power has given way to the age of the rule of law. Humans established a common contractual, political law, to arrest their natural course toward mutual annihilation and death. Was the establishment of justice a necessary element for the continuation of human life in a secure political framework, as Protagoras thought? (Plato *Protagoras*, 322A–C). Was the foundation of organized systems of law and government the consequence of a conspiracy of the "many" weak against the intelligent "few"? (Plato 2003, *The Republic*, 359A–B). As O'Sullivan (2012) pointed out, in the mind of Critias, the transition from the pre-political/apolitical age to political societies was made possible by the institutionalization of legal norms capable of producing objective definitions of justice. In his own words: "Afterwards, as I think, men made laws the transgression of which entailed penalties, in order that the absolute rule of justice might be extended to all, and that presumptuous opinions might be subjected to the common law; so that if any one committed an offense, he was punished" (Plato 2008, *Critias*, B.25, DK 88).

However, the imposition of conventional justice did not erect fences against violence and conflict (the consequence of the natural inclination of men and women towards greed). People considered laws and political institutions "hypocritical"; political *symbiosis* (co-existence) and human civilization were developed for the purpose of prosperity and well-being. In the state of society, the mighty and strong impose their own laws, even by committing injustices (Plato 1995, *The Statesman*, 273C). In the state of society, men and women obeyed the law only when they were under the supervision of individuals considered responsible for imposing order; in the absence of supervision, they were engaging with wrongdoing: "Then because the laws prevented men from acting violently in public, they continued to do wrong in secret" (Plato 2008, *Critias*, B.25, DK 88). Hidden injustices, not identified by civil law, were the main reason behind the birth of religion, Critias claimed. Religion, he believed, is an ingenious conception invented by wise men to limit the suffering inflicted on members of the political community by such injustices simply by exploiting the fear of post-mortem punishment from superior (divine) beings. In the face of divine punishment, people refrained from engaging in acts that cause suffering to others; they had to develop an ethic of self-limitation against the natural instinct of hedonism, selfishness, and greed. Thus, Critias expresses intense admiration for the political implications of religious discourses. Perhaps this view constitutes an expression of fear of the looming threat of mass revolts against the powers of a few intelligent men. In the following passage of Plato's *Gorgias*, the words of Socrates' dialectical opponent Calicles perhaps echo Critias' positions: "But I suppose the makers of the laws are the weaker sort of men, and the more numerous. So it is with a view to themselves and their own interest that they make their laws and distribute their praises and censures; and to

terrorize the stronger sort of folk who are able to get an advantage, and to prevent them from getting one over them, they tell them, that such aggrandizement is foul and unjust, and that wrongdoing is just this endeavor to get the advantage of one's neighbors: for I expect they are well content to see themselves on an equality, when they are so inferior" (Plato 1967, *Gorgias* 483b–484c). Through this passage we understand that, although in Critias' mind civil law is imposed in order to restrain the weak, in certain cases it ends up a powerful instrument in the hands of an "ignorant majority" (the "weak" and "numerous"), which propagates the idea that justice consists of the doctrine of the equality of all before the law.

The conventionalist view of the creation of the civil society (which begins with Democritus) is vividly echoed in the sophistic movement, where nature (*φύσει*) is contrasted to law (*νόμῳ*).³ For Critias, law is the cohesive bond of civil society, the cornerstone of the social contract, and the foundation of the well-being of humanity; religion advocates faith in a transcendent afterlife. Therefore, it encourages voluntary consent to divine laws that do not contradict the positive laws of society. While laws establish a *de facto* system of awarding praise to obedient citizens, imposing punishments on those engaging in illegal activities, religion, instead of promising earthly rewards and punishments, is almost exclusively concerned with otherworldliness. The aim of civil law is to impose limitations on natural (pre-social) liberty; civil law restrains hedonism and greed by means of persuasion (that is, by the rational foundation of the power of conventional law for the benefit of civil life) or through brute force, that is, through the iron fist of the State. In other words, civil law is based on human reason as a necessary condition for achieving self-preservation and attainment of prosperity through civil development, whereas religion is based on fear concerning the fate of human existence after physical death. Religion, this brilliant enactment of a perceptive mind (according to Critias), accomplishes obedience by exploiting the innermost human fear of non-existence after the inescapable event of death and offers the hope of postmortem continuity. In short, justice against wrongdoing must not simply rely on rational means of obedience; the exploitation of irrational passions, such as hope and fear, is also necessary: "then, I think, an intelligent and wise man first contrived the fear of the gods for mortals, that there might be some dread of the wicked, even if they act unjustly or formulate or mentally plan something secretly" (Plato 2008, *Critias*, B.25, DK 88).

