The Historical Journal (2025), **68**, 995–1015
doi:10.1017/S0018246X25100940

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Empire, Conscience, and Another Independency in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*

Amy Chandran

Hamilton School of Classical and Civic Education, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, USA
Email: amytchandran@gmail.com

Abstract

Leviathan's famous pronouncement that England had been 'reduced to the Independency of the Primitive Christians' has often been understood to signal support for the newly ascendant Cromwellian Independents in England. This article ventures an alternative reading of the passage by investigating the notion of 'Independency' with an eye to wider European political discourses. Scholars such as Francisco Suárez contended for the natural independence of temporal sovereigns while specifying the juridical rights and reach of imperial power. The fact that Christ and the Apostles had eschewed involvement in temporal affairs clarified this initial independency. This original state was especially important in French narratives aimed at securing autonomy against both empire and church. In light of this, Hobbes's statement may be interpreted as endorsing a time-delimited notion of free conscience given England's ruinous political state, but one looking forward to the unified rule of a sovereign with civil and ecclesiastical power.

Investigation of Thomas Hobbes's connection to English Independents remains a popular line of inquiry among efforts to trace emerging notions of 'liberty of conscience' in the seventeenth century.[1] Independents rose to prominence in the lead up to the regicide of Charles I and boasted the favour of Oliver Cromwell. The faction eschewed formal structures of ecclesial authority, as well as the use of force on 'tender consciences'.[2] Both their anti-statist and anti-Royalist credentials make Hobbes an unlikely ally of the group. Nevertheless, *Leviathan*'s forty-seventh chapter, detailing the incursion of 'knots' on an original 'Christian Liberty', contains a reference that has occasioned extensive analysis:

[1]Richard Tuck, 'Hobbes and Locke on toleration', in Mary G. Dietz, ed., *Thomas Hobbes and political theory* (Lawrence, KS, 1990), pp. 153–71; Jeffrey R. Collins, *The allegiance of Thomas Hobbes* (Oxford, 2007); Teresa M. Bejan, 'Difference without disagreement: rethinking Hobbes on "Independency" and toleration', *Review of Politics*, 78 (2016), pp. 1–25; Boleslaw Z. Kabala, 'The return of the intolerant Hobbes', *History of European Ideas*, 45 (2019), pp. 785–802; Jacqueline Rose, 'Hobbes among the heretics?', *Historical Journal*, 52 (2009), pp. 493–511; Arash Abizadeh, 'Publicity, privacy, and religious toleration in Hobbes's Leviathan', *Modern Intellectual History*, 10 (2013), pp. 261–91; Johann Sommerville, 'Hobbes and toleration', in Marcus P. Adams, ed., *A companion to Hobbes* (Hoboken, NJ, 2021), pp. 318–31.

[2]George Yule, *The Independents in the English Civil War* (Cambridge, 1958); J. H. Hexter, 'The Independents in the English Civil War', *American Historical Review*, 64 (1959), pp. 362–3.

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X25100940 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> And so we are reduced to the Independency of the Primitive Christians to follow Paul, or Cephas, or Apollos, 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, (the fault which the Apostle reprehended in the Corinthians,) is perhaps the best.[3]

Despite Hobbes's protestations to the contrary, contemporaries viewed this pronouncement of England's reduction to the 'Independency of the Primitive Christians' as a not-so-veiled, politically expedient endorsement of the Cromwellian regime.[4] Jeffrey Collins has offered the most erudite exposition of the thesis, persuasively arguing that a fear of growing clerical power (among other things) led to shifts in Hobbes's political allegiance over the 1640s and accommodation of Cromwell's new regime.[5] Others, such as Noel Malcolm, have explained the passage as a 'last-minute adjustment' that Hobbes made to appear more aligned with political realities; but Malcolm suggests that this 'praise of Independency' is otherwise an anomaly.[6]

Indeed, the apparent hat tip to private conscience in England's diverse and war-torn religious landscape hearkens to broader interpretive tensions. The significance of Hobbes's distinction between interior faith and exterior confession was a central preoccupation of twentieth-century scholarship and remains a source of disagreement.[7] *Leviathan*'s less tolerant core, immortalized in the imposing figure of the frontispiece wielding both crosier and sword, stands in sharp contrast to an alleged interest in a sect known for favouring congregationalism and free conscience.[8] As such, it is little surprise that Hobbes's supposed support for Independents has also met with significant objections. Johann Sommerville, for example, has voiced serious doubts that *Leviathan* could be counted 'as a defense of Independent thinking in

[3]All references to Thomas Hobbes, *Vol. 4: Leviathan: the English and Latin texts,* ed. Noel Malcolm (The Clarendon Edition of the Works of Thomas Hobbes, Oxford, 2012) (L: chapter, page number). L: XLVII, p. 1116.

[4]Collins, *The allegiance of Thomas Hobbes*; Mark Goldie, 'The reception of Hobbes', in J. H. Burns and Mark Goldie, eds., *The Cambridge history of political thought, 1450–1700* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 589–615; Bejan, 'Difference without disagreement', p. 7.

[5]Collins, *The allegiance of Thomas Hobbes,* passim.

[6]Thomas Hobbes, *Vol. 3: Leviathan: editorial introduction*, ed. Noel Malcolm (The Clarendon Edition of the Works of Thomas Hobbes, Oxford, 2012), p. 64.

[7]Leslie Stephen, *Hobbes* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1961); Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the state theory of Thomas Hobbes: meaning and failure of a political symbol*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago, IL, 1996); Leo Strauss, *Hobbes's critique of religion & related writings* (Chicago, IL, 2011). See also Jeffrey R. Collins, *In the shadow of Leviathan: John Locke and the politics of conscience* (Cambridge, 2020); Alan Ryan, 'A more tolerant Hobbes?', in Susan Mendus, ed., *Justifying toleration: conceptual and historical perspectives* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 37–58; J. Judd Owen, 'The tolerant Leviathan: Hobbes and the paradox of liberalism', *Polity*, 37 (2005), pp. 130–48, at p. 133; Tuck, 'Hobbes and Locke on toleration'; Nicholas Higgins, 'Hobbes's paradoxical toleration: inter regentes tolerantia, tolerans intolerantia inter plebem', *Politics and Religion*, 9 (2016), pp. 139–61; Edwin Curley, 'Hobbes and the cause of religious toleration', in Patricia Springbord, ed., *The Cambridge companion to Hobbes's Leviathan* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 309–34.

[8]Johann Sommerville, 'Hobbes and Independency', *Rivista di Storia della Filosofia*, 59 (2004), pp. 155–73; Lodi Nauta, 'Hobbes on religion and the church between *The elements of law* and *Leviathan*: a dramatic change of direction?', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 63 (2002), pp. 577–98; Joshua Mitchell, 'Religion and the fable of liberalism: the case of Hobbes', *Theoria (Pietermaritzburg)*, 55 (2008), pp. 1–16.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X25100940 Published online by Cambridge University Press

general', pointing to the fanatical puritanism that Hobbes recognized in this ascendant English faction, and an array of other incongruencies.[9] More recently, Sharon Lloyd has offered philosophical analysis of the tensions entailed by this view.[10] If these difficulties are admitted, the puzzle of just how to interpret Chapter 47's reference to 'Independency' remains.

