Hobbes’ Christian Commonwealth

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I Introduction

Few would hold that established churches can also be separate from the governments that establish them, yet the concepts are not so interlocked that one could not have one without the other. It is well known that Hobbes held that the church was to be subservient to the state, yet he never held that any particular sect was to have itself installed as the one true orthodoxy. In an age of religious strife and partisanship, when religious contention tumbled dynasties, governments and ancient alliances, the favored solutions to that contention called for recapturing some semblance of the religious homogeneity of the past. It is one mark of Hobbes’ novel thinking that fixed on establishing peace and security he inculcates the virtues of the unity and authority of the state, and avoids naming his favorite sect as the true voice of God whose church must be established by the state as an arm of the sovereign.

Hidden in Leviathan is a systematic assault on sectarianism. Little has been written about the Third and Fourth Parts of Leviathan, nearly half the whole, mainly because it has seemed to most commentators to be no more than a series of disjointed bickerings on small points of scripture. In my view the main thrust of Leviathan is to expose the pretentions of those sectarian views which tend to justify civil strife on authority higher than man. Without this higher authority, in Hobbes’ view, the principal cause of civil war within and between commonwealths would be removed. Thus, Leviathan both erects the theory of the unified state and undermines the authority of all churches.

II Hobbes’ Fundamental Theory

Hobbes’ fundamental theory has as its model the kind of theory found in geometry. To a few basic empirical axioms are added some crucial definitions and from these is derived a set of implications, which, he points out (Lev. XV, 122f [Oxford 1909 edition - reprint of edition of 1651]) might be termed ‘conclusions’ or ‘theorems’ as well as ‘laws.’ Given the context, Hobbes’ choice of
'Laws of Nature' as the collective name for the derived statements makes good sense. For the truth is that if the basic empirical axioms are well-founded and the definitions unambiguous, then the derived statements are as well-founded and since they are imperatives the choice of calling them 'Laws of Nature' does not seem either arbitrary or misleading.

There are four empirical axioms. They are empirical because they purport to be descriptions of matters of fact, and they are axioms because since they apply to the state of nature and since it does not exist, they can not be evidenced for by any method of demonstration save retrodictive induction. Nevertheless, though they cannot be demonstrated neither can they be shown to be either false or improbable. So in the end they are very like the mathematical axioms of Euclidean Geometry.

The four empirical axioms are:

1) In a state of nature no man is born with a right to have, hold, or use anything that anyone else does not have an equal right (or claim) to, and therefore may not pretend to or hope for possession of it. *(Lev. XIII, 94).*  
   [That is, as Hobbes' gloss has it, “Men by Nature Equall”].

2) Equality of hope and the ability to pursue coupled with conflicting desires for unsharable things leads to enmity, and enmity to war *(Lev. XIII, 95)* ['War' is defined as 'the period during which there is a known disposition to fight' rather than only the period of actual battle. All periods of non-war are 'peace'.] *(Lev. XIII, 96).*

3) "The Desires, and other Passions of man, are in themselves no Sin. No more are the Actions, that proceed from those Passions, till they know a Law that forbids them: which till lawes be made they cannot know; nor can any Law be made, till they have agreed upon the Person that shall make it.” *(Lev. XIII, 97).*

4) In a state of nature, i.e. a war of every man against every man, nothing is just, unjust, right or wrong, nor is there property ownership. *(Lev. XIII, 98).*

To the four empirical axioms are added five crucial definitions, the first of which amounts to the theoretical synthesis of the empirical axioms.

**RN)** "THE RIGHT OF NATURE"! ... is the Liberty each man hath to use his own power as he will himself, for the preservation of his own Nature; that is to say, of his own life ...” *(Lev. XIV, 99).*

**LIB**) "LIBERTY is ... the absence of external Impediments.” (ibid).

**LN**) "A LAW OF NATURE ... is a Precept, or general Rule, found out be