The founder of the religious body perceived the inner concerns of men and women, explaining the issue of biological transience through pleasing stories about eternal life and the existence of divine beings, who spread their wrath or providence to human beings. More importantly, mythological religious stories depict scenes of extreme natural threats (thunder, fire, deadly wind and rain) prevailing in the place of residence of gods. This cultivates a sense of fear and awe towards the latter. (Guthrie 1971, p. 243). "He said that the gods dwell in a place, at the sight of which only men are overcome with terror. He discerned that it was precisely from there that the fears of mortals and the hope in the difficulties of life came, that is, from the revolving, up there, dome of heaven . . . with such fears he surrounded humans, by means of his excellently elaborated words he made the gods dwell in a suitable place, and by the power of the laws he put an end to iniquity. In this way, I think, he first convinced mortals to believe that there is a race of gods." (Plato 2008, *Critias*, B-25, DK 88).

Critias is also credited with the tragedies of *Pirithous*, *Rhadumunthus*, and *Tennes*, but the name of the tragic poet Euripides is involved in their authorship. Sextus the Empiricus (Sextus Empiricus 1936, *Against the Physicists*, 1, 24), representative of Skeptic philosophy, attributes *Sisyphus* to Critias, while other ancient sources attribute it to Euripides. However, most modern researchers (Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1963; Kahn 1997), who highlighted the importance of this particular text (cited below), attribute it to Critias. There exists a satyr drama with the same title that belongs to Euripides (415 BC) and completes the trilogy *Alexandros*, *Palamedes*, and *The Trojan Women*.⁴ What prompts us to credit the following passage from *Sisyphus* to Critias is (a) its profound emphasis on the transition from the

state of nature to the state of society (which is central to his thought), and (b) its insistence on the role of religion as an instrument of mass control and political conformity.

ΣΙΣΥΦΟΣ

ἦν χρόνος ὅτ' ἦν ἄτακτος ἀνθρώπων βίος
καὶ θηριώδης ἰσχύος θ' ὑπερήτης,
ὅτ' οὐδ' ἄθλον οὔτε τοῖς ἐσθλοῖσιν ἦν
οὔτ' αὖ κόλασμα τοῖς κακοῖς ἐγίγνετο.
κἄπειτά μοι δοκοῦσιν ἄνθρωποι νόμους (5)
θέσθαι κολαστάς, ἵνα δίκη τύραννος ἦ
ἢ τὴν θ' ὕβριν δούλην ἔχη.
ἐζημιούτο δ' εἴ τις ἐξαμαρτάνει.
ἔπειτ' ἐπειδὴ τὰ μὲν οἱ νόμοι
ἀπειρογον αὐτοῦς ἔργα μὴ πράσσειν βία, (10)
λάθρα δ' ἔπρασσον, τηνικαῦτά μοι δοκεῖ
ἢ πυκνός τις καὶ σοφός γνῶμην ἀνὴρ
θεῶν δέος θνητοῖσιν ἐξευρεῖν, ὅπως
εἴη τι δεῖμα τοῖς κακοῖσι, κἄν λάθρα
πράσσωσιν ἢ λέγωσιν ἢ φρονῶσι <τι>. (15)
ἐντεῦθεν οὖν τὸ θεῖον εἰσηγήσατο,
ὡς ἔστι δαίμων ἀφθίτῳ θάλλων βίῳ
νόῳ τ' ἀκούων καὶ βλέπων, φρονῶν τε καὶ
προσέχων τε ταῦτα καὶ φύσιν θείαν φορῶν,
ὃς πᾶν (μὲν) τὸ λεχθὲν ἐν βροτοῖς ἀκούσεται, (20)
<τὸ> δρώμενον δὲ πᾶν ἰδεῖν δυνήσεται.
ἐὰν δὲ σὺν σιγῇ τι βουλευῆς κακόν,
τοῦτ' οὐχὶ λήσει τοὺς θεοὺς· τὸ γὰρ φρονούῃν
ἢ ἔνεστι. τοῦσδε τοὺς λόγους λέγων
διδασκῶν ἡδιστον εἰσηγήσατο (25)
ψευδεῖ καλύψας τὴν ἀλήθειαν λόγῳ.
<ναίειν> δ' ἔφασκε τοὺς θεοὺς ἐνταῦθ' ἵνα
μάλιστα ἄνθρωποι ἐξέπληξεν ἀγῶν,
ὅθεν περ ἔγνω τοὺς φόβους ὄντας βροτοῖς
καὶ τὰς ὀνήσεις τῷ τάλαιπῶρῳ βίῳ, (30)
ἐκ τῆς ὑπερθε περιφορᾶς, ἵν' ἀστραπᾶς
κατεῖδον οὔσας, δεινὰ δὲ κτυπήματα
βροντῆς τό τ' ἀστερωπὸν οὐρανοῦ δέμας,
Χρόνου καλὸν ποίκιλμα, τέκτονος σοφοῦ,
ὅθεν τε λαμπρὸς ἀστέρως στείχει μύδρος (35)
ὅθ' ὑγρὸς εἰς γῆν ὄμβρος ἐκπορεύεται.
τοῖους πέριξ ἔστησεν ἀνθρώποις φόβους,
δι' οὓς καλῶς τε τῷ λόγῳ κατώκισεν
τὸν δαίμον' οὗτος ἐν πρέποντι χωρίῳ,
τὴν ἀνομίαν τε τοῖς νόμοις κατέσβεσεν (40)

