CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LAW, POLITICS AND RELIGION: IN SEARCH OF CRITERIA FOR UNDERSTANDING MODERNITY

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1. INTRODUCTION: HOBES AND MODERNITY

If someone hears the word ‘Modernity’, the first connotations are possibly among others ‘Occident’, ‘Europe’, ‘Reason’, ‘Progress’. These terms are in fact characterised as modern because they mark a beginning point of a new era. As a striking example is to be cited the “Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes”, i.e. the “Quarrel of the Ancient and the Modern”, in 1687. It is a literary contest between intellectuals and authors whether antiquity could be surpassed by the present in favour of a rational constitution of the world. Instead of imitation invention rules and the emergence of a concept of secularisation of politics and sacralisation of experience is surprisingly confirmed by one of the founders of modern political theory: Thomas Hobbes.

In his book Leviathan (published in 1651) he states:

... that neither Plato, nor any other Philosopher hitherto, hath put into order, and sufficiently, or probably proved all the Theoremes of Morall doctrine, that men may learn thereby, both how to govern, and how to obey; I recover some hope, that one time or other, this writing of mine, may fall into the hands of a Soveraign, who will consider it himselfe, (for it is short, and I think clear,) without the help of any interested, or envious interpreter; and by the exercise of entire Soveraignty, in protecting the Public teaching of it, convert this Truth of Speculation, into the Utility of Practice.2

Three aspects are decisive for this example of concentrated modern consciousness (e.g. ‘I think clear’):

1 Gröbl-Steinbach 1994, p. 144.
1. A recent and present founder of a new science of politics has overcome the whole range of philosophers from Plato until now, and that means: Antiquity is lower-ranking, Modernity is prior-ranking.

2. Governance and Obedience are the ruling principles of Modernity. The new man has to learn this as one’s standard of behaviour.

3. The modern philosopher identifies himself with the Sovereign superior to an irritating Interpreter, and the conversion of the ‘Truth of Speculation into the Utility of Practice’ shows the striving for unity of thinking, acting, and application.

According to Hobbes, the main feature of Modernity is the unification of a multitude of men, or the submission of their wills unto one Will: “This is more than Consent, or Concord; it is a reall Unitie of them all, in one and the same Person, made by Covenant of every man with every man (...).”

The act of unification is not merely an act of immanentization of power. On the contrary. The religious dimension becomes visible at once:

This done, the Multitude so united in one Person, is called a COMMON-WEALTH, in latine CIVITAS. This is the Generation of that great LEVIATHAN, or rather (to speake more reverently) of that Mortall God, to which wee owe under the Immortal God, our peace and defence. … And in him consisteth the Essence of the Common-Wealth; which (to define it,) is One Person, of whose Acts a great Multitude, by mutual Covenants one with another, have made themselves every one the Author, to the end he may use the strength and means of them all, as he shall think expedient, for their Peace and Common Defence. And he that carryeth this Person, is called SOVERAIGNE, and said to have Soveraigne Power; and every one besides, his SUBJECT.

With Mortal God as Sovereign on one side, and Subject as Author on the other side a hallmark of transcendence is revealed by which the relationship of dominion and power and the responsibility for peace and defence is clearly subdivided: Sovereignty is absolute. In this view ‘Unity’ is the magic word to which everyone – requested or not – has contributed and furthermore will do. In short: Other examples within the History of Political Ideas would substantiate the notion that Modernity is without restraints if an apology of dominion and power is incorporated into a ‘system of thought’ (for the sake not to insult philosophy, especially Plato!).

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