Hobbes and His “Apology”

Since the May Fourth movement, several generations of Chinese scholars and intellectuals have been informed by and have grown up within the Enlightenment tradition of a radical critique of religion. Thus we have already formed this habit: criticizing the religion of the establishment is an “obviously correct” task, however, this “obviously correct” attitude was not always considered so obviously correct in the West. We do not need to mention the fact that it was only the new tradition of the Enlightenment spirit that arrived at this “obviously correct” political situation… many thinkers during the Enlightenment relied on their pungent and audacious religious criticism so as to earn for themselves the reputation of being a great hero with a historical mission, and it was the audacity of their critique that was viewed as a virtue by the May Fourth movement in China, a virtue that at that time was seen as something that should be emulated by us Chinese. … Today we have begun to realize that we should be more cautious and have some reservations when we talk about the “obviously correct” critique of religion of the Enlightenment and that we should not “obviously correctly” attack the religion of the establishment. Even so, we must still take into consideration what the reasons might be for this cautious reservation in matters concerning the critique of religion—and therefore we should first clarify the following question: what might the reason be for the “obviously correct” critique of the religion of the establishment?

The case of [Thomas] Hobbes’s “heresy” is an outstanding historical example that can help us to gain a better understanding of this “obviously correct” reasoning, because he is commonly considered one of the important harbingers of the critique of religion in the intellectual history of modern Europe; he laid the foundation and gave the direction for the Enlightenment that followed. After the English-language version of Hobbes’s Leviathan appeared in 1651, some readers understood very well that the author gave the impression only of confirming the Christian faith, but in fact he was secretly criticizing Christian doctrine when he discussed the different theological issues, especially topics concerning prophesy, miracles, the divine, and the inspiration of the Bible. More than ten years later (1670), Spinoza’s Tractatus theologico-politicus was

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published, and some people soon noticed that [Baruch] Spinoza was obviously imitating Hobbes’s religious criticism. However, Spinoza’s heretical thoughts were more manifest and more daring—in other words, Hobbes’s critique of religion was almost immediately imitated by philosophers, and Spinoza was Hobbes’s first famous disciple, but by no means his last. . . .

But after Hobbes read Spinoza’s book, he said he would not dare to write so audaciously (“I durst not write so boldly”). . . . Was Hobbes more timid or cautious than Spinoza? For perceptive readers, it is actually quite obvious that Hobbes’s critique of religion is even more radical. . . . Spinoza seems to be even more audacious, and Hobbes’s method of expression is very rhetorical, and he is more diplomatic. Because Hobbes used rhetorical skills, his critique of religion did not seem so radical, which could have been motivated by several factors: cautious expression could be motivated by the fear of religious suppression, or it could be because of a concern for the religious needs of the people—the former implies that the critique of religion is proper and correct, and cautious expression is employed only because the political environment does not allow such critique, but as soon the political setting allows more, one should openly criticize religion. However, under the second motive a philosopher would not openly and excessively criticize religion, even if he does not share the religious faith of the people, and even in a political environment of so-called total freedom of speech and openness, he would still write cautiously.

Which kind of motivation can we ascribe to Hobbes?

The two kinds of motives of cautious expression—“fear” and “concern”—are related to the moral character of a philosopher.