οὕτω δὲ πρῶτον οἶμαι πεῖσά τινα
θνητοὺς νομίζειν δαιμόνων εἶναι γένος

“There was a time when human life was disorderly, full of cruelty, subject to power; a time when neither the good men were rewarded nor the wicked punished. [5] Afterwards, I think, men made laws that prescribed punishments, so that the law might rule over them all equally, and have arrogance as its servant; and if any one did a wrong, he was punished. [10] Then, because the laws prevented men from doing wrong openly, yet men still did wrong in secret, then, I think, for the first time some intelligent and wise man wised up for mortals the fear of the gods, [15] so that there is something for the evil to fear even when they do or say or think something in secret. Thus, he devised the divine, that is to say, there is a demon who lives in an endless acme, a demon who hears and sees mentally, who thinks to the utmost, who observes everything and who is surrounded by a divine nature: [20] this demon will hear whatever is said among mortals and will be able to perceive whatever is done. And if you secretly plan something evil, it will not go unnoticed by the gods. Because their mind is very strong. [25] With these words he presented the most attractive teaching, covering the truth behind a false word. He said that the gods dwell in a place, for which people, just by seeing it, feel terror. He understood that it was precisely from there that people's fears went, [30] and help in the sufferings of life, that is, from the rotating, up there, dome of the sky, where he saw that the lightnings and the terrible claps of thunder were, and the starlight of the sky, beautiful, full of ornaments, the work of Time, the wise craftsman; [35] it is the place where the bright fiery mass of the star moves, and whence the wet rain falls to the earth. With such fears he surrounded the humans; with these fears he putted—by his words—the god to dwell in a suitable place, [40] and through the laws he eliminated iniquity. *** And I think this is how he convinced, for the first time, mortals to believe that exist the race of gods.”

In summary, for Critias, religion is a discovery and an instrument of political philosophy. Religion is developed under the auspices of the dominant political power, acquiring instrumental status. Religious faith constitutes a means of submission to civil law. More precisely, irrational passions, such as fear and hope, prompt faith in a transcendent entity. Divine laws share much in common with the laws of the State, which are common rules of conduct that protect civility against war and conflict. Religion is a highly efficient tool of

political control of citizens; it sets guidelines for citizens who cannot rationally perceive the purpose of civil society. Moreover, a precondition of civil society is the existence and application of positive law.

3. Hobbes' Rational Social Order

Like Critias, Hobbes expressed his intense concerns over life in the state of nature, where (as mentioned earlier) no State and no common power or other artificial body exists in order to coerce and bind human beings together (directing them towards the common benefit), and where everyone strives to fulfill his/her (innate) "restlesse desire" for possession and domination for power, riches, fame, prestige, and honor (Hobbes 2006, *Leviathan*, XI). More precisely, he shares Critias' concerns about the consequences of human greed and the boundless desire for endless acquisition of riches and power, which prompt men and women to violate the laws of nature, that is, of laws that protect peace, well-being, prosperity, and security. "The Greeks [Plato, more precisely] call the violation of this law [of nature] *pleonexia* [rapacity]; that is, a desire of more than their share (Hobbes 2006, *Leviathan*, XV). In short, rapacity refers to the "perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power [that] ceaseth onely in Death", the "generall inclination of all mankind" (Hobbes 2006, *Leviathan*, XI). In the state of nature, rapacity encourages competition for property and power, which easily escalates into conflict in the event that there exists no authority to impose justice, repressing aggression, ensuring that possession is acquired through peaceful means. In the state of nature, where "every man has a Right to every thing; even to one anothers body", the "condition of Warre of every one against every one" becomes permanent (Hobbes 2006, *Leviathan*, XXVIII). This war cannot be brought to an end because all forms of enmity are perpetual; neither can victors (the strongest who survived the battle) escape the possibility of losing their lives in a potentially forthcoming conflict (Hobbes 1998, *De Cive*, I–XIV). Hence, in the state of nature, in the state of perfect *insecurity* (ibid.), where everyone is a potential enemy, human lives become "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" (*Leviathan*, XIII). In order to avoid violent death, men form alliances "so that if we must have *war*, it will not be a war against all men nor without aid" (*De Cive*, I–XIV). In exchange for security they seek to relinquish certain liberties and transfer them to an absolute sovereign power, a *de facto* ruler, contracting thus with each other and forming a state (Hobbes 1998, *De Cive*, II–IX; 1999, *Elements of Law*, I–XV; 2006, *Leviathan*, XIV; Furedi 2013, pp. 184, 187).⁵ They insist "that unless sovereignty was indivisible, society would be doomed to permanent conflict" (Furedi 2013, p. 182); it will be brought back to the state of nature, the state of war, where "every man has a Right to every thing; even to one anothers body" (Hobbes 2006, *Leviathan*, XIV). Only under this process can individuals free themselves from the insecurity of the state of nature, "whereof they may be compelled both to keep the peace amongst themselves" (Hobbes 1999, *Elements of Law*, XIX–XXI). The laws of nature are preserved only when the multitude appoints one man, or an assembly of men, "to beare their Person; and every one owne, and acknowledge himselfe to be Author of whatsoever he that so beareth their Persons, shall Act, or Cause to be Acted, in those things which concerne the Common Peace and Safetie" (Hobbes 2006, *Leviathan*, XVII).

