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STATE VS. GOD: ON AN ATHEISTIC IMPLICATION OF EUROPEAN STATISM

The title of my essay may suggest that I am going to discuss a concept of an atheist government which strives to eliminate the presence of God from public life.¹ I will not, however, proceed in this way and I will skip the emblematic phenomena of European atheism such as the French Revolution, which gave rise to the secular government in France, or the communist revolution, which created a godless government in Russia. The atheism that openly fights against God, though still current in many cultures, has already been well diagnosed and well responded to, at least in theory.² The aim of my article is to reveal a specific form of atheism which consists in promoting the primacy of loyalty to the state over loyalty to God and seems to thrive exceptionally well in historically Christian countries, like that of Poland.

State vs. Religious Loyalty

In 2014 in Warsaw, Poland, a dramatic event took place: a doctor (Bogdan Chazan) who refused, because of his religious faith, to perform an abortion on a woman was dismissed from his practice at the hospital. Under Polish law, abortions are allowed until the 25th week of pregnancy only

¹ On philosophical theories supporting the superiority of politics over religion, see Pawel Tarasiewicz, “Between Politics and Religion—in Search of the *Golden Mean*,” trans. Jan R. Kobylecki, *Studia Gilsoniana* 1 (2012): 122–126.

² See, Zofia J. Zdybicka, “Atheism,” trans. Hugh McDonald, in *The Universal Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Andrzej Maryniarczyk (<http://www.ptta.pl/pef/haslaen/a/atheism.pdf>, accessed on Oct 25, 2015); Étienne Gilson, *L’athéisme difficile* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1979).

if the life of the expectant mother or her child is at risk, or in cases of incest or rape. The mayor of Warsaw (Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz) said that she cancelled the doctor's contract as director of a city's hospital because he failed to inform the mother that the procedure would be illegal after 24 weeks, and for failing to inform her where else she could go to have the abortion.³

As a result, the public opinion was almost entirely focused on the doctor's decision. Secular media claimed that he did not have a right to either refuse aiding her in finding another hospital that would perform the abortion or to invoke a conscience clause while being in a management position.⁴ Catholic media, in turn, argued that his behavior was absolutely exemplary and quickly perpetuated him as a symbol of freedom of conscience in politics.⁵

Few people paid attention to the other party of the case: the mayor of Warsaw who dismissed the doctor. Her behavior, however, illustrates the point at which I aim: an atheistic implication of European statism.⁶ What can be surprising is the fact that implications of this kind do not need to be represented only by atheists; they can also involve people like the mayor of Warsaw who in her country is very well known as a declared Catholic and a politician closely connected with the Church.⁷

³ "Polish doctor dismissed in 'abortion refusal' case," *BBC News* (July 9, 2014), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28225793>, accessed on June 20, 2015.

⁴ *Nota bene*, "[a]fter his refusal to perform abortion a criminal proceeding started as well as professional disciplinary proceeding in the Physician's Council. Both proceedings were recently decided in favor of prof. Chazan . . ." ("Polish Constitutional Tribunal Dismissed Limitations to Medical Doctors Conscientious Objection," <http://www.en.ordoiuris.pl/polish-constitutional-tribunal-dismissed-limitations-to-medical-doctors-conscientious-objection,3677,i.html>, accessed on Oct 10, 2015).

⁵ Cf. "Protest held outside Polish embassy in defence of dismissed doctor," *The Protection of Conscience Project* (Sept 3, 2014), <http://consciencelaws.org/blog/?cat=1190>, accessed on Oct 15, 2015.

⁶ "[A]lthough the word 'statism' itself rarely occurs, the phenomena it connotes have certainly been widely recognised and discussed. The expression 'statism' first emerged as such in France around 1880 to describe political doctrines that called for an expansion of the role and responsibilities of the state in all areas of the economy and civil society. The word was also used in Switzerland in the 1890s in the struggle to resist a proposed expansion of federal powers at the expense of the cantons, especially in the economic and financial domains. Nowadays, a usage of 'statism' prevails that denotes the dominant position of the state vis-à-vis society, its individual domains, and the individual" (Bob Jessop, "Statism," *Historical Materialism* 15:2 (2007): 233).

