

What is Real Unity?

The Christology behind Hobbes's Commonwealth

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Abstract: Hobbes's famous expression "real unity" from the incorporation passage of *Leviathan* has puzzled scholars for many reasons, not least among them that he strongly preferred to describe political phenomena as "artificial" rather than "real." This paper examines the historical usage of "real unity" in England during the 17th century and finds that the expression unequivocally refers to Jesus Christ's divine representation of his church "body." Clarifying the precise referent of Hobbes's "real unity" suggests that we may need to reevaluate our legalist understanding of his theory of political representation and make better attempts to reconcile his alleged materialism with his persistent invocations of the metaphysical "body politic."

One of the most memorable passages in *Leviathan* contains an intriguing expression that is frequently quoted but perhaps not well understood. In Chapter XVII Hobbes describes the relationship between individuals and their newly-elected political representative as one which is "more than consent or concord: it is a *real unity* of them all, in one and the same person."² This phrase "real unity" stands out, not only for the clarity and didactic force with which Hobbes declared it, but also for the way in which it clashes with his preferred terminology for political representation. Hobbes everywhere else in *Leviathan* describes representation as an "artificial" or "fictional" relationship,³ and prior to Chapter XVII, he had examined the prospect of corporate unity solely within the legal context, in terms of purely formal or attributed unity rather than anything else that could be taken as actual, genuine, or real: "For it is the unity of the representer, not the unity of the represented, that maketh [them] one,"⁴ he explained. That he would declare this same unity to be "real" in the next chapter is striking, especially because he tended to avoid that qualifier on principle. Ever cautious about essences and our knowledge of them, Hobbes carefully reserved the term "real" for phenomena that were categorically *not* notional, rhetorical, artificial or fictitious.⁵ The decision to flout his own directive and categorize representative unity as real, even though obviously fictitious, invites scrutiny. Recent scholars have conjectured that Hobbes's "real unity" could be a paradox, an irony, or perhaps even a simple mistake.⁶

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² Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Noel Malcolm (Oxford, 2014), XVII.13. In order to facilitate reference between the various editions of *Leviathan*, the Molesworth paragraph numbers are adduced throughout.

³ Hobbes, XVI.1-2, 4, 9; and see also XVII.12.

⁴ Hobbes, XVI.13.

⁵ See Hobbes, XXVII.1, XXXIV.25, XXXV.11, XXXVII.13, XLIV.3, XLVI.16, and Latin Appendix.I.4,65, III.15.

⁶ Patricia Springborg, "The Paradoxical Hobbes: A Critical Response to the Hobbes Symposium, *Political Theory*, Vol. 36, 2008," *Political Theory* 37, no. 5 (2009): 683–84; See also Deborah Baumgold, "UnParadoxical Hobbes: In Reply to Springborg," *Political Theory* 37, no. 5 (2009): 691–92. Mónica Brito Vieira, *The Elements of Representation in Hobbes:*

But if Hobbes chose the expression deliberately and sincerely, the best explanation of its meaning might be found in the contrast between “real unity” and mere “concord.” Hobbes defined concord as the “consent of many” to undertake some immediate and exigent action.⁷ This type of agreement could last only as long as the crisis that provoked it, according to Hobbes, because without a common threat to unify them, human beings would inexorably return to the petty disagreements and antagonisms that divided them and foreclosed the possibility of settled society. When he promised that political representation created a unity that was “more than concord,” he was suggesting that this type of agreement would be longer lasting than the ephemeral unity conjured up when many individual wills temporarily concur. And when he said that it was “real,” he must have meant merely that it was durable and could be relied upon to promote social security and peace. His choice of the word “real” is unfortunate since it is the colloquial antonym of “fictitious” – which seems the most appropriate term in this context. But thankfully Hobbes used the expression “real unity” only once, so perhaps it need not concern scholars unduly.

This hypothesis is certainly adequate and correct in its emphasis of the contrast between concord and representation, but it does not fully capture the significance of Hobbes’s “real unity” nor what would have been understood by it in the 17th century. The phrase prominently appears in hundreds of tracts, treatises, sermons, and discourses of the period, and a careful study of the contexts in which they occur reveals that “real unity” was an idiosyncratic, early-modern English expression used to describe the relationship of Jesus Christ with believers. The “real union” that he had with them was almost always likened to an organic relationship, as of a head or soul to a living body, and this metaphor would often be linked to a larger discussion about Christ’s role as sovereign “representative” of that body. The consonance of these theological themes with Hobbes’s political principles and purports cannot be ignored. He almost certainly chose the phrase “real unity” because of the meanings, images, and emotions it would evoke in the psychology of his readers. And for us, the phrase should be treated as significant, despite its singular occurrence, because it amplifies the two major themes of that important passage and of his work as a whole: embodiment and religious authority.

The first of these – embodiment – is expressed in the metaphor of the “body politic,” a moral and organic conceit that Hobbes committed to long before *Leviathan* and clung to long after.⁸ Recent scholars have tended to deemphasize this aspect of his rhetorical vision, preferring instead the legalese of his consent-based arguments, and being particularly captivated by his analogy of the machine. Moreover, the role of rhetoric itself in Hobbes’s works has lately been of great interest, with some theorists wondering if certain tropes of his, such as the body politic, are not more usefully

Aesthetics, Theatre, Law, and Theology in the Construction of Hobbes’s Theory of the State, Studies in the History of Political Thought, v. 2 (Leiden/Boston, 2009), 165–66.

⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive* [1641], ed. Bernard Gert (Indianapolis, 1991), V.4,6. See also *Human Nature* [1640;1650], ed. J. C. A. Gaskin, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford, 2008), XIX.4,6; *De Corpore Politico* [1640;1650], ed. J. C. A. Gaskin, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford, 2008), XXVII.7; *Leviathan*, XVII.2-5.

⁸ He used it in his earliest works, *Human Nature* and *De Corpore Politico* (1640), and reiterated it in a late scientific work, *De Homine* (1658).

categorized as instances of obfuscation and irony rather than clarification or enlightenment.⁹ This question cannot be answered properly without a comprehensive understanding of all Hobbes's rhetorical referents, their contextual effect, and their philosophic significance for the totality of his thought. The phrase "real unity" is an opportunity to do just that: to unearth the historical relevance of Hobbes's favorite metaphor, to register its organic connotations, to examine the role it plays within its immediate context on political formation, and to explore its significance for Hobbes's political project as a whole. Whatever he may have said or implied elsewhere about legal or mechanistic relationships in society, Hobbes chose the most climactic paragraph of *Leviathan* as a moment to celebrate embodiment, and the pregnant phrase "real unity" ensured that his early-modern readers would recognize it as such. We can share that significance with them, but only if we understand the expression in the way that they did.

The embodiment they would have associated with "real unity" was deeply religious and bound up in the figure of Christ as divine representative. The paragraph in *Leviathan* that contains "real unity" certainly has a heightened rhetorical valence that suggests the quasi-divine, so it seems likely that Hobbes found the Christological dimensions of the expression to be just as useful as the organic. But this suggestion invites troublesome questions about Hobbes's own religious beliefs, or at least about his intentions when implying or expositing theological themes – the assessment of which has cast yet another apple of discord into the scholarly ranks.¹⁰ Thankfully it may not be necessary to weigh the sincerity of Hobbes's personal convictions here so long as we can show how it would have been advantageous for him to invoke religion at specific junctures in his political discourse. Given his obvious attempts in this passage to glorify the Sovereign as a salvific figure (who incorporates lost humanity, and inspires reverence, gratitude, and awe), the parallel to Jesus Christ and his church body must have been irresistible to Hobbes. The relevant emotions and psychologies were already present in his readers, easy to arouse and even easier to exploit. Whether Hobbes meant to suggest something further – about the fusion of politics and religion, for instance, or the mediation of God through the state – is a bit harder to ascertain, although certainly within the realm of possibility.

Perhaps he could not avoid doing so. By 1651 when *Leviathan* was published, the expression "real unity" had already become a byword for ecclesiastical controversy in England and Scotland. Though it was originally conceived as a theological neologism that could be used by all Christians regardless of affiliation, Protestants tended to use it far more frequently than Catholics, often to emphasize the virtues of invisible and *spiritual* cohesion over and against that which was merely

⁹ See Victoria Ann Kahn, "Hobbes: A Rhetoric of Logic," in *Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism in the Renaissance* (Ithaca, 1985), 157–58, 160–61, 170, 177–78; Bryan Garsten, "The Rhetoric against Rhetoric: Hobbes," in *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment* (Cambridge, Mass./London, 2009), 27, 19, 36; Stephen B. Hequembourg, "Hobbes's Leviathan: A Tale of Two Bodies," *The Seventeenth Century* 28, no. 1 (2013): 21–36. Cf. Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge/New York, 1996), 5–8 346–347, 426–29, and especially 362–363.

¹⁰ See Paul D. Cooke, *Hobbes and Christianity: Reassessing the Bible in Leviathan* (Lanham, 1996); Patricia Springborg, "Hobbes on Religion," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes* (Cambridge, 1996), 346–80; Edwin Curley, "'I Durst Not Write So Boldly' or How to Read Hobbes' Theological-Political Treatise," in *Hobbes e Spinoza*, 1992, 497–593. Cf. A.P. Martinich, *The Two Gods of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes on Religion and Politics* (Cambridge/ New York, 2002).

formal or *institutional*. By mid-century the Protestants had begun to turn on each other, with Independents accusing Presbyterians of privileging the institutional unity of a national church over the invisible unity of independent congregations. Oliver Cromwell wrote a famous letter to Parliament in 1645 reporting that the Independents and Presbyterians in his army enjoyed a “real unity” in Christ that was “most glorious, because inward and spiritual.” He obliquely suggested that Parliament concern itself with “other things” than the imposition of a national church.¹¹ As the letter circulated (unofficially) throughout England and Scotland, Cromwell’s “real unity” was loudly praised by Independents and panned by Presbyterians, further politicizing the innocuous phrase and converting it into a protest slogan against formal and institutional uniformity. When Hobbes used it in 1651, he was not only imbuing his political project with a Christological cast, he was also appropriating what was at that point a divisive Independent idiom in order to say something significant about institutional uniformity, openly evincing the extent to which this arcane theological premise had become a urgent political concern.

There has been a great deal of interest lately in Hobbes’s ecclesiastical affiliation and affinities. His expression “real unity” offers another invaluable opportunity to examine these possibilities, while simultaneously engaging all the major aspects of Hobbes’s thought: social, political, and religious. Ignorance about the idiosyncratic early-modern meaning of “real unity” leaves us in the dark about these connections, puzzled about an otherwise odd claim by Hobbes, and perhaps less informed about the rich interplay of political and ecclesiastical concerns that motivated *Leviathan* and mobilized the entire nation. Hobbes’s “real unity” echoed Cromwell’s “real unity,” which was also Christ’s “real unity”: a unity that was both embodied and ecclesiastical.

Real Unity: the historical context

The sweep of Presbyterianism in England during the 17th century cannot be overstated. While Henry VIII had been ambivalent about the status of Protestantism in the realm, ironically it was Queen Mary, with all her violent antipathy, that tipped the national scales in favor of Protestant reform. Hundreds of influential theologians and clergy fled her wrath to Calvin’s Geneva and other Protestant havens across the Continent. They returned during Elizabeth’s reign, zealous for Calvinist reform and determined to “purify”¹² ecclesiastical structures by making them Presbyterian. A groundswell of popular support buoyed their efforts, especially in rural areas and among the middle- and lower-classes. Beleaguered holdouts in the monarchical court and high-bishopry maintained control as long as they could, but the Puritan uprising could be neither contained nor appeased. In 1638, Scotland abolished the episcopacy and declared their national church Presbyterian. Five years later, England’s Parliament invited Scottish representatives to join a commission at Westminster that had been appointed to investigate and recommend a similar ecclesiastical structure for the Church of

¹¹ Oliver Cromwell, “Letter to William Lenthall, Speaker of the House of Commons, from Bristol,” September 14, 1645; republished in Joshua Sprigg, *Anglia Rediviva*, 1647, 112–18.

¹² Thus the colloquial appellation “Puritan.”

England. This Westminster Assembly met for ten years (1643-1653) and ultimately produced a catechism and a Confession of Faith, which was immediately adopted by the Church of Scotland.