Hobbes attributes to the Sovereign the ownership of the political system, as well as of the institutions of society as a whole, including religious institutions, to the extent that he/she and the society are one "civil institution", as Olsthoorn (2018, p. 12) wrote. In his own words, "of everything their representative saith or doth in their name, every man giving their common representative *authority* from himself in particular, and among all the actions the representer doth" (Hobbes 2006, *Leviathan*, XVI; emphasis added). As we understand, in Hobbes' political philosophy, the Sovereign is *authorized* to become the sole ruler of the State; his/her subjects ascribe to the Sovereign him/herself the "*authorship*" of the commonwealth (Ward 2022, p. 18); that is, only the Sovereign has an active role in the process of taking important decisions that would impact the course of the society. The subjects must remain passive, sharing no responsibility in the process of "writing" history. Therefore, if the commonwealth is "owned" by the Sovereign and if religious

institutions (churches, philanthropic associations, etc.) are an integral part of the social life of the same commonwealth, it turns out that, in Hobbes' mind, all religious institutions are also considered property of the Sovereign. The fear of war and destruction, and the fear of violent death, prompt men and women to entirely submit "their Will, and their Judgements" to the Judgment of the Sovereign (Hobbes 2006, *Leviathan*, XVII), that is, to the Judgment of their master, who alone is capable of protecting the state of society. In order to defend themselves from the devastating consequences of their innate rapacity, which leads to a perpetual war and a zero-sum game where everyone is threatened by annihilation, human beings "voluntarily replace compulsive mutual fear by the again compulsive fear of a neutral third power, the government, and thus they substitute for an immeasurable, endless, and inevitable danger", the danger of war and desolation, "a measurable, limited, and avoidable danger—the danger which threatens only the law-breakers from the courts of law" (Strauss 1963, p. 67). In this regard, human beings are creators of political society; they know the cause and purpose of its creation. In Hobbes' philosophy, political science is demonstrable to its creators. However, metaphysics and religious beliefs are not. There is no solid evidence that proves the existence of a transcendent entity, nor does the human mind have the capacity to acquire complete knowledge of either the first principles or the destination of such an entity. Therefore, the moral validity of a theological position should be evaluated according to the norms and ways of life defended by the Sovereign. In the state of nature, there is no such thing as justice or injustice: "To this warre of every man against every man, this also is consequent; that nothing can be Unjust. The notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice have there no place. Where there is no common Power, there is no Law: where no Law, no Injustice" (Hobbes 2006, *Leviathan*, XIII). Hence, if there was no primary political convention that could be defined by legal coercion on what is just and what is unjust, no theological argument could acquire objective status; instead, all would derive from unrestrained human *pleonexia* (rapacity), which incites violence and conflict. Thus, religion is a human creation; it is considered valid thanks to the force of the social contract.