⁷ On the connections of Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz with the Church in Poland, see, Sabrina P. Ramet, *Whose Democracy? Nationalism, Religion, and the Doctrine of Collective Rights*

Why did the mayor of Warsaw choose to dismiss a pro-life doctor who tried to save an unborn baby rather than support his action? Why did she give preference to loyalty to the state's law rather than to loyalty to her Christian faith? Why do other Christians ever decide to behave in a way which promotes statism rather than protect the individual from becoming a cog in the machine of the state? I only hope that they do it merely for expediency and eventually realize that no Christian can be a servant of God and of wealth and survive (cf. Lk 16:13).

The European statism, however, is not only well equipped with practical lures, like promising prospects for finding jobs in state administration,⁸ but also it can be well furnished with philosophical arguments which say that: 1) there is no contradiction between Christian faith and absolute loyalty to the government; 2) absolute loyalty to the government can never be wrong or lead to sin; and 3) there is a necessary supremacy of the government over God which conforms with the Bible and the Christian faith. Such philosophical arguments can be supported by at least two philosophers of a great renown, namely Thomas Hobbes⁹ and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.¹⁰

in Post-1989 Eastern Europe (Lanham, M.D.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997), 106: "As early as August 1995, the Polish bishops issued a letter to the faithful calling on them to vote against former communists and to choose candidates 'who will defend ethical and evangelical values (meaning the Church's preferred candidate, Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz, chief of the Central Bank)."

⁸ Offering jobs by the state is particularly important, especially in those countries where the threat of unemployment is ever-present. In Poland, tendencies in the labor market are best reflected in the popularity of subjects studied at universities. In the 2015–2016 academic year, for example, at John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland, the overall number of seats for the first year of B.A. and M.A. studies—conducted in Polish language—in administration was planned to reach 310, while in philosophy only 25 (<http://www.kul.pl/jakie-sa-limity-miejsc-na-kazdym-kierunku,12568.html>, accessed on Oct 20, 2015).

⁹ For online information resources on Hobbes, see, Garrath Williams, "Thomas Hobbes: Moral and Political Philosophy," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. James Fieser and Bradley Dowden (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/hobmoral/>, accessed on Oct 25, 2015); Sharon A. Lloyd and Susanne Sreedhar, "Hobbes's Moral and Political Philosophy," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta (<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/hobbes-moral/>, accessed on Oct 25, 2015).

¹⁰ For online information resources on Hegel, see, David A. Duquette, "Hegel: Social and Political Thought," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. James Fieser and Bradley Dowden (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/hegelsoc/>, accessed on Oct 25, 2015); Paul Redding, "Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta (<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/hegel/>, accessed on Oct 25, 2015).

Hobbean Statism

Let us begin with Hobbes to show how he struggles against the God of Christianity and replaces God's authority with the authority of the government which, for Hobbes, is a secular sovereign. Hobbes' political doctrine is too famous, of course, to be in need of a special introduction. Instead I am going to immediately focus on answering the following question: what arguments does Hobbes use to justify the primacy of the secular sovereign over God?