The Assembly had far less impact on its intended recipient, the Church of England. Enthusiasm for Presbyterianism held strong during the first few years of its sitting, and initially it seemed all but certain that the national church would be reformed along those lines. But mid-session, the Assembly's progress lost momentum to a small but vocal faction of Independent adherents, who objected to the very notion of a national church, even if it was non-episcopal. Support for Independency was at first mainly concentrated in the army, which was easily monitored and contained by Parliament, but was also a deepening embarrassment and a delicate dilemma, given the army's indispensability in Parliament's ongoing conflict with Charles I. The Lieutenant General – and rising star – of the army cavalry was Oliver Cromwell (an outspoken Independent), and he was tasked with providing weekly military updates to Parliament. Perhaps it was inevitable that he would (mis)use one of these missives to question the ecclesiastical proceedings at Westminster, or at least remind Parliament of his own preferences in the matter. He wrote the fateful letter from Bristol on September 14, 1645. Like all the others before it, Cromwell gave a dry, meticulous account of the various experiences, decisions, and movements taken by the army that week. But this time, on the back page, he offered a few unsolicited remarks on religion, ostensibly framed as a report on army morale and cohesion. He wrote,

Some praises are due to those gallant men, of whose valour so much mention is made...It's their joy that they are instruments of God's glory and their country's good. It's their honour that God vouchsafes to use them... Presbyterians, Independents, all have here the same spirit of faith and prayer, the same presence and answer. They agree here [and] have no names of difference – pity it is it should be otherwise anywhere! All that believe have the *real unity*, which is most glorious because inward and spiritual, in the Body and to the Head. For being united in forms (commonly called Uniformity) every Christian will, for peace-sake, study and do, as far as conscience will permit. And for brethren, in things of the mind, we look for no compulsion but that of light and reason.

In other things, God hath put the sword in the Parliament's hands, for the terror of evil-doers and the praise of them that do well. If any plead exemption from that, he knows not the Gospel; if any would wring that out of your hands or steal it from you, under what pretence soever, I hope they shall do it without effect. That God will maintain it in your hands and direct you in the use thereof, is the prayer of

Your humble servant, *Oliver Cromwell*.¹³

Parliament probably disapproved of these unsolicited admonishments, but given Cromwell's invaluable service to their cause, and the incendiary effect his letter might spark nationwide over an

¹³ Cromwell, "Letter to Parliament," September 14, 1645 (emphasis added).

issue that was hot enough already,¹⁴ Parliament chose to snuff the embers out. When his letter was released to the public, as all the rest had been, the final page was quietly omitted.¹⁵

This decision backfired badly. An anonymous whistleblower discovered the original and reprinted it with a splashy title obliquely accusing Parliament of a coverup.¹⁶ The author was almost certainly an Independent (or several Independents), suspicious that Cromwell had been deliberately “wronged” by the omission. George Thomason, a book collector who was at that time carefully preserving tracts, treatises, and documents as they appeared, reported that the anonymous addendum to Cromwell’s letter was “printed by the Independent party and scattered up and down the streets”¹⁷ – implying that the publication was little more than a hastily composed flyer, attached to windows or lampposts and slipped under doors. It probably would not have attracted more attention or drawn a wider readership had not David Buchanan happened upon one. Buchanan was a Scottish Presbyterian who was convinced of a vast English conspiracy against Scotland, and he had proved a nuisance to Parliament in the past by leaking classified documents to the public.¹⁸ A matter of days after the Cromwell flyer was distributed, Buchanan published a tract entitled *Truth, It’s Manifest*, in which he crowed, “These last days I met with a printed paper, the title whereof did show it to be the latter part of the letter written and sent from Bristol...I have thought fit to give this piece of the letter unto the view of the world, and so be communicated unto all, according to the intent of the writer thereof.”¹⁹ Buchanan interpreted Parliament’s bowdlerization of Cromwell’s letter as an attempt to subserve Independency (not inhibit it, as the Independents suspected), by concealing from the pro-Presbyterian public the extent of influence quietly wielded by the movement over British political policy. “In these few lines [by Cromwell],” warned Buchanan, “the malicious plot of factious Independents is more discovered, against Church and State, than by whatsoever hath been said or written by them to this day.”²⁰

¹⁴ “The controversy is now hot,” wryly observed Scottish member of Westminster Assembly George Gillespie, upon the introduction of Independent concerns into the proceedings: *Aaron’s Rod Blossoming, or, The Divine Ordinance of Church-Government Vindicated* (London, 1646).

¹⁵ Oliver Cromwell, *Lieutenant General Cromwell’s Letter to the House of Commons, of All the Particulars of Taking the City of Bristol, Ordered by the Commons Assembled in Parliament, That This Letter and Orders Be Forthwith Printed and Published*, ed. Henry Elsynge, Clerk of Parliament, House of Commons, 1645.

¹⁶ Anonymous, *The Conclusion of Lieutenant General Cromwell’s Letter to the House of Commons, Concerning the Taking of Bristol Which Was Contained in the Original, (Signed by Himself) but Omitted in the Printed Copy, Which Is Authorized by the House of Commons, (Though There Was a Whole Page Left Blank in That Sheet): Whereby the World May Know, How Both Truth Itself, and That Worthy Gentleman Are Wronged (as Well as Other Men) Either by the Printer or Some Others*, 1645.

¹⁷ A handwritten note in the margin of Thomason’s “Collection of Civil War Tracts,” residing in the British Library, see *Catalogue of the Pamphlets, Books, Newspapers, and Manuscripts Relating to the Civil War, the Commonwealth, and Restoration, Collected by George Thomason, 1640-1661*, ed. Trustees of the British Museum, vol. 1, 1908, 397. For more on the Independent printing initiative for this letter, see David R. Como, “An Unattributed Pamphlet by William Walwyn: New Light on the Prehistory of the Leveller Movement,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (September 2006): 360–61.

¹⁸ Just a week before the Cromwell flyer, Buchanan had published a tract defending his whistleblowing behavior and vowing to continue: see *A Short and True Relation of Some Main Passages of Things Wherein the Scots Are Particularly Concerned*, 1645, 9–11.

¹⁹ He complained, “It seems strange to sundry to see this piece of the letter not so communicated abroad unto the world...and seen but in the hands of some few – seeing the public is concerned in it as much at least as in the former part [of the letter]”: David Buchanan, *Truth, It’s Manifest* (London, 1645), 121–22.

²⁰ Buchanan, 127.

Parliament quickly moved to censure Buchanan’s work but did not offer a full rebuttal of his insinuations,²¹ considering perhaps that there was no need. Buchanan was not regarded highly, even by fellow Presbyterians or Scots, and indeed the initial public response to his exposé was fairly dismissive, with some denouncing him as a “hot-headed Presbyterian” and a “zealot for his Kirk government.”²² Edward Bowles, one of Cromwell’s cavalry chaplains, who was himself a Presbyterian and the son of a respected member of the Westminster Assembly, expressed sympathy for both Cromwell’s remarks and Parliament’s prudent response. “It is a greater wonder to me,” he wrote, “that [Buchanan] should so confidently print it when the Parliament had forbid it.”²³ Other Presbyterians ignored Buchanan’s role in the affair and instead focused their ire on Cromwell. One particularly polemical Presbyterian in England noted with sarcasm that the timing of Cromwell’s letter – after a major military success – amplified the scandal of its content: “After victories we have been minded by letters from the army of ‘liberty of conscience’ and ‘expecting no compulsion in matters of the mind, [as if to threaten,] ‘Will you discourage those that fight so bravely, and that God hath made so instrumental to you? If they may not have liberty of conscience and liberty to preach, the army will be discouraged. And if they may not preach, they will not fight.’”²⁴ Another Presbyterian, Samuel Rutherford, who was one of Scotland’s most influential pastors, wrote that he felt obliged to theologically analyze and rebut Cromwell’s statements, “because this letter was publicly printed, and contains doctrine unsound and scandalous.” After taking Cromwell to task, line by line, he concluded by rebuking Bowles for undue generosity toward Cromwell and Parliament.²⁵ These broadsides only increased the notoriety of Cromwell’s letter and expanded readership of Buchanan’s tract in which it had been published – John Milton himself had read it.²⁶ When a certain Independent member of the Westminster Assembly gave a well-attended public lecture in London around that time, he could quote from Cromwell’s letter without mentioning his name, confident that the audience needed no further clarification. “You know who said it,” he quipped.²⁷

Hobbes was in France at the time, but he kept sufficiently abreast of the news back home to have heard of the incident. It is possible that he became acquainted with the expression “real unity” upon reading Cromwell’s letter, but it is far more likely that doing so would merely have reinforced his long familiarity with it. Even a casual 17th-century reader of theology, far less interested or engaged than Hobbes, would have noticed the gradually increasing frequency of invocations to Christ’s “real unity.” By 1651 when Hobbes published *Leviathan*, usage of the phrase had exploded (see Figures 1 and 2), and although it remained consistent for decades afterwards, the mid-century

²¹ See Edward Bowles, *Manifest Truth*, 1646, 74 (postscript).

²² Abraham Babington, *An Answer to a Discourse Entitled, Truth It’s Manifest*, c.1648, 52, 54. See also Nicholas Lockyer, *A Little Stone, out of the Mountain: Church-Order Briefly Opened* (Leith, 1652), 48–51.

²³ Bowles, *Manifest Truth*, 69. Another chaplain in the Parliamentary army eventually republished Cromwell’s letter in a less incendiary manner than that of the “anonymous” flyer: see Sprigg, *Anglia Rediviva*, 112–18.

²⁴ Thomas Edwards, *Gangraena, or, A Catalogue and Discovery of Many of the Errors, Heresies, Blasphemies and Pernicious Practices of the Sectaries of This Time*, 1646, 64–65. For more on his political activities against Independency, see Ann Hughes, *Gangraena and the Struggle for the English Revolution* (Oxford, 2004), 318–415.

²⁵ Samuel Rutherford, *A Survey of the Spiritual Antichrist: Opening the Secrets of Familism and Antinomianism*, 1648, 250–51.

²⁶ John Milton, *Eikonoklastēs*, 1650, 79.

²⁷ William Greenhill, *Expositions Continued upon the Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, Ninth, Tenth, Eleventh, Twelfth, and Thirteenth Chapters of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 1649, 424.

era gave “real unity” a prominence in theological discourses that was unprecedented.²⁸ The urgency of this emphasis was due, at least in part, to the watershed ecclesiastical conflict between the Independents and Presbyterians, which pushed to the fore all Biblical exegesis related to the nature of Christ’s church. But what made this “real unity” exegesis so effective as a theological cudgel – first for one side and then the other – was its thoroughly *uncontroversial* status, as a doctrine held firmly by both parties. “That a Christian is by faith *really* knit to Christ and made one with him and so hath eternal life from him...is old Scripture doctrine, acknowledged by all Protestant divines,” wrote Humphrey Chambers (1652), a Presbyterian member of the Westminster Assembly.²⁹

Chambers’ claim is certainly defensible. Similar formulations to the one he gave – describing the relationship between Christ and church members as a physiological “real unity” – began to appear quite early in the century, by theological authorities whose works were read and approved by virtually all Protestants, regardless of emerging factions. One such author, Girolamo Zanchi, declared (1599), “Even as the members can draw no motion, sense, or life from the head unless they be joined to it...even so cannot men receive any salvation or life from Christ (in whom only it consisteth) unless they be coupled [with him] in a true and *real union*, and being coupled do abide in him.”³⁰ Zanchi was a popular Continental theologian, recognized as one of Calvin’s successors in Geneva, and widely read in England. The Cavendish library at Hardwick Hall, which Hobbes oversaw and maintained, contained all of Zanchi’s works, for example.³¹ As demonstrated in the above quote, Zanchi tended to describe the “real unity” dynamic in much the same way as Cromwell did in his famous letter: as a physiological relationship with Christ shared by all those who believe in him. But even more interestingly, Zanchi embellished his account with concepts and themes that would figure prominently in Hobbes’s political vision: among them, the “incorporation” of individuals into a single human being, and the cohesion of this new organism in the one “soul” that they all share. Zanchi reasoned, “Surely if there were in all men but one and the self-same soul, it must follow that innumerable many persons were only one man.” He proceeded to argue that this abstract hypothetical had become a reality through Jesus Christ: “The Holy Ghost – [being] one and the same in all the godly, which being also in Christ – doth so *really* couple us with him that we are one body with him and amongst ourselves, yea, all of us one new man in the same head Christ.”³² Zanchi described this transformation not only in terms of a biological creation, but also as a formal, political intervention: as a “covenant” and an agreement of many individuals together to each forego his discrete and isolated existence, however natural, on behalf of a radically collectivist ideal and an

²⁸ Further details of my archival survey of the phrase and the printed works in which it appeared may be found at my website, <https://www.saritazaffini.com/>.