Making a long story short, in Hobbes' ideal commonwealth, religion is under the control and supervision (under the ownership) of the omnipotent Sovereign, as the social contract advocates (such as any activity that develops within the political society). If (as mentioned earlier) the commonwealth is owned by the Sovereign and if religious institutions are part of the social life of the same commonwealth, God has no jurisdiction over the political community. So long as a civil society is owned by the Sovereign, so long as it is created by the complete assignment of absolute natural right and absolute natural liberty of all humans to the omnipotent leader, only the latter is responsible for its protection. No God or any imagined transcendent entity. The laws of Moses, the Ten Commandments, did not become political laws because they were delivered by God. It was Moses himself, as the Sovereign political representative of the people of Israel, who ratified them and put them into force (Hobbes 2006, *Leviathan* XLII; Beiner 2011, p. 51). Thus, Hobbes disapproved of medieval notions regarding the parallel authority of the Church and the State (State 1990, p. 18). Separate political and religious authorities undermine the position of the Sovereign as a supreme leader and owner of the commonwealth, who is responsible for providing security. Religion, when it acts uncontrollably, is an obstacle to the understanding and exercise of political science, and this is because political science—as a science—is rationally provable, while religion based on faith and not on rationality is not provable, and therefore it is not a science (Hobbes 2006, *Leviathan* XII). Furthermore, religion (as also Critias suggested) takes advantage of people's fear of the afterlife and their ignorance of the first causes of everything, and replaces them with the concept of the transcendent and inaccessible (*ibid.*). Therefore, the existence of religion presupposes fear and ignorance, which is contrary to the concept of science. The maintenance of fear over people's belief in immaterial spirits consolidates the power of religious officials and allows for an increase in their selfishness at the expense of others (acquisition of power, wealth, power positions, and pleasures) (Geach 1981; Pasquino 2001).

Hobbes developed his views on religion by drawing on Machiavelli. The latter considers religion to be an *instrumentum regni*. In short, Machiavelli disengaged politics from metaphysics, but did not hesitate to use metaphysical ideas as a tool. Similarly, Hobbes attempted to inaugurate a new relationship between political science and religion, a pragmatic relationship (to use different terms). Religion could be an important tool in the hands of the Sovereign. Machiavelli, referring to the constructive coupling of ecclesiastical and political power, notes that the powers of the leaders of the Catholic Church rested neither on *virtù* nor on *fortuna*, but on the ancient institutions of religion, which are so strong and of such a nature that they could perpetuate their power. Church leaders have States they do not need to defend, subjects they do not need to govern, and powers that no one claims. None of the subjects, regardless of how their leaders treat them, even think of escaping their power. Only religious leaders are safe and blissful (Machiavelli 1992, *The Prince*, XI; Machiavelli 2003, *The Discourses*, I–XIII). For Machiavelli, the merging of political and religious authority presupposes the assimilation of ecclesiastical privileges to the State. Religion could easily perpetuate political power by submitting everyone to the designs and commands of a ruler (Del Lucchese 2015, pp. 59–64). Drawing on this perspective, Hobbes in *De Cive* (XVII) develops arguments in favor of subjecting ecclesiastical authorities to the State (Stauffer 2010, pp. 868–79; Tsampazis 2022, pp. 63–84). The former is owned by the latter; it exists by virtue of political convention. This implies that none of the adherents of religious teaching defy the higher political law instituted by the Sovereign.

Religion (in Hobbes' mind), so long as it promotes norms and values approved by the Sovereign, could safeguard peace and stability in the commonwealth. Religion discourages rapacity not by resorting to physical coercion, which is the task of the Sovereign, but through the exploitation of the fear of post-mortal punishment, incited by the Christian worldview. Like Critias, who considered religion a necessary addition to civil law, in Hobbes' mind, belief in the Christian God promotes an ethic of limitation and selflessness, and a mentality of disgust towards material possession, which shapes social attitudes that comply with the Sovereign's pursuits, with his/her ultimate objective to rely on means of political repression, punishing those who out of greed attempt to possess property and riches at the expense of the well-being of others. Therefore, religion indirectly encourages obedience to social hierarchies and reinforces the power of the State. At the same time, we have identified a crucial divergence between Hobbes and Critias; Hobbes does not argue that religion will always contribute to social peace and individual security. For the latter, religion *can* promote stability and concord only when the ecclesiastical authorities are censored (Herrero 2023, p. 55). Placed under the surveillance of the Sovereign, their official representatives do not promote values and ideas that challenge the established order and, instead, see themselves as an integral component of the State, owned by the Sovereign him/herself. We will see in what follows that this is a crucial point in Hobbes' absolutist philosophy.

4. Hobbes beyond Critias

Hobbes was aware of the threat strong belief in immaterial spirits could pose to a society; it could lead to the creation of a coalition of believers who profess allegiance to ideals other than those promoted by the Sovereign. More importantly, religious pluralism could lead to the creation of factions, each of which adopts diametrically opposite interpretations of the Scripture, undermining not only the power of the Sovereign, and the unity of the State and the Church, but also the peaceful order when different factions consider the theological interpretations offered by all others invalid. According to Furedi (2013), Hobbes' insistence on obedience to the established political order by means of coercion and repression is coextensive with this polemic against pluralism (p. 182). Of course, Hobbes was not hostile to any form of disagreement related to religion (Bejan 2016). However, he feared that intense disagreements (ibid.) would "inevitably" lead to "conflicts of dogma, with destructive consequences" (Furedi 2013, p. 182). Hence, debates that contain intense disagreements must be suppressed by the Sovereign him/herself (Bejan 2016; Herrero 2023,