This article attends to this conundrum by another avenue, yet to be adequately explored; namely, the extent to which Hobbes's statement might be understood as hearkening to a wider notion of independency, with a distinctive set of theoretical, historical, and political underpinnings. The very nomenclature adopted by English Independents alluded to a broader discourse, which borrowed from both secular and sacred narratives regarding the freedom and independence of city-states, as well as the independence that Christianity had enjoyed in its primitive moments. The fact that Christ had not interfered in temporal power arrangements illustrated the independent, spiritual nature of the church at its origins, prior to Constantine's conversion. In sharpening claims to an original autonomy from both the Roman empire and Roman church, French Gallicans were particularly vocal in extolling this primitive independence and its accompanying 'Liberties'. While scholars have demonstrated an awareness and even sensitivity to the wider set of ideas invoked by the term 'Independency', they have remained focused on interpreting these within the political dynamics of the English Civil War. This article proposes taking the broader European context as primary for determining authorial intentions, particularly in light of the fact that Hobbes spent the decade leading up to *Leviathan*'s publication living in France. Doing so yields an interpretation of what it would mean to be reduced to 'Independency' with a different emphasis and significance.

In the analysis offered below, I make the case for another independency. First, I review the debate over Hobbes's affiliation with Independents, and the effective stalemate that marks present scholarship. Next, I consider the two other instances in which *Leviathan* makes mention of 'Independency', as well as a handful of references to being 'independent'. Third, I sketch the wider discourse that contended for the naturalness of independently existing temporal cities and kingdoms, and the importance of independency as political autonomy, relating to empire (both spiritual and temporal). I then suggest that Chapter 47's references to 'Independency' resonate with this idea of an original autonomy enjoyed prior to Constantine's conversion (before Christianity's felicitous meeting with civil sovereignty). Fourth, I take up the difficulties of transposing the concept, as Hobbes does in his long-run narration of 'knots' tied and loosed on Christian liberty. I suggest that the particular political and philosophical significance of the pre-Constantinian moment of the Apostles has especial resonances with Hobbes's 'state of nature' and illuminates the relevance of *Leviathan*'s treatment of sacred history. Finally, I offer a discussion of how this might bear on Hobbes's wider assessment of England's situation and a certain hopefulness portrayed by the same.

[9]Sommerville, 'Hobbes and Independency'; Thomas Hobbes, *Behemoth or the Long Parliament*, ed. Ferdinand Tönnies (Chicago, IL, 1990), p. 136.

[10]S. A. Lloyd, 'Hobbes's theory of responsibility as support for Sommerville's argument against Hobbes's approval of Independency', *Hobbes Studies*, 35 (2022), pp. 51–66.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X25100940 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I

As parliamentary divisions cauterized amid the turmoil of the English Civil War, a faction of English Independents rose to prominence and paved the way for the regicide, orchestrating Pride's Purge in 1648 (during which, members hostile to the New Model Army were prevented from entering parliament). Although debate continues over how best to characterize the ecclesiological impulses of Independents, historically they garnered a reputation as puritans with more tolerant leanings.[11] It is not difficult to rationalize the abundance of ink spilt adjudicating Hobbes's possible affiliation with these parliamentarians – if his allegiance did shift away from the Royalist cause over the 1640s, it is of the utmost importance for parsing *Leviathan*'s wider significance. Yet, it comes with profound historical and philosophical difficulties. Sommerville's character analysis of Independents not only casts doubt on the likelihood that Hobbes held deep personal ties, but highlights sharp differences between their ecclesial programme and traditional interpretations of *Leviathan*.[12] Blair Worden, Collins (and others) have gone to impressive lengths to redress the causticity of these critiques, tempering the overall implications of such an allegiance by revealing Independents' diverse leanings. On Collins's assessment, the Magisterial vein of Independents, particularly prominent in the 1640s, 'espoused "free conscience" only within a narrowly defined theological spectrum' and in a manner 'necessary for the creation of [England's] Godly Commonwealth'.[13] Furthering this contention of a delimited religious tolerance, Boleslaw Kabala has shown that Hobbes's position might more easily be reconciled in view of the Independents' (second) *Humble Proposal*. This plan for church reform is suggestive of the fact that many leading Independents understood toleration to be quite compatible with a state-supported confession of faith.[14] Teresa Bejan, by contrast, has suggested that the supporting conditions invoked in Chapter 47 are more important. These explain that the reduction to independency might be judged 'for the best' if it be 'without contention' and 'without measuring the Doctrine of Christ, by our affection to the Person of his Minister'. Such conditions, Bejan points out, were far from being satisfied in the late stages of the English Civil War.[15] Thus, while Chapter 47's reference has been subjected to extensive scrutiny, there is little consensus over how to square apparent incongruencies.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty of interpretations that downplay Independents' views on religious tolerance is that Chapter 47 seems to foreground them. Hobbes explains that 'it may be best' to have been 'reduced to the Independency of the Primitive Christians', precisely because 'there ought to be no Power over the Consciences of men, but of the Word it selfe, working Faith in every one, not always

[11]For treatments of Independents and recent debate on the extent to which it is accurate to portray the group as favourable towards a liberty of conscience, see Yule, *The Independents in the English Civil War*; Hexter, 'The Independents in the English Civil War'; Valerie Pearl, 'The "Royal Independents", in the English Civil War', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 18 (1968), pp. 69–96; Jeffrey R. Collins, 'The church settlement of Oliver Cromwell', *History (London)*, 87 (2002), pp. 18–40; Blair Worden, *God's instruments* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 63–90.

[12]Sommerville, 'Hobbes and Independency'; Sommerville, 'Hobbes and toleration'.

[13]Collins, *The allegiance of Thomas Hobbes*, p. 102.

[14]Kabala, 'The return of the intolerant Hobbes'.

[15]Bejan, 'Difference without disagreement'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X25100940 Published online by Cambridge University Press

according to the purpose of them that Plant and Water, but of God himself, that giveth the Increase'.[16] As Arash Abizadeh has pointed out, it is the toleration rather than the Erastianism of Independents that Hobbes highlights.[17]

The contested affirmation of independency in Chapter 47, however, is just one facet of a much wider interpretive debate. Most readers perceive a tension between a thoroughgoing absolutism and the positive embrace of free religious conscience touted by Independents. Indeed, perhaps even more pressing than the implications regarding political allegiance are the tensions that the passage creates with *Leviathan*'s wider sentiments on conscience. The affirmation that a reversion to independency is endorsed because 'there ought to be no Power over the Consciences of men' operates in direct opposition to other admonitions to subject one's conscience to one's sovereign.[18] Perhaps the clearest exposition of this overarching contention has been offered by Johan Tralau, who compellingly argues that Hobbes's conception of conscience as a 'public phenomenon' undermines any workable recourse to private conscience.[19] Lloyd likewise explains that Hobbes's theory requires individuals to conform their public conscience to sovereign judgements out of a genuine reciprocity – a duty which underpins *Leviathan*'s moral reasoning.[20] The private conscience subordinates itself because one's 'settled opinion' (Hobbes's definition of conscience) rationally appreciates this mutual submission as an act in one's genuine self-interest. In keeping with this explication, Lloyd argues that the state of nature is defined by the freedom accorded to private conscience. Any endorsement of free conscience thus hearkens back to a natural condition, which Lloyd contends is not able to be as fully escaped as is usually supposed.[21]

A further complication of adjudging Hobbes's measured affirmation of 'Independency' arises from the printing history of *Leviathan.* The only extant manuscript of *Leviathan*, a scribal copy produced on vellum, contains two references to 'Independents'. It is commonly held that this vellum copy was produced in 1651 for Charles II, with whom Hobbes had been in exile.[22] But these two references to Independents are not found in what has been identified as the earliest *printed* copy of *Leviathan*, known as the 'Head' edition. In Chapter 18, where this latter edition notes, 'those that disagreed in Politiques; and after between the Dissenters about the liberty of Religion', the vellum copy reads, 'the temporall factions of parliamentarians and royalists, by the name of Roundheads and Cavaliers, and since

[16]L: XLVII, p. 1116.

