

From state to society, through sacred history: Hobbes and Spinoza

John Robertson,
Faculty of History and Clare College, Cambridge

The author

John Robertson has been Professor of the History of Political Thought in the Faculty of History and a Fellow of Clare College since 2010. Between 1980 and 2010 he was a Fellow of St Hugh's College and a University Lecturer (CUF) in Modern History at Oxford. As an undergraduate he read Modern History at Wadham College Oxford, after which he studied for his doctorate under the supervision of Hugh Trevor-Roper. He was a Research Lecturer (equivalent to a Junior Research Fellow) at Christ Church, Oxford before he took up his position at St Hugh's. Derived from his thesis, his first book, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Militia Issue* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1985), reflected the inspiration not only of Trevor-Roper but of John G. A. Pocock, and in particular of *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975). Having met Istvan Hont in Oxford in the later 1970s, he contributed a paper on Hume at the 'limits' of the civic humanist tradition to the first conference organised by the King's College Research Centre Project on the History of Political Economy, directed by Hont and Michael Ignatieff, and to the ensuing volume, *Wealth and Virtue. The shaping of political economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (1983). His early interest in civic humanism led him to closer study of the eccentric but highly intelligent Scottish republican, Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun, and to the debate which preceded the Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707, of which Fletcher was much the most imaginative critic. These interests yielded an edition of *Andrew Fletcher: Political Works* (Cambridge, 1997) in the 'Blue Texts' series, and an edited volume on *A Union for Empire: political thought and the Union of 1707* (Cambridge, 1995). His introductions to these emphasised the European setting in which Fletcher and other Scots addressed their country's predicament, and the ways in which forms of 'union' were presented as a counterweight to the threat of 'universal monarchy'. Subsequently a long-standing interest in Neapolitan historical and political thought over the same period, from the late seventeenth to the later eighteenth centuries, culminated in the comparative study *The Case for the Enlightenment. Scotland and Naples 1680-1760* (Cambridge, 2005). Suggesting that Scotland and Naples faced strikingly similar political and economic circumstances at the outset of the eighteenth century, this argued that a common interest in Epicurean moral philosophy and a commitment to political economy were the key to both countries' participation in the European movement of 'Enlightenment'. Since coming to Cambridge he has pursued two interests, the question of the Enlightenment and the different accounts given of it by philosophers and historians, and the uses of sacred history in political thought in the later seventeenth and

eighteenth centuries, another interest shared with John Pocock. The first has so far yielded *The Enlightenment. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2015), the second an article on sacred history and the problem of sociability in Neapolitan thought in the early eighteenth century, in *The Historical Journal* (56, 2013). ‘The sacred and the social 1650-1800’ was the subject of the Carlyle lectures in the History of Political Thought at Oxford, and the Benedict Lectures in the History of Political Philosophy at Boston University, given while on leave in 2015-2016.

The paper

The paper represents a re-working of the first two of the Carlyle Lectures. It examines the contrasting interpretations of sacred history, and in particular of the history of the ancient Hebrews, by Thomas Hobbes and Benedict Spinoza. Alarmed by assertions of clerical power and intolerance in the British kingdoms and the United Provinces of the Netherlands, Hobbes in chapters 15-18 of *De Cive* (1642, 1647) and again in Part III of *Leviathan* (1651), Spinoza in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (1670) interpreted the historical Books of the Bible in support of arguments that religious authority should be exercised by the civil power. These arguments and their implications for toleration and religious and intellectual liberty have been much studied by Hobbes and Spinoza scholars in recent years. But little attention has been given to the remarkable lengths to which both Hobbes and Spinoza went to explain how the Bible should be understood as ‘the word of God’. Before the historical content of the Bible could be interpreted, it was essential to grasp the conceptual architecture of the Bible, in particular the role of prophecy in articulating the word of God, and also its textual composition, yielding the form in which it has been received. A substantial section of the paper explores the many similarities, and a few significant differences, in the ways Hobbes and Spinoza proposed to understand the Bible as the word of God. Turning to the content of sacred history, a further significant difference becomes apparent. Hobbes’s insistence that from the Mosaic covenants onwards the priestly powers were united with those of the civil sovereign repeatedly ran into what he found to be the recalcitrance of the ancient Hebrews; in response, he re-framed his arguments in *Leviathan* to underline the importance of the Christian sovereign, ‘the state’, asserting authority not only over the churches in the present, but over interpretation of the future, when sacred history will culminate in the corporeal resurrection of the redeemed. By contrast, Spinoza’s interpretation of Biblical history explicitly separates the social from the civil, *societas* from the *civitas*, to explore how the revealed religion of the Jews habituated them to ‘piety and obedience’. For the Hebrews, the ‘word of God’ was the sacred historical narrative of their survival as a people, a society held together by more than fear of a sovereign. In Spinoza’s account of sacred history, it is argued, we can begin to see the shift of focus from ‘state’ to ‘society’ which characterises so much of political thought between 1650 and 1800.