p. 55). The Bible, [Hobbes \(2006\)](#) claimed, contains ambiguous passages, which convey unclear messages (sometimes subject to long, controversial, and fierce debates) (*Leviathan*, XXXVIII). To avoid social confusion, which Hobbes believed would be detrimental to social peace, all ecclesiastical authorities must submit their will to the judgment of the Sovereign. This is another reason that prompted Hobbes to suggest that ecclesiastical jurisdiction should be merged with civil jurisdiction ([Herrero 2023](#), p. 119). Ecclesiastical authorities must be placed under the surveillance of the Sovereign, who is the one and only “authorized interpreter of God’s word, either as the interpreter of the Scriptures, or as the authority that enforces the words of the prophet”, suggesting that “[t]he practice of religion depends entirely” on what the Sovereign him/herself “dictates” ([Herrero 2016](#), p. 3; emphasis added). In other words, “the Christian monarch enters into sacred history as an interpreter of the divine word” and is “regarded as the definitive interpreter of the doctrine ‘Jesus is the Christ’” ([Herrero 2023](#), p. 55). In *Behemoth*, [Hobbes \(1990\)](#) gives a historical account of the English Civil War and accuses Presbyterian ministers of inciting disobedience to the lawful Sovereign, encouraging the people to interpret the Scripture by themselves. This (Hobbes believed) could lead to the intensification of social divisions, fueling violence between different religious sects (Puritan fundamentalists, divine right Episcopalians, or papal supremacists), which (in turn) resulted in the collapse of social order ([Beiner 2011](#), pp. 47, 62, 70; [Lloyd 2002](#), p. 193).

Religious sects, controlled by certain priests, can catalyze civil society by restoring the pre-social state of war and conflict. The State must annihilate any possibility of the existence of factions. In Hobbes’ mind, the thoughts of human beings are shadows of their actions; whoever controls thinking (or rather the irrationality of the human mind) also inspires rebellious acts. As [Stauffer \(2010\)](#) put it, Hobbes believed that “actions spring from opinions, and because certain religious doctrines encourage citizens to believe that they must obey an authority higher than the civil sovereign”, which (he feared) could undermine the State (p. 868). For Hobbes, a religious faction or any faction is a multitude of subjects assembled either by mutual convention or by the force of one, without the authority of him or those who bear the supreme political power. A faction is, therefore, like a city within a city, for as by the union of men and women in the state of nature, a civil society is created, so by a new union of subjects into this civil society a faction springs up ([Hobbes 1998](#), *De Cive*, XIII). Those who set up a faction—whether politicians or religious orators, who possess great eloquence but little wisdom—undermine social peace; through rebellious discourses they whip up the ignorant and irrational passions of the crowd, promoting political reforms that serve their own self-interested goals. However, in order to succeed in overthrowing the Sovereign representative, they need not only rhetorical eloquence and power, but also to acknowledge the four structural factors: (1) a large number of subjects must be able to follow them, because without a large number of followers their attempt would be a movement of desperation; (2) the appropriate means must be employed in order to oppose the powerful state (weapons, ammunition, money, etc.); (3) mutual trust is required, so that the rebels, just like a herd of bloodthirsty wolves, which moves with cooperation and concord, could accomplish their goals; and finally (4) a competent commander is needed, who can inspire and establish the unity of the faction’s purpose in the multiplicity of the crowd through his ability to evoke the consent of the subjects in his person ([Vavouras 2016](#), pp. 115–18).

In short, if fear and punishment is the most effective way to uproot once and for all revolutionary ideas from the popular mind, because fear removes from the human conscience opinions that justify rebellious actions ([Hobbes 1999](#), *Elements of Law*, XXVII), and if rebellious actions are often incited by religion, we end up to the following conclusion: fear (and punishment) must be directed towards those who adopt Biblical interpretations that diverge from the officially accepted dogma, and (more importantly) towards those who see religion as a fountain of inspiration for the development of arguments that justify disobedience to the established political order. Nonetheless, which Biblical approaches would Hobbes consider appropriate to be adopted and promoted by the State? Accord-