²⁹ Humphrey Chambers, *Animadversions on Mr. William Dell’s Book Entitled The Crucified and Quickened Christian*, 1652, 45, emphasis added here and throughout this paper where cognates of the expression “real unity” are expressed.

³⁰ Girolamo Zanchi, *A Confession of Christian Religion, Which Now at Length Being 70 Years of Age, He Caused to Be Published in the Name of Himself & His Family* (Cambridge, 1599), chap. XII, 76–77.

³¹ From a list drawn up by Hobbes in the 1620s: see Richard A. Talaska, *The Hardwick Library and Hobbes’s Early Intellectual Development*, 1st edition (Charlottesville, 2013); Noel Malcolm, “Review of Talaska: The Hardwick Library and Hobbes’s Early Intellectual Development,” *Hobbes Studies* 26, no. 2 (2013): 200–203.

³² Zanchi, *Confession*, chap. XII, 88–89. “...a true and an essential communion, which is made by the Holy Ghost and by faith: since nothing can knit more strictly diverse substances and natures into one than the Holy Ghost, as we see in the incarnation of the Son of God, and in the creation of man, being compounded of the soul and the body.”

absolutist Sovereign. “They which truly belong unto the covenant [are] incorporated into Christ,” explained Zanchi, “that they should no longer be their own men, but his, by whom they are called into the society of the covenant, and consequently into one body with him and all the saints.”³³

These tropes – of the body, of the covenant, of society, and of Christ as head and soul – were synonymous fixtures of the “real unity” genre as it developed during the 16th and 17th centuries. Zanchi’s text is certainly representative of the genre, but many other authors and works, also from the turn of the century, exhibit these characteristics just as clearly. William Perkins, a moderate Anglican theologian of the Elizabethan era, offered the same account, and his influence in England, even well into the 17th century, extended much further than Zanchi’s. (The Hardwick library included several volumes from Perkins as well.)³⁴ “The union with Christ is a work of God whereby all believers are made one with Christ,” Perkins wrote (1603):

For the better conceiving of this, suppose a man whose head lies in Italy, his arms in Germany and Spain, his feet in England. Suppose further that one and the same soul extends itself to all foresaid parts and quickens them. They are all now become one in respect of one and the same soul, and all concur as members to one and the same body. Even so, all the saints in heaven and all believers upon earth having one and the same spirit of Christ dwelling in them, are one in Christ.³⁵

Perkins quickly clarified, “They are not one, *barely by consent of heart and affection.*”³⁶ The mention here of “consent” is important, not only for the implied distinction between moral embodiment and other agreement-based relationships (more on this later), but also for the striking formulation with which it was expressed – a formulation that seems to anticipate Hobbes’s famous claim about “real unity” entailing “more than consent or concord.”³⁷ Perkins elaborated in another work (1600):

Albeit it be a most near and *real union*, yet we must not think that it [is a union] by touching, mixture, or, as it were, by soldering of one soul with another, *neither by a bare agreement of the souls among themselves*, but by the communion and operation of the same spirit – which being by nature infinite, is of sufficient ability to conjoin those things together which are of themselves far distant from each other, the like we see in the soul of a man, which conjoineth the head with the foot.³⁸

Again, the reference here to an “agreement among themselves” – that does not rise to “real unity” and is therefore insufficient to transform them into one person – corresponds nicely to Hobbes’s statement on “real unity.”

It also closely parallels several passages in Hobbes’s work that describe the inadequacy of casual consensus, which he defined as “concord.” Hobbes explained (1640), “When the wills of many concur to one and the same action, this concurrence of their wills is called ‘consent’ (or ‘concord’), by which we must not understand *one will* of many men (for every man hath his several

³³ Zanchi, chap. XV, 116.

³⁴ See Talaska, *Hobbes and the Hardwick Library*, 59, 61.

³⁵ William Perkins, *A Commentary or Exposition, upon the Five First Chapters of the Epistle to the Galatians*, 1603, 264–65.

³⁶ Perkins, 265, emphasis added.

³⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XVII.13.

³⁸ William Perkins, *A Golden Chain, or, The Description of Theology Containing the Order of the Causes of Salvation and Damnation, According to God’s Word* (Cambridge, 1600), 115, emphasis added.

will) but *many wills* to the producing of one effect.”³⁹ The distinction here for Hobbes – and for the theologians above – had to do with the difference between one will and many wills. Consent itself was less the issue than the *subject* of that consent: did consent come from many persons or from one person (of many members)? If the former, then the body metaphor was inappropriate to describe it; if the latter, then the body metaphor was ideal. A “body politic,” according to Hobbes, “signifieth not the *concord* but the *union* of many men,”⁴⁰ which he described as an “involving or including of many wills in one.”⁴¹ This is precisely the kind of union claimed by English theologians for the relationship between Christ and believers, and they were just as concerned as Hobbes to distinguish this unity from lesser types of “consent” or “concord.” Simon Birckbeck, another moderate Anglican pastor, declared (1635), “We have by reason of our mystical union with Christ (whereby we become members of Christ’s body and quickened by his spirit)...a greater and more *real union* than barely by consent or concord of will.”⁴² This quote is so similar to the assertion Hobbes would make fifteen years later (“This is more than consent or concord: it is a *real unity* of them all, in one and the same person.”⁴³), he could have borrowed it as a prototype. The likelihood of this possibility increases in that Birckbek’s book – while fairly obscure, even at the time – was a great favorite of John Selden, a close friend of Hobbes, who thought that the book offered an invaluable defense of Anglicanism against Roman Catholicism.⁴⁴ It is not inconceivable that he recommended it or sent it to Hobbes, perhaps while Hobbes was exiled in France, writing *Leviathan* and experiencing Catholicism in all its Continental strength.

But regardless, and even if Hobbes never read Birckbek, or took note of the relevant passages in Perkins and Zanchi, or read Cromwell’s letter, it would be surprising if he was unaware of the larger “mystical body” genre, and the significance of “real unity” within it. The doctrine of Christ’s church body practically dominated early-modern theology for decades. And in this confessional period – when almost everyone, irrespective of their class, station, or trade, made it their business to read and parse sophisticated doctrinal discourses – the tropes and jargon of Christological embodiment quickly passed into popular parlance. The *Leviathan* passage in which Hobbes cites the “real unity” of the Commonwealth exhibits all the indicators commonly associated with this theological genre: descriptions of a new society, the incorporation of consenting individuals, the symbiotic physiology of their relationship, and an absolutist Sovereign who simultaneously owns the organism and also forms part of it, as sustainer and soul. Unless the proximity of these tropes to Hobbes’s expression “real unity” are entirely coincidental, which beggars belief, it seems safe to dispel the scholarly uncertainties surrounding its significance and

³⁹ Hobbes, *Human Nature*, XII.7, emphasis added. And for the “concord” aside see XIX.4.

⁴⁰ Hobbes, *De Corpore Politico*, XXVII.7, emphasis added.

⁴¹ Hobbes, *Human Nature*, XII.8.

⁴² Simon Birckbek, *The Protestants’ Evidence Taken out of Good Records; Showing That for Fifteen Hundred Years next after Christ, Divers Worthy Guides of God’s Church, Have in Sundry Weighty Points of Religion, Taught as the Church of England Now Doth*, 1635, 77.

⁴³ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XVII.13.

⁴⁴ See Anthony à Wood, *Athenæ Oxonienses: An Exact History of All the Writers and Bishops Who Have Had Their Education in the Most Ancient and Famous University of Oxford, from the Fifteenth Year of King Henry the Seventh, Dom. 1500, to the End of the Year 1690*, 1692, 128. Wood was a famous antiquarian collector and historian of the 17th century.

provisionally declare its referent to be Christological. The implications of this discovery for Hobbes research are too numerous to be explained adequately – far less defended – here. But two major premises from the Christological genre in question that are especially relevant to Hobbes’s thought and interpretation deserve some brief elaboration. In early-modern theological discourse, they were considered to be fundamental and virtually unassailable tenets of the genre, however vast, detailed, and contested other aspects would remain: Christ’s “real unity” was held to be *embodied* and *ecclesiastical*.

Real Unity and Embodiment

No analogy for Christ’s “real unity” was more prominent in the early-modern era than that of the body, primarily because pastors and theologians believed that the Bible itself had established this rhetorical preference “Nothing is more often used in the holy Scriptures than this similitude,” wrote Zanchi, “that hereby we might more easily and clearly understand what and how great this conjunction of all us is with Christ, through his spirit, which dwelleth in all people that are regenerate.”⁴⁵ While many similar analogies appear throughout the New Testament (such as the vine and branches,⁴⁶ or cornerstone and edifice⁴⁷), the body metaphor, elaborated by the Apostle Paul in his epistles,⁴⁸ was thought to communicate certain important characteristics of Christian unity insufficiently captured in the others. A well-structured building may rely upon a harmony of parts, for instance, but has no dynamism or symbiosis. A vine may exhibit these organic characteristics, but it lacks the anthropic and biological sophistication one might hope for when analogizing an entity as complex and diverse as human society.

Moreover choosing the correct and most ideal metaphor for the church community was hardly the only challenge. Far more worrisome to pastors and theologians was the creeping insinuation that it was impossible to understand Christ’s mysterious bond with believers *except* by metaphor, and that this might indicate the phenomenon in question was not merely elusive or opaque to finite human minds, but fictitious and illusory. The term “mystical” – which had been the most popular qualifier for the union of Christ with believers (and sacramental instantiations of his body) since at least the Middle Ages – began to connote this fanciful sense during the early-modern era, inducing pastors and theologians to seek alternative terminology. Discourses and treatises that in an earlier era would have been laced with references to the “mystical” nature of Christ’s union, began to claim instead that it was “real.” By 1620, the qualifier “real” had become ubiquitous in these theological contexts, as the superior term whereby to define Christ’s union and also to distance it from the (admittedly helpful) metaphors that threatened to undermine its validity. “This wonderful union [with Christ] is not a thing in mere imagination,” warned Huguenot expatriate Pierre Moulin⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Zanchi, *Confession*, chap. XII, 86.

⁴⁶ See John 15:1-7, Romans 11:16-24, Ephesians 3:17, and Colossians 2:7

⁴⁷ See Matthew 21:42-44, Acts 4:11, Romans 9:33, I Corinthians 3:11-13, Ephesians 2:20, and I Peter 2:4-8

⁴⁸ See Romans 12:4-5, Ephesians 4-6, 12, 15-16, 25; 5:23, 29-30, I Corinthians 6:15; 12:12-27; 10:16-17, Colossians 1:17-18; 2:10-11, 19; 3:15

⁴⁹ Moulin was a great favorite of King James I, who invited him to England as his personal guest. And if the Hardwick Library is any indication, Moulin was also a favorite of Hobbes. See Talaska, *Hobbes and the Hardwick Library*, 49, 56–58.

(1620). “It is a true, *real*, and substantial union.”⁵⁰ Anglican bishop Joseph Hall⁵¹ similarly urged (1620),

Do not conceive of [Christ’s] union as some imaginary thing that hath no other being but in the brain. Do not think it an union merely virtual...nor yet a metaphorical union by way of figurative resemblance. But know that this is a true, *real*, essential, substantial union, whereby the person of the believer is indissolubly united to the glorious person of the Son of God.⁵²

The intention here was not to question or discredit the robust rhetorical tradition associated with Christian unity, but to reassess its doctrinal role and prevent a reification of metaphors themselves, independent of the reality they were meant to explain. As one Westminster Assembly member pithily put it (1622), “A true, *real union* of our persons with the person of Christ...is to be noted against their conceit who imagine this union to be only in imagination or conceit.”⁵³ Christian unity was understood to be a concrete and objective reality, wholly separate from subjective experiences or endorsements. Yet far from hampering subjective belief, this tenet tended to fortify and foster it.

The 17th-century demarcation between “real” and “metaphorical” unity may be of some relevance to a recent strand of Hobbes scholarship in which his rhetorical intentions have been subjected to fresh scrutiny. Rather than assuming that Hobbes selected metaphors and analogies in order to poetically illuminate the rationality of his political vision,⁵⁴ many scholars argue instead that he used them to conceal, exploit, ridicule, or perhaps simply to amuse and entertain.⁵⁵ His body leitmotif is often marshaled in defense of this hypothesis, not only because it is the rhetorical conceit he invested in most heavily, but also because it seems at odds with what has become the standard modern assessment of Hobbes: that he was a radical individualist rather than a collectivist. The jarring dissonance between this conclusion and his “body politic” conceit (which suggests a moral and organic cohesion that would be impossible in any individualist society) underwrites scholarly speculation that Hobbes “[did] not take his own metaphor seriously.”⁵⁶ On this view, Hobbes may have indulged in the body metaphor as a conciliation to “weaker minds” who would perhaps expect it, or would be unlikely to accept his actual political prescriptions if presented more transparently. Hobbes’s intention would have been to distort, and distract from, his rational postulates in order to

⁵⁰ Pierre Du Moulin, *The Buckler of the Faith, or, A Defense of the Confession of Faith of the Reformed Churches in France*, 1620, 429.