In the second part of his *Leviathan*, Hobbes makes an analogy between the earthly sovereign and the God of the Bible. Both God and the sovereign have absolute power, remain outside the law and consequently cannot act unjustly. The fear of the omnipotent God is, therefore, similar to the terror by which the human sovereign reigns.¹¹ But Hobbes is aware that, as he puts it in his *Citizen*, "no man can serve two masters; nor is he less, but rather more of a master, whom we are to obey for fear of damnation than he whom we obey for fear of temporal death," and again, as he adds in his *Behemoth*, "as much as eternal torture is more terrible than death, so much [the people] would fear the clergy more than the King." The fear of God's eternal punishments then could be a source of anarchy which should be avoided by the earthly sovereign for any price.¹² To escape from this danger, Hobbes robes himself in the vestments of a theologian and delivers a new interpretation of the Scriptures. His reading of the Scriptures has three principal objectives. He strives to show that: 1) with the ascension of Christ to heaven, the kingdom of God has disappeared from history and will come again at the end of time; 2) the absence of the audible voice of God on the earth must be compensated by the interpretation of the Scriptures reserved to and given only by the earthly sovereign;¹³ and 3) the Scriptures do not provide any evidence for the idea that the soul of man is by its nature eternal nor that eternal rewards and punishments—heaven, hell or purgatory—are to be understood literally.¹⁴

Against the most accepted and orthodox Christian interpretations, Hobbes claims that the soul is corporeal and does not have an existence

¹¹ Gabriel L. Negretto, "Hobbes' Leviathan. The Irresistible Power of a Mortal God," in *Analisi e diritto 2001. Ricerche di giurisprudenza analitica*, ed. P. Comanducci and R. Guastini (Torino: Giappichelli, 2002), 182.

¹² *Id.*, 186.

¹³ See *id.*, 185.

¹⁴ *Id.*, 187.

apart from the body. In his view, the soul must perish with the death of the body and will start to enjoy immortality only when the body rises from the dead on the day of resurrection.¹⁵ According to him, the first coming of Christ did not establish eternal life here and now but only the hope of resurrection in the future world. In other words, Hobbes' interpretation of the Scriptures postpones eternal life to an unknown and remote future. In the meantime, people have to accept that their physical death is equivalent to a state of non-existence.

It is evident that Hobbes' teaching on eternal life is a part of his political strategy. By undermining the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, Hobbes strives to make men understand that there is no greater power than the secular sovereign, nor greater evil than corporeal death. In this sense, Hobbes' political philosophy represents an outright assault against the supernaturalist elements of Christianity.

But Hobbes' reformulation of the doctrine of salvation and immortality also has another face: the supernatural powers of the earthly sovereign. Given the correspondence which Hobbes sees between civil obedience and religious salvation, his criticism of the idea of immortality in this life, makes the power of the secular sovereign to resemble even more the power of a secularized god. Whereas salvation in the other world is uncertain, disobedience to the earthly sovereign's will may in this world entail, if not an eternal damnation, at least a death which is equal to a non-existence lasting indefinitely long.¹⁶

Hobbes' reinterpretation of the Scriptures is then part of a strategy of political persuasion. By claiming that the kingdom of God is an earthly kingdom that existed in the past and will not be restored until the second coming of Christ at the end of time, and that there is no salvation nor immortality until the end of history, Hobbes both dethrones the authority of the Church and reinforces the deterrent power of civil sanctions. He places God beyond history, in a distant past and in a distant future. He concludes that we live in a profane time where the only visible authority is the secular authority of the government.¹⁷

What do we think about Hobbes' conceptions of the superiority of the government and the mortal nature of the soul? Would it have any chance to find acceptance among Christians, say, Catholics in Poland?

¹⁵ Id.

¹⁶ Id., 188.

¹⁷ Id., 189.

Instead of guessing the answer, it seems better to quote some sociological data. In 2012, the Polish Catholic Information Agency reported the results of sociological investigations on the religiosity of Polish society in which 93% members were professed Catholics. Thus, Poles who declared the lack of faith in the immortality of the soul were 29%, those who did not believe in heaven 32%, in life after death 34%, in resurrection 37%, in the existence of hell 44%.¹⁸ Is there still any ground to believe in the complete failure of Hobbes' doctrine in one of the most Catholic societies in the world? Evidently, it seems that there is not.