ing to Stauffer (2010), Hobbes denounced “ghostly” interpretations” (p. 870), rooted in “superstitious fear of [demonic] spirits”, based on “prognostics from dreams” and “false prophecies”. These interpretations should be forbidden because they abuse “the simple people” and encourage civil disobedience (Hobbes *Leviathan*, II; VI). Hobbes’ suggestion that transcendent entities are created by the most irrational human fear points only to “the many gods of the Gentiles” (Hobbes 2006, *Leviathan* XXII) and to the Gods of polytheistic pagan (ancient) religions (Stauffer 2010, p. 872); on the other hand, the Christian perception of God is rooted in a rational view regarding life and coexistence. The fear of most-mortal punishment carries a logical explanation; “Fear of power invisible, feigned by the mind, or imagined from tales” should be “publicly allowed” (Hobbes *Leviathan*, VI), because it is not based on ignorance and superstition; it rests on the idea that rapacity is punishable by God, so long as its manifestation in the human world puts men and women back to the state of nature, the state of perpetual war and destruction. Hence, belief in the existence of God must be associated with the pursuit of rational answers to issues revolving around life and society (pp. 869–70). Therefore, the main task of the Sovereign is to approve an interpretation of the Scripture, grounded in a rational morality (p. 878). Religion creates a binding language and culture. Should this culture remain protected from the menace of superstition, that is, of religious doctrines which incite and exploit profound irrational fears, the threat of war dies out. In Strauss’ (1963) words, “the word of God itself becomes binding only on the basis of sovereign command” (p. 69). In the *Elements of Law* (I–XVII), Hobbes (1999) asserted that the laws of nature which men and women (and in particular the Sovereign) must follow, are binding by “reason of revelation”, as well as by “natural knowledge of God” (Strauss 1963, p. 69). In *De Cive*, the first of this demand is weakened, while in his *Leviathan* the two demands are no longer even mentioned (ibid.).

Therefore, any mixing of religion with political philosophy must be done as a subsidiary of the former to the latter. For if religion, theoretically or actively, undermines the role of the Sovereign as the owner of the commonwealth, then we can speak either of a faction, that is, of a disruptive authority that acts against official authority with the risk of the dissolution of the civil society and a return to the natural state of civil war, or of the irrationality of a belief in the afterlife as opposed to the rationality of political sovereignty that ensures self-preservation and self-sufficiency. From this point of view, Critias’ philosophical teaching on religion receives an expression of a rationally structured view-proposition in the political philosophy of Hobbes. Religion, if it can play any political role, would be its instrumental use by political philosophy for the ideological subjugation of the subjects of a civil society.

To recapitulate, Hobbes developed an insight that emphasizes the perspective of religion as a sovereign ideology which must go hand in hand with political sovereignty. If religion ideologically aids the expansion of State enforcement, then we have a proper use of the religious factor and absolute control over the irrationality of the crown of the subjects. On the contrary, if the State loses control over the belief in immaterial spirits, then the disintegration of the civil society is born, because the existence of another ideology is equivalent to the creation of a faction, that is, to a hostile city within the main city itself. Hobbes (unlike Critias) considered that belief in immaterial spirits is a double-edged sword. Such beliefs are often exploited by religious leaders, who challenge the political primacy of the Sovereign out of self-interest. Religious factions are more dangerous than any other; they incorporate characteristics that could undermine civil society, spreading conflict and strife. From this point of view, religion must not be separated from political sovereignty. Ecclesiastical authorities, to use different terms, should be *owned* by the Sovereign; they constitute an extension of the iron hand of his/her authoritarian State. To further prevent the spread of sectarian violence, the Sovereign must bridge (even through means of suppression) intense disagreements, safeguarding the foundations of a rational social order.

5. Conclusions

This study found common ground between Hobbes' and Critias' views on religion (in relation to civil society). For both thinkers, there is a pre-political/pre-social condition called the "state of nature", within which men and women struggle to survive. There was an age when any concept of political organization was absent and human beings were living a savage life. They were subjected to insecurity subjected to insecurity. Reading the first lines of Critias' passage, it is impossible not to be reminded of Hobbes's descriptions in chapter XIII of *Leviathan* that human pre-social life was insecure and completely subjugated to violence. Critias' view of the state of nature is remarkably similar to that of Hobbes. For both thinkers in this anarchic condition, concepts of *right* and *wrong*, and *good* and *evil*, are absent. The only justice that exists is that of might and force. Right is considered whatever the powerful makes right by force; *true* or *just* is whatever can be imposed through brute force. The more violent a man was, the easier it would be for him to survive in this state of endless war. For Hobbes, human beings are bloodthirsty wolves who attempt to gratify their insatiable propensity to acquire power and property. Similarly, Critias believed that men and women are governed by a negative natural essence, by a ruthless desire for endless acquisition of things that do not simply cover basic biological needs. This natural passion (of greed) is extremely powerful. It cannot be defeated by means of rationality, or even by legal coercion. In other words, civil law does not fully eradicate this negative impulse to chaos; greed and its consequences continue to lurk within the state of society; they continue to apply even after the activation of the political contract. Men and women, not being able to get rid of their "evil" nature, tend to do wrong in secret, where the law cannot extend its power. In response, he considered the role of religion; belief in a transcendent reality, which influences collective and individual modes of living, exploits the human fear of afterlife. Evil deeds, it is assumed, would lead to post-mortal punishments. This (in Critias' thought) effectively prevents human beings from wrongdoing in secret. The law, being a human construction, is limited, and has a certain extent of enforcement, while God, being an immaterial spirit, watches over human beings; God sees all their actions and judges even their intentions.

