**A mark of the beast: Hobbes and implicit faith in context**

**By**

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**Abstract:** I place Hobbes’s discussion of faith in historical context. More specifically, I embed his reflections upon faith within a cluster of highly contentious mid-seventeenth-century English discussions over the role of implicit and explicit faith in Christian life. I use my historically informed interpretation of Hobbesian faith or belief in order to advance the following interpretation of *Leviathan.*  First, I claim that central arguments regarding authority and obedience within *Leviathan* are not secular; they are informed by the papal doctrine of implicit faith, but have essential Anglican colorings. Second, I claim that the relationship between the subject and the civil sovereign is not properly understood as an exchange relation where subjects offer obedience for protection. Using my historically rooted reading, I will explain how the subject exchanges implicit faith with the civil sovereign as the Lord’s lieutenant for protections. Third, I will argue that sovereign authorization is not a profession of secular consent. My historical reading reveals that sovereign authorization is an informed profession of implicit faith. Fourth, I will use my historical reading to show that Hobbes vigorously rejects what Protestants of his time would interpret as religious liberty (i.e., the liberty of conscience doctrine).

**A mark of the beast: Hobbes and implicit faith in context**

**Introduction**

In this paper I place Hobbes’s discussion of faith in historical context. More specifically, I embed his reflections upon faith within a cluster of highly contentious mid-seventeenth-century English discussions over the role of implicit and explicit faith in Christian life. My decision to embed Hobbes’s account of faith into these discussions is not haphazard. Hobbes begins his account of the Christian Commonwealth in *Leviathan* (Part III, Chapter 32) by articulating the distinction between implicit and explicit faith. He was therefore aware of the distinction, and he permitted it to frame his reflections upon the Christian Commonwealth.

Framing Christian authority as a matter of explicit or implicit faith is not unique to Hobbes. The distinction was central to English Reformers and Counter-Reformers because the doctrines of implicit and explicit faith considered if mortals had authority over individuals in matters of faith (i.e., belief). In essence, the doctrines answered questions about the foundations of authority and belief, as well as the grounds of obedience. Given that Hobbes is a philosopher of authority and its foundations who is keenly aware of the way claims to religious authority and assertions of belief can support or destabilize a commonwealth, it is not surprising to find him engaging with discussions about implicit and explicit faith and it is appropriate to embed his reflections upon faith in this context.

I use my historically informed interpretation of Hobbesian faith or belief in order to advance the following interpretation of *Leviathan.*  First, I claim that central arguments regarding authority and obedience within *Leviathan* are not secular; they are informed by the papal doctrine of implicit faith, but have essential Anglican colorings. Second, I claim that the relationship between the subject and the civil sovereign is not properly understood as an exchange relation where subjects offer obedience for protection. Using my historically rooted reading, I will explain how the subject exchanges implicit faith with the civil sovereign as the Lord’s lieutenant for protections. Third, I will argue that sovereign authorization is not a profession of secular consent. My historical reading reveals that sovereign authorization is an informed profession of implicit faith. Fourth, I will use my historical reading to show that Hobbes vigorously rejects what Protestants of his time would interpret as religious liberty (i.e., the liberty of conscience doctrine).

**Implicit Faith as Doctrine and Rhetoric in Mid-Seventeenth-Century England**

The fear of Counter-Reformation (i.e., the return of Popery) preoccupied Protestants living in England between 1620 and 1660. Officially, implicit faith was the doctrine of the Catholic Church and Protestants rejected it forcefully. But a firm rejection of implicit faith did not preclude different Protestant churches and sects from accusing each other of adopting it. In Reformation England, the association of implicit faith with a particular Protestant church or sect undermined that church’s or sect’s religious credentials, and placed them in league with Anti-Christ (i.e., the Pope). Any alliance with the beast was rhetorically devastating and Protestants deployed the rhetorical strategy regularly to slander their opponents in their contestations over the true faith. Catholics were also quick to show where a particular Protestant church or sect relied upon implicit faith. This was their way of defending the fundamentals of Catholicism.

**The Substance of Implicit Faith (in a nutshell)**

Substantively, the doctrine of implicit faith maintained that the church was the foundation of Christian faith. This meant that a human institution (the church) housing a human authority (in Catholicism, the pope) was the ground of Christianity. The Church became the ground because God (the ultimate ground) entrusted His authority over faith to the church. Explaining this aspect of the doctrine of implicit faith, Henry Hammond said God “command[ed] the Church to be believed,” and exited the human scene (intervening once in awhile with wrath and mercy, of course).[[1]](#footnote-1) As the Protestant Richard Baxter put it succinctly,

To believe implicitly [i.e., to subscribe to implicit faith]…is not to believe God, but to resolve our faith into some humane testimony….[For example,] the Papists believe Scripture to be the Word of God, because their Church saith so: and we, because our Church, or our Leaders say so.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Hobbes adopts the argument from implicit faith that Baxter describes here regarding the foundation of faith. He argues that human authority is the ground of Christian faith: “There is..no other Government in this life, neither of State, nor Religion, but Temporall.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Hobbes becomes more specific when he specifies that the civil sovereign’s testaments are faith’s ultimate ground:

The Faith of Christians ever since our Saviours time hath had for foundation….the authority of those that made the Old and New Testament to be received for the Rule of Faith; which none could do but Christian Soveraignes who are…the Supreme Pastors, and the onely Persons, whom Christians now hear speak from God.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Astonishing implications followed from the assertion that an authoritative human fiat or testament ultimately grounded faith. First, it meant that faith’s foundation was external to the individual believer. Its ground was not within the individual’s soul (i.e., within conscience or spirit or reason); it was in the external church (i.e., in the head(s) of the church, and more precisely still, in his/her/their words). Of course, different religions and sects organized their churches differently, locating authority within different offices and individuals. Thomas Hobbes, for example, following a strand of Anglicanism, argued that God gave authority over the faith to a national church. He then equated the civil sovereign with the national church (the civil sovereign was the church represented on earth), and concluded that the civil sovereign possessed ultimate religious (and temporal) authority as head of the church:

The Church…is the same thing [as] a Commonwealth of Christians; called Commonwealth because it consisteth of men united in one person, their Sovereign; and a Church, because it consiseth in Christian men, united in one Christian Sovereign.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Catholics, by contrast, gave authority over belief to the Pope whose church crossed national boundaries and encompassed all of Christendom. What is important for my purposes is that according to the doctrine of implicit faith, in whatever office a particular church located ultimate human authority, the person(s) who held that office was (were) the ultimate ground of (the) faith.

A second implication following from the claim that human authority grounded faith was that Scripture was not faith’s foundation. With respect to Catholicism, the doctrine of implicit faith rendered the Pope’s “supreme authority” truly *supreme*. Scripture’s authority and its meaning rested on the Pope’s fiat, rather than upon the Word as an independent authority.[[6]](#footnote-6) Hobbes replaced the Pope’s fiat with the civil sovereign’s, and claimed that “none but the Soveraign in a Christian Commonwealth, can take notice of what is, or what is not the Word of God.” Not only was the civil sovereign the only person who had the right to determine what was or wasn’t Scripture. The sovereign’s fiat also rendered Scripture’s words authoritative: “the Legislative Authority of the Common-wealth…giveth to [Scripture], the force of Law.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

For Protestants, the idea of grounding faith in pronouncements issued by an external human authority amounted to leaving faith devoid of foundation. Protestant Stephen Marshall protested, saying that he “loath to be led by an implicite faith,” because it was “without…ground.”[[8]](#footnote-8) The mere words of another mortal could not ground his faith. Protestants like Marshall adopted a different doctrine---the doctrine of explicit faith (a doctrine that aimed to explicate the faith), although they did not always call it by this name. This doctrine urged Protestants to free Christianity from its external and mortal foundation, and to found faith upon a different ground. Some Protestants grounded faith in the Spirit, others in Scripture, others in conscience, others in probabilistic reason or prudence (Chillingsworth), still others in logic, or the light or law of nature.

What these very different varieties of Protestantism shared was a rejection of the papal doctrine of implicit faith. Mortal pronouncements could not be the rock. These Protestants demanded religious freedom (i.e., liberty of conscience) construed negatively in the sense of freedom from external human authority as the ground of faith. Many also demanded the positive freedom (i.e., liberty of conscience) to search Scripture for themselves and to heed their spiritually guided interpretation of its words. Others demanded the positive freedom (i.e. liberty of conscience) to hear and heed their own or another’s divine spirit. Still others called for the positive freedom (i.e. liberty of conscience) to hear other’s teachings, to discuss and deliberate upon them, and to use independent judgment (i.e., liberty of conscience) to draw authoritative conclusions regarding the faith.

**The two objects of implicit faith**

Englishmen recognized two distinct objects of implicit faith, although they frequently muddled their distinctiveness. Consider the following representative example written by X:

They who do require an implicit Faith in the Church for Articles…do require an implicit faith in the church, because they believe that God hath required of them…to believe whatever the Church says.

As this passage shows, in addition to God, one object of implicit faith was “the church.” Like X, Hobbes also makes “the church” (i.e., the civil sovereign) the object of faith when he asks subjects to “repose” their “trust, and faith” in the sovereign’s authority.[[9]](#footnote-9) Subjects who hold the church “in faith” acknowledge the church’s ultimate authority over their faith. They therefore forfeit claims to independent religious authority and heed the church’s dictates.

The specific articles and dictates pronounced by the church were the second objects of implicit faith. Here, the church’s mere pronouncement became the necessary and sufficient ground of an individuals’ belief in any specific article or dictate. As one Englishmen put it, those with implicit faith “entertained and received” what authorities ordained, believing that their act of ordination was “a sufficient ground or warrant” for belief, or credit. Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, noted how persons with implicit faith “abandon[ed]” themselves, yielding up “not only their wills and affections, but their reasons also, and judgments” to a human authority, “giv[ing] credit” to the authority’s “bare asseverations.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Likewise, Presbyterian Thomas Edwards said those who “go by implicite faith” “take up things upon trust from others…and [do] not see with their own eyes, nor examine things themselves.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Hobbes may not have obligated subjects to sincerely believe in the sovereign’s commands and teachings, but he certainly tried to persuade them to entertain, receive and heed the sovereign’s commands without blinking. He also noted that there was sufficient empirical evidence to support the claim that many subjects had and did, in fact, ground their faith in the ungrounded and unexamined fiats issued by human authority. Hobbes wrote,

We see daily by experience all sorts of People, that such men as study nothing but their food and ease, are content to believe any absurdity, rather than to trouble themselves to examine it; holding their faith as it were…by an expresse…law.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Proponents of implicit faith used rhetoric to justify why private individuals should make the testaments issued by a mortal possessing religious authority the grounds of their faith. Here they forged analogies between religious authorities and “the rock.” Mortal authorities were imagined at the foundation serving as the “pillars of faith;” they were “immoveable,” “infallible,” and “definitive.” As supreme judges they (like rocks at the foundation of a house) provided “settledness” and “certainty” to matters that were controversial.[[13]](#footnote-13) Needless to say, this description of mortal authority parallels Hobbes’s description of the civil sovereign.