[17]Abizadeh, 'Publicity, privacy, and religious toleration', p. 263. Collins offers the astute rejoinder that pitting toleration against Erastianism misconstrues the *politique* dynamics at play in Collins, *In the shadow*, pp. 315–77.

[18]L: XVII, p. 694.

[19]Johan Tralau, 'Hobbes contra liberty of conscience', *Political Theory*, 39 (2011), pp. 58–84.

[20]S. A. Lloyd, 'Authorization and moral responsibility in the philosophy of Hobbes', *Hobbes Studies*, 29 (2016), pp. 169–88; S. A. Lloyd, 'Hobbes on the duty not to act on conscience', in Laurens van Apeldoorn and Robin Douglass, eds., *Hobbes on politics and religion* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 256–72; S. A. Lloyd, *Morality in the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes: cases in the law of nature* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 51–2.

[21]S. A. Lloyd, 'The state of nature as a continuum concept', in Adams, ed., *A companion to Hobbes*, pp. 156–70.

[22]Hobbes, *Leviathan: editorial introduction*, ed. Malcolm, p. 197; Richard Tuck, 'Introduction', in Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge, 1996), pp. li–lii.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X25100940 Published online by Cambridge University Press

between the doctrinall factions of Presbyterians *and Independents*'.[23] The second discrepancy, similarly negative in tone, appears in Chapter 22. Outlining irregular, unlawful bodies in a commonwealth, Hobbes explains that 'Factions for Government of Religion, as of Papists, Protestants, &c. or of State, as Patricians.'[24] In the vellum manuscript, the '&c.' reads 'Independents'; again, signalling an indictment of the group. As such, explicit mention is made of English Independents in at least one, but not all, of the earliest copies of *Leviathan.* In these instances, Hobbes lays blame with the group for being factious, in a tone that is echoed in *Behemoth*'s later narration of England's conflict.[25]

Although the precise details of how and when Hobbes amended one manuscript or another remain a mystery, Noel Malcolm meticulously supports his contention that both the manuscript and printed copy were likely based off a now-unknown earlier fair copy.[26] Malcolm and Tuck argue that Hobbes likely *removed* the references from the copy intended for printing.[27] Likewise, Collins suggests that this omission of the two negative references evidences Hobbes's assessment of Independents evolving 'in a favorable direction'. As such, scholars have largely concluded that the references to Independents in the vellum manuscript were subsequently omitted.[28] However, it also seems plausible that if Hobbes did intend the vellum manuscript to be presented to Charles II, he might have added these slights to that particular copy, to clarify his opposition to Independents and his allegiance to the Royalist cause. Either way, the discrepancy confirms that Hobbes was not only attentive to the existence of Independents, but that he developed an especial intent to either express or downplay his sentiments towards them.

Most importantly, these variations in the text allow one to contrast the explicit references to 'Independents' with references to 'Independency' which appear consistently across both the manuscript and printed copy of *Leviathan*. The term 'Independents' is consistently used to label the English faction, while the term 'Independency', as we shall presently see, alludes to a distinctive notion of political autonomy.

II

Besides the famous passage quoted at the beginning of this article, there are two other references to 'Independency' in Chapters 13 and 47 of *Leviathan*, neither of which is particularly suggestive of the Independent faction. The first appears in the final paragraphs expounding the 'Natural Condition of Mankind', and is best known for encapsulating Hobbes's early contributions to international relations theory. Having explained historical instances of the 'natural condition', Hobbes exclaims:

> But though there had never been any time, wherein particular men were in a condition of warre one against another; yet in all times, Kings, and Persons of

[23]L: XVIII, p. 278. Emphasis added.
[24]L: XXII, p. 372.
[25]Hobbes, *Behemoth*, ed. Tönnies, pp. 136–7.
[26]Hobbes, *Leviathan: editorial introduction*, ed. Malcolm, pp. 197–209.
[27]Ibid., p. 197; Tuck, 'Introduction', pp. li–lvi.
[28]Collins, *The allegiance of Thomas Hobbes*, pp. 145–6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X25100940 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> Soveraigne authority, *because of their Independency*, are in continuall jealousies, and in the state and posture of Gladiators; having their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another.[29]

Sovereigns, Hobbes explains, are in a state of nature with respect to one another on account of an 'Independency'. This use of independency, as Bejan puts it, is 'a synonym for liberty in Milton's republican sense' such that it bespeaks an 'autonomy', or a relation between persons without a common authority who might therefore easily come to strife.[30] This sense of independency in Chapter 13 concurs with other uses of the term 'independent' throughout *Leviathan*, which reference a formal separation or anarchic freedom. For example, Chapter 22's taxonomy of 'systems' or collective bodies describes the commonwealth as a regular system that is 'Absolute, and *Independent*, subject to none but their own Representative'.[31] Likewise, issuing a warning against the attractions of 'mixt' government, Hobbes explains that divisions of power make not for 'one independent Commonwealth, but three independent Factions'.[32] All of this suggests that there is at least one other competing sense of 'independence' at work in *Leviathan* that is closely related to the state of nature and the liberties entailed – a relation that applies in an international arena once sovereignty is established.[33]

The second mention of 'Independency' appears in Chapter 47 just a few paragraphs before the famous reference quoted in the article's introduction. The subject of this chapter is 'the Benefit' that proceeds from 'the Kingdom of Darkness'. Hobbes leaves little doubt that the entity at the heart of his screed is the 'Confederacy of Deceivers' that is best and most especially exemplified by the Roman Catholic church. The proximity of this reference to the passage in question makes it especially relevant for interpreting 'Independency' within Part IV's broader narration of the 'darkness' incurred from the abuses of Scripture (Chapter 44), 'Daemonology' and other gentile 'Reliques' (Chapter 45), and 'Vain Philosophy' (Chapter 46).

Chapter 47 begins with an appeal to Lucius Cassius's principle, '*cui bono?*' – in order to adduce responsibility for the kingdom of darkness, one must ask to whom the 'profit, honour or other contentment' of such a kingdom have accrued.[34] To whose benefit has it been promulgated '*that the present Church, now Militant on Earth,*

[29]L: XIII, p. 196. Emphasis added.

[30]Bejan, 'Difference without disagreement', p. 10.

[31]L: XXII, p. 348.

[32]L: XXIX, p. 512. Emphasis added.

[33]The proposition that Hobbes's anti-republican stance explains his developing conception of liberty has been well explored via Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before liberalism* (Cambridge, 1998), as well as various replies, such as Jeffrey R. Collins, 'Quentin Skinner's Hobbes and the neo-republican project', *Modern Intellectual History*, 6 (2009), pp. 343–67; Robin Douglass, 'Thomas Hobbes's changing account of liberty and challenge to republicanism', *History of Political Thought*, 36 (2015), pp. 281–309. Pushing beyond these critiques, further investigation of republican resonances in Hobbes's thought especially with respect to the notion of 'independence' as it applies to the sovereign collective is merited. The possibility of a greater, if surprising, affinity with certain strands of republicanism has been recognized in: Jon Parkin, *Taming the Leviathan: the reception of the political and religious ideas of Thomas Hobbes in England, 1640–1700* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 179–83, 404; and Lars Vinx, 'Hobbes on civic liberty and the rule of law', in David Dyzenhaus and Thomas Poole, eds., *Hobbes and the law* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 145–64.