Hobbes believed that in the face of natural adversity, men and women voluntarily surrender their natural freedoms to the State; they agree to live together under the power of contractual law, which is capable of preventing them from harming each other. Hobbes' social contract marks the concession of all the pre-social freedom and power of every man to the Sovereign in equal return for a living under the protection of law. A repressive Sovereign, who acts as though he "owns" the society, and who subjects everyone to his/her will and judgment, must use raw force to punish those who engage with acts of disobedience, which undermines the state of peace in society. Thus, the Sovereign offers negative incentives that discourage wrong-doing; he/she suppresses the negative consequences of *pleonexia* (rapacity), and the passion for endless acquisition. Like Critias, Hobbes saw religion as an important addition to civil law. More precisely, the Christian religion could create bonds of unity in the populace, preventing divisions and conflicts. However, the contribution of religion to social peace is not unconditional. the meaning of words in the Scripture is ambiguous and creates intense dispute (Herrero 2016, p. 3). To resolve this problem, Hobbes considers the Sovereign responsible for deciding which interpretation is acceptable (ibid.). In other words, pluralism must be forbidden; pluralism is the *par excellence* source of conflict; it incites sectarianism, which undermines the unity of the commonwealth (Furedi 2013, p. 182). More importantly, the Sovereign undertakes the task of defending (even through the use of raw force) a "rational" interpretation of the Scripture; that is, interpretations based on superstition and false prophecies must be prohibited (Hobbes 2006, *Leviathan*, VI), since they arouse irrational passions that incite disobedience to the established authorities, as was the case of Puritan and Catholic sects during the English Civil War. Like Hobbes, Critias expresses his admiration for the ingenious discovery of religious propaganda and its practical implementation in politics. On the other hand, his philosophy does not offer strong support for a social contract

between human beings and rulers, who consider religious morality an indispensable weapon in their attempts to impose and safeguard social order.

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Notes

- ¹ Without acknowledging that viewpoints are (to a degree) products of a particular cultural and historical context, without acclaiming society as the matrix of some of the ideas an author expresses and a reference point for understanding what exactly the same author attempts to say, we risk interpreting a philosophical text from a standpoint that meets our own expectations about what the thinker may have said (Skinner 1988, p. 31).
- ² Strauss (1963) mentions Hobbes' autobiographies, where there are statements concerning this translation of Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* into English, through which he attempted to communicate to his fellow citizens the views Thucydides himself held on democracy as a polity incapable of safeguarding peace and social stability (Strauss 1963, pp. 61, 64–65). Monarchy (he argued) is the best type of government for peaceful commonwealth (ibid.). During the "first period of his life (up to 1629)", Strauss claimed, Hobbes's main philosophical interests were centred around Homer's poetry and Aristotle's moral thought (pp. 31–33). Among scholasticism, aristocracy, and Puritanism, humanism was the most decisive Hobbes' influence during his youth (p. 31). This is evident in his ardent emphasis on the importance of "mathematical and scientific" reasoning (ibid.). Aristotle was (for Hobbes) "the highest authority in philosophy" (p. 33). Hobbes's break with humanism is evident in the *Leviathan*, as well as in *De Cive*, where he fiercely rejects Aristotle's claim concerning the primary objectives of the State to promote the so-called "good life" (ibid.) by allowing the members of a community to become sole protagonists in the process of political decision making. In Hobbes's post-humanist thought, the ultimate role of the State is protection from violent death (ibid.).
- ³ The passage seems to be a strong utterance of a sophist, such as Critias, who outlines his views regarding the relationship between religion and politics, rather than a poet, such as Euripides, who satirizes the human condition with detachment (Popper 1966; Dihle 1977; Kahn 1997; Malcolm 1989; Whitmarsh 2014).
- ⁴ As to the authorship of the passage, there has been a great deal of dispute since ancient times, which continues unabated to the present day. The opinion has also been expressed that the passage may belong to Democritus (Kahn 1997) or that it influenced Plato (Popper 1966)—nephew of Critias—in the theory of the brave lie in the *Republic*.
- ⁵ For Hobbes (2006), a mutual transferring of rights upon consideration of reciprocal benefit, according to which both parties perform what they have been agreed upon, is called a *contract* between individuals, from which a State has been created (*Leviathan*, XIV).

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