⁵¹ His early works were found in the Hardwick library in the 1620s.

⁵² Joseph Hall, *Christ Mystical, or, The Blessed Union of Christ and His Members*, 1647, 9–12. See also Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity Eight Books*, 1604, 124: “Only our minds by intellectual conceit are able to apprehend that such a *real* body there is, a body collective, because it containeth an huge multitude - a body mystical, because the mystery of their conjunction is removed altogether from sense.”

⁵³ William Gouge, *Of Domestic Duties, Eight Treatises*, 1622, 97. See also Benjamin King, *The Marriage of the Lamb*, 1640, 8: “Now this union is not a mere notional and intellectual union, that consists only in the understanding, and without the understanding is nothing...But this union is a *real*, mystical, and spiritual union.”

⁵⁴ This is the objective of (legitimate) rhetoric, according to the classical tradition. For a sustained argument that Hobbes used rhetoric in this way, see Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, especially 344ff.

⁵⁵ David Johnston was one of the first to elaborate these themes, see *The Rhetoric of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes and the Politics of Cultural Transformation*, Studies in Moral, Political, and Legal Philosophy (Princeton, 1986), especially 76–79.

⁵⁶ Hequembourg, “Tale of Two Bodies,” 25–26.

manipulate or emotionally overwhelm his audience into acquiescence.⁵⁷ More perceptive minds among them would recognize his clever ploy, enjoy the metaphor for its entertainment value,⁵⁸ and understand Hobbes to be gently ridiculing a time-worn myth about social cohesion – while simultaneously asserting the opposite.⁵⁹ There would be no doubt for them that Hobbes’s body politic was a purely fictitious illusion, “exist[ing] *only* in the imaginations of men.”⁶⁰

This is of course the very inference that most alarmed 17th-century theologians, and led them to adopt the “real unity” terminology when discussing the “embodiment” of Christ’s church. They were convinced that any shadow of doubt about the *objective* reality of the union – quite apart from the rhetorical metaphor used to describe it – would ultimately destroy all *subjective* belief in it. This assumption is most common within traditional religious communities, but it often seems just as relevant in other contexts – such as the socio-political or economic – that rely for their success on certain collective commitments, creeds, or psychologies.⁶¹ Can an individual (or citizen) truly believe in something they know full well to be objectively false or non-existent? Many scholars, who are otherwise sympathetic to the “irony” hypothesis in Hobbes’s work, doubt this prospect, and are especially dubious that any such belief could be sustained under duress or through a real-world crisis. They question whether Hobbes would have wanted to expose the fragility of his commonwealth so overtly by declaring its unity to be a specious myth and a mere figment of their own imagination.⁶² Hobbes certainly gave many indications that he did *not* seek to build his commonwealth upon the flimsy foundation of wavering human opinions and passions alone, but also upon the firm ground of a concrete reality that can be experienced, investigated, discovered, and understood with enough scientific confidence to justify emotional belief and obligation.⁶³

⁵⁷ See Hequembourg, 29–32; Johnston, *The Rhetoric of Leviathan*, 76–79; Garsten, “Rhetoric against Rhetoric,” 27–29, 36; Robin Douglass, “The Body Politic ‘Is a Fictitious Body,’” *Hobbes Studies* 27, no. 2 (2014): 139–42.

⁵⁸ Victoria Kahn, *Wayward Contracts: The Crisis of Political Obligation in England, 1640-1674* (Princeton, 2004), 6, 280.

⁵⁹ Patricia Springborg, “Leviathan, the Christian Commonwealth Incorporated,” *Political Studies* 24, no. 2 (June 1, 1976): 175; Patricia Springborg, “Thomas Hobbes and Cardinal Bellarmine: Leviathan and ‘The Ghost of the Roman Empire,’” *History of Political Thought* 16, no. 4 (1995): 523: “His materialism could not easily accommodate collectivities...so the term ‘body politic’ was really no more than a literary conceit...a spoof on all organic theories of the state.”

⁶⁰ Douglass, “The Body Politic ‘Is a Fictitious Body,’” 142, emphasis in original.

⁶¹ See Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*. (Berkeley, 1967), 100–111.

⁶² Jean Hampton, *Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition* (Cambridge/New York, 1986), 264: “But if the state is perceived as our creation, then it is extremely unlikely that we should...alienate our power to it.” See also David Runciman, “Hobbes and the Person of the Commonwealth,” in *Pluralism and the Personality of the State*, Ideas in Context 47 (Cambridge, 1997), 31–33; David Runciman, “What Kind of Person Is Hobbes’s State? A Reply to Skinner,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2000): 276–78; Arash Abizadeh, “The Representation of Hobbesian Sovereignty: Leviathan as Mythology,” in *Hobbes Today: Insights for the 21st Century*, 2013, 128–30, 141–42. And Douglass, “The Body Politic ‘Is a Fictitious Body,’” 142: “The very idea that the body politic is only a fictitious body might prove insidious if appropriated by those who would rather use it excite sedition than to move men towards peace.”

⁶³ For a sample see *Leviathan*, V.3-4, 22; XI.17-19; XXV.13; XXVII.12; XLVI.1-2; Review&Conclusion.1. And *Human Nature*, V.12-14; VI (entire); XIII.4. See also Katrin Flikschuh, “Elusive Unity: The General Will in Hobbes and Kant,” *Hobbes Studies* 25, no. 1 (2012): 21: “For Hobbes...political unity must be empirically real.” And Abizadeh, “The Representation of Hobbesian Sovereignty,” 128–29, 141–42: “...cannot simply be willed into being: it must be experienced by the subject as the necessary acknowledgment of an external reality that simultaneously resonates with what the subject reads deep in his soul...The Hobbesian God gains a real existence, independent of the vicissitudes of the subject’s imagination.”

Moreover, even if Hobbes did wish his metaphors and analogies to impart the sense that his commonwealth was completely ephemeral, it is unlikely that his 17th-century readers would have surmised this from the account he offered. The socio-political tropes he used and the claims he made about them were so thoroughly traditional,⁶⁴ they probably would have been understood in the traditional sense – as rhetorical depictions of an independent, socio-political reality. That is certainly how the similar rhetoric of Christ’s church-body was understood, which Hobbes’s commonwealth-body so closely parallels, up to and including the “real unity” flourish. In early-modern theology, incorporation narratives were offered, not as flights of fancy to be indulged in comfortable leisure, but as stirring announcements of salvation to an audience in the throes of an existential crisis. Organic tropes amplified the severity of the predicament and described the alternatives with stark, grim clarity: life or death, health or sickness, synergy or disintegration. But these analogies merely clarified, and dramatized, a reality experienced and confirmed by other means.⁶⁵ An English Christian could confidently assert (1643), “By union I am a member of the body, whereof Christ is the head. We are partakers of the same spirit: then is our union real, *revera* [in reality], and not metaphorical only.”⁶⁶ The opposite insinuation – that embodiment was clearly metaphorical, and therefore *merely* metaphorical – would have met with scorn and derision, as if it were a cruel joke played upon desperate suppliants. “Imaginary unions are as useless here as imaginary parts [of the body],” frowned one pastor (1644). “Health is not in imagination.”⁶⁷

The intensity and seriousness with which this body conceit was elaborated typifies an important peculiarity of *Christian* organicism, in contrast with *classical* organicism. Ancient iterations of the ‘body politic’ (from the likes of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, for instance) were far less angst-y, primarily because human society was believed to have originated spontaneously and instinctually, like biological evolution. Supposedly subject to the same social impulses obeyed by other animal and insect organisms, humans were thought to have drifted ineluctably toward each other from the very beginning of their existence.⁶⁸ The “body” metaphor helpfully described the essence and structure their relationships, but gave no indication that it could be otherwise. Social “embodiment” was taken as a given, and individualistic alternatives were deemed unlikely, if not impossible – even in some

⁶⁴ For a sense of this ancient genre and how similar it is to Hobbes’s iteration, see John of Salisbury, *Policraticus: The Statesman’s Book*, trans. John Dickinson (1928), V.21, in which he also appeals to the precedent of Plato and Cicero. For famous examples from Hobbes’s own day, see James I, King of England, “A Speech to the Lords and Commons of the Parliament at Whitehall [March 1609],” in *The Political Works of James I* (1965), 307–9; Edward Forset, *A Comparative Discourse of the Bodies Natural and Politic Wherein out of the Principles of Nature Is Set Forth the True Form of a Commonweal, with the Duty of Subjects, and Right of Sovereign*, 1606.

⁶⁵ See William Lyford, *The Plain Man’s Senses Exercised*, 1655, 115: “The union produceth real effects and operations in us, therefore the union is *real*.”

⁶⁶ Henry Roborough, *The Doctrine of Justification Cleared*, 1643, 91. Roborough was a Puritan scribe for the Westminster Assembly and joined the (Presbyterian) declaration against the king’s death in 1649.

⁶⁷ George Hughes, *A Dry Rod Blooming and Fruit-Bearing, Or, A Treatise of the Pain, Gain, and Use of Chastenings*, 1644, 116. Hughes was a non-Conformist Puritan, probably Presbyterian.

⁶⁸ See Plato, *Republic*, ed. C. D. C. Reeve, trans. G. M. A. Grube, 2nd edition (Indianapolis, 1992), 369b-c; Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Thomas Alan Sinclair and Trevor J. Saunders, Rev. ed, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth, England/New York, 1981), 1252a24, 1252b15-39, 1253a1, 1278b15-29; Cicero, *De Re Publica [The Republic]*, trans. Clinton Walker Keyes, Loeb Classical Library 213 (Harvard, 2006), I.XXV.39.

hypothetical, primordial period.⁶⁹ Christianity rejected this last assumption, although it borrowed heavily many other aspects of the organistic genre. From St. Paul onward,⁷⁰ Christian theologians analogized their church community as an embodied society of believers, exhibiting all the symbiotic traits celebrated in the ancient iteration. But so far from it being an effortless development, determined and effected by nature, the church-body received its hard-won existence after a protracted struggle and impossible odds. Before its creation – and beyond its confines – sinful individuals fought for a bitter, half-existence, hopelessly fractured and dispersed by their own violence and dysfunction.⁷¹ Unification and peace were desperately needed but, under these circumstances, absurdly improbable.

To even the most casual readers of Hobbes, it should be obvious that he hewed closer to the Christian version of organicism than to the classical.⁷² His famous “nasty, brutish, and short” description of natural human behavior⁷³ has more in common with dour Christian accounts of original sin than with the optimistic teleology of the ancients. Hobbes in fact always made a point of countering the ancients precisely on this point, and reminding his readers that humans could not at all be compared with bees or other organisms in their various herds and hives, because unlike them, humans compete for personal glory, they hate each other and are envious, they invade and destroy.⁷⁴ Socio-political unions of these creatures would be doomed from the outset. The most they could achieve would be some thin, tense, and temporary agreement that Hobbes called “concord” rather than “union” – a fleeting and occasional truce, under perpetual threat of dissolution.⁷⁵ St. Augustine once defined the political community in precisely these terms, as “a promiscuous multitude unworthy of the name ‘people.’”⁷⁶ And while Hobbes seems to have thought this was true of humans in their *natural* state (and perhaps also in badly constituted political regimes), he also believed it was possible for any given collectivity to achieve peace, order, stability, and strength, but it required that every individual must submit themselves to an absolutist sovereign.⁷⁷ This solution is

⁶⁹ There is one rather notable exception. For a surprisingly voluntarist account, *a la* Hobbes or Rousseau, see Cicero, *De Inventione [The Invention (of Rhetoric)]*, trans. H. M. Hubbell, Loeb Classical Library 386 (Harvard, 1968), I.II.