Hegelian Statism

While the influence of Hobbes on Christian theology seems to be of minor significance, Hegel's importance for modern theology is widely recognized, as: 1) no other philosopher since the 18th century has had more influence on theologians than him; 2) apart from Hegel, it is not possible to understand our recent intellectual history; and 3) his influence can be found even at the Second Vatican Council.¹⁹ How can Hegel be helpful in bringing Christians to accept statism or even adopt it? The answer is contained in Hegel's theory of God.

For Hegel, God is not a transcendent creator but the essence of the universe. This divine essence is thoroughly rational; it is universal reason which underlies the objectivity of all that exists. As an objective rational essence this universal reason develops itself by logical implication into the material universe and then into human subjectivity. Human individuality is thus a subsequent appearance of universal divine essence which completes divine self-manifestation at a certain level.²⁰

The self-manifestation of God, however, can be fully completed neither by humanity as a whole nor by the individuals of which it consists but by the particular states in which individual people live. According to He-

¹⁸ See "Sekularyzacja w Polsce wolniejsza [The Secularization in Poland Slows Down]," Polish Catholic Information Agency (April 13, 2012).

¹⁹ See Daniel P. Jamros, S.J., "Hegel on the Incarnation: Unique or Universal?," *Theological Studies* 56 (1995): 276, especially n. 2: "Consider the following entry from Gerald O'Collins, S.J., and Edward G. Farrugia, S.J., *A Concise Dictionary of Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1991) s.v. 'Self-Communication': 'Term used by German idealists like Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), and then adopted by theologians like Karl Rahner (1904–1984) and the Second Vatican Council (DV 6) to designate the self-manifestation and self-giving of God in the process of revelation and grace'."

²⁰ Cf. id., 277.

gel, while composing states, the individuals merely reproduce themselves without change from one generation to the next. Their principal occupation in life consists in trading with each other for petty economic advantage. Since individual people are self-serving and capricious, their doings are barely worth noting by the philosopher concerned with nobler things. By contrast, states are mighty, hence important, organizations. Each of them is not just a system of government but an idea incarnate which manifests itself in that system. Like Hobbes, Hegel sees the sovereignty of the state as its most important characteristic in which it differs from other organizations. Unlike Hobbes, Hegel does not see this sovereignty merely as an instrument of imposing law and order on the subjects, but endows it with high ethical content, i.e., with freedom. Thus, the state possesses the freedom to develop in accordance with its own nature; the freedom which consequently the state bestows on its citizens—so long as they cooperate with it. This is possible, because the state is nothing else but a divine self-manifestation, which means that this is God Himself who rules the state by making it rise, grow, reach maturity and decay in an everlasting search for a more perfect political order that is at the same time a more perfect truth.²¹

The theoretical outcomes of Hegelian statism are self-evident: 1) the state is the most perfect self-manifestation of God on earth; 2) outside the state, a man can mean nothing; and 3) the redemption of a man is possible only through the state. There can be no doubt that, while reading Hegel, the adherents of statism must feel like they are in paradise. In the light of Hegel's theory, they can see not only their dreams come true, but also themselves being saints.

Is it possible to make this theory unsuccessful in practice? Is it possible to protect societies from Hegelian statism? It seems it is. The very first thing which comes to mind as a remedy against statism is democracy. Considering that democracy prevails in the West, it seems to be rather impossible for Hegelian statism to be supported by the majority of free people. But regrettably, there is a potential trap: to be ruled by the advocates of statism in a democratic country, it is enough to have a government affected by a conviction about the saving power of the state.²²

²¹ Martin van Creveld, *The Rise and Decline of the State* (Cambridge: University Press, 1999), 195–196.