[34]L: XLVII, p. 1104.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X25100940 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is the Kingdom of God'? To clarify matters Hobbes adds that the 'Kingdom of God' in question is the 'Kingdom of Glory, or the Land of Promise'. Having originally received their 'right' as 'Supreme Teachers of Christian Doctrine, by, and under, Christian Emperors', the popes crafted a pretence of this claim during the demise of the Roman empire, extending their title to 'the Right of St Peter'. The benefits attaching to the 'Universal Monarchy' over Christendom, entailed by the doctrine that 'the Church now on Earth, is the Kingdome of Christ', was great enough to indict the pontiffs as the doctrine's primary authors, according to Hobbes.[35]

In order to appreciate the force of the accusation, it is worth reviewing the dual schemes Hobbes employs to account for various instantiations of the 'Kingdom of God'. The first (and most familiar) distinguishes the *Kingdom of God by Nature* from the *Prophetique Kingdom of God*. Chapter 31 explains that this synchronic distinction turns on how the 'Word of God' is promulgated, whether by *rational reason* (nature) or by the *voyce of some man* (prophetic), respectively.[36] The second schema is historically (or diachronically) ensconced, and traces divisions in the unfolding Kingdom of God by *nature, grace*, and *glory*.[37] In step with the Catholic pronouncements of this division, Hobbes explains that the kingdom of *grace*, building on *nature*, is one that is presently participated in through acceptation of a promise, while remaining 'but a *Promise* of the Land'.[38] By contrast, the kingdom of glory *is* 'the Land of Promise' – the heavenly fulfilment itself, which Hobbes explains elsewhere will be experienced 'on earth', at the second coming and Christ's universal reign in glory.[39] Therefore, the pope's assertion of a *universal*, spiritual sovereignty, exercised in claims to certain privileges and jurisdiction, was tantamount to asserting rule over a kingdom *of glory*, and thus a premature imitation of Christ's universal rule, which was yet to materialize.[40]

After laying down this initial accusation, Hobbes offers a further account of historical descent, issuing in Chapter 47's first mention of independency. Hobbes explains that civil sovereigns might reasonably have been expected to have 'recovered' what right they had unadvisedly let go, once certain churches had 'renounced this universal Power of the Pope'. Turning specifically to England, Hobbes notes:

> And in England it was so in effect; saving that they, by whom the Kings administered the Government of Religion, by maintaining their employment to be in Gods Right, seemed to usurp, *if not a Supremacy, yet an Independency on the Civil Power*: and they but seemed to usurp it, in as much as they acknowledged a Right in the King, to deprive them of the Exercise of their Functions at his pleasure.[41]

[35]L: XLVII, pp. 1104–6.

[36]L: XXXI, p. 556.

[37]L: XXXV, p. 634.

[38]L: XXXV, p. 644; L: XLVII, p. 1104. On the Catholic origins, see Ben Jones, 'The natural kingdom of God in Hobbes's political thought', *History of European Ideas*, 45 (2019), pp. 436–53.

[39]L: XXXVIII, pp. 700–8.

[40]L: XXXV, p. 644.

[41]L: XLVII, p. 1106. Emphasis added.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X25100940 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Although English sovereigns ought to have recuperated their right at the time that they cast off papal authority, Hobbes suggests that this effort was hampered by clerical assertions. English clerics seemed to usurp sovereign authority by 'maintaining their employment to be in Gods Right' – that is, by claiming a distinct and immediate grant of divine right, familiar from long-standing narrations of episcopal power – which Hobbes suggests amounted to an 'Independency on the Civil Power', if not a supremacy. Associating this 'Independency' with claims to divine right makes it very unlikely that this first mention in Chapter 47 is a veiled reference to Independents, who demarcated their own position from the English episcopacy by disavowing the *jure divino* origins of clerical authority.[42] Thus, Chapter 47's first use of independency is most cogently interpreted in keeping with earlier instances that denote claims to autonomy and non-subjection.

If we then turn to the final, crucial instance of 'Independency', the wider pattern of use throughout *Leviathan* would urge against taking it as a direct reference to Independents. Nevertheless, assessing Hobbes's intent in pronouncing a reduction to the 'Independency of the Primitive Christians' requires close attention to the further sequence of events narrated in Chapter 47. Hobbes explains that Presbyterians, imitating the power grabs of the Roman clergy, also laid claim to the Kingdom of God, in hopes of 'the same which the Popes expected: to have a Sovereign Power over the People'.[43] Hobbes likens the Presbyterian clergy to the authors of 'this Darkness in Religion', and expands upon a list of twelve supporting doctrines they employed, including infallibility, the subjection of bishops, ecclesiastical immunities, auricular confessions, and, among others, the employment of Aristotelian metaphysics and ethics. Hobbes suggests that such schemes were perpetrated in order that men might 'mistake the *Ignis fatuus* of Vain Philosophy, for the Light of the Gospell'.[44]

After firmly indicting the clergy, Hobbes turns to the 'Emperors, and other Christian Sovereigns, under whose Government these Errors and the like encroachments of Ecclesiastiques upon their Office, at first crept in'.[45] Less commonly noted by readers is the fact that Hobbes lays significant blame at the feet of temporal sovereigns who suffered a 'want of foresight' and as such might rightly be charged as 'accessories to their own, and the Publique damage'.[46] These sovereigns, Hobbes suggests, ought to have clamped down on 'seditious Doctrines' before they took hold among the people – in particular, those doctrines that suggested an authority independent of the sovereign's. Hobbes then engages a theodicy of sorts, asking how God's omnipotence might be maintained amidst evidence of such devastating corruption. While God 'suffereth many times the prosperity of his enemies, together with their ambition, to grow to such a height', this does not continue indefinitely. If God permits the 'Machinations of men against the Truth' it is because these themselves become the means by which people's eyes are opened to such manoeuvres. The remedy is in evidence when such men, 'by too much grasping let go all, as

[42]Collins, *The allegiance of Thomas Hobbes*, pp. 95–6, 169, and passim.
[43]L: XLVII, p. 1106.
[44]L: XLVII, p. 1110.
[45]L: XLVII, p. 1112.
[46]L: XLVII, p. 1112.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X25100940 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Peters net was broken, by the struggling of too great a multitude of Fishes'.[47] The Reformation, in Hobbes's eyes, was a potent example of just such an undoing.

In the very next passage, Hobbes explains that to 'strive to resist such encroachments' *before* the eyes of their subjects were opened would have been futile and only increased the power being resisted. Thus, Fredrick Barbarossa could not be blamed for his deference to history's only English pope – Pope Adrian's subjects (and their Catholic beliefs) required as much. By contrast, those sovereigns who *initially* permitted such pernicious doctrines to be forged in their dominions (and universities) were to blame; for these had 'holden the Stirrop to all the succeeding Popes, whilest they mounted into the Thrones of all Christian Soveraigns, to ride, and tire, both them, and their people, at their pleasure'.[48] As Hobbes's exculpation of Barbarossa suggests, the political possibilities of any moment ought to be viewed against the ebb and flow of power relations. Hobbes's narrative then shifts to a more hopeful tenor, by suggesting a historical symmetry between the creation and undoing of such corruptions:

> But as the Inventions of men are woven, so also are they ravelled out; the way is the same, but the order is inverted: The web begins at the first Elements of Power, which are Wisdom, Humility, Sincerity, and other vertues 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.[49]

Hobbes sets out the image of an initial period in which all obedience flowed from reverence and an admiration of a genuine claim to God's power. Following this, slowly but surely a series of 'knots' were tied on this initial liberty – the first was incurred when the 'Presbyters...assembling to consider what they should teach...made it to be thought the people were thereby obliged to follow their Doctrine'.[50] The second, when the presbyters of cities attained authority and appropriated the name of bishop to themselves. The 'third and last knot' was tied with the bishop of Rome's assertion of authority over all other bishops in the empire (partly by the wills of the emperors themselves, Hobbes admonishes), which formed 'the whole *Synthesis* and *Construction* of the Pontificiall Power'.[51]

Hobbes then suggests that 'the *Analysis,* or *Resolution*' will come about in the 'same way; but beginneth with the knot that was last tyed; as we may see in the dissolution of the praeterpoliticall Church Government in England'.[52] The *untying* of knots began with Elizabeth I's dissolution of papal power, which caused the bishops to go from being functionaries of the pope to functionaries of the queen. The second knot was untied by the Presbyterians who 'obtained the putting down of Episcopacy'. Hobbes explains that 'at almost the same time' power was taken from the Presbyterians,

[47]L: XLVII, p. 1112.
[48]L: XLVII, p. 1114.
[49]L: XLVII, p. 1114.
[50]L: XLVII, p. 1114.
[51]L: XLVII, p. 1114.
[52]L: XLVII, p. 1114.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X25100940 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'And so we are reduced to the Independency of the Primitive Christians as to follow Paul, or Cephas, or Apollos, every man as he liketh best.'[53] Taken within this long-run narrative, it is not difficult to see why Clarendon, Collins, and others supposed Hobbes to have been making reference to yet another sectarian group operating in England at that moment. On this reading, papal authority gave way to episcopal right; episcopal right to Presbyterian power; and finally, the Presbyterians to tolerant Independents. Yet, it is also clear that Chapter 47's sequence suggests this period is an echo of that first moment of 'Christian Liberty', extant before any knots had been tied. Indeed, Hobbes holds it to have been perhaps 'for the best' precisely because it resolves the knots that had corrupted a primitive and purer Christian scenario. The 'Independency' of such a moment evidently captures an initial liberty able to be enjoyed absent hierarchical (ecclesial) structures – a liberty consonant with the autonomy signified by the term independency elsewhere in *Leviathan*.

III

The long-run narrative of Chapter 47 illustrates the dissolution of praeterpolitical government in religion and suggests a return to a primitive period extant at the time of the Apostles. The fact that English Independents consciously embraced an association with primitive governance structures renders the point ventured in this section a rather subtle one. Deciphering a meaningful distinction between a veiled reference to the English sect and the emphasis entailed by broader European invocations of 'Independency' requires attending to wider developments of late medieval and early modern political discourse. If Hobbes did have this alternate sense in mind, it may be that his pronouncement of England's reduction to independency was made without an intentional allusion to the English sect and its accompanying complications.

We begin from Chapter 47's overarching theme: *empire*. In particular, that 'empire of souls' claimed by the pontiff (as it was so aptly captured by Robert Bellarmine, Hobbes's foe of just a few chapters earlier).[54] As has already been noted, tracing the vicissitudes of a republican political tradition reveals 'independence' to have been a watchword for medieval city-states which touted their autonomy against imperial ambitions.[55] The *translatio imperii*, and its 'secular' transformation in narratives of decline and fall, has long been a point of interest for scholars navigating continuities across the medieval, Renaissance, and early modern periods.[56] Without becoming mired in the complexities of this debate, it is evident that Hobbes unequivocally abjured the legitimacy of grand appeals to empire; these were merely evidence of crafty historical actors with pretensions to greater power. Independence, insofar as

[53]L: XLVII, p. 1116.

[54]On Bellarmine's usage, see Stefania Tutino, *Empire of souls* (Oxford, 2010).

[55]Sarah Mortimer, *Reformation, resistance, and reason of state (1517–1625)* (Oxford, 2021), pp. 18–23; Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner, *Republicanism: a shared European heritage* (Cambridge, 2002), passim.

[56]Cary J. Nederman, 'Empire and the historiography of European political thought: Marsiglio of Padua, Nicholas of Cusa, and the medieval/modern divide', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 66 (2005), pp. 1–15; J. G. A. Pocock, 'The historiography of the *translatio imperii*', in *Barbarism and Religion*, III (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 127–51.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X25100940 Published online by Cambridge University Press

it denoted an anti-imperialist thread in early modern humanism, certainly captures a vivid sentiment present in Hobbes's thought.

Yet, Hobbes specifies that it is an independency '*of the Primitive Christians*' and so it is more specific than these familiar republican allusions. It is well known that quarrels against and between papal and imperial powers proved particularly illuminating for Hobbes. The principle, *rex est imperator in regno suo*, was the harbinger of a new order, still taking shape as Hobbes was writing, that saw imperial claims give way to those of nation-state monarchs.[57] The contention for the king's power in his local dominion – in opposition to *both* church and empire – gained special clarity in the public legal thought of France in the late medieval period. An early exemplar of just how this polemical point began to crystallize is offered in John of Paris's *De potestate regia et papali*, penned in support of Philip IV during his famous dispute with Boniface VIII at the turn of the fourteenth century.[58] In contrast to Hobbes, John wished to affirm the universal, spiritual authority of the pope while precluding papal interference in temporal matters of taxation. He did so by distinguishing the natural independence of temporal authority.[59] The intellectual agility required to balance this subtle opposition to both pontiff and Holy Roman emperor resulted in a pastiche of creative reasoning. Arguing against imperial claims, John drew upon Aristotelian logic to contend for the naturalness of independent cities, regions, and kingdoms.[60] A localized, temporal authority allowed communities to commit governance to a ruler that accorded with the specific needs of their community.[61]

John's contributions also evidence the landmark importance of Constantine in French historical narratives, and by way of contrast, an appeal to an earlier moment of primitive Christianity. The *Donation of Constantine*, famously shown by Lorezo Valla to be a forgery in the fifteenth century, supposedly verified the Emperor Constantine's recognition of the sacred rights of the papacy, and the conferral of imperial insignia and authority over western provinces to Pope Sylvester. Writing over a century before Valla's intervention, John of Paris had to attend to this alleged grant of imperial privileges to the papacy, in defending Philip IV's right to hold and administer clerical taxes. Again, John invoked the original independence of France from the Roman empire – and the especial historical moment of the supposed donation. John's sentiments, often seen as an early source of Gallican thought, carved out a distinctive affinity between the *independence* of the French church at its foundations, and the *independence* of the French states from the empire. It linked this to the moment of the Apostles and primitive Christians, the historical moment prior to Constantine's conversion.[62]

[57]Charles Howard McIlwain, *The growth of political thought in the West: from the Greeks to the end of the middle ages* (New York, NY, 1932), p. 268; Francis Oakley, *The watershed of modern politics: law, virtue, kingship, and consent (1300–1650)* (New Haven, CT, 2015), pp. 1–5.

[58]John of Paris, *On royal and papal power: a translation, with introduction, of the De potestate regia et papali of John of Paris* (New York, NY, 1974). For background, see Joseph Canning, *Ideas of power in the late middle ages 1296–1417* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 11–59.

[59]John of Paris, *On royal and papal power*, pp. 12–13.

[60]Ibid., pp. 12–13.

[61]Chris Jones, 'Historical understanding and the nature of temporal power in the thought of John of Paris', in Chris Jones, ed., *John of Paris: beyond royal and papal power* (Turnhout, 2015), pp. 77–118.

[62]Canning, *Ideas of power in the late middle ages 1296–1417*, pp. 49–59.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X25100940 Published online by Cambridge University Press

A century later, the idea of independence received further theoretical clarity at the hands of Jean Gerson, a French conciliarist. Gerson's exposition of the *communitas perfectas*, as a self-sufficient, independent, and autonomous corporation, insisted on the state as a 'perfect society' with a separate jurisdiction to the church.[63] These treatments laid the foundations for a complex conception of *les libertés* of the Gallican church, deeply rooted in appeals to an original independence of the Frankish people. By the end of the sixteenth century, such claims had gained considerable momentum amid the churn of conflicts with Rome. Pierre Pithou, for example, opens his quintessential statement of the Gallican liberties by insisting these are 'natural franchises'.[64] Likewise, Antoine Hotman maintains that France's greater liberty was not due to privileges granted or rights acquired, but rather to France being 'frank and free from its first origin'.[65] These narrations, which tie natural independence to the special liberty enjoyed by French Christians, may reveal the inspiration for Hobbes's notion of 'Christian Liberty'. While this idea is central to Chapter 47's narration of knots, as Malcolm points out, it is otherwise 'not a typical Hobbesian term and appears nowhere else in *Leviathan*'.[66]

The emphasis on primitive arrangements, operating in step with humanist impulses to return *ad fontes*, became central to reformist screeds that sought a purer moment in Christian history.[67] Constantine, moreover, retained a mythical status as the temporal ruler who had brought order and certainty to the limited role of Rome. Rather than the donation, it was Constantine's celebrated role as *episcopus externus*, a patron who, on account of his temporal power and personal interest in the church, marked the dawning of a new period in which the church enjoyed greater security and protection. As I have recently argued elsewhere, this account is reflected in Hobbes's specific treatment of the first Christian emperor.[68] A primitive Christianity, in this respect, was not simply in the purview of Independents in England, but resounded throughout emerging nation-state narratives, especially in France where Hobbes was stationed while he wrote *Leviathan*.

Closer in time to *Leviathan*, and in a text that Hobbes very likely read, we can see how these contentions for the natural independence of states gained theoretical clarity and precision. In his extensive work on political jurisdiction and its origin, *De legibus ac Deo legislatore*, Francisco Suárez considers the question of a natural universal jurisdiction, by asking 'whether the Emperor is by right the Lord and Prince of the whole world' and by consequence able to obligate all persons.[69] Denying

[63]John Neville Figgis, *Studies of political thought from Gerson to Grotius 1414–1625; the Birkbeck Lectures delivered in Trinity College, Cambridge, 1900* (Cambridge, 1916); Quentin Skinner, *The foundations of modern political thought*, II: *The age of reformation* (Cambridge, 1978).

[64]Pierre Pithou, 'Les libertez de l'église gallicane', in Pierre Dupuy, ed., *Traitez des droits et libertez de l'église gallicane* (Paris, 1639), p. 5.

[65]Antoine Hotman, 'Traité des droits ecclesiastique', in Dupuy, ed., *Traitez des droits et libertez de l'église gallicane*, p. 310.

[66]Hobbes, *Leviathan: editorial introduction*, ed. Malcolm, p. 63.

[67]Jotham Parsons, *The church in the republic: Gallicanism & political ideology in Renaissance France* (Washington, DC, 2004), especially ch. 1.

[68]Amy Chandran, 'Hobbes in France, Gallican histories, and Leviathan's supreme pastor', *Modern Intellectual History*, 20 (2023), pp. 359–87.

[69]Francisco Suárez, *De legibus ac Deo legislatore* (Lyon, 1619), p. 130.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X25100940 Published online by Cambridge University Press

any such jurisdiction existed by conquest or divine gift, Suárez stresses that the Roman emperor received power from the people itself and the Roman republic alone. Extending this denial further, Suárez explains that it is also evident that Christ did not confer universal jurisdiction:

> at no point did Christ confer immediately and by himself, the temporal dominion or jurisdiction over things to men; therefore, neither did Christ give that to the emperor...it is clear that after the Ascension of Christ and the preaching of the Gospel, the remaining earthly kingdoms or empires did not immediately fail, nor did the Roman emperor begin to rule more widely than he previously had. Neither did the king of the Persians, or the kings of the Indians or of the Japanese or China, lose their supreme temporal power.[70]

A little further on, Suárez makes a point very similar to one made by Hobbes; namely, that the Roman emperor could not hold jurisdiction over Christians simply on account of his being Christian, because this would imply that temporal sovereigns would lose their supremacy if they converted (their dominions being brought into the empire at their conversion).[71] Thus, over a series of contentions, Suárez substantiates a line of reasoning that not only underscores the original naturalness of independent temporal states, but shows these to be especially connected to the status of the primitive church. The theoretical point becomes clearest in light of Christ's direct political engagement (or lack thereof) with respect to the Roman empire. The notion of independency is manifest in the initial institution of the church as a spiritual entity (an independence Christ seemed to tacitly affirm). If this independence was evidenced in the period of the Apostles, the subsequent Christianization of the empire ushered in a new set of political premises regarding God's providential purpose in Constantine's conversion.[72] Even Hobbes's scholastic opponents, therefore, contended for the philosophical soundness of a natural, temporal sovereignty, despite being otherwise willing apologists for papal claims.

What this brief excursion suggests is that a theoretically rich conception of independence developed in early modern European political discourses. Where Chapter 47's narrative is viewed in light of this, the reference to independency can be seen to transcend England's sectarian landscape. The concept evokes a much more expansive set of claims, which abjure the existence of universal jurisdiction – either for empire or church – and are uniquely related to the church's earliest political condition.

IV

If we return to Chapter 47 with this distinctive sense of 'Independency' at hand, a number of difficulties remain. The famous passage falls amid an exposition of the construction and deconstruction of papal claims, in a history held to be marked by a symmetry – just 'as the Inventions of men are woven, so also are they ravelled out'.

[70]Ibid., p. 130. Translation my own.
[71]L: XLII, p. 852.
[72]For example, see Augustine, *Civitas Dei*, bk V, ch. 12.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X25100940 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Hobbes explains: 'The web begins at the first Elements of Power, which are Wisdom, Humility, Sincerity, and other vertues 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 Civil Power.'[73]

The estimation of independency as 'perhaps the best', just a few paragraphs later, rests on Hobbes's adjudication that 'there ought to be no Power over the Conscience of men, but of the Word itself, working Faith in every one'.[74] This reduction points *back* to the 'first Elements of Power' – the moment in which the Apostles were obeyed out of reverence, with the assent of a free conscience.

The significance of this initial period of the Apostles in Hobbes's wider exposition has received far less attention than might be expected, especially given this pre-Constantinian moment is distinguished at multiple points in *Leviathan*. Chapter 42 opens with the announcement of a novel time distinction, not extant in *De cive*'s narration, *before* and *after* the conversion of Kings.[75] In the primitive moment, prior to Constantine's conversion (before civil sovereigns had embraced Christianity), Hobbes explains it was 'manifest, that the Power Ecclesiastical was in the Apostles'.[76] Inquiry into the nature of this 'power ecclesiastical' famously transpires via a treatment of Cardinal Bellarmine's third general controversy. Against Bellarmine, Hobbes contends that Christ left the Apostles the power of 'schoolmasters', rather than 'commanders' – their precepts being 'not Laws, but wholesome Counsels'.[77] This initial period, then, was marked by *persuasion* and the normative force of counsel rather than command, so that the Apostles had 'no Power by that title of Christs Ministers to Punish'.[78] The formation of a Christian people thus occurred through an assent to authority which was freely and willingly given (under no prior obligation). If Constantine's conversion ushered in a new moment in which the sword and crosier – power civil and ecclesiastical – were once more united in a singular sovereign, this passage from a moment of free assent to one of unified rule echoes Hobbes's account of the Mosaic kingdom.

As I have recently contended elsewhere, this appeal to a freely given epistemic assent reveals a unique set of resonances between Hobbes's narration of sacred history and *Leviathan*'s theory of sovereignty by institution.[79] While Abraham holds both civil and ecclesiastical authority as a natural sovereign (much like any pagan ruler), the fact that Moses does not inherit Abraham's paternal sovereign right invites closer consideration of institution. Hobbes explains that in this later case, the people obliged themselves by way of a freely given consent because they believed Moses' authority was divine.[80] Both this institution of Moses and the moment prior to the conversion of kings illustrate the potential for religious and civil power to operate independently of one another. Early Christians offered

[73]L: XLVII, p. 1114.
[74]L: XLVII, p. 1116.
[75]L: XLII, p. 774.
[76]L: XLII, p. 774.
[77]L: XLII, p. 780.
[78]L: XLII, p. 782.
[79]Amy Chandran, 'A "divine lawgiver" for the Leviathan? The commonwealth by institution and the case of the prudent prophet', *History of European Ideas*, 50 (2024), pp. 1343–62.
[80]L: XL, p. 740.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X25100940 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Christ and the Apostles an obedience from a reverence and free assent; the Apostles, in turn, enjoined Christians to obey civil authority. As such, civil and religious authority attained a harmony that looked toward the inauguration of a Christian commonwealth. The model of a kingdom, civil and ecclesiastical, manifest in Moses' sovereignty, is therefore recapitulated in Constantine's conversion and the time of 'Pastor Kings'.

Of course, Hobbes insists that sovereigns have the same rights whether they are created by acquisition or institution. The free character of religious assent underscored in sacred history, both new and old, should not be conflated with the distinct role played by the formal consent of the mutual covenant that creates the entity of the state. In fact, Hobbes identifies this more unique pattern wherein religious assent precedes civil authority as a specific feature of the Christian God's *modus operandi* in history. Drawing a contrast to the authors of pagan religions, Chapter 12 explains:

> But where God himself, by supernaturall Revelation, planted Religion; there he also made to himself a peculiar Kingdome; and gave Lawes, not only of behaviour towards himself; but also towards one another; and thereby in the Kingdome of God, the Policy, and *laws Civill, are a part of Religion*; and therefore *the distinction of Temporall, and Spirituall Domination, hath there no place*.[81]

Hobbes contrasts God's 'divine' politiques with the 'humane' politiques of the pagans; in the former, religion is 'planted' first, so that the civil laws are 'part of Religion'. By contrast, in the latter, religion is introduced into an extant civil order by figures like Numa Pompilius, 'to keep the people in obedience, and peace'. Chapter 16 confirms this, pointing out that the idols of the pagans could not be represented until civil authority was already in existence.[82] The divine character of God's political action, wherein religion precedes civil authority, minimizes the possibility of subsequent claims to spiritual authority, independent of civil sovereignty.

In her defence of Somerville's contentions, Lloyd underscores the wider stakes of seemingly conflicting statements regarding conscience. The puzzle is partly resolved by recognizing that once a sovereign exists, Hobbes stresses the priority of obeying his or her command; whereas, in Lloyd's view, the state of nature is defined by the fact that individuals may exercise judgement in accordance with a free conscience.[83] The 'Independency' enjoyed by primitive Christians entails just such a freedom. Against pretensions of both emperor and pope, Hobbes recalls this historical moment as one in which there is no power over the conscience, revealing a parallel with the philosophical conditions of the state of nature. The implication, however, is that the benefit of such unobstructed private judgement is circumscribed *temporally*; it depends upon an initial recognition of wisdom, humility, and sincerity, and ultimately, consenting to a sovereign. Where no civil law exists, man has 'no other rule to follow but his own reason' and thus must follow his conscience; his

[81]L: XII, p. 160. Emphasis added.

[82]L: XVI, p. 248.

[83]Lloyd, 'Hobbes's theory of responsibility', pp. 58–64; and Lloyd, 'The state of nature as a continuum concept', passim.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X25100940 Published online by Cambridge University Press

conscience being none other than proclamation by natural reason of the rational 'Word of God' to man.[84] An initial freedom therefore ought to provide conditions that allow for the most rational selection of a sovereign. By contrast, deferring to private conscience *after* a civil sovereign exists causes weakness or disease in the body politic; for once a sovereign emerges, 'the Law is the publique Conscience'.[85]

If we now return to the specific narration of England's position, we can examine why Hobbes might have viewed the situation to hold certain parallels to this pre-Constantinian moment. Later in life, narrating (in the third person) *Leviathan*'s composition, Hobbes explained:

> In that work he described the right of kings in both spiritual and temporal terms, using both reason and the authority of sacred scripture. This was done so that it might be made clear to all that it was impossible to establish peace in the Christian world unless that doctrine was accepted...He also wished at the same time to deal with theological matters in the text, the administrative structures and powers of the Church were in abeyance, and of no importance.[86]

Not only did *Leviathan* provide a defence of the necessity of a king's spiritual right (in addition to temporal power), Hobbes had offered this explication at a moment in which the church's administrative structures and powers were 'in abeyance'. *Leviathan* was an attempt to clarify the importance of unifying civil and ecclesiastical power in a moment of independency, in which there was no authority in religion (even if there was a Christian community of sorts).

In later narrations, Hobbes also referenced his desire to address those who saw the horrors of civil war and imputed the crimes and travesties to God as sovereign. How could God's omnipotence be reconciled with his oversight of England's troubles, including regicide and mass bloodshed?[87] Recall Hobbes's suggestion that God allows historical calamities to unfold, in order that these might be brought to happier resolve, in a view that ultimately looked forward to Christ's universal rule. England's misfortunes were not merely evidence that the kingdom of glory was yet to be attained, but might even reveal the machinations of those actors wrongfully grasping at power. Acknowledgement of this 'Independency', then, suggested that England's politico-religious order was in ruins, but that this might be adjudged 'for the best' (perhaps) precisely insofar as it showed renewal to be possible.

Leviathan's pronouncement of the disintegration of religious authority finds a further distinctive explication in Chapter 12, in a passage directly leading into Hobbes's analysis of the state of nature. Hobbes explains how those with the Government of Religion come to ruin – namely, by suspicion of their wisdom, sincerity, or love:

> Seeing all formed Religion, is founded at first, upon the faith which a multitude hath in some one person, whom they believe not only to be a wiseman,

[84]L: XXIX, p. 502; L: XXXI, p. 556.

[85]L: XXIX, p. 502.

[86]Thomas Hobbes, *The elements of law, natural and politic: Part I, Human nature, Part II, De corpore politico; with three lives*, World's Classics (New York, NY, 1994), p. 248.

[87]Ibid., p. 249. See also Hobbes, *Leviathan: editorial introduction*, ed. Malcolm, pp. 10–12.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X25100940 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> and to labour to procure their happiness…It followeth necessarily, when they that have the Government of Religion, shall come to have either the wisdom of those men, their sincerity, or their love suspected; or that they shall be unable to shew any probable token of Divine Revelation; that the Religion which they desire to uphold, must be suspected likewise; and (without the fear of the Civil Sword) contradicted and rejected.[88]

If we return to Chapter 47's narration of England's more immediate circumstances, just a few paragraphs after the pronouncement of this reduction to independency, Hobbes admonishes those responsible for the breakdown:

> Nor ought those Teachers to be displeased with this losse of their antient Authority: For there is none should know better then they, that power is preserved by the same Vertues by which it is acquired; that is to say, by Wisdome, Humility, Clearnesse of Doctrine, and sincerity of Conversation; and not by suppression of the Naturall Sciences, and of the Morality of Naturall Reason.[89]

Hobbes's tempered optimism regarding England's reduction to independency, then, seems to rest on a belief in the potential for wisdom, humility, sincerity, and, importantly, the flourishing of natural science and reason to provide new beginnings for some power and authority. If England was reduced to a quasi-state of nature that allowed each person to judge in accordance with his or her conscience, this was preferable precisely insofar as it might facilitate a genuine embrace of authority, wielded virtuously in matters both civil *and* ecclesiastical.

Here, one further subtlety of Hobbes's assessment merits mentioning. At first, Chapter 47 suggests that independency is characterized by the persuasive mode of counsel, such that the people's 'Consciences were free, and their Words and Actions subject *to none but the Civill Power*'. In the reversion to this state, the reduction to independency, Hobbes explains that there ought to be no power over men's consciences but 'the Word itself, working Faith in every one' according to God's purpose. There is an apparent slippage here – we might ask Hobbes to whom is one subject: the civil power or the 'Word itself' (the more direct authority of God)? Although individuals are 'free' in the period prior to Constantine's conversion, there is a harmony between civil power and God's word, precisely because the Word of God enjoins perfect obedience to civil power. The regicide had, however, now cast England into a new political moment, one lacking a clear authority. But if God had permitted England to be brought to its knees, the resolution must lie in the opportunity to once again bring the exercise of civil power and the Word of God into alignment. Such a moment of rupture – a return to a state of individual independency – could be of benefit precisely because the existence of God's Word, especially manifest through natural reason or the laws of nature, afforded a better foundation for newly constructing sovereign power. Moreover, England's predicament was not total anarchy, for the Word of God and laws of nature, newly clarified by Hobbes himself, were perhaps reason enough to hope for a more rational foundation. As others have

[88]L: XII, p. 180.

[89]L: XLVII, p. 1116.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X25100940 Published online by Cambridge University Press

noted, pursuit of a more reasonable union 'without contention, and without measuring the Doctrine of Christ, by our affection to the Person of his Minister', suggests that Hobbes recognized the imperative for putting factious quarrels to one side, and the need for a good faith effort to reach a true consensus on England's future sovereign.

V

Just how to reconcile Hobbes's espoused Royalism with Chapter 47's alleged hat tip to Independents, or *Leviathan*'s praise of 'free conscience' with its otherwise thoroughgoing absolutism, is a long-standing difficulty. This article has asked what sense might be made of Chapter 47's pronouncement of a reduction to the 'Independency of the Primitive Christians', where it is assumed that Hobbes was not communicating his approval of the English sect. After all, explicit reference to 'Independents' appears in one of two of the earliest extant copies of *Leviathan*, but the specific term 'Independency' is otherwise employed to connote a state of political autonomy.

There is good reason to suspect that a continental (and especially French) discourse became salient to Hobbes, living in France during the 1640s as he was; as such, it is particularly important to account for the way in which independency featured in this context. Claims to an original independence that conferred an exceptional liberty on France and inured their sovereign from the pretensions of popes and emperors alike were readily touted by Gallican authors. The prominent philosophical defences of John of Paris and Francisco Suárez (among others) worked against the legitimacy of certain imperial claims by appealing to a natural, temporal independence. The contours of such an independence were made especially clear in the moment of primitive Christianity, where the absence of any conferral of power by Christ to emperor (or of temporal power to the pope) confirmed the existence of this independent temporal authority for sovereigns. Temporal arrangements, on this account, thus preserved an independence from any ecclesiastical order, and claims to a natural universal jurisdiction on the part of an emperor could be shown to be spurious. If this strand of reasoning lent itself to a parallel deflation of papalist claims (to universal, spiritual jurisdiction), it is little surprise that Hobbes exploited such a line of reasoning. The narrative offered in Chapter 47 may be understood against this philosophical-political history of empire, its various encroachments on temporal sovereignty, and corresponding theoretical invocations of 'Independency'.

If this notion of independency was in view, it remains to be seen whether such a thesis excludes the possibility that English Independents were not also in Hobbes's sights. The strongest version of the argument offered might hold that, writing and living in France, Hobbes was entirely inattentive to the possibility that Chapter 47's reference would be understood as an allusion to the English sect. In this case, the two references to 'Independents' inserted into the vellum manuscript might be thought to reflect Hobbes's response when his initial readers alerted him to the likelihood of misinterpretation – especially given that the references seem to lump Independents in with Presbyterians. Yet, ascribing such negligence to Hobbes might also seem far-fetched. As a perspicacious observer of English politics, it is unlikely that he

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X25100940 Published online by Cambridge University Press

would have been oblivious to the factions at play in the 1640s. Perhaps a more probable alternative is that Hobbes was cognizant that this reference to independency might suggest his accommodation of the ascendant Cromwellian regime; at the same time, he knew he might explain it as a reference to a broader theoretical discourse. Yet even so, pronouncing England's 'Independency' to denote the lack of any clear sovereign came with a risk of being understood to lack faith in the Royalist cause.

More importantly, what the foregoing analysis illustrates is that Hobbes was deeply aware of the historical reasoning that motivated Independents' admiration of primitive ecclesial structures. But this reading tempers the starkness of the thesis that Hobbes shifted his political allegiance to Cromwellian Independents by placing such an endorsement within the broader outline of sacred history. Hobbes's appreciation of 'Independency' and an accompanying liberty of conscience is contingent upon its ability to eventually bring about a greater unity. This alternative might strengthen the force of Collins's explication of an Erastian or Magisterial impulse among Independents, or Kabala's contention that Independents were ultimately far less afraid to insist upon theological unity than is usually supposed. But if Independents rightly diagnosed the creep of corruption that had so weakened authorial structures in England, Hobbes's overall historical analysis suggests that 'Independency' is merely a prelude to the emergence of a new Moses or Constantine.

An appreciation of the temporally delimited nature of this endorsement of 'Independency' suggests that the liberty of conscience touted by Independents was not the final destination in Hobbes's view. Rather, England's position within the sweeping arc of sacred history could be assessed by looking back to a model of 'divine politics' and forward to a stronger unification under a sovereign, civil and ecclesiastical. Any endorsement of individual judgements in accordance with private conscience (or natural reason) should, in Hobbes's view, ideally lead to actions more closely aligned with natural reason and God's Word. Hobbes's limited optimism thus stems from the fact that God had not left England unaided. A purer, less corrupted vision of England as a Christian commonwealth was now possible, the knots on 'Christian Liberty' having been untied. The Word, taken as a measure of Christ's doctrine, manifest in the Laws of Nature, could serve as a more rational foundation for peace. Hobbes's own exposition of a science of politics, moreover, might itself be proffered as a new reason for hope – an answer to a theodicy of sorts posed in light of England's woes.

All of this opens up a new possibility in long-running debates over Chapter 47's reference to independency; namely, that if Hobbes did intend to reference Independents, it was with a view to a wider political discourse that emphasized the significance of the independence that marked primitive Christianity. For primitive Christians, freedom of conscience had not *detracted* from civil obedience because the Apostles had posed no threat to civil authority. By implication, a certain liberty of conscience might be seen as salutary precisely insofar as it made possible one's free assent to a sovereign wielding authority in matters both civil *and ecclesiastical*, in the institution of a commonwealth. If this is so, Hobbes's ultimate hope that private conscience might be transformed into public allegiance comes into view, and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X25100940 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the long-contested endorsement of Chapter 47 may be seen as a far more modest political gesture than has sometimes been supposed.

Acknowledgements. I owe a debt of thanks to the various anonymous reviewers who provided excellent comments on this piece. In addition, I am very grateful to Jeffrey Church for his insightful remarks on an earlier version presented at an MPSA Conference, and to Jeffrey Collins, who graciously provided an immensely helpful and learned set of suggestions.

Cite this article: Amy Chandran, 'Empire, Conscience, and Another Independency in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*', *The Historical Journal*, 68 (2025), pp. 995–1015. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X25100940

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X25100940 Published online by Cambridge University Press