⁷⁰ For a sampling of St. Paul’s organicist imagery, see Romans 12:3-6, I Corinthians 12:12ff; Ephesians 4:1-5; Colossians 2:8, 18-19, 3:11-15

⁷¹ St. Augustine critiqued Cicero’s instinctualist organicism for failing to adequately appreciate human sinfulness. Augustine claimed that political societies outside the church were merely temporary truces, both fragile and tense. “There is not that common sense of right,” he wrote, “which transforms a multitude of men into a people, whose estate has been said [by Cicero] to constitute a state.” See *City of God, Volume VI: Books 18-20*, trans. William Chase Greene, Loeb Classical Library 416 (Harvard, 1960), I.30; III.25; XIX.7, 12, 21, 23-25.

⁷² I have written more extensively on this theme in another piece, see Sarita Zaffini, “The Two Bodies of Hobbes and Rousseau,” *The European Legacy* 27, no. 6 (2022): 533–62.

⁷³ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XIII.

⁷⁴ Hobbes, XVII.6-12. For parallel passages, see *Human Nature*, XIX.8-9, 11; *De Cive*, V.5.

⁷⁵ For “concord” see Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XVII.2-5; *Human Nature*, XII.7-8, XIX. 4, 6; *De Corpore Politico*, XXVII.7; *De Cive*, V.4, 6.

⁷⁶ Augustine, *City of God, Volume VI*, XIX.21, see also XIX.23. For Hobbes’s distinction between “multitude” and “people,” see *Leviathan*, XI.20, XVI.13, XVIII.18; *Human Nature*, XIX.8; *De Corpore Politico*, XX.2, XXI.2, 11; *De Cive*, VI.1, XII.8, VI.19.

⁷⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XVII.

of course not unlike that of Christianity, which offers peace to sinners upon the condition of unreserved submission to Jesus Christ the King.⁷⁸

And Hobbes goes still further along these lines, in that he insists the political sovereign is the “soul” of the collectivity, not merely its forbidding dictator. Hobbes certainly approved of despotism and believed that its considerable merits were often underappreciated,⁷⁹ but he also seemed cognizant that citizens would expect – and perhaps should receive – more than an orderly police state.⁸⁰ It may be basic and fundamental that citizens feel safe from each other, but if they have no other connection, share no further goal, and perceive no moral need for each other, can they be said to live in society at all? Is it likely that such an arrangement would inspire loyalty and obligation? Would it foster communal growth and prosperity, economically or otherwise? Mindful of these worries – or at least aware that there was little point in exaggerating the detriments of individualism if the solution was not a significant improvement – Hobbes promised not merely *security* but “real *unity*” within the commonwealth. Citizens could feel that they were a genuine “people” (not just a multitude-being-policed), and that they were valuable members of one living, self-preserving organism, capable of quickening, protecting, and sustaining them. But true to the Christian formula, Hobbes’s social organism depended for its very existence upon one indispensable figure, analogized as the “soul.” When Cardinal Bellarmine protested that society “coheres together” naturally, as the ancients claimed, Hobbes answered, “It is true, they cohere together. But they depend only on the sovereign, which is the soul of the commonwealth – which failing, the commonwealth is dissolved into a civil war, no one man so much as cohering to another, for want of a common dependance on a known sovereign, just as the members of the natural body dissolve into earth, for want of a soul to hold them together.”⁸¹

For Hobbes, there was no growth, no life, no society, and no *body* without one sovereign locus of power and being.⁸² The English Christians thought this as well – about Christ’s church – and expressed it in almost the same way. “The life of a Christian doth as immediately flow from Christ as the life of the body from the soul,” wrote Humphrey Chambers (1644), a prominent Presbyterian member of the Westminster Assembly.

And as the body has no habit of life in itself distinct and apart from the reasonable soul, but the soul itself that dwells in the body is the life of the body, and when the soul withdraws, the body is dead and hath no habit of life in itself afterwards – so if Christ should withdraw, all spiritual life would leave him, and the Second Death would swallow him up. And as the presence of the soul in each member is the life of it, so is Christ’s presence

⁷⁸ See Thomas Manton, *Christ’s Eternal Existence*, 1685 [posthumous, 1650], 216–17: “Every man must give his hand to the Lord and personally engage for himself...We ratify the Covenant in our own persons by a professed subjection to the gospel of Christ.”

⁷⁹ See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XX; *De Cive*, IX; *De Corpore Politico*, XXIII.

⁸⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXX.1ff; *De Cive*, XIII.4ff.

⁸¹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLII.125. For other references to the Sovereign as the “soul,” see Introduction.1, XXI.21, and XXIX.23.

⁸² See Hobbes, *De Cive*, XII.4: “The single wills of the subjects are contained in the will of the city...which hath no being but by...Supreme Power.”

– in all his members – their true and very life, wherefore saith Paul, *Christ lives in me*, as God lived in Christ, and as the soul lives in the body.⁸³

Outside of this church body and detached from sovereignty, each individual would otherwise stand alone – a condition Chambers described as “very miserable.” He explained,

Every man by nature and according to his first birth is a distinct person by himself, and lives a proper life of his own, in and by himself, till faith comes and knits him unto Christ. And then he subsists in Christ’s person, and is no more a person by himself.

The imagery here is almost identical to that pictured in Hobbes’s famous frontispiece of *Leviathan*, where the great body of the commonwealth seems also to be the great body of the sovereign (who is the head), made up of a myriad of individuals, who are contained within.⁸⁴ “We through faith are not persons by ourselves,” Chambers reiterated.

But we are Parts and Members of Christ, and live in his Person, and consequently in so near a union with him that Christ cannot be saved without us nor we perish without him...Christ is made so one with a Christian that there is no more distinction between them in this unity than there is between the head and a member.

This physiological relationship made it possible for believers to “live and act” in Christ, and easily to own his actions as their own: in a very real sense those actions *were* their own. Chambers described a believer’s hypothetical defense against hostile assailants (such as the devil):

[The believer] (because of this most *real* and near union with Christ) may reply in truth and say, ‘It is not I. I am not I. I am through faith become a member of Christ, and I am he and he is I. And if you have anything to say, say it to the Person himself, for I am but a Member, and do live in his Person.’⁸⁵

Legal attribution of words and actions would be possible, not merely on the basis of a distant, economic authorization, but because the author and agent literally make up the same person and they are parts of the same whole. Chambers wrote, “The works of believers are sometimes attributed to Christ and sometimes to them. And it is no matter whether they be attributed to Christ in them or them in Christ, seeing it is Christ in believers that is all, and doth all, and hath the glory of all.”⁸⁶ In Hobbes’s terms, this would be an example of a natural person representing himself because he is *himself*.⁸⁷

And there is good reason to wonder if Hobbes’s “real unity” narrative is indeed suggesting this profound shift – from a distant, legal authorization between would-be citizens and their would-be sovereign, to a more simple, immediate representation of citizens-and-sovereign-together, in one

⁸³ Chambers, *Animadversions*, 54–55. For a similar sentiment, see Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity*, 202.

⁸⁴ See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXX.30: “Every sovereign hath the same right, in procuring the safety of his people, that any particular man can have in procuring the safety of his own body.”

⁸⁵ Chambers, *Animadversions*, 47–55.

⁸⁶ Chambers, 63. For other statements about the indistinction of Christ and his church, and their sharing of the same name, see Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity*, 219; Gouge, *Of Domestic Duties*, 97.

⁸⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XVI.3: “A person is the same that an actor is, both on the stage and in common conversation; and to personate is to act, or *represent, himself* or another...Cicero says...‘I bear three persons: *my own*, my adversary’s, and the judge’s.’” Emphasis added.

body, *as one body itself*. This type of relationship between author and agent would be as intimate and instinctual as the soul representing the rest of the body to the outside world. It would be much stronger and more indivisible, in that it seems absurd (or impossible) for parts of a body to distance themselves from the soul, or refuse to identify with it, or protest its preeminence. The very attempt would be foolishly self-destructive because they and the soul belong to the same *self*, and the soul is more indispensable to the health of that self than they.⁸⁸ That Hobbes made this very point several times throughout *Leviathan* – emphasizing the futility and absurdity of popular dissent against the sole guarantor of their life and safety – lends some credence to the theory that he adopted Christian-organicist rhetoric sincerely, fully appreciative of its consonance with his own political convictions.

The subject of legal and contractual authorization in *Leviathan* has recently been the focus of several excellent scholarly pieces tracking the prominence of that theme, and investigating its unique development in that text compared with Hobbes's other works. But far less attention has been paid to the organicist dimension of his project, which he elaborated with at least as much gusto and which often seems to overpower or overwhelm his coolly rationalist legalese. These two dimensions may not be incompatible, as the above passages from Chambers indicates. Christian organicism allowed for the coincidence of legal unity – either as a predecessor to deeper unity, or as its logical conclusion. But by itself, legal unity between author and agent (or between subject and sovereign, believer and Christ) could forge only a formal and institutional bond between them, while “real” unity created a much tighter fusion between them by knitting together their entire beings, not merely their words. Hobbes seems to have coveted the psychological strength of this Christian relationship enough to shamelessly appropriate its tropes and terminology as his own.

Real Unity and Ecclesiology

We have thus far investigated the *metaphysical* implications of theological “real unity,” as an inward connection between believers with each other and with Christ. But it could also be examined in its *physical* manifestations, in its outward association of select believers in concrete congregations, gathering in brick-and-mortar buildings, at one time or place as opposed to another. The first phenomenon pertains to the ecclesiology of the *invisible* church, while the second pertains to that of the *visible* church. And while all Christians believe in the reality of the invisible church⁸⁹ – as Christ's kingdom of the saints, to be fully revealed in the world to come – they have often disagreed about its relationship to that of the visible, institutional church.

The 17th century was an era in which this disagreement grew to deafening intensity, provoked initially by Protestant animosity against Catholic institutionalism, and then amplified by counter-concerns about the possibility of ecclesiastical (and socio-political) anarchy. This collision of internal, spiritual unity with external, institutional unity was nowhere more fierce or conspicuous

⁸⁸ See Hobbes, *De Cive*, Preface: “[Ancient subjects] revered the Supreme Power, whether residing in one man or in a council, as a certain visible divinity...They could not entertain so strange a fancy, as not to desire the preservation of that by which they were preserved.”

⁸⁹ Even Hobbes believed in it, at least *in potentia*. See Hobbes, XVII.19.

than in Britain, where the “real unity” of Christ’s invisible church became a battle standard against “Romish” uniformity of affiliation, doctrine, rites, and rules. Paranoia about trace remnants of institutionalism lingered, long after Roman Catholicism had been thoroughly discredited and deposed, ultimately releasing itself in prolonged crusades against clergy suspected of harboring quasi-Catholic convictions about ecclesiastical conformity. Pockets of these holdouts were easily found among the ranks of high-church Anglicans, who closely attended the king and Archbishop Laud, but as time went on, they were sought even in the most unlikely of places, such as the Westminster Assembly, dominated by Presbyterians who had made it their *raison d’être* to destroy Laud and overthrow the tyranny of his “prelates.” Cromwell’s letter to Parliament is a perfect example of such a Protestant purity test, in which he accused the Presbyterians of plotting to erect a new state church upon the ruins of the last, and thus of denigrating the superior power of Christ’s “real unity,” already in force among true believers, regardless of denomination.

The first thing to say about “real unity” in its relation to ecclesiology, then, is that it was a Protestant (as opposed to Roman Catholic) principle. If you recall, Humphrey Chambers described Christ’s “real unity” as “old, Scripture doctrine, acknowledged by all *Protestant* divines.”⁹⁰ His careful qualification here implies that “real unity” served as a reliable indicator demarcating Protestant theology from Catholic, and from a plain usage standpoint, the phrase almost never appeared in Catholic tracts or treatises, while it was ubiquitous in Protestant texts. At the century’s end, an anonymous Catholic theologian observed wryly that “real unity” was held by Protestants to be the vaunted “bane of the infallibility of the [Catholic] Church, of the Pope’s Supremacy, and of the authority of general councils, etc...the shield of the Reformation and the defense of the Protestant cause.”⁹¹ It began to earn that reputation long before the 17th century, when proto-Protestants first began to articulate objections to Roman Catholic hegemony, often in reaction to specific papal claims to be the “vicar of Christ.” After a long history of provocative insinuations, the Catholic church delivered its most unequivocal stance on this issue in the papal bull *Unam sanctam* (1302), originally intended as a political clarification about the relationship between spiritual and temporal authority, but notorious later for its bold theological statements about *Christ’s* authority:

The true faith compels us to believe that there is one holy catholic, apostolic Church...the one mystical body, whose head is Christ, but the head of Christ is God.⁹² And outside of her there is no salvation or remission of sins...[Christ] prayed for his soul, that is, for himself, the head; and at the same time for the body, and he named his body, that is, the one Church, because there is but one Bridegroom⁹³...There is one body of the one and only Church, and one head, not two heads, as if the Church were a monster. And this head is Christ, and his vicar, Peter and his successor; for the Lord himself said to Peter: ‘Feed my sheep.’⁹⁴ And he said ‘my sheep’ in general, not these or those sheep in particular; from which it is clear that all were committed to him...We therefore declare, say, and affirm that submission on the part of every man to the bishop of Rome is altogether necessary for his salvation.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Chambers, *Animadversions*, 45, emphasis added, and originally quoted above, fn.27.

⁹¹ B. D., *Controversial Discourses Relating to the Church Being an Answer to Dr. Sherlock’s Discourse Concerning the Nature, Unity, and Communion of the Catholic Church*, 1697, 105.

⁹² I Corinthians 11:3

⁹³ John 3:29

⁹⁴ John 21:16

⁹⁵ Pope Boniface VIII, “Unam sanctam [1302],” (1927), <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/B8-unam.asp>.

Especially interesting here is the conflation of two bodies – the invisible “mystical” body of which Christ was head, and the visible institutional body of which the Pope was head. Their interrelation was considered not merely coincident, as if one body were superimposed upon the other (which might be contentious enough), but a fusion, as if they were the same thing. This indistinction was made possible and justified on the basis of the Pope’s status *in loco Christi*, as the representative of Christ on earth in human form, and therefore the manifestation of Christ’s ecclesiastical sovereignty over the Church as both “head” and “soul.” Medieval backlash against this claim was swift. Marsilius of Padua (1324) famously countered,

No bishop or church is as such the head or principal of the others on the strength of the words of Scripture. For according to the words of Scripture or the truth, the head of the Church strictly speaking, and the foundation of the faith by the direct ordinance of God, is Christ himself alone: not any apostle, bishop, or priest, as the Apostle says quite explicitly in Ephesians 4 and 5, Colossians 1, and I Corinthians 10, where he says that all apostles, prophets, learned men, and the rest of the faithful make up ‘the body of Christ,’ which is the Church in all its members. But no one is the head except Christ alone.⁹⁶

Marsilius allowed for strong human governance of the earthly church, and even recommended singular rule,⁹⁷ but refused to grant it sovereignty in the same sense as Christ or reduce the church’s unity to magisterial allegiance. He reasoned,

Taking ‘church’ in its proper signification as the multitude of the faithful, there is in this way one church just as there is one faith. And since faith is not numerically one in all the faithful, but one in species or kind, it cannot be concluded that the church is one in any other way. And when it is added that the church is not one except through the numerical unity of one bishop who is superior to the rest, I deny this...As for what was added from John 10: ‘and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd;’ one should say, that Christ was speaking of himself... For neither Peter nor Paul nor any other apostle is anywhere named in respect of this unity of the fold, but only the *unity of faith* and person of Christ, who alone is, by the direct ordination of God, the head and foundation and prince of all shepherds.⁹⁸

The so-called “unity of the faith,” which he contrasts both with the unity of the clergy⁹⁹ and that of the church institution itself, performs the same work here as the idiom “real unity” would during the 17th century in Britain. It refers to a spiritual and invisible relationship between believers and Christ, from which all other formal or “sensible” signs of unity – such as human institutions, identities, associations, hierarchies, etc. – borrow their derivative and analogical power.

And while “real unity” gradually eclipsed this earlier formulation, “unity of faith” prepared the way for it in England, as a rallying cry against the competing unity offered by Rome. King James I exhorted his subjects (1609),

⁹⁶ Marsilius of Padua, *The Defender of the Peace [Defensor Pacis]*, trans. Annabel S. Brett (Cambridge, 2005), 393, see also 531-533. He explicitly upbraided Boniface VIII for claiming otherwise, “prejudicially and contrary to the literal sense of Scripture, relying on metaphorical expositions” (407).

⁹⁷ See Marsilius of Padua, 396ff, 496–97.

⁹⁸ Marsilius of Padua, 495–96, 498, emphasis added.

⁹⁹ Marsilius says that ecclesiastical hierarchy under one universal bishop fosters practical harmony in the church and supports its unity, “because the *unity of the faith* is more apparent from it, as being a sensible sign of that unity.” But it cannot be regarded as the source or guarantee of that unity. See 396-397.

Keep fast the *unity of faith* amongst yourselves...Let not the foolish heat of your preachers for idle controversies or indifferent things tear asunder that mystical Body whereof ye are a part...And let not our division breed a slander of our faith and be a word of reproach in the mouths of our adversaries [the Catholics], who make unity to be one of the special notes of the true Church.¹⁰⁰

James's care to signal here that the church's physiological unity was "mystical," rather than formal or institutional, formed part of a larger strategy against Rome on one hand and against overly zealous Protestants on the other, who worried that the English monarch secretly coveted the Pope's ecclesiastical authority for himself. This alarm had been sounded early on, when Henry VIII broke from Rome in 1534 only to pronounce himself the "the Supreme Head on earth" of the English church, in organic stylings eerily similar to those claimed by the Pope. In Geneva, John Calvin reported himself to be "grievously vexed" by Henry's assumed title, and declared that the English were "guilty of blasphemy when they called him the chief Head of the Church under Christ. This was certainly too much."¹⁰¹ Anglican divine Richard Hooker responded by reassuring his English readers that "Mr. Calvin spake by misinformation and thought we had meant thereby far otherwise than we do...We do not impart to kings, when we term them *Heads*, the honor which properly is given to our Lord and Saviour Christ, when the blessed apostles in Scripture do term him *the Head of the Church*."¹⁰² Hooker proceeded to enumerate the various differences between Christ's headship of the church and that of kings, in order (or rank), in measure (or purview), and in kind – this last distinction considered by him to be the most "weighty" and important of them all:

As the head is the highest part of a man, above which there is none, always joined with the body, so Christ is the highest in his Church, inseparably knit with it. Again, as the head giveth sense and moving to all the body, so he quickeneth...The headship which we give to kings is altogether visibly exercised, and ordereth only the external frame of the Church's affairs here amongst us, so that it plainly differeth from Christ's, even in very nature and kind. To be in such sort united unto the Church, or any particular assembly, or in any one man, doth nether agree, nor hath the possibility of agreeing, unto any besides him.¹⁰³

Hooker took pains here to distinguish Christ's unity from monarchical unity in order to assuage Protestant concerns about certain relationships and powers that were to be reserved and attributed to Christ alone. A deep, spiritual, and invisible unity of human persons, as if they made up one symbiotic organism, was impossible unless it was orchestrated by a divine authority such as Christ, who could unilaterally fuse them all, breathe life into them, and sustain them as head and soul. This union alone could be regarded as "true," "real," and properly physiological, in stark contrast with the superficial union achieved by mere human authority, which could only be considered formal and/or institutional.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ King of England James I, *An Apology for the Oath of Allegiance*, 1609, 133, emphasis added. Several editions were found in the Hardwick Library, see Talaska, *Hobbes and the Hardwick Library*, 41, 55. And for an interesting history of this work, which was published anonymously in 1608, see Marcy L. North, "Anonymity's Subject: James I and the Debate over the Oath of Allegiance," *New Literary History* 33, no. 2 (2002): 215–32.

¹⁰¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on Amos*, 1557, 34.

¹⁰² Richard Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity, Book VIII [Written 1593]*, ed. Raymond Aaron Houk (New York, 1931), 200.

¹⁰³ Hooker, 201–2.

¹⁰⁴ See Edward Elton, *An Exposition of the Epistle of St Paul to the Colossians Delivered in Sundry Sermons*, 1615, 225, 715: "The union whereby Christ and his church are united [is] a true and *real union*...It is not natural, as when two things are joined in nature...nor political or civil, as the prince and people are conjoined; but it is mystical and spiritual by the bond of the

The ramifications of this theological distinction ranged far beyond the bounds of the church, quietly calling into question other cultural instances of organic rhetoric, such as the commonplace sociological conceit of the “body politic. If ecclesiastical leaders could be criticized for describing their authority over the church in physiological terms, could it not be considered doubly problematic, *a fortiori*, for monarchs to say they were “heads” even of their own political communities, notwithstanding long pre-modern precedent? Was it appropriate for political unity to be depicted with the same metaphor as Christ’s unity? At the very least, it seemed to many that it was imperative to clearly differentiate the “body” politic from the “body” of Christ’s church, not only as separate institutions, but also as communities founded, integrated, and maintained through entirely distinct modes.¹⁰⁵ Thomas Starkey, who worked as a royal publicist for Henry VIII, explained it this way (1536):

There is one unity spiritual and another political...And as in the spiritual life we must ever most regard this unity spiritual, so in the worldly must be had respect of the political, the which briefly to describe is nothing else but a concord, agreement, and a consent of all them which be in one policy, to the receiving and putting in use such laws, constitutions, and ordinances, as by politic wits are devised to the conservation of the worldly quietness and tranquility...The other unity spiritual is of another sort (and bringeth man to an higher consideration), which is this: a certain consent of spirit and mind, and as it were with one heart, a heavenly conspiracy to the attaining of heavenly things... This spiritual unity was stabled in his flock by our master Christ (by him that is unity itself)...¹⁰⁶

While Starkey’s distinction here between mere “consent” versus a “consent of spirit and mind” may seem a bit opaque, it is clear that he believed them to be qualitatively distinct and that he privileged the latter over the former. Spiritual unity in Christ was all the more powerful because it was a moral and intrinsic reality, reaching deep into the very psyches of individuals, demanding unreserved donations of their entire beings to each other, rather than soliciting merely their formal, extrinsic assent to this or that discrete socio-political initiative. It is understandable how the body metaphor came to be synonymous with the unique dynamic of spiritual unity during this era. And while its application in other contexts was not immediately abandoned, from this point on those who made organic allusions on behalf of human officers or institutions usually felt the need to explain, defend, differentiate, or demur. Many modern scholars have tracked the gradual fading of the organic motif in socio-political contexts during the early-modern period, and have attributed that development to the rise of liberal individualism as a dominant socio-political worldview.¹⁰⁷ Whatever truth there may be in this assessment, the retreat of political organicism probably began long before that point, in the face of theological pressure to cede the body metaphor to religion and to Christ.

spirit, and by faith.” See also Thomas Jackson, *A Treatise of the Holy Catholic Faith and Church*, 1627, 18: “This union betwixt the members of the true church...is wrought by a power supernatural, by a skill super-artificial, by a wisdom infinitely surmounting the highest reach of human policy. It exceeds all other unions of bodies civil, artificial, or natural.”

¹⁰⁵ See Paul Baynes, *The Diocesan’s Trial*, 1621, 83: “All that is in a politic body cannot hold in Christ’s mystical body.”

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Starkey, *Exhortation to the People, Exhorting Them to Unity and Obedience*, 1536, 64–65. This work was commissioned by Thomas Cromwell, who was at that time chief minister to Henry VIII.

¹⁰⁷ David George Hale, *The Body Politic: A Political Metaphor in Renaissance English Literature* (Mouton, 1971), 108–37. See also Otto Friedrich von Gierke, *Natural Law and the Theory of Society, 1500 to 1800*, trans. Ernest Barker (Cambridge, 1934), lxi–lxx; Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society*, ed. José Harris, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge, 2001).

For obvious reasons, absolutist monarchs were often among the last to accept this rhetorical shift. James I clung to the body metaphor as long as he could, frequently expounding on the physiological indispensability of his political role as Britain's "head" in his speeches to Parliament,¹⁰⁸ but even in these appeals, he betrayed his anxieties about the organic trope's waning significance and his own redundancy. Frowning admonitions against decapitation of the body politic and bemused dismay at his subjects' aspirations to form a "headless multitude" punctuate James's discourses, revealing the extent to which he considered the traditional inviolability of his monarchical office to be under attack. Among many catalysts for this growing popular skepticism, Protestant zeal to extol Christ's spiritual headship was perhaps the most obvious and direct, immediately diminishing all other perceived competitors in its wake. Henry Finch, a member of Parliament, published a work (1621) in which he rhapsodized about the church,

How honourable and glorious things must be spoken of thee, thou excellent City of God! In thee is seen a body politic whereunto all other corporations of the world are but counterfeits... Thou hast a soul, as it were, which other corporations want, that glueth and knitteth the parts together, one unto another and all unto the head. And what is that soul? The quickening spirit of Christ, which is God himself, that doth unite and make thee one in him.¹⁰⁹

James I found Finch's book objectional on many levels and promptly had both him and his publisher imprisoned until they had satisfactorily repented "for having written so unadvisedly."¹¹⁰ Perturbed still, James arranged for his chief minister, Archbishop Laud, to refute Finch publicly in a sermon preached on the occasion of his birthday, 1621. Laud enthusiastically enlarged upon David's psalm injunction "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem... Peace be within thy walls,"¹¹¹ deriving from this passage the principle of church/state synchrony. "The Church hath the same walls that the State hath," he declared. "And by reason of the knot which God himself hath knit between the bodies [of Church and State], the walls of the State cannot be broken but the Church suffers with it."¹¹² Laud daringly claimed that the walls of the Church were its "priests," and darkly noted that in England it was becoming more and more difficult for these "walls" to successfully *stand* against onslaughts, let alone prosper.¹¹³ He concluded by exhorting the congregation to "seek and endeavor the good of both [Church and State], as well as pray for the good of both," just as David had. And Laud could not resist a snide parting shot: "Hath the Church of England such ill luck that it cannot do as David bids it but it must anger the Puritan?"¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁸ See James I, King of England, "Speech to Parliament 1609"; and also James I, King of England, "A Speech, as It Was Delivered in the Upper House of the Parliament to the Lords Spiritual and Temporal [March 1603]," in *The Political Works of James I* (1965), 269–80: "I am the Head and the whole Island is my Body... Could ever the body be counted without the head, which was inseparably joined thereunto?"

¹⁰⁹ Henry Finch, *The Calling of the Jews*, 1621, 103.

¹¹⁰ See Franz Kobler, "Sir Henry Finch (1558—1625) and the First English Advocates of the Restoration of the Jews to Palestine," *Transactions (Jewish Historical Society of England)* 16 (1945): 116.

¹¹¹ Psalm 122:6-7

¹¹² William Laud, "Sermon on Psalm 122:6-7, Preached before His Majesty at Wansted, 19th June 1621," in *Seven Sermons Preached upon Several Occasions by the Right Reverend and Learned Father in God, William Laud, Late Archbishop of Canterbury*, 1651, 34–35.

¹¹³ Laud, 37–39: "We must vary the prayer from *Sit pax* to *Sint muri* - not presume to pray [that] there may be peace and plenty within the Walls, but that the very walls themselves may stand".

¹¹⁴ Laud, 8–9, 17.

This last remark alludes, of course, to the growing rift between high-Anglicans and the “puritan” reformers, recently returned from the Continent. But even more revealingly, it suggests that Christ’s “real unity” had become a major source of their conflict. As Finch’s paean indicates, the doctrine of Christ’s “real unity” tended to drive a wedge between the invisible “corporation” of true believers and all other human “corporations,” such as the political state and even the visible, institutional church. This demarcation often proved contentious, especially since the contrast was never favorable or flattering to the institutions pitted against Christ’s invisible body. Whether or not it was the intention, relentless comparative assessments of these institutions – as less powerful, less authoritative, less unified, less dynamic, less *real* – quickly began to erode public support for their continued socio-political hegemony and power. In England the loudest protests to this trend came from the King and from the high-Anglican clergy, who were also the chief beneficiaries of traditional hegemony and power – a coincidence archly reported by their critics. While it is likely their objections often were motivated by conservative devotion to the status-quo or a desperate urge to maintain their state (*a la Machiavelli*), some of their resistance was probably motivated by genuine concern for the stability of church and state. Protestantism’s long-term sustainability was as yet unclear, and it seemed contingent upon the emergence of a new authority and unifying principle capable of replacing that which was formerly provided by the Roman Catholic magisterium. For many high-ranking clergy and politicians in England, sweeping, indiscriminate indictments against human authorities and institutions – common among Puritan theologians – did not inspire confidence.

Archbishop Laud and the King frequently expressed frustration at being caught between Rome and the Puritans, both politically and philosophically, with the former eager to reimpose autocratic rule from the Continent, and the latter threatening to disengage from all large-scale ecclesiastical superstructures *tout court*. But of the two, the Puritans posed a more immediate problem. James I angrily took to calling them a “confused anarchy,”¹¹⁵ and warned his son that their “popular parity in the church” was an “enemy to unity, which is the mother of order.”¹¹⁶ James and his archbishop Laud developed a high-Anglican rejoinder to this “parity” that seemed inspired by Roman Catholic notions of institutional solidarity, in that ecclesiastical unity was conceived as a conflation of every possible dimension of the Christian experience: visible and invisible, external and internal, institutional and mystical, public and private. Once the State was allied to this ecclesiastical complex, the resulting conglomerate had a consonance capable of mediating and moderating all major aspects of citizens’ lives. Folding Christ’s mystical body into the institutional apparatus gave Laud the license to refer to the whole as one massive organism, and he took special pleasure synthesizing its spiritual soul. “What then?” he rhetorized. “Will any kind of unity serve the turn? Surely any will do much good, but the best is safest, and that is the Unity of the Spirit [of Christ].”¹¹⁷ He explained,

¹¹⁵ James I, *Apology*, 44–45.

¹¹⁶ James I, *Basilikon Doron, Or His Majesty’s Instructions to His Dearest Son, Henry the Prince*, 1603, 41.

¹¹⁷ William Laud, “Sermon on Ephesians 4:3, Preached on the 17th of March, 1628, at Westminster, at the Opening of the Parliament,” in *Seven Sermons Preached upon Several Occasions by the Right Reverend and Learned Father in God, William Laud, Late Archbishop of Canterbury*, 1651, 251.

‘Tis the Spirit that joins all the members of the Church into one Body. And ‘tis the Church that blesses the State, not simply with unity, but with that unity with which itself is blessed of God... And as the presence of the Unity of the Spirit is the cause of all unity that is good, so the want of it is the cause of all defects in unity. For as in the body of a man, the spirit holds the members together, but if the soul depart, the members fall asunder – so ‘tis in the Church, and so in the State.¹¹⁸

Extending the invisible, spiritual unity of Christ to the civil State, via the institutional hierarchy of the Anglican Church, was a brazenly risky venture. But Laud sprinkled his sermon with sharp denunciations of Roman Catholic unity: a shrewd Anglican strategy that sometimes distracted Puritan complainants and blunted the ferocity of their attacks. Laud pointedly identified the Pope as the source and extent of Catholic unity,¹¹⁹ confident perhaps that that specific feature (which had no direct Anglican equivalent) would obviate or divert damning comparisons.

The Puritans were not deceived, however, and they often complained that the alleged contrast between Anglican and Catholic hierarchy had become a distinction without a difference. One particularly outspoken Presbyterian, William Prynne, observed that Laud had himself admitted that the national church structure was but a carving up the Pope’s “monarchy” into a universal “aristocracy” of many ecclesiastical heads,¹²⁰ “as much to say, ‘rather by many popes than by one.’”¹²¹ John Milton even wondered aloud if it would not be more honest and efficient for these mini-popes to formally answer to one universal Pope, given their commitments to large-scale ecclesiastical uniformity within Christendom. Why stop at national uniformity?¹²² Convinced that Laudian Anglicanism aspired to the same power and “unity” of Rome, the Puritans wasted no time including the Church of England in their routine denunciations of papal prerogative. “It is not *who* shall be the man or power, but *whether* there shall be any such man or power we dispute,” sternly clarified Richard Baxter, a leading Presbyterian.

Christ is another kind of Head and Center... Let us be content with one Head and one Heart, and center there. Let this intellectual unity of faith... the unity of those that center in him, [though] less conspicuous and glorious in the world... be seconded with a cordial unity of holy love to Christ and his Members (that so our unity may begin at the Head and Heart, and not perversely at the fingers and toes of smaller matters, or at the hair and nails of ceremonies and indifferent modes).¹²³

The physiological trope continued to dominate discourses of this type – strategically retained by the high-Anglican institutionalists, but wielded with considerably more energy and imagination by the

¹¹⁸ Laud, 253–54.

¹¹⁹ “The Pope, which Bellarmine hath put into the definition of the Church – that there might be one ministerial head to keep all in unity – is as great as any, if not the greatest, cause of divided Christianity” see Laud, 258, 281.

¹²⁰ See William Laud, *A Relation of the Conference between William Laud and Mr. Fisher the Jesuit, by the Command of King James*, 1639, 200.

¹²¹ William Prynne, *Lord Bishops, None of the Lord’s Bishops*, 1640, Chapter 1 (unnumbered manuscript). See also Chapter 5: “They have made up one entire new Catholic Church [in England].”

¹²² John Milton, *The Reason of Church Government Urged against Prelaty*, 1641, 22, 25.

¹²³ Richard Baxter, *A Key for Catholics, to Open the Juggling of the Jesuits*, 1659, 34, 457–58.

Puritans to champion an ecclesiastical unity which was “divine” rather than merely human.¹²⁴ Usage of the expression “real unity” more than tripled during this period (1620-1650).

And even once the immediate quasi-“popish” threat of high-Anglicanism had been neutralized or overthrown, militant enthusiasm for Christ’s “real unity” continued unabated as the Puritans began to turn on each other. Perhaps this was inevitable, in that fierce ideological reactions often abhor the vacuum caused by an opponent’s demise, and seek release in struggles against strains of the defeated credo, however faint or trivial. But the behavior of the Presbyterians following their rise to majoritarian power certainly fanned the familiar flames of controversy and kept them burning high. Although James I had been convinced the Puritans stood for “popular parity,” and the doctrine of Christ’s “real unity” fostered this impression, the Presbyterians never explicitly confirmed this commitment, and once they had stacked the Westminster Assembly in a bid to shape the new Church of England along Presbyterian lines, they formally disavowed it. The emerging Independents regarded this as an egregious capitulation. John Milton announced that it was – if not a wholesale betrayal of the Reformation itself – certainly a treacherous transgression against the central foundations of Protestantism. What had a State Church to do with freedom of conscience? The Presbyterians openly admitted that their national scheme indeed suffered believers to be “somewhat straitened and bound up” rather than allowing them to be “divided, though at full liberty and elbow-room.”¹²⁵ But it was justified (most unwisely) as a necessity of Christian unity. “Without subordination among ecclesiastical courts, and the authority of the higher above the inferior,” wrote one prominent Scottish theologian, “it were utterly impossible to preserve unity or to make an end of controversy in a nation.”¹²⁶ This explanation set off a minefield of Puritan triggers about institutional uniformity, so recently engaged against Laud and Rome, and unleashed a righteous Independent counter-campaign on behalf of Christ’s “real unity,” this time against many original advocates of that doctrine themselves. Oliver Cromwell’s 1646 letter to Parliament is a brilliant example of this genre, in which he pleaded for the sufficiency of “real unity” among Christians, rather than institutional “uniformity,” and coolly suggested that Parliament direct their coercive power toward “other things.”

Situating Hobbes within this ecclesiastical context is tricky for several reasons – chief among them his tendency to borrow promiscuously from many different theological traditions and invent his own when none suited to his satisfaction. It has recently become popular to identify Hobbes as an Independent during the period in which he wrote *Leviathan*,¹²⁷ based primarily upon a somewhat

¹²⁴ Baxter, 57: “Our Union is divine, having a divine Head and Center, and divine doctrine and law in which we agree. But the Papists is human, having a carnal Head and Center, and human decrees and canons for its matter and rule.”

¹²⁵ George Gillespie, *Wholesome Severity Reconciled with Christian Liberty, or, The True Resolution of a Present Controversy Concerning Liberty of Conscience*, 1645, 39–40: “Doth not the Solemn League and Covenant bind you sincerely, really, and constantly to endeavour the nearest uniformity and conjunction in religion, and that you shall not suffer yourselves directly or indirectly to be withdrawn from this blessed union and conjunction?”

¹²⁶ George Gillespie, *An Assertion of the Government of the Church of Scotland in the Points of Ruling-Elders and of the Authority of Presbyteries and Synods* (Edinburgh, 1641), 187. Gillespie was one of the most visible and vocal Scottish commissioners to the Westminster Assembly. For a similar sentiment, see Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXIX.5.

¹²⁷ For the most sustained argument on behalf of this hypothesis, see Jeffrey R. Collins, *The Allegiance of Thomas Hobbes* (Oxford/New York, 2005). For arguments against, see Johann Sommerville, “Hobbes and independency,” *Rivista di*

obscure line that appears deep in the book, where he wearily reports that England has been “reduced to the independancy of the primitive Christians, to follow Paul, or Cephas, or Apollos, every man as he liketh best: which, if it be without contention...is perhaps the best.”¹²⁸ While hardly a full-throated endorsement of Independency,¹²⁹ one perhaps could conjecture that Hobbes’s “real unity” reference earlier in the book shares with this latter statement some vague interest in communicating qualified support for the reigning theological ideology in 1651.¹³⁰ But this is too convenient an explanation, at least for the “real unity” reference, because Hobbes used the expression to connote something quite contrary to the Independent philosophy, rather than aligned with it. Hobbes’s firm commitment – in the “real unity” passage and throughout all his work – was to singular, undivided, institutional rule, not to pluralism or divided powers, and certainly not to “spiritual” entities and associations set apart from the visible and political.¹³¹ He shared Archbishop Laud’s belief that the Christian church should form with the State an absolutist, religio-political complex of authority over the commonwealth,¹³² and in fact proved even more bullish than Laud on this issue by audaciously insisting that the state-church complex have *one* head (rather than the sly Anglican *two*¹³³), who would serve both as “civil sovereign” and religious high-priest, authorized to preach, administer the sacraments, excommunicate, and mediate in all other ways as “God’s vicegerent.”¹³⁴ Anglican apologists – from Hooker and Starkey to Laud – had always vigorously denied these ministerial rights to monarchs, hoping to distance the “Head of the Church of England” from accusations of “popishness,”¹³⁵ but Hobbes openly asserted, with his usual tone-

Storia della Filosofia, August 6, 2004; Teresa M. Bejan, “Difference without Disagreement: Rethinking Hobbes on ‘Independency’ and Toleration,” *The Review of Politics* 78, no. 1 (2016): 1–25; S. A. Lloyd, “Hobbes’s Theory of Responsibility as Support for Sommerville’s Argument Against Hobbes’s Approval of Independency,” *Hobbes Studies* 35, no. 1 (January 2022): 51–66.

¹²⁸ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLVII.20.

¹²⁹ The “Paul/Cephas/Apollos” reference is to I Corinthians 1:12, it is a Pauline condemnation, and was used as slur in early-modern theological discourse, even by Independents. Hobbes’s description of Independency in those terms is revealing and would not have been received by Independents as anything other than a derogatory parody. See William Dell, *The Way of True Peace and Unity among the Faithful and Churches of Christ* (London, 1649), 214–15.

¹³⁰ Although he detested the perceived betrayal, Clarendon believed Hobbes’s overtures to the Independents to be shallow and opportunistic: see Edward Hyde Clarendon, *A Brief View and Survey of the Dangerous and Pernicious Errors to Church and State, in Mr. Hobbes’s Book, Entitled Leviathan*, 1676, 308–9: “I dare say he did with his heart, as well as by his tongue, quit that party the very day that the King was proclaimed.”

¹³¹ See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XII.22, XXXIX.5, XLII.123, 128.

¹³² See Hobbes, XXXIII.24, XLII.79–80, 115; XLVII.2; *De Cive*, XVII.21, 28.

¹³³ See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLVII.3, 20.

¹³⁴ Hobbes, XLII.70–73, 78–79. See also *De Corpore Politico*, XXVI.11; and *De Cive*, XVIII.14, where he states that priesthood is potentially a “great bond of civil obedience.”

¹³⁵ For a sampling, see Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity, Book VIII [Written 1593]*, 182, 189; John Whitgift, *The Works of John Whitgift, D.D., The Third Portion, Containing The Defence of the Answer to the Admonition against the Reply of Thomas Cartwright; Tractates XI - XXIII; Sermons, Selected Letters &c. Vol 3 of 3* (Cambridge, 1853), 414–15, 424–25, 434, 592; William Fulke, *A Retentive, to Stay Good Christians, in True Faith and Religion, against the Motives of Richard Bristow Also a Discovery of the Dangerous Rock of the Popish Church*, 1580, 188–89, 191, 278–79, 303: “Although [the King] have authority over ecclesiastical persons and in causes ecclesiastical (according to God’s word), yet is he no ecclesiastical officer but a Civil Magistrate”.

deaf audacity, “Every Christian prince is no less supreme pastor of his own subjects than the Pope of his.”¹³⁶

Impervious to all the Puritans’ bright red lines, Hobbes certainly would not have hesitated to appropriate a term such as “real unity” for political purposes, even if it were considered an exclusively Christological phenomenon. In fact there is a good chance he would have appropriated it precisely *because* it was considered Christ’s alone. Hobbes frequently reminded his readers that Christ was currently in heaven and thus in no position to govern human beings directly or physically on earth. Until he returned to do so, the job had been given over to God’s other representatives, such as Christian kings – to rule, guide, protect, and maintain the terrestrial church in his absence. Provisional delegations of Christ’s ecclesiastical functions and responsibilities to these “vicegerents” could therefore be considered neither presumptuous nor prejudicial to his honor or role.¹³⁷ Armed with this rationale, Hobbes would have had no reason to refrain from describing the civil sovereign in Christological terms, especially if those terms magnified his persona or enhanced his prestige.

Adding “real unity” to his political range might deliver this. Christ’s exalted bond with his people offered a certain enviable sociological experience that could transform any community lucky enough to simulate it and divinize the individual who was able to make it a possibility in the first place. Moreover, failure to harness this potential had become, not merely a missed opportunity, but a dangerous liability in the early-modern era. The very existence of Christ’s “real unity” was a competitive threat to every other corporation that lacked it. “Nothing can be more real than this union,” read a religious catechism of 1688: “A political union [by contrast] is an union of persons in policy or government, and is too narrow and low to express this union.”¹³⁸ Hobbes had a neurotic distaste for comparisons such as these, and the main purpose of his work – so evocatively illustrated in the frontispiece of *Leviathan* – was to fuse church and state, religion and politics, so tightly that such contrasts and comparisons could no longer be drawn.¹³⁹ Perhaps ultimately there is no better explanation for his invocation of Christ’s “real unity” in the public square.

Conclusion

¹³⁶ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLII.131. See also XLIV.5 for “power regal under Christ” given to civil sovereigns. The “popish” cast of his sovereign was noted even by those who were otherwise somewhat sympathetic: see Clarendon, *Survey of Leviathan*, 64–65; William Lucy, *An Answer to Mr. Hobbes, His Leviathan, with Observations, Censures, and Confutations of Divers Errors*, 1673, 10.

¹³⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLI.3-6, XLII.6, 43-44, 54, 106, 124, 128, 132; XLIV.4-5, 17.

¹³⁸ Anonymous, *Catechism Made Practical, the Christian Instructed*, 1688, 59–60. See also Robert Ferguson, *The Interest of Reason in Religion, with the Import & Use of Scripture-Metaphors, and the Nature of the Union Betwixt Christ & Believers*, 1675, 621: “A political relation doth not adequately express that oneness which the Scripture so augustly celebrates as interceding betwixt Christ and believers.”

¹³⁹ See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Social Contract*, trans. Victor Gourevitch, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings* (Cambridge, 2018), IV.VIII.13: “Of all Christian authors, the philosopher Hobbes is the only one who clearly saw the evil and the remedy, who dared to propose reuniting the two heads of the eagle and to bring everything back to political unity, without which no State or Government will ever be well-constituted.”

The crisis of church and state in England during the Civil War era could be analyzed or framed in various different ways, with an eye toward shifting perspectives on representation, for instance, or authority, or identity, or freedom, etc. But surely *unity* deserves consideration as an important angle, not only for the way it engaged all the others, but also for the comic tragedy of its prominence as the one desideratum tirelessly sought by all and destroyed by all. Under the rubble of its ruins, Christ's "real unity" gradually emerged as the epicenter of a widening chasm between external, public unity on one side and internal, private unity on the other, forcing everyone to take a side. Advocates for one type of unity tended to view the opposite type with suspicion, as a potential competitive threat and affront, but those who favored public unity quickly found that they had more cause for alarm. The retreat of Christ's "real unity" to the private sphere left public institutions hollow and their authoritative powers disenchanting, ill equipped for a struggle to maintain hegemony against decentralized pluralism.

When Hobbes claimed that the commonwealth had "real unity," he was probably attempting to close the gap between the two realms. An uncompromising statist, Hobbes could see that the separation between spiritual and "temporal" was far more injurious to the latter, and the capitulation of the former was possible only if its private powers were reincorporated back into the political apparatus. His description of institutional unity as *real* unity is probably a performative instance of this strategy, and almost certainly how it would have been understood in the theological context of his time.

"Real Unity" Time Horizon 1600-1700

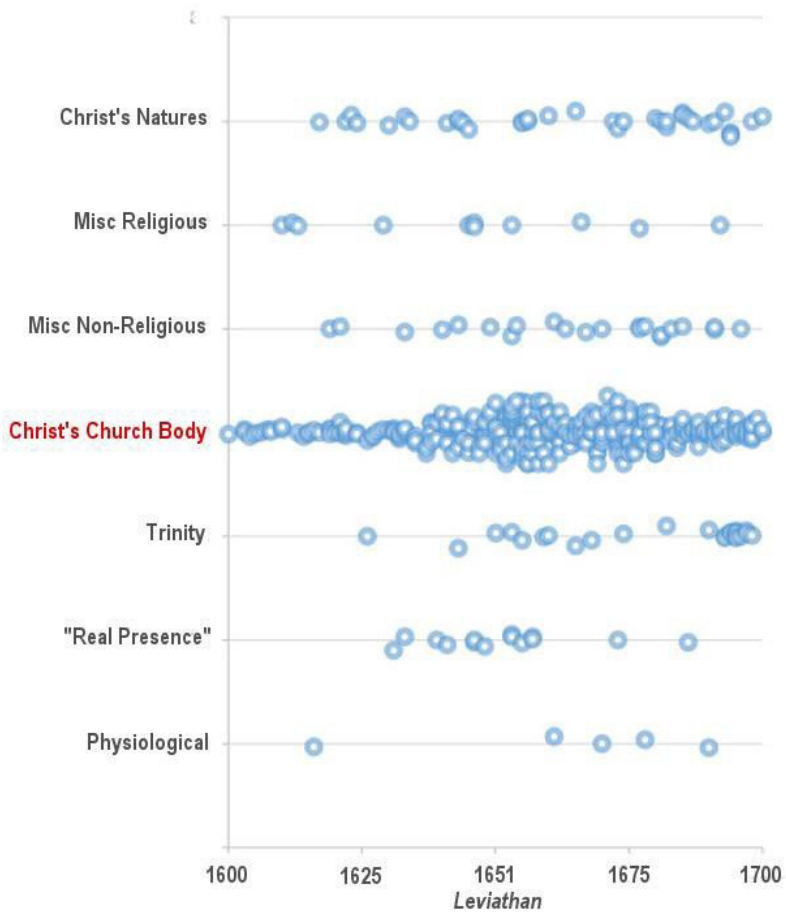


Figure 1

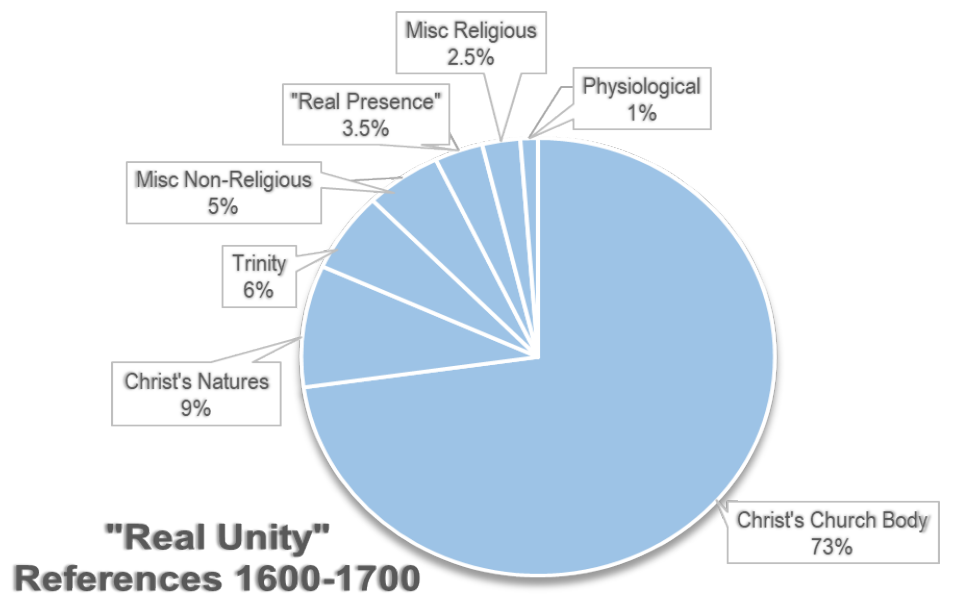


Figure 2