

Hobbes's Critique Of Miltonian Independency

Simon Kow
University of Kings College
skow@admin.ukings.ns.ca

[John Milton's] widowe assures me that Mr Thomas Hobbes was not one of his acquaintance: that her husband did not like him at all: but he would grant him to be a man of great parts, and a learned man. Their Interests and Tenets did run counter to each other.

Vide Mr Hobbes' *Behemoth*.¹

In the context of the British civil wars, a comparison of the thought of Hobbes and Milton elucidates the connections between Hobbes's conception of the relation of church to state and his stance on freedom of religion.² In response to the religious warfare ravaging early modern Europe, Hobbes advocated the strict subordination of church to state--thus reuniting, as Rousseau put it, the "two heads of the eagle" rendered asunder by Christianity.³ This prescription would seem to exclude the sort of religious liberty championed by Milton. Indeed, Aubrey's remark suggests that the opposition between the two thinkers is effectively summarized in Hobbes's dismissal in *Behemoth* of Milton as an ill-reasoning Independent.⁴ As pamphleteer, secretary to Cromwell, and revolutionary poet, Milton recommended the separation of church and state as conducive to the protection and even flourishing of Christian liberty, i.e., the freedom of the Christian to follow his or her conscience in matters of faith as well as politics.⁵ In other words, Christian subjects are to be free from both lordly and priestly authorities, except

¹ John Aubrey, *Brief Lives* (1681), ed. John Buchanan-Brown (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 203.

² The little scholarship that has been devoted to comparisons of Hobbes and Milton does not address in any detail Hobbes's Erastianism and Milton's Independency. See Marjorie Nicolson, "Milton and Hobbes," *Studies in Philology* 23 (1926): 405-433; and Don M. Wolfe, "Milton and Hobbes: A Contrast in Social Temper," *Studies in Philology* 41 (1944): 410-426.

³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du Contrat Social* (1762), ed. Pierre Burgelin (Paris: Flammarion, 1992), bk. 4, chap. 8, pp. 160-162.

⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *Behemoth; or, the Long Parliament* (1682), ed. Ferdinand Tönnies (London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Co., 1889; reprint ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 163-164.

⁵ See John Milton, *Of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes* (1659), cited by A.S.P. Woodhouse, ed., *Puritanism and Liberty* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1938), p. 228, in which Christian liberty is opposed to both civil and ecclesiastical tyranny.

where voluntarily consented to. Joining the two, whether in Catholic, Anglican, or Erastian forms, is an affront to heaven. As the Archangel Michael prophesies in *Paradise Lost*, “Spiritual laws by carnal power shall force / On every conscience;...”⁶ The view of Milton and others that the fusion of church and state effectively stifles religious freedom fits well, as scholars have argued, with the strongly authoritarian elements of Hobbes’s politics.⁷ Nevertheless, this paper suggests that a more nuanced understanding of why Hobbes prescribed the unity of church and state reveals a certain degree of religious freedom in his thought.

Given his deep suspicion of most religious doctrines and the innovatively mundane character of his theory of political consent, one would be mistaken in imputing to Hobbes a purely theocratic intention. Instead, an explanation of Hobbes’s Erastianism must be consistent with the fundamental goal of his political thought: to establish peace and commodious living. Accordingly, some scholars have argued that Hobbes sought to harness the power of religion for such ends. Charles Tarlton thinks that Hobbes promoted “a political education properly exploiting the ‘seeds of religion’” to deceive the majority of subjects into giving their obedience.⁸ In his analysis of Hobbes’s history of the civil war, Stephen Holmes notes the remark in *Behemoth* that it is “not in man’s power to suppress the power of religion”⁹ and concludes that “a prudent sovereign will attempt to monopolize the pretence of spiritual power.”¹⁰ The divine authority of the sovereign, according to this account, should be asserted against the power of ambitious priests. Ronald Beiner argues that Hobbes reinterpreted Christianity in a Judaic fashion, in which the sovereign is invested with divine authority as in a Jewish theocracy until the eventual return of Christ the worldly king.¹¹

Doubt may be cast on these views of Hobbes as theorist of divinized authority. In commenting on the religious controversies inflamed by Archbishop Laud, the Hobbesian interlocutor in *Behemoth* remarks,

A state can constrain obedience, but convince no error, nor alter the minds of them that believe they have the better reason. Suppression of doctrine does but unite and exasperate, that is, increase both the malice and power of them that have already believed them.¹²

It is thus difficult to reconcile this comment with the notion that, as Beiner puts it, “Hobbes wants ultimately to re-theocratize politics rather than de-theocratize it” as an

⁶ *Paradise Lost* (1667) 12. 521-522.

⁷ See, for example, Clifford Orwin, “On Sovereign Authorization,” *Political Theory* 3 (February 1975): 26-44; or more idiosyncratically, Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, trans. George Schwab and Erna Hilfstein (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996).

⁸ Charles D. Tarlton, “The Creation and Maintenance of Government: A Neglected Dimension of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*,” *Political Studies* 29 (1978): 327.

⁹ Hobbes, *Behemoth*, p. 82.

¹⁰ Stephen Holmes, “Political Psychology in Hobbes’s *Behemoth*,” in *Thomas Hobbes and Political Theory*, ed. Mary G. Dietz (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1990), p. 142.

¹¹ Ronald Beiner, “Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau on Civil Religion,” *Review of Politics* 55 (Fall 1993): 628-630.

¹² Hobbes, *Behemoth*, p. 62.

effective means of countering religious sedition.¹³ In the context of the civil wars, Hobbes recognized the perils of attempting to manipulate religion for political purposes.

Other scholars have portrayed Hobbes as a more liberal thinker. Edward Andrew depicts Hobbes as a defender of sceptical toleration as opposed to the rights of anarchic conscience championed by Protestant revolutionaries like Milton. Hobbes, he writes, “was the most philosophic spokesman for the tradition that combined religious scepticism with the Erastian supremacy of the state in matters of conscience.”¹⁴ In this tradition, which includes the thought of Hume, Voltaire, and Diderot, the state adopts a policy of sceptical indifference to religion through an established church and purely formal religion: “an established church diminishes religious enthusiasm, zeal, and even piety. A ceremonial religion tends ‘to mollify that fierce and gloomy spirit of devotion.’”¹⁵ Andrew challenges the identification of church establishment with religious piety on the one hand, and the separation of church and state with secular modernity on the other. Hobbes sought to counteract religious sedition through an established church, while Milton’s prescription of separating church and state arose from his passionate religious convictions.

Richard Tuck goes further in arguing for Hobbes’s liberal credentials. He contends that by the time of the writing of *Leviathan*, Hobbes had become a radical tolerationist along Lockean lines. For example, Tuck points to a striking passage in chapter 47 of *Leviathan* in which Hobbes “praised the decentralized ecclesiastical order of the new republic in England.”¹⁶ In effect, Tuck believes that Hobbes came to prefer a plurality of religious sects free from state regulation, and thus *a fortiori* from state imposition of doctrine.

Hobbes’s tentative defence of the sort of Independency officially promulgated in republican England would entail some agreement with Milton’s ecclesiastical stance. But even putting aside Hobbes’s castigation in *Behemoth* of the 1651 declaration of the “Free-State,”¹⁷ his severe critique in *Leviathan* of private conscience as opposed to law distances his position from Miltonian Independency as well as Lockean rights of conscience.¹⁸ Still, what are we to make of Hobbes’s seeming endorsement of Independency in Chapter 47 of *Leviathan*, given the strongly Erastian position he took in the rest of *Leviathan* and his other political works? I shall extend and modify Andrew’s insight that Hobbes promoted a sceptical toleration of religion through an established church by examining Hobbes’s views on certain issues relating to Milton’s Independency. Hobbes’s strategy for neutralising the power of seditious religious doctrines which were espoused by Milton and others is more complex than Andrew suggests. Milton espoused Independency in order to promote Christian liberty. Hobbes, in contrast, sought to subordinate church to state for the sake of peaceful, commodious living. But he also considered the merits of separating church and state--not, however,

¹³ Beiner, “Civil Religion,” p. 629.

¹⁴ Edward Andrew, *Conscience and its Critics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), p. 64.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 118. The reference is to Hume’s *History of England*, vol. 7.

¹⁶ Richard Tuck, “Hobbes and Locke on Toleration,” in *Thomas Hobbes and Political Theory*, pp. 163-164.

¹⁷ Hobbes, *Behemoth*, p. 164.

¹⁸ See Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), ed. C.B. Macpherson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), chap. 29, pp. 365-366.

out of religious zeal, but out of a recognition that encouraging privacy of religious belief and practice could, under certain circumstances, be another effective means of defanging priestly power. Examining Hobbes's critique and qualified endorsement of Independency is a way to evaluate the liberal and authoritarian elements of his thought on religion--elements which have led scholars to such varying interpretations of his religious politics.

An examination of Milton's Independency must begin with his views on scriptural authority. In his treatise on Christian doctrine, Milton presented himself as the exemplar of the seeker of religious truth.¹⁹ In the introductory epistle, he explained how he had sought answers to religious questions by relying on his own examination of God's word. Arguably, the central teaching of this treatise is that the Christian should not be beholden to others in the interpretation of God's word. Indeed, he did not insist that the reader agree with his views on subjects such as the Trinity, angels, or the Sabbath. On the contrary, he wrote, "I advise every reader, and set him an example by doing the same myself, to withhold his consent from those opinions about which he does not feel fully convinced, until the evidence of the Bible convinces him and induces his reason to assent and believe."²⁰ As this statement indicates, he believed that one who carefully arrives at one's own understanding of the Bible will come to agree with his interpretation; but the method of interpretation must be examination for oneself, as he had done. In effect, he advanced a hermeneutical teaching as well as a teaching on the content of scripture.

This form of self-teaching is linked to individual salvation. Since it was for Milton the principal route to religious truth, the inward "illumination of the Holy Spirit"--what Milton also called "conscience"--is both guide to interpreting scripture and the key to salvation. Conscience is the guide to the free will, informing it of right and wrong. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton characterizes conscience as "a Comforter" to the "faithful, left among the th' unfaithful herd, / The enemies of truth..." Conscience is the promise of God,

...who shall dwell
His Spirit within them, and the law of faith
Working through love, upon their hearts shall write,
To guide them all in truth...²¹

¹⁹ For the argument that the treatise may not be Milton's work at all, see William B. Hunter, "The Provenance of the *Christian Doctrine*," *Studies in English Literature* 32 (1992): 129-142. See also pp. 143-166 for objections and replies. Hunter argues that the heterodoxy of the treatise is inconsistent with the orthodoxy of *Paradise Lost*, putting Milton's authorship of both under question. I do not address issues of orthodoxy; my view is that one can develop an argument about Independency based on certain ideas present in both works. Furthermore, the charge of heterodoxy is not necessarily an objection to Milton's authorship, since his theological views were radically unconventional.

²⁰ Milton, *Complete Prose Works*, gen. ed. Don M. Wolfe, vol. 6: *Christian Doctrine*, trans. John Carey, ed. Maurice Kelley (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 121-122. As Christopher Hill notes, the very reason Milton stressed the need for individual examination of scripture was the incompetence and corruption of previous interpreters: "Labour and considerable scholarship are...necessary for a proper understanding of the Bible," and thus a task for learned and virtuous individuals. Thus, *Christian Doctrine* "was written in Latin, which the common people could not understand." Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), pp. 248-250. In contrast, according to *Leviathan*--a book published in English--the sovereign must be chief interpreter of scripture.

²¹ *Paradise Lost* 12. 480-497.

Likewise, with respect to what one should believe, "God has revealed the way of eternal salvation only to the individual faith of each man, and demands of us that any man who wishes to be saved should work out his beliefs for himself." Milton's Christianity was radically individualistic, placing the burden of religious doctrine on everyone's conscience. One may consult the advice of others in interpreting scripture, but the settling of one's own religious beliefs depends on direct, unmediated revelation and persuasion.²²

Accordingly, Milton spoke of the "double scripture," a notion which challenges the supremacy even of the written word in its literal sense. The Gospels teach that "There is the external scripture of the written word and in the internal scripture of the Holy Spirit which he, according to God's promise, has engraved upon the hearts of believers, and which is certainly not to be neglected." In fact, the internal authority of the spirit may in some cases be superior to the "external" authority of scripture even as it is written in the Bible. Milton placed such certainty in the individual conscience that he believed it could revise and amend written scripture if necessary. He quite reasonably cited the corruption of Biblical scripture through the ages. After all, the books of the Bible were written at such different times and in such different places that the texts were liable to corruption. Moreover, given the Miltonian critique of established clergy, the handling of the texts by various priests added to the likelihood of the written scripture's occasional unreliability. Milton drew this striking conclusion:

I do not know why God's providence should have committed the contents of the New Testament to such wayward and uncertain guardians, unless it was so that this very fact might convince us that the Spirit which is given to us is a more certain guide than scripture, and that we ought to follow it.

Milton contrasted the possible corruption of written scripture with the incorruptibility of inward spirit as a guide to the interpretation of the former. He exalted individual conscience not only over church dogma, but even over literal scripture in those cases when it cannot be regarded as the word of God.²³

Despite this individualistic approach to scriptural interpretation and salvation, Milton did not abandon the idea of the church altogether. He accepted the importance of collective worship and instruction. A church, he wrote, should be "chiefly organised for the purpose of promoting mutual edification and the communion of the saints." What Milton opposed was not churches per se but rather how they have been organized. Now, it is true of all forms of Christianity that Christ is considered the spiritual head of the church. Milton went further, asserting that Christ is also the head of the visible church. Since religious faith is a matter between the individual alone and God, no human being

²² Milton, *Christian Doctrine*, p. 118; and see *Prose Works*, vol.7 (revised): *A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes*, ed. Robert W. Ayers, pp. 242-244.

²³ Milton, *Christian Doctrine*, pp. 587-592. Milton was careful, however, not to give fanatics license to misinterpret the Bible as they please. The inward spirit may revise written scripture only in cases of glaring inconsistencies.

can set him or herself up as head or even as superior office of the church. God may commission “extraordinary ministers”--prophets, apostles, and evangelists--to “set up or to reform the church,” but any believer can be an “ordinary minister,” if possessing certain gifts. Milton did not elaborate on what precisely these gifts are, but he did cite scriptural passages referring to gifts of speech by the grace of God. The point is that the traditional clergy should not have a monopoly over religious instruction. But how will an assembly of believers know who among them is gifted to act as ordinary minister? Milton declared that ministers should be elected by the people. This assertion is consistent with his emphasis on individual conscience and his view that a minister must possess certain gifts by God’s grace. For if one is a true believer and thus moved by the Holy Spirit within oneself, then an assembly of true believers is fit to judge who by God should be elected their ministers. Thus Milton took the Independentist position that scriptural interpretation and salvation are individual affairs and that churches should be organized on that basis. A group of believers should assemble with the sole purpose of facilitating their individual pursuits of salvation. Such churches may co-operate and consult with each other, but they would be “self contained and complete.”²⁴

How can the centrality of individual conscience in religion be reconciled with the emphasis on law in holy scripture, particularly in the Old Testament? Milton regarded Christianity as a universal religion of faith displacing the old Jewish religion of law. The “new covenant through faith in Christ” abolished the old covenant of Mosaic law. In other words, the old law enforced obedience to God through the fear of divine retribution for transgressing God’s laws. This, as Milton characterized it, was a servile discipline, fit for childish creatures who could only obey God out of the fear of punishment. In contrast, for Milton, the religion of the Gospels is that of a manly freedom, in which Christians choose Christ and the promise of eternal life because of their faith. Milton pointed to the difference between circumcision and baptism as the sacred rites of the old and new religions: circumcision was a seal of righteousness, an obscure sign in the flesh that bound believers to service; whereas baptism is an initiation into the Gospel, a remission of sins and the birth of a manly freedom of service to God. Under the old religion, we were cursed, in that we had to obey the law which carried no promise, in contrast to the hope of eternal life under the new covenant.²⁵ As the Archangel Michael remarks in *Paradise Lost*:

So law appears imperfect, and but giv’n
With purpose to resign them in full time
Up to a better cov’nant, disciplined
From shadowy types to truth, from flesh to spirit,
From imposition of strict laws, to free
Acceptance of large grace, from servile fear
To filial, works of law to works of faith.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 566, 570-573, 593-594, and 601.

²⁵ Milton, *Christian Doctrine*, pp. 515, 517, 525, 528-531, and 548.

²⁶ *Paradise Lost* 12. 300-306. “Shadowy types to truth” seems to evoke Platonism or Neoplatonism, but William G. Madsen argues that “it is more meaningful to describe the symbolic method of *Paradise Lost* as Christian” in that “Christ is the symbolizing center of the poem since it is through Him that the major metaphors find their significance.” For example, the Garden of Eden, Satan, and Adam’s exaltation of Eve are shadowy types (and in the latter case, a false representation) of the image of Christ in humanity, of

The precise transition from Mosaic law to the Gospel was the internalisation of the law, from external obedience to internal faith. The death and resurrection of Christ announced the possibility of salvation. Humanity now had a saviour to believe in, God's own son who clearly justified freely chosen service to God. In him, Mosaic law was abolished but not broken: its purpose was now fulfilled in faith rather than in servile obedience. "We must realise," Milton argued, "that only the written surface has been changed, and that the law is now inscribed on believers' hearts by the spirit." What was the purview of prophets and high priests is now the inner realm of faith and conscience--beyond the scope of the present ecclesiastical authorities.²⁷

The manly freedom Milton spoke of as the result of the new inward religion of faith and conscience was the foundation of his conception of "Christian liberty." Like Hobbes, Milton regarded law as a constraint on liberty. He applied this conceptual relationship, in a radicalized form, to the old and new religions. Hobbes considered civil law (i.e., of earthly commonwealths) as a legitimate constraint on natural right,²⁸ whereas Milton described the old law (of God) as a law of slavery. In other words, Milton embraced Christian liberty to the extent that he regarded the old divine law as fit only for the infantile state of humanity in the time of the Old Testament. With the law of God inscribed on human hearts, however, Christian liberty can be attained by obeying our consciences and following the true faith. Religious liberty may certainly have been present before Christ, but its full manifestation--the religious truth in our hearts that will set us free--came about with the "advent of Christ, our liberator."²⁹

The attainment of Christian liberty has had significant political implications. We have not, Milton warned, freed ourselves from God's external law only to fall into the hands of unjust human law. As we noted, the religion of the Gospel is an internalization of God's law, the acquisition of new freedom to serve God guided by inner conscience. The subservience of Christian liberty to human law would thus be the lowest depths into which the Christian may plunge. The obedience to Mosaic law may have been a servile discipline, but a necessary one for infant humanity until the latter was fit for manly freedom. The maturity to Christian liberty is thus hardly a victory "if our fear which was then servile to God only, must be now servile in religion towards men."³⁰

Christ as "intercessor and re-creator," and of Christ as son of God. William G. Madsen, *From Shadowy Types to Truth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 83-84. In light of the contrast made between the old new religion of law and the new religion of faith in *Christian Doctrine*, the symbol of Christ is indeed more useful than the allegory of the cave for understanding Milton's theology.

²⁷ Milton, *Christian Doctrine*, pp. 528-534. A.S.P. Woodhouse points out that the concept of an inward law qualified a doctrine of Christian liberty which would otherwise "lead to Antinomianism, and apparently did so in some sects." A.S.P. Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. [65] n. 2. Compared to the fanatical sects of the Revolution, Milton's internalization of law places limits on Christian liberty. Compared to Hobbes's conception of religion as law (see *Behemoth*, p. 46), however, Milton's view is antinomian. Conversely, Hobbesian religion from Milton's perspective is servile obedience, a negation of Christian liberty.

²⁸ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 14, p. 189.

²⁹ Milton, *Christian Doctrine*, pp. 535-536.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 123-124; *Civil Power*, pp. 263-265. Austin Woolrych writes that Christian liberty "frees us not only from the bond of Judaical ceremonies but from all set forms, places, and times in the worship of God,"

In a 1660 pamphlet, Milton argued that political liberty would only be attained in a republican regime guided by an aristocratic body. Indeed, Christ recommended this free commonwealth as best for humanity until the second coming.³¹ Despite the divine sanction for the free commonwealth, however, Milton insisted that the civil and ecclesiastical powers should be distinguished. On this point, he again emphasized the disjunction between the old and new religions. In the old Jewish kingdoms, political and religious authority was united in the theocratic rule of a high priest. But the same government is not applicable to the Christian era: "If church and state shall be made one flesh again as under the law, let it be withall considerd, that God who then joind them hath now severd them." Milton thought that these two spheres must be kept separate; that everyone is subject to the legitimate civil authority in civil matters, but only members of a church are subject to ecclesiastical powers, and solely in religious matters. It should be emphasized that Milton believed the two domains to be separable: political liberty and Christian liberty, and likewise civil authority and religious authority, are different spheres. He contrasted the outward force of the one with the inward persuasion of the other.³² They are not, therefore, exact counterparts. Although Milton was concerned to curb excessive constraints on outward political liberty, he accepted that just civil laws should be obeyed. In religion, however, the true Christian should be free from external law; and so the scope of ecclesiastical authority is severely limited because the subject matter of religion is individual faith and conscience, not law.

In his argument for the separation of church and state, Milton was suggesting that the worst evil in ecclesiastical affairs is the use of outward force in an essentially inward religion. In civil matters, it is sufficient for political liberty if force and coercion are used wisely and judiciously. In ecclesiastical matters, however, any use of force is contrary to Christian liberty. Because the realm of religion is belief and conscience, "external force should never be used in Christ's kingdom, the church." Civil magistrates have a duty to protect and foster religion, but not to impose belief or enforce public profession. They carry out this duty by not supervising the particular churches, which Milton regarded as largely voluntary organizations. Furthermore, the use of force in religion--by magistrates and priests alike--is contrary to God's glory, which upholds Christian liberty, and ineffective, since conscience is the inner voice of God and untouchable by outward force. That is to say, compulsion in ecclesiastical affairs is outward violence against true believers. Thus, the proper purview of the state is non-interference in religious matters, while the instruments of church discipline should only be persuasion, demonstration, and other spiritual means--never compulsion to belief--because one's faith is paramount, and thus one's participation in church for the sake of following one's own conscience must be protected. We can see why Milton did not extend the same Christian liberty to Catholics, for whom (in his view) imposition of church doctrine is part of their very beliefs.³³

and suggests that this view may be an implicit critique of the enforcement of Sabbath-keeping by law in Milton's time. Austin Woolrych, "Historical Introduction" to *Prose Works*, vol. 7, pp. 51-52.

³¹ Milton, *The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* (1660), in *Areopagitica and Other Political Writings of John Milton* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), pp. 422-423.

³² Milton, *Christian Doctrine*, pp. 611-613; *Civil Power*, pp. 255, 260.

³³ Milton, *Christian Doctrine*, pp. 436-437, 797-799; *Civil Power*, pp. 244, 261, 266, 268, 271. Milton emphasized non-interference in varieties of Christian doctrine and individual faith rather than in outward forms of worship (which are secondary). As Arthur E. Barker points out, corruption of religious service

Milton declared that he wrote “heretofore against *Salmasius* and regal tyranny over the state; now against *Erastus* and state-tyrannie over the church.”³⁴ But considering his concern that the civil power was itself controlled by certain churches (particularly the Catholic and Presbyterian), we might rather say that he wrote against the church’s use of the state’s tyranny over the churches. One may oppose the mingling of religion and politics on the grounds that there should be no religious interference in the political realm. Milton shared this view, but only insofar as he feared the use of the civil power by certain churches, to the detriment of the true religion. He regarded Presbyterian backsliding as a betrayal of the Revolution, and emphasized the degeneracy of Presbyterianism into a quasi-Catholic abuse of political power to enforce its particular doctrine. As he wrote to General Cromwell upon the establishment of the republican Commonwealth:

...yet more remains
 To conquer still; peace hath her victories
 No less renowned than war, new foes arise
 Threat’ning to bind our souls with secular chains:
 Help us to save free conscience from the paw
 Of hireling wolves whose Gospel is their maw.³⁵

The struggle against religious oppression did not end with the execution of the king. In the divine theodicy, the ultimate task of humanity is the full attainment of our manly freedom under God. Thus we are presented with the religious policy of Milton’s best regime: “This liberty of conscience which above all other things ought to be to all men dearest and most precious, no government more inclinable not to favor only but to protect, then a free Commonwealth.”³⁶ In other words, while civil liberty is guaranteed by aristocratic republicanism, Christian liberty is fostered by the strict separation of church and state. The failure to achieve either in England after 1660 was doubtless a bitter disappointment for Milton, who may have cared more about such principles than the personal glory he ultimately achieved as a poet.

The points discussed above--individual interpretation, the church as voluntary association, Christian liberty, and the separation of church and state--are the pillars of Milton’s Independency. Hobbes’s teaching was opposed to Milton’s in each respect. First, Hobbes insisted that “by wise and learned interpretation, and carefull ratiocination, all rules and precepts necessary to the knowledge of our duty both to God and man, without Enthusiasme, or supernatural Inspiration, may easily be deduced,”³⁷ a clear rejection of Milton’s “inward illumination of the Holy Spirit” as a guide to interpretation.

would take away from the “freedom, not of all men, but the truly conscientious.” Arthur E. Barker, *Milton and the Puritan Dilemma* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), 254-255. In a limited, external respect, the Christian magistrate’s duty to protect religion would include the prohibition of abhorrent practices, such as human sacrifice.

³⁴ Milton, *Civil Power*, p. 252 (Milton’s emphasis).

³⁵ Milton, “To the Lord General Cromwell, May 1652,” in *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Leonard (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 114, lines 9-14.

³⁶ Milton, *Readie and Easie Way*, p. 439.

³⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 32, p. 414.

He was also critical of the over-rationalization of scripture: "it is with the mysteries of our Religion, as with wholesome pills for the sick, which swallowed whole, have the vertue to cure; but chewed, are for the most part cast up again without effect."³⁸ This statement may appear rather ironic, considering that the second half of *Leviathan* is taken up with careful consideration of scripture. But Hobbes may have intended to settle religious controversies once and for all, and thus show that abstruse theological disputes over the mysteries of religion are not fit subjects for human reasoning. If Hobbes's reading of scripture merely confirms what he wrote in the first half of *Leviathan*,³⁹ then dwelling on theological matters is a distraction from political obedience. Hobbes concluded that only two things are essential for salvation: belief in Christ, and obedience to the laws of the sovereign.⁴⁰ His careful exegesis of scripture is an elaborate effort to prove to Christian subjects that these simple tenets of salvation are all they need to know from the Bible. In this way, he sought to counteract both the misappropriation of scripture by ambitious priests and the dangers of individual interpretation.

For Hobbes, the religious duty of humanity with respect to one's actions is primarily a matter of obedience to law. Like Milton, he considered the Jews of the Old Testament to be a particular people subject to God's law. Furthermore, Hobbes argued that the kingdom of God spoken of in Old Testament scripture was a "*Kingdome properly so named*," consistent with the origins of sovereignty described in the first part of *Leviathan*. That is to say, the people of Israel covenanted with God to have him as their king. The kingdom of God was not a metaphor but a political reality for the Jews. The initial covenant took place between God and Abraham, in which Abraham and his seed covenanted to obey God as sovereign, who in turn promised them the land of Canaan. This covenant was renewed by Moses, who ruled the people of Israel as God's lieutenant.⁴¹ The kingdom of God was a civil kingdom, in which the sovereign was instituted by a social covenant. Hobbesian and Miltonian accounts of the Old Testament are in general agreement over the point that the Jewish religion was a religion of law.

Hobbes sharply differed with Milton on the relation between the old kingdom of God and the religion of the Gospel. For Hobbes, the kingdom of God did not lose its original meaning--that of the sovereignty of god. The new covenant brought about by Christ was not a change from the religion of law to the religion of faith. In Chapter 40 of

³⁸ Ibid., chap. 32, p. 410.

³⁹ J.G.A. Pocock thinks that in the second half of *Leviathan*, the sovereign is confronted by a "new system of authority" based on God's word as revealed in history. This theological-historical account of sovereign authority "will come into direct and potentially competitive coexistence" with the ahistorical account based on reason which justified the institution of sovereignty. J.G.A. Pocock, *Politics, Language, and Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 166. But in the context of the civil wars, the sovereign's ecclesiastical authority is derived from the ahistorical problem of resolving controversies, and Hobbes's scriptural exegesis is largely devoted to confirming this authority in the Bible.

⁴⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 43, p. 610.

⁴¹ Ibid., chap. 35, pp. 442-444 (Hobbes's emphasis). Furthermore, as David Johnston notes, "By arguing that the kingdom of God described in Scripture was a kingdom in a literal sense, Hobbes could claim that no division between spiritual and civil authority had existed in Biblical times." David Johnston, *The Rhetoric of Leviathan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 169. This may also help to explain Milton's largely negative account of the religion of the Jews: the unity of civil and ecclesiastical powers in Old Testament kingdoms as a model for commonwealths generally is, of course, contrary to the separation of church and state.

Leviathan, Hobbes depicted the period between Moses and the New Testament as various changes in political authority, from high priests to kings, until subjection to the Babylonian, Macedonian, and finally Roman empires. Likewise, the new covenant of Christ marked a change in God's political kingdom. Hobbes noted Christ's office as redeemer for our sins. But Milton regarded Christ as a symbol of faith as opposed to law--that salvation is obtained through faith in Christ who died for our sins, not obedience to God's law as set down by external authorities--whereas Hobbes separated the redemptive act of Christ from the new covenant. It is true that Christ did not come to earth in order to assume earthly power, but this does not mean that religion ceased to be a religion of law. Instead, he announced the kingdom of God to come, an earthly commonwealth of the future with Christ as God's lieutenant. His mission was "to prepare men to live so, as to be worthy of the Immortality Beleevers were to enjoy, at such time as he should come in majesty, to take possession of his Fathers Kingdome." Thus, the law of God was not abolished in the new covenant, but rather renewed. Milton understood the new covenant in moral and metaphysical terms, as a transformation of religion from law to faith, conscience, and love, but Hobbes saw it in political terms: the promise of a future kingdom of God of similar character to the old kingdom of God. Indeed, Hobbes declared that Christ "is to be King...like (in office) to Moses."⁴² Christ will be the sovereign authority, not the Truth that shall set you free. Hobbes saw no maturing of humanity from the servile discipline of Jewish law to the manly freedom of Christian faith. Religious duty for him has consisted and always will consist essentially in obedience to God's law. It is reflective of Milton's republicanism and Hobbes's political teaching that the one considered the external imposition of God's law to be fit only for the servile, while the other regarded the religion of law as consonant with the kingdom of God in both the Old and New Testaments.

If Christianity is as much a religion of law as the religion of the Jews, then what laws did Christ bid us obey? Hobbes maintained that God's law throughout scripture is compatible with civil law. Christ did not give new laws to humanity, but rather gave "Counsell to observe those wee are subject to; that is to say, the Laws of Nature, and the Laws of our severall Sovereigns." The laws of nature, which come from God, command us to obey the laws of the sovereign; and Christ himself, when referring to the Pharisees "that sate in Moses seat" and to the tribute owed to Caesar, taught the same (though by interpreting Christ to have preached obedience to the Pharisees, Hobbes inadvertently compared Jesus to his religious persecutors). Thus, in between the old kingdom of God and Christ's kingdom to come is for the faithful a period of observance of God's laws which command obedience to civil law, a quiet waiting for the coming of the saviour.⁴³ Although we are obviously not under God's direct rule at the moment, part of our present duty to God nevertheless consists in obedience to the civil laws.

Moreover, human laws applies to acts, not wills. The law restricts freedom in the sense of doing what one will.⁴⁴ This principle is true of civil law in ecclesiastical affairs as well. In the interests of peace, subjects are not absolutely free to act as their consciences may direct them. Hobbes was sceptical of the claim that individual

⁴² Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 41, pp. 514-518.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, chap. 41, 516; chap. 43, 610-612. See Beiner, "Civil Religion," pp. 628-629.

⁴⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 21, p. 262.

conscience is a reliable guide to right and wrong: the law is the “publique Conscience,” in that the civil law, not private opinion, is the rule of good and evil actions for members of the commonwealth.⁴⁵ But this notion does not entail that one is bound to believe in private what the law dictates. The law commands obedience, not belief. That is to say, civil law restricts freedom of action; but individual belief is separable from free action. “For internall Faith,” he wrote, “is in its own nature invisible, and consequently exempted from all human jurisdiction; whereas the words, and actions that proceed from it, as breaches of our Civill obedience, are injustice both before God and Man.”⁴⁶ All that a sovereign can possibly (and legitimately) command is external obedience, not inward faith. Hobbes acknowledged that some would regard it abhorrent that a sovereign could, for example, order one to deny one’s faith in public. But in the interests of peace, he argued, purely inward belief must suffice for individuals where civil law commands public profession.⁴⁷ It is, after all, a two-way street: words and actions must suffice for the sovereign. Hobbes endorsed, in his own fashion, freedom of (inward) thought but not of speech and expression. Two decades after the publication of *Leviathan*, Spinoza would argue that despite the necessity for outward religion to be consistent with public peace, freedom of speech is not separable from freedom of thought.⁴⁸ With respect to the view that acts may be restrained in accordance with peace but that free speech and thought must be tolerated, Spinoza’s liberalism was between the positions of Hobbes and Milton (who endorsed freedom of worship as well as belief and speech).

Why are words for Hobbes not exempt from jurisdiction? Hobbes linked seditious speech with rebellious activity, particularly in his analysis of spiritual authorities seeking to undermine and appropriate civil sovereignty. In general, “there have been in all times in the Church of Christ, false Teachers, that seek reputation with the people, by phantasticall and false doctrines; and by such reputation (as is the nature of Ambition), to govern them for their private benefit.”⁴⁹ These false teachers are the agents of the “Kingdome of Darknesse,” in contrast to the light of true religion and “of the Understanding.” In particular, the seditious preachers of the Gospel interpreted scripture to prove, above all, that their church is the kingdom of God. Consequently, the persons that they deceive obey these teachers rather than their civil sovereigns.⁵⁰ Hobbes placed enormous importance on the power of words to make human beings believe and act according to them.⁵¹

It is in this context that we may assess Hobbes’s critique of the Independents and their allies. In the first dialogue of *Behemoth*, Hobbes named multiple sources of

⁴⁵ Ibid., chap. 29, p. 366. The characterization of law as public conscience may be linked with Hobbes’s critique of the private interpretation of scripture. In this sense, his conception of law was in part a response to Protestantism. See Mark Whitaker, “Hobbes’s View of the Reformation,” *History of Political Thought* 9 (1988): 49: “the whole of *Leviathan* can be said to be a commentary on the Reformation.”

⁴⁶ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 42, pp. 550-551.

⁴⁷ Ibid., chap. 43, pp. 624-625.

⁴⁸ Benedict de Spinoza, *A Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. R.H.M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1951), chaps. 19-20, pp. 245-266.

⁴⁹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 43, pp. 609-610.

⁵⁰ Ibid., chap. 44, pp. 627-630.

⁵¹ See Whitaker, “Hobbes’s View,” pp. 54-55; Holmes, “Political Psychology,” pp. 128-130. As they point out, political turmoil for Hobbes was in part a result of the misuse of language and the consequent disjunction between things and their proper signification.

religious sedition leading to the civil war, including the historical wrangles between sovereign and Pope, the Presbyterians' collusion with Parliament against the monarchy, and even the moral philosophy of the Anglican clergy. The more radical Puritan sects in England became a significant political force only in the struggle between Cromwell and the Presbyterian-controlled Parliament. Hobbes described their "strange...and pernicious doctrines" as "out-doing the Reformation (as they pretended) both of Luther and Calvin; receding from the former divinity (or church philosophy, for religion is another thing) as much as Luther and Calvin had receded from the Pope." But Hobbes showed no sympathy for the out-done reformers, and found a delicious irony in the fact that the Presbyterians were undermined by "this brood of their own hatching."⁵² In other words, in preaching political disobedience on religious grounds--that the people (led by ministers), not the sovereign, are judges of God's commands--the Presbyterians opened the floodgates for more radical sects to claim a divine right from God. In this respect, the Independents simply continued the seditious work of the Presbyterians.⁵³

Hobbes considered Miltonian "Christian liberty" in this light. When the Parliament was reduced by Cromwell, the Rump "voted liberty of conscience to the sectaries; that is, they plucked out the sting of Presbytery, which consisted in a severe imposing of odd opinions of the people, impertinent to religion, but conducing to the advancement of the power of the Presbyterian ministers." Hobbes may have preferred such liberty over Presbyterian impositions, but impugned the motives of the Rump: "What account can be given of actions that proceed not from reason, but from spite and such-like passions?"⁵⁴ The stance of the Independents was not unclouded by malice. In Hobbes's view, not only did this act display the self-destructive consequences of the Presbyterians' freewheeling interpretation of scripture, but it also showed the true import of the Independents' version of Christian liberty. Milton regarded Presbyterians as half-hearted reformers of the church, because they would not advocate absolute freedom of conscience. Hobbes, however, argued that the Independents and their allies merely sought to bring to fruition the license which the Presbyterians themselves assumed in opposing the king. We saw that Hobbes regarded inward conscience as exempt from human jurisdiction, but not publicly displayed worship--which is included in Miltonian freedom of conscience. For Hobbes, then, the Rump's act of voting of liberty of conscience merely served to reinforce sectarian power in government.

Nevertheless, Hobbes did make some remarks in favour of Christian liberty, but within the framework of the law. Despite themselves, the religious enemies of peace might have inadvertently brought about the dismantling of the kingdom of darkness. Hobbes wrote of the web spun around the religion of the Apostles, "whom the people converted, obeyed, out of Reverence: not by Obligation: Their Consciences were free, and their Words and Actions subject to none but the Civill Power." With the rise of

⁵² Hobbes, *Behemoth*, pp. 135-136, 165.

⁵³ Royce MacGillivray observes that "Hobbes is inclined to blame the Presbyterians more heavily" than the Independents for the king's murder. Royce MacGillivray, "Thomas Hobbes's History of the English Civil War: A Study of *Behemoth*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 31 (1970): 196. One should not, however, misconstrue this apportioning of blame as sympathy (on the same page, MacGillivray characterizes Hobbes's treatment of Cromwell as "not unfriendly"). Hobbes did not attribute much originality to the acts of the Independents and their allies, because of their resemblance to the Presbyterians.

⁵⁴ Hobbes, *Behemoth*, p. 169.

ecclesiastical organizations, three knots were tied upon this Christian liberty: the early Christian presbyters (assemblies) obliging belief in their doctrines; the setting-up of bishops in every city and province; and the “whole *Synthesis* and *Construction* of the Pontificall Power” in which the universal spiritual authority was invested in the Bishop of Rome. Now the knots have been untied, beginning with the last--the dissolution of papal power by Queen Elizabeth--then the putting down of the episcopacy by the Presbyterians, and finally the Presbyterians' subsequent loss of power. The result is a return of sorts to the “Independency of the Primitive Christians to follow...every man as he liketh best: Which, if it be without contention, and without measuring the Doctrine of Christ, by our affection to the Person of his Minister...is perhaps the best.”⁵⁵

Was Hobbes an Independent like Milton? It may be significant that Hobbes returned to England shortly after the time liberty of conscience was voted in by the Rump (1650). Still, this apparent endorsement of Christian liberty is qualified: after all, did Hobbes think that the freedom to follow whomever one pleases could be granted “without contention”? His analysis of religious conflict indicates that peaceful independency (though perhaps possible and even desirable) was unlikely, especially in his time. Hobbes may have strongly believed in shielding individual faith from ecclesiastical interference; but his commitment to Christian liberty was limited by his concern for peace. In light of everything else he wrote in *Leviathan* and *Behemoth*, the only Christian liberty that would be realistically compatible with his political teaching is freedom of purely inward belief. But that he made these remarks at all is indicative of a recognition that were peaceful independency achievable, it could be (like the establishment of a public religion, which he usually advocated) an effective tool against the power of the priesthood--hence his emphasis on not “measuring the Doctrine of Christ, by our affection to the Person of his Minister.” One could imagine a peaceable state whose policy is that religion is a purely private affair. Hobbes at least contemplated the possibility that there is more than one strategy for rendering religion politically safe, though he did not waver from the position that some strategies are more realistic than others.

Hobbes's analysis of the civil wars and the benefits of peaceful independency suggest a greater complexity than has been hitherto acknowledged by scholars. It challenges the characterization of Hobbes as intolerant Erastian in contrast to secular Enlightenment theorists. It also puts into question other interpretations placing Hobbesian church establishment with sceptical toleration on the one side and the separation of church and state with Protestant zeal on the other. Hobbes pondered both options--though not equally. Moreover, the basis upon which he considered the latter as well as the former exhibits the anti-Miltonian character of his thought even when showing qualified approval of Independency. This leads us to reconsider the too easy characterization of Hobbes as an absolutist who simply sought to stifle freedom in the interests of peace. Milton, the champion of Christian liberty, was antagonistic towards the rule of law in religious matters. Hobbes, in opposing the seditious potential of such a stance, espoused a limited, regulated form of religious freedom. That he did so for principally strategic reasons should not prevent us from regarding his formulation as a pragmatic balance between liberty and authority.

⁵⁵ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 47, pp. 710-711.