Those Protestants who rejected implicit faith rejected this imagery. They did not care to apprehend or to imagine mortal authority as “the rock.” Human authorities were “blind” men who were subject to delusions. Worse, they were tyrants who “erred,” acted “arbitrarily,” and governed religion by the “invention of men” (i.e., “governed by will and power”). Worse still, mortal authorities usurped the true rock of faith (i.e. Christ and God) and expected individuals to worship them in ways that only God himself should be worshipped (i.e., with implicit faith).

But as much as Protestants detested the doctrine of implicit faith and the conceptions of authority and obedience attending it, like Hobbes, they noted humankind’s tendency to rely on implicit faith. Henry Burton, for example, wrote:

Mans nature is too prone to idolize the power [of state religion]; making it supreme law and lord over conscience so…to ease themselves of their labour to search into the Scripture, and so to come to know what they believe [i.e., possess explicit faith]; most men pinning their Religion upon the sleeve either of the Priest, as the Papists do; or also of the Magistrate, as our common protestants do, wrapping all up in an implicite faith.[[14]](#footnote-14)

With equal frustration in the people’s tendency to take faith or belief on human authority, the radical John Saltmarsh wrote:

There is a great danger of bringing people under a Popish implicit obedience [i.e., implicit faith]…And we know it by experience, that the people have been ever devoted to any thing the State sets up; all the disputes of conscience of the common people usually ending in this, Whether it be established by Law or no; and going usually no higher nor further then a State or Act of State for their religion.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Protestants like Burton and Saltmarsh urged individuals to fight against their papist tendency to pin their faith or belief on human authority. They tried to liberate beliefs (i.e. liberty of conscience) from external human authority when they called on men, and sometimes women, to “stand on [the] basis of [their] own judgments” rather than “lean[], with implicit faith, on others.” [[16]](#footnote-16)

**The Obligations Embodied within the Doctrine of Implicit Faith**

***Obligations imposed upon private (internal) belief: believing in church doctrine***

The doctrine of implicit faith specified a number of obligations. The first attended to the proper relationship between the individual and the dictates issued by the church. As noted above, many believed the church’s doctrine. Many also assumed that the mere fact that the church issued the doctrine was a necessary and sufficient ground for their belief. Proponents of implicit faith were also trying to persuade individuals to believe in church doctrine. But did the doctrine of implicit faith *obligate* individualsto believe in its doctrine? The short answer is “yes,” but Englishmen who advanced the doctrine of implicit faith *stretched* the meanings they associated with “belief” and “faith” considerably.

There were some who asserted that the obligation to believe (i.e. have faith or trust) tied individuals to grant that the church’s doctrine was true and right. This was because the church was infallible. Let me offer some evidence to support this point. Consider first the words of Catholic Thomas Vane. He wrote that Christians “may and must (though it go against the grain of their private judgment) submit themselves by an implicit faith to the Church….and so believing what she saith to be true.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Likewise, the Independent Katherine Chidley’s said, “Rome…would have all men, to content themselves, with an implicit faith; and to take for granted, what government [the church’s] Laws alloweth.”[[18]](#footnote-18) The Baptist Samuel Richardson asserted that implicit faith “would have all men believe…as their Churches believe…though it be never so groundless.”[[19]](#footnote-19) The Scottish Baron Alexander Forbes wrote, “For implicit faith…they are bound to believe, because their Priests and prime commanders do inform them.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Finally, Scottish Presbyterian Samuel Rutherford’s explained:

[To] obey the decrees of the Church with a blind faith [i.e., implicit faith], without inquiring in the warrants and grounds of their decrees…is good Popery, as Magistrates and all men are to believe as the Church beleeveth with an implicite faith.[[21]](#footnote-21)

All of the quotations above demonstrate that the doctrine of implicit faith obligated Christians to believe *in* Church doctrine just because *it was* church doctrine.

Protestants who rejected implicit faith urged Englishmen to liberate themselves from this arbitrary obligation. They maintained that human authorities should not be “raised” to such “excesses of credit” (i.e., trust).[[22]](#footnote-22) To “stand in awe” of authority amounted to idolatry.[[23]](#footnote-23) Those who “pitted their faith on [their] leaders sleeves” were chastised. They were criticized for “giving ear” to external human authorities because “giving ear” amounted to entrusting one’s faith to them, as faith (according to St. Paul) came by hearing.

Many passages in *Leviathan* demonstrate that Hobbes does not subscribe to this interpretation of what follows from the doctrine implicit faith. He writes that “a private man has always the liberty (because thought is free) to believe, or not believe in his heart, those acts that have been [declared]” by the sovereign.[[24]](#footnote-24) He also urges the sovereign not to “extend the power of the law….to the very thoughts of men….by examination and inquisition of what they hold [as true].”[[25]](#footnote-25) At first blush, this passage appears to suggest that Hobbes defends religious liberty because he does not obligate individuals to believe in the testaments issued by the civil sovereign. But notice the way Hobbes qualifies his statement here. He says that beliefs grounded in thought are free and he explains that the sovereign should not impose commands upon thoughts. I will return to Hobbes’s account of free thought and its relationship to belief later in the paper. Here I only want to point out that this statement leaves open the possibility that thoughtless beliefs exist, and Hobbes explicitly affirms that they do when he asserts that “believing and knowing” are not “one.”[[26]](#footnote-26) This, in turn, opens up the possibility that the sovereign who has no authority over thought may retain some kind of authority over thoughtless belief(s).

***Obligations imposed upon private (internal) belief: endeavoring to believe in church doctrine***

Not all Englishmen construed the doctrine of implicit faith as obliging individuals to inwardly believe in the verity and goodness of church doctrine.

Some maintained that the doctrine only placed an obligation upon an individual’s inclinations, or upon the will (as the action-initiating inclination). Here, all that was required was “to endeavor,” or “be disposed,” or “prepared” or “resolved” to believe in church doctrine. As in the previous case, this requirement imposed an internal obligation upon the individual, but the burden of obligation was not as robust because it did not command sincere belief in church doctrine.

Let me offer some representative articulations of this alternative position. Consider the writings of Philip Scot. Not much is known about Scot, but he is worth quoting because he references Thomas Hobbes explicitly. “He[Hobbes] esteemed not Christians bound to believe...He saith ch 18 n 14 that it is enough if one endeavor to believe them, though he doth not.”[[27]](#footnote-27) This formulation of the “belief obligation” is not unique to Hobbes. Presbyterian Samuel Rutherford shared it and referenced Estius and Suarez for support: “Implicit faith is, saith Estius, when any ***is ready to believe*** what the Church shall teach[,] which faith (Suarez saith)…doth submit the mind to the nearest rule of teaching, to wit, to the Church.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Anglican Jeremy Taylor also maintained that implicit faith imposed an obligation upon an individual’s inclinations. He wrote,

Faith by the implicite…required of them to have a minde ***prepared to believe*** whatever the Church says; which because it is a proposition of no absolute certainty, whosoever does ***in readiness of mind*** believe…does…believe…sufficiently.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Catholics also sometimes relaxed the “belief obligation” in this manner. Vane said, “People….must not be unbelieving of any thing; but by an implicit faith at the least, believe all that the Church believes, by….***being prepared to believe*** explicitly what….she shall declare.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

Optimally, of course, Vane hoped that a Catholic would sincerely believe the church “in all points of Faith.” This is because only a sincere believer fully “participate[d] in the soul of the church, which is the spirit of truth.” [[31]](#footnote-31) Catholics who only endeavored to believe were not fully sharing in the truth; their doubt placed one of their feet outside the Christian community. Sincere believers, by contrast, were “knit together in one mind, and one judgment.” This was optimal. [[32]](#footnote-32)

Hobbes shares Vane’s ideal conception of the Christian subject and he attempts to persuade subjects to share in their sovereign’s expressed beliefs. He praises pastors (i.e., teachers) appointed by the sovereign when they have “a mind conformable” to that of their civil sovereign, for example.[[33]](#footnote-33) He urges subjects to make their internal “governour” (i.e., their conscience) conform inwardly to the sovereign’s commands because peace is more secure when external actions correspond with inner belief. Without such unity of thought and action “there must needs follow faction and civil war in the common-wealth.”[[34]](#footnote-34) He encourages men to obey the sovereign “for conscience sake.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Moreover, he instructs subjects to *“receive* the positive commandments of God from their Soveraign.”[[36]](#footnote-36) Here he urges them to take the sovereign’s commandments as truth because they are God’s commandments. Moreover, Hobbes warns subjects against inwardly despising the civil sovereign’s testaments because hatred of the sovereign’s articles amounts to hatred of Christ: “He which heareth his Soveraign being a Christian, heareth Christ; and he that despiseth the Doctrine which his King being a Christian, authorizeth, despiseth the Doctrine of Christ.”[[37]](#footnote-37) In these passages, Hobbes is not giving the civil sovereign coercive authority over private belief. But he is certainly counseling subjects to align their private beliefs with the civil sovereign’s public testaments because. Such an alignment might lead to a teaching position within the sovereign’s church; the alignment also secures civil peace, and satisfies Christ.

***Obligations imposed upon internal (private) judgment***

In addition to placing an obligation upon internal *beliefs* and/or *inclinations*, the doctrine of implicit faith imposed an obligation upon the faculty of private *judgment*. The domain of faith or belief was distinct from the domain of judgment (at least in the Reformed Christian imagination). Therefore, it was possible to decouple belief from judgment and to impose obligations upon the latter without imposing them upon the former.

First, implicit faith obligated individuals to acknowledge the church as the authoritative judge with respect to religious matters. Here, individuals were commanded to abdicate the authority of their own private judgment and to acknowledge the church’s judicial authority. As Protestant Nathaneal Culverwel put it,

An implicit faith…[involves] a slavish acknowledgment of some infallible judge of controversies,..It shut[s] up and imprison[s] the generality of people in a dark and benighted condition, not so much as allowing them the light of their own Candle [their own judgments], the lamp of the lord that ought to shine in them. [[38]](#footnote-38)

Culverwel opposes those who make it difficult for individuals to exercise their independent judgment and insists that the individual must be free to authoritatively judge religious controversies for himself or herself (i.e. have liberty of conscience).

Espousers of the doctrine of implicit faith challenged Protestants like Culverwell. They explained why individuals should replace their private judgment with the church’s. First, they summoned hierarchical notions, maintaining that an individual’s judgment was substantively inferior to the church’s superior judgment. Second, they presented skeptical arguments and maintained that an individual’s judgment was uncertain, inconstant and ultimately inconclusive. Only the church’s judgment brought certainty, stability and conclusiveness to religious matters. Third, they argued that reliance upon private judgment bred confusion, controversy, and ultimately schism and religious war. Only the church’s judgment concluded religious controversies peacefully and unified the church.[[39]](#footnote-39)

For the same prudential reasons, Hobbes supports subjects who replace their private judgment with the sovereign’s public judgment. He also seems to support subjects who decide to renounce the activity of exercising private judgment altogether. In a commonwealth, Hobbes reasons that individuals should not “judge the goodnesse and wicknesse of their own, and of other men’s actions, and of the actions of the commonwealth itself, by their own passions, and no man calleth good or evil, but that which is so in his own eyes.” In a commonwealth, individuals should use “publique laws” as the basis for their judgment.[[40]](#footnote-40) That is, subjects should use public laws as “rules” for judging; they should “examine and try out the truth” of their own doctrines, as well as the doctrines of other private individuals using the sovereign’s rule. If a subject discovers a doctrine “contrary to that rule” he or should should complain to the civil sovereign “and leave to the Sovereign…to uphold or forbid them, as he should see cause.”[[41]](#footnote-41) For Hobbes, to permit “private m[e]n, without the authority of the common-wealth…..to interpret [laws and doctrines] by [their] own spirit, is [an] error.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

Moreover, Hobbes appears to want to encourage individuals to forfeit the exercise of judging altogether. He issues such encouragement when he equates forfeiture of judgment with the doctrine of Christ. Hobbes says the Messiah “came not to judge the world.”[[43]](#footnote-43) Christ “refused to take upon himself to be a judge.”[[44]](#footnote-44) If Christ did not judge subjects or civil sovereigns when he walked the earth, Christians should not exercise their judgments either.

As with the case of belief, there was more than one way to understand what obligations the doctrine of implicit faith imposed upon private judgment. The less robust reading of the doctrine did not require individuals to replace or abandon the activity of judging altogether. Instead, it only required individuals *to submit* their judgment to the church’s in the final instance. Here, the doctrine of implicit faith only “constrain[ed] all men to stand to [the Church-officer’s] determination.”[[45]](#footnote-45) As Thomas Edwards said,

An implicit faith…[gives the Church the authority to] put a final determination and conclusion to great offences and differences without return[ing] back the businesse to the Church represented, or so much as ever acquainting them with the businesse before all was ended.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Hobbes also advances this account of a subject’s obligation to his or her sovereign. Whenever disputes arise, Hobbes writes “we must have recourse to Gods Lieutenant [i.e. the civil sovereign]; to whom in all doubtful cases, we have submitted our private judgments.”[[47]](#footnote-47)

***Obligations imposed upon outward speech, action and behavior***

The doctrine of implicit faith also imposed obligations upon the individual’s outward speech, action and behavior. In essence, it obligated individuals to conform outwardly in all matters to the church. Implicit faith was therefore sometimes called “implicit obedience.” Any outward expression of nonconformity amounted to a breach of duty, or sin. Vane, for example, said people with implicit faith must “adhere” to the Church.”[[48]](#footnote-48) And Anglican William Prynne tied implicit faith to *absolute* obedience in secular and sacred affairs: “Implicit Faith [is the doctrine] that whatever [authority] Commands (though against the express laws of God)…may and ought to be obeyed.”[[49]](#footnote-49) Hobbes concurs: individuals must obey the sovereign in deed and speech (except when life itself is in jeopardy, but it is not ultimately clear who gets to make this judgment).[[50]](#footnote-50)

Absolute or near absolute conformity to church command is a heavy burden for any individual to bear. But there’s a twist. Some supporters of this particular obligation maintained that so long as individuals conformed outwardly to church command, their obligations to the church were satisfied. That is to say, these proponents of the doctrine of implicit faith were willing to completely relax the internal obligations that I previously discussed. Individuals did not have to believe, or try to believe in church doctrine. Nor they did not have to abdicate or submit their judgment to a higher authority. The Catholic Vane wrote, “It will suffice…to believe them [doctrines of church] implicitly, that is, *to adhere to* the Church that doth believe them.” Adherence means conformity. Thus, it suffices to conform. Another Englishmen wrote, “All by an implicite must believe, that their governors..[who] may erre…must not be resisted by the modest sonnes of the church, but obeyed.”[[51]](#footnote-51) Here, subjects could judge that the church erred and they could believe an alternative truth. They only could not resist the erring church. Needless to say, the notion that keeping faith (i.e. the third law of nature) amounts to outward conformity and non-resistance is a doctrine discoverable within *Leviathan.*

Protestants who rejected the doctrine of implicit faith used colorful metaphors to describe those who fulfilled the obligation to conform outwardly. The implicitly faithful were individuals who were “led by the nose.” They “walked,” “followed” and “assented” to whatever human authority commanded. In essence, they were authority’s loyal—i.e. faithful---adherents. For this reason Protestants said conformists were not “free” men; they did not ground their actions on their own consciences. They were the church’s “sworne-men…and would..give…assent to [the churches] dictates, with an implicite faith.”[[52]](#footnote-52) Men who pledged implicit faith (in the way Hobbes instructs subjects to pledge themselves to the sovereign) performed actions not because they were “in [themselves] good or indifferent.” They performed or omitted them “in obedience unto him, whose supreme authority they make the foundation…of all good actions.”[[53]](#footnote-53)

As these phrases suggest, Protestants vigorously rejected the way the espousers of the doctrine of implicit faith reduced the notion of belief to outward conformity. William Prynne called this implicit faith conception of belief “faithless faith.” Outward conformity was faithless because it did not reflect or correspond to the individual’s internal beliefs and judgments. This is why the Protestant William Slayter said “implicite faith [is] indeed no faith.”[[54]](#footnote-54) But from a different perspective implicit faith was form of faith because it expressed blind trust in an external human authority. Thus, it was “faithless faith.” As Hobbes put it, if we “speak, as (by lawful authority) we are commanded; and…live accordingly;…[then, we reveal the]… Faith reposed in him that speaketh.”[[55]](#footnote-55)

Protestants acknowledged Hobbes’s point and forcefully rejected the idea that a human command could serve as the foundation for individual *action*. Citing Luther, the Protestant Richard Crakanthrope wrote,

Every such ***act,*** is not onely impious, but even Antichristian, and containeth in it a virtual and implicit renouncing of the whole faith….Luther says **to do** any…[action]…. because the Pope as Pope teacheth that they are to be done, or commands the doing of them is in very deed a yielding one self to be a vassal of Antichirst, a receiving a marke of the beast, and a vertuall or implicit denial of the faith in Christ.[[56]](#footnote-56)

To do an action because a human authority commanded it was to deny Christ the authority to command; the act was therefore anti-christian. Note the way Crankanthrope does not equate action from implicit faith with *secularism*. He equates it with Catholicism and anti-Christ.

Like Crankanthrope, the Protestant Samuel Rutherford maintained that *actions* that “tak[e] cognizance only of the fact of the Church, not inquiring into the nature of the thing” were illegitimately grounded. [[57]](#footnote-57) Account to the radical Saltmarsh, obedient action grounded in authoritative command denied individuals the use of their own “light,’” and undermined individual “liberty.”[[58]](#footnote-58) For the Protestant radical and Leveller John Lilburne, actions must conform to loftier Christian standards such as “[scriptural] law, reason, equity, justice or conscience.”[[59]](#footnote-59) William Strong, a pastor of an independent congregation, concurred with Lilburne and said,

***Do nothing***but that wherein your consciences are first satisfied: without this a man cannot be accepted with himself, much less with God….To be led by an implicit faith is a thing unworthy of a man, much more of a Magistrate.[[60]](#footnote-60)

Radical Protestant Thomas Harby echoes Strong’s assertation that action from authority is “unworthy of a man.” Such action was only fit for “the vilest vassals of slavery:”

[Individuals] must (in all their motions and actions) walk and act in the liberty of the light of God in their own spirits: and not act of acquiesce from principles of an implicite-faith in the Arbitrary command of will and power in any Representative or person whatsoever.

For Harby, freedom amounted to action from conscience. It could not be reduced to the act of social contracting because the act of *consenting* that established authority*,* even if consenting was voluntary, gave another human being the authority to lead and this form of subjection rendered the subject unfree. Harby said,

It is *small satisfaction* or *security* to any man (that may see if he will, but will follow and be led by a blind man, till both fall into a ditch and perish) to think to say for himself a blind man led him, and it was his own will, and he would be led by him.[[61]](#footnote-61)

**Thinking Not Required: Implicit Faith as freedom f*rom* Apprehending and Understanding.**

One might assume that if the doctrine of implicit faith imposed obligations on action, belief, will and/or private judgment, then it must also impose obligations on the faculties of cognition and understanding (e.g., it would oblige individuals to form particular conceptions or thoughts, and to possess particular knowledge). This assumption fatally misunderstands the doctrine of implicit faith. It *did not* impose such obligations. The processes of conceptualizing and comprehending remained “free” from obligation because neither underwrote implicit faith. In fact, implicit faith was sometimes specifically defined as that faith that *lacked* cognition and understanding.

Let me offer a few representative articulations of the way Englishmen disconnected implicit faith from thought. Describing the doctrine, the Protestant Francis Rous wrote,

As for implicit faith of any article or doctrine, a man is then said to have it, when he believes that concerning it, which the Church teacheth them… although for his own part, he have not perhaps so much as heard of it in particular; or if he did, he hath forgot it, or if he did remember it, he hath not capacity enough to apprehend or understand it.[[62]](#footnote-62)

Rous here decoupled implicit faith from cognition (apprehension) and understanding (knowledge). Hobbes also performs this divorce. He maintains that those who ask “how do we know” our beliefs (i.e. how do we know that they are true) fundamentally misunderstand the nature of belief; they speak “as if believing and knowing were all one,” and they are not.[[63]](#footnote-63)

This meant that the doctrine of implicit faith wedded faith to ignorance. As one Englishmen put it, “Implicite faith…would persuade the people they may be ignorant, and little or no knowledge is required of them.”[[64]](#footnote-64) As Presbyterian George Gillespie noted, “The Papists know not what those things be which they believe by implicit faith: so that such a faith is rightly called mere articulorum fidei ignorantia, a mere ignorance of the articles of faith.”[[65]](#footnote-65) And George Digby the Lord of Bristol even remarked that when “there is no Logic, no reasoning….[then men are] led by implicite faith.”[[66]](#footnote-66)

Ephraim Pagitt tried to flesh out this disconnect he and others noted between faith, cognition and knowledge in the doctrine of implicit faith. He reasoned that when faith lacked cognition and understanding, professions of faith (i.e, worship) were intellectually *empty*, “reverent” expressions of “assent,” or “consent.” Professions of faith amounted to ritual, and the purpose of ritual worship was not to promote understanding in the worshippers (afterall, the Catholic mass was in Latin, and people prayed the Pater Noster without understanding a word of what they were saying). Professions of faith served to glorify the incomprehensible God by professing blind reverence to His authority. Pagitt wrote:

[The] pillars of the roman church, lay down this ground, that implicit faith in its own nature is not a knowledge of things to be believed, but a reverent assent unto them, whether they be known or unknown: hereupon they [i.e. Catholics] build [their church/faith]. It is sufficient [for Catholics] to give…consent to the Church, and to believe as the [church] believe[s].[[67]](#footnote-67)

Hobbes adopts what Pagitt here identifies as Rome’s line of reasoning. With respect to the way faith relates to knowledge or correct opinion, he writes that “Our faith…consisteth not in our Opinion…for the nature of God is incomprehensible; that is to say, we understand nothing of what he is, but only that he is.”[[68]](#footnote-68) With respect to the purpose of worship, he explains that it “cannot signifie what he [God] is, but ought to signifie our desire to honour him, with the best Appelations we can think of.”[[69]](#footnote-69)

Radical Protestants, however, refused to decouple understanding and knowledge from faith and they refused to understand worship as blind reference. They used many illuminating words and phrases to describe individuals with implicit faith who severed thought from their faith. They called implicit faith “credulity,” or “credulity without consideration.” The called the implicitly faithful those who “swallowed things credulously,” they had a “blind faith;” they expressed “blind zeal;” and they professed “blind assent.” Because their faith was “blind;” radical Protestants said they had an “ignorant faith;” theirs was the “faith of fooles;” their worship was “ignorant devotion;” and they rested in “brutish ignorance.”[[70]](#footnote-70)

**Thinking Discouraged: Implicit Faith as Discouraging Apprehension and Understanding**

Proponents of the doctrine of implicit not only positively severed the obligation to believe from the obligation to apprehend and know. They also discouraged individuals from seeking knowledge or understanding of their faith. Translating the Bible into the vernacular was not only unnecessary; it was ill advised. Asking questions or deliberating with others about the principles of faith was impertinent. Proponents of implicit faith even encouraged individuals to *choose* ignorance. The implicitly faithful individual was to “believe[] the Canons and Determinations of the Church, and…[to] set[] bounds to all his wisdom and knowledge, and labour[] to avoid all Speculations thereon, fearing through the frailty of his Intellect, to fall into some Error.”[[71]](#footnote-71)

The reasons why proponents discouraged individuals from seeking to know their faith explicitly were numerous. The first reason was elitists. Religious authorities knew better; there was therefore no reason for the laity to seek to understand; it was sufficient to submit to their authority of their betters. However, the espousers of the doctrine of implicit faith presented this elitism as egalitarian. Imposing no obligation upon the laity to think about their faith was democratic because everyone could be ignorant. Thus, the doctrine of implicit faith could serve “the capacit[ies] of the unlearned as well as the learned.”[[72]](#footnote-72) Needless to say, radical Protestants rejected this “democratic” defense of ignorance. They maintained that we “should believe that the way to eternal life can be understood by all” because “the poor hath understanding” and may come to know, explicate, and intelligently profess their faith.

Another reason why proponents of implicit faith discouraged individuals from seeking to understand their faith had to do with the limits they placed upon the intellectual faculty. Because the intellect sees through a glass darkly, intellectual inquiry into faith would be fruitless, and endless. Inquirers who used reason to understand faith would only discover “contradictions, loose conceptions, and endlesse controversies.” Proponents of implicit faith reasoned that these intellectual fruits could lead to atheism, to schism, and ultimately to religious war.[[73]](#footnote-73) The defenders of ignorance therefore concluded, “What remains to every man, [is] but [to] lay[] aside endless dispute….[and] to cast himself into the arms of this Holy Mother Church, and wholly rely upon her…[and] submit themselves to the visible head thereof.”[[74]](#footnote-74)

Hobbes defends ignorance in matters of faith for many of the same reasons the proponents of the doctrine of implicit faith did. First, he did not think there was much utility in chewing on religious cud because the fundamental principles of Christianity were contradictory [i.e. mysterious] and therefore could not be chewed by the faculty of reason. He maintained that the fundamental article of Christianity (i.e. that Jesus was the Christ) was fundamentally contradictory, and the human mind was incapable of apprehending and comprehending this mystery at the root of their faith.[[75]](#footnote-75) He therefore instructed individuals “not to labour in sifting out a philosophical truth by logic, of such mysteries as are not comprehensible, nor fall under any rule of natural science.”[[76]](#footnote-76) Instead of seeking truth, Hobbes urged subjects to “captivate their understanding,” “forbear contraction,” and listen to what their lawful pastors teach them. By listening to their pastor’s words patiently and silently, individuals would come to believe that Christ was the Messiah. This was because faith came “by hearing” (and not by thinking).

In numerous ways, Protestants disagreed with men like Hobbes and the other proponents of the doctrine of implicit faith who decoupled faith from knowledge. They impose obligations upon the intellect, arguing that individuals had a positive obligation to apprehend (or endeavor to apprehend) and understand (or endeavor to understand) the objects of their faith. Those who did not have an adequate grasp (or did not seek to grasp) their faith should expect damnation.

Let me offer a few representative articulations of this point. Some Englishmen simply referenced passages from Paul and stated, “Ignorance is no excuse” on judgment day. “No implicite Fayth doeth save…..What we believe, we must distinctly know, and not rely on an implicite faith, to be saved thereby;”[[77]](#footnote-77) Other Englishmen offered a more reasoned explanation for why faith must be tied to apprehension and thought: “Implicite faith..is not of itself sufficient for salvation…for it cannot be that the will be effectually affected, and embrace that as good which it doth not at all distinctly know.”[[78]](#footnote-78) Thomas Fuller declared that individuals were required to,

Labour to attain some competent measure of knowledge in matters of salvation…believe no man with implicit faith in matters of such moment; for he who buys a jewel in a case, without ever looking on it, deserves to be cozened with a Bristol stone. [[79]](#footnote-79)

Milton acknowledged that the process of coming to apprehend and know one’s faith was burdensome. He even said “there is not any burden that some would gladier post off to another, then the charge and care of their Religion.” But he argued that individuals must know their faith:

 A man may be a heretick in the truth [and thus damned]…if he believe things only because his Pastor says so, or the Assembly so determines, without *knowing* other reason, though his belief be true, yet the very truth he holds, becomes his heresie.[[80]](#footnote-80)

Other Protestants rejected implicit faith’s celebration of ignorance by arguing that it was impossible for an individual to believe something if he or she hadn’t conceived of it, or didn’t know it. For example, Pagitt said, “This implicit faith we reject: for faith containeth a knowledge of things to be believed; and nothing is believed that is not knowne.” Richard Stock insisted that belief required knowledge and asserted that individuals were at least obligated to try to know: “A man cannot believe, unless he know… therefore every one ought to bend his eares, and his head to know.”[[81]](#footnote-81) Along similar lines, Bishop John Bramhall did not think it possible to “truly” profess one’s faith (to express assent or consent and be saved thereby), if one lacked an understanding of the faith they professed. Those who followed a creed by implicit faith “without discussion” could not be said to (i.e., it was impossible to say that they) “consent truly” even though they voluntarily “resolv[ed] themselves” (i.e. consented).[[82]](#footnote-82)

Still other Protestants made arguments from prudence in order to reject implicit faith’s acceptance of ignorance, and to encourage inquiry. The Puritan William Ames said, “It is farre better to be humbly and modestly inquisitive, then Popishly and Sottishly ignorant, for the Wise mans eyes are in his head, but the Foole destroyes himself by a strange implicit faith, and blind obedience.”[[83]](#footnote-83) John Saltmarsh also associated prudence with inquiry and danger with ignorance when he wrote, “There is a great danger of bringing people under a Popish implicit obedience, by forcing on a practice of that which they scarce know, or know but in part.”

Finally, Protestants like Francis Cheynell renounced implicit faith’s connection between faith and ignorance by encouraging Englishmen to become “fitted with the Noble Science of Christ and Heaven.” Cheynell here weds faith to understanding and cognition and claims that such a marriage was “noble:”

[A noble] faith…[is] a faith that is not built upon Quicksands…upon the Authority of man, much lesse upon the Authority of the Man of sin, the Pope, or Church of Rome…an Implicite Faith…is but an Ignoble Faith, because it leads men hood winked to a blinde obedience….A faith that [is] truly Noble, [is] a searching faith, a busy faith, an examining faith…There’s work for Noblemen…Search the Scriptures; that’s a noble employment, On that noble-men would make it their business, and their recreation also; that they might be fitted with the Noble Science of Christ and Heaven.[[84]](#footnote-84)

Cheynell is demanding the freedom to inquire into the faith (religious liberty). This inquiry is necessary because it enables individuals to offer informed professions of their faith (and salvation required this of Protestants). It enabled individuals to obtain the knowledge or “science of Christ.” It gave them the opportunity to possess independent and explicit, rather than dependent and implicit, faith.

**Persuasion’s Dual Role: Teaching the Doctrine of Implicit Faith, and Undermining all Competing Doctrines of Faith**

***Teaching the Doctrine of Implicit Faith***

Advocates of implicit faith had to support their doctrine because individuals would not become or remain implicitly faithful spontaneously. Therefore, in the final analysis, apprehension and understanding had a fundamental role to play. These faculties were exercised in order to support the doctrine of implicit faith. Subjects had to be taught to apprehend human authority as the stable, infallible, foundational (un-appealable) rock of their faith. They had to grasp the external and (in some accounts) internal obligations that followed from the doctrine of implicit faith. They also had to see why abandoning private inquiry, embracing ignorance, and trusting blindly the in naked fiats issued by mortal authorities was prudent (i.e. why it would lead to security and stability). These were the goals that the evangelizers of implicit faith set out for themselves. The radical John Saltmarsh captured these goals beautifully in his discussion of the role that instruction plays within the doctrine of implicit faith. He wrote,

You [i.e. the supporters of implicit faith] say, The people must be instructed, that is, they must only know that they must obey….They are only to be instructed and taught that this is the Government to which they must submit. So the people under Popery, Prelacy, & were instructed, with that limitation and restriction….This were fair dealing with Conscience;….Compliancy and submission…are the duties you set out for the people. The people may easily see the interest you allow them; viz. an interest of compliance only, and submission or obedience to what is done already not any liberty to examine and refuse [i.e., liberty of conscience].[[85]](#footnote-85)

Thomas Hobbes is an evangelizer of implicit faith. The *Leviathan* offers instruction in compliance and obedience to the civil sovereign. It offers the kind of instruction that Saltmarsh links to the proponents of the doctrine of implicit faith.

***Undermining all Competing Doctrines of Faith***

The second goal that the evangelizers of implicit