

The Modern State, Coercive Violence and Idolatry

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In this brief statement, I bring together three threads: the “salvific” role of the modern state, Thomas Hobbes’ vision of the state holding a monopoly on the use of coercive violence, and modern distaste for YHWH’s use of coercive violence. I was set to thinking by Cavanaugh’s claim that the modern state offers an alternative soteriology to that of the Church.¹ Soteriology, being the study of salvation, refers to deliverance from a threat, where the particular threat varies with context. It may be, for example, the threat of eternal damnation by an angry or just God, the threat of defeat by personal sin and moral failure, or the threat of physical, emotional or relational danger. Cavanaugh’s claim seems to be that the modern state offers to save its citizens from what they most fear. He refers to this as the myth of the state as savior.² As he traces the history of its development, it is specifically the threat of the so-called “wars of religion” from which the modern state saves its people. As the myth³ goes, the battle between Catholicism and Protestantism raged across Europe for long enough that the blood of the irreconcilable adherents fed the development of a system of government that promised to save the world from perpetual suffering and cruelty. Having vanquished the beast of the wars of religion, the modern state now preserves peace and promotes prosperity by creating a free and safe space for the conduct of civil society.⁴ As the myth reflects upon itself, it proclaims that within the structures of the modern state, its citizenry is freed from terrorizing fears and each individual citizen is free to live according to that individual’s wishes, pursuing whatever dreams are in view, with the best possible chance of achieving them. This is the vision of the modern state as savior: the state wondrously provides maximal freedom from fear and maximal individual freedom to pursue the perceived good.⁵

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes carefully develops the necessity and function of the modern state.⁶ In his anthropology, human beings are solitary by nature, i.e. individuals are the fundamental unit and each pursues individual goals through individual means. The predicament human beings face is that they are not alone—other individuals frustrate and threaten them because individual lives inevitably conflict with one another. If you build a fine house, I will want to take it for myself rather than working to build my own fine house. Because humanity shares a common world, the inevitable conflicts produce a world with everyone at war with everyone else. Hobbes’ remedy is brilliant and severe: every individual must commit to a covenant whereby each surrenders the free exercise of

¹ William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination* (New York: T. & T. Clark Publishers, 2003), 9.

² Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical*, ch. 1.

³ I use the term without prejudice to its historical truth, but rather to denote a story that explains and justifies the current situation.

⁴ Cavanaugh also considers this free, civil society to be a (misleading) myth (Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical*, ch. 2).

⁵ More specifically, this is the vision of the modern *liberal* state, which currently dominates the world stage.

⁶ For this discussion, I depend upon the introduction to *Leviathan* by Michael Oakeshott (Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* [ed. Michael Oakeshott; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946], vii-lxvi).

personal will to a single beneficiary, namely the civil government. The dilemma of the conflict over the house disappears because you and I both surrender our will to live in the one house—which would necessarily lead to conflict—to the civil government who then decides who will have the house. The government must have power commensurate with this authority, and so it is given a monopoly on the use of coercive violence.⁷ If I try to take back my original right of will to live in the house, in defiance of the government's will, it has the power to force me to comply. Leviathan provides peace among humankind through the necessary sacrifice of individual will and the threat of overpowering force. Leviathan is the world's savior.⁸

I now turn to the problem of YHWH's use of violence in the Old Testament. The parade example is YHWH's command to Israel to work genocidal violence against her neighbors (Deut 7). Beyond this, YHWH also coercively threatened (Deut 28) and carried out (2 Kgs 17; 24-25) violent terrors against his own chosen people when they displeased him. In the modern world, such behavior is commonly seen as unbecoming for a deity.⁹ Why is this divine activity censured? There are clearly many reasons for rejecting YHWH's violence, but I suggest that an important and rarely mentioned reason is modern society's commitment to the leviathan of civil government as savior. Such devotion to and dependence upon the state as savior runs into direct conflict with YHWH's claim to be Israel's savior (cf. Exod 14:30-31). The world of leviathan depends upon *everyone* ceding personal will—especially the personal use of coercive violence—to leviathan. If anyone attempts to reclaim the right to will, leviathan has the duty of reasserting itself over the rebel. Though YHWH is obviously more than a citizen of any state, the inculcated demand for rejecting personal violence means that the personified and violent YHWH is illegitimate within this worldview. Hobbes is not ignorant of Christianity and dedicates a quarter of his book to the discussion of a specifically Christian state. However Hobbes tames “religion” to be a personal matter with no public expression beyond what is permitted by leviathan. There seems to be no place for the living and active YHWH, but rather only provision for matters of principle and law that flow from the Christian deity to leviathan for implementation by the people. It seems that YHWH presents even more of a problem for democratic, capitalistic societies where leviathan is an impersonal, regulated system. Laws are debated and decided

⁷ Interestingly, it seems to me that many citizens of such states do not often think of them as violent, regardless of the almost continual violence of police, prisons and military forces.

⁸ While Hobbes has a multiplicity of states in view, who live in threatening tension with one another, the progressive globalization process is rapidly moving toward a world of a single global state—i.e. where a single, complex entity is authorized to will for all people and to control all legitimate coercive violence. Cavanaugh usefully characterizes globalization not as the dissolution of the idea of the nation-state, but the “hyperextension of the nation-state's project” to enfold the entire globe (Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical*, 99).

The degree to which Hobbes' vision correctly describes present political reality is a topic for further study. However, the basic features of state monopolized violence and surrender of individual will to state control seem to correspond broadly to contemporary Western life.

⁹ E.g., the SBL presidential address John J. Collins, “The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence,” *JBL* 122:1 (2003), 3-21.

by collective representative bodies, interpreted by systems of courts and appeals, and enforced by systems of police and corrections. Laws are enforced by depersonalized structures that require the separation of job and worker (e.g., a police officer or judge must do everything “by the book,” meaning each individual official must do what any other responsible police officer or judge would do in a given situation). When wearing the badge or the robe, individuality should be left behind to a considerable extent.¹⁰ Money and property flow through impersonal markets to satisfy the demands of multitudes of consumers through the productive power of publicly-owned corporations, driven by the demands of multitudes of institutional investors. In this particular leviathan, good citizens operate within the system, trusting that it will keep the world spinning rightly, saving from disaster, and providing abundant prosperity. If anything goes wrong, there are ways the citizenry can work within the system to set things right again. In such a worldview, to approve of YHWH’s will and power is subversive because he threatens leviathan’s very life. YHWH’s willfulness and strength endangers the civil savior. However, within the biblical view the day may (will?) come when the jealous YHWH—who is described as far above every nation (Deut 32:8-9)—decides to take a stand against this widely-accepted idol-savior known as leviathan.

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¹⁰ While the president or prime minister of the state displays considerable personality, when that leadership leads to violence the leader faces considerable scrutiny about the objective reasons for the violence, as President Bush and Prime Minister Blair have learned with regard to the Iraq war.