²² It seems that potential supporters of such a government are especially those who prefer to think of the state as “the nanny state.” On the meaning of the nanny state, see Andrew Irvine, “How to Make Governments Competitive,” in *In the Agora: The Public Face of Canadian*

Statism and Democracy

Theodore J. Forstmann in his article “Statism: Opiate of the Elites,” wittily remarks that letting statism into democracy can be well described by

a new twist on an old fable about a kingdom and a tainted well: One of the king’s men bursts through the palace doors and rushes up to the throne. “Your highness,” he says, “the city well is tainted, and all who have drunk from it have gone mad. Your subjects are marching on the castle to demand your head. You must flee at once!” The king pondered this message for several moments and then made a startling move. He fetched water from the well and drank it himself. Thereafter, the mad king ruled his mad kingdom in perfect harmony.²³

The story of statism in democracy is similar but reversed: “The elites have drunk deeply from the well of political salvation, inducing visions of government-engineered utopia.”²⁴ Today, many of the political leaders in the West believe that the state, not the individual, is the spiritual center of society. According to this view, it is the government that assumes a moral significance and outweighs individual claims.²⁵

A sober reflection on the presence of statism in democracy can be found in the famous book *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville who wrote about America’s future and its citizens: “I am not afraid that they will find in their leaders tyrants, but rather tutors.” A government led by such men “does not tyrannize, it hinders, it represses, it enervates, it extinguishes, it stupefies, and finally it reduces each nation to being noth-

Philosophy, ed. Andrew D. Irvine and John S. Russell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 176–177: “The growth of what Margaret Thatcher used to call ‘the nanny state’ means that psychologically, we and our children have become more and more dependent on government. Often we simply assume that if a task is too large or too complex for us to do it ourselves, the only option is to give it to government. Like all large businesses, large governments benefit from economies of scale; at the same time, though, they lead to greater inefficiencies and reduced individual initiative.”

²³ Theodore J. Forstmann, “Statism: Opiate of the Elites,” *Imprimis* 26:5 (May 1997): 3.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.*, 2.

ing more than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd.”²⁶

According to Forstmann, adherents of statism implement their shepherdship upon democracy by: 1) making people value security over freedom; 2) manipulating common language; and 3) using the law and the courts to overcome popular will.²⁷

Conclusion

As a concluding remark, I would like to explore the words of Jesus Christ in Mark 12:17, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s,” which seem to be a particularly fertile ground for formulating a Christian reply to the arguments of statism.

In their interpretations, both Hobbes and Hegel want us to focus on Caesar or, speaking more precisely, to get in line with the state rather than to bother ourselves with serving God.²⁸ Such a concentration on the state is to be justified either because God is, as we are told by Hobbes, actually inaccessible for us, or because the state is, as we are taught by Hegel, the most perfect self-manifestation of God. In the light of Christ’s words cited above, however, neither Hobbes nor Hegel can be right. First, since—while living on the earth—we are to give what is Caesar’s to Caesar and what is God’s to God, both Caesar and God are accessible for us here and now. Second, since we are to render to Caesar other things than those we are to render to God, both Caesar and God have to differ from each other.

Consequently, the proper understanding of Christ’s teaching on Caesar and God seems to be an effective defender against the temptation of trading Christian faith in God for either a Hobbean or Hegelian philosophy of statism.

²⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition*, vol. 4, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/quote/281>, accessed on June 21, 2015.

²⁷ Forstmann, “Statism: Opiate of the Elites,” 3.

²⁸ We are strongly encouraged here to think of statism as if it were a kind of idolatry, where the state is the recipient of that glory which is due to God alone.

**STATE VS. GOD: ON AN ATHEISTIC IMPLICATION OF
EUROPEAN STATISM****SUMMARY**

The article consists of four parts. First, it gives an example of statism present in contemporary Europe which consists in giving a priority of loyalty to the state at the expense of loyalty to God. Secondly, it traces the idea of European statism in the thought of Hobbes and Hegel to show how the state was to replace or equal God's authority. Thirdly, it considers whether democracy can efficiently protect against statism. Finally, it explores the words of Jesus Christ—"Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's"—to formulate an argument against trading Christian faith for the philosophy of statism.

KEYWORDS: atheism, statism, Christianity, God, Christ, Hobbes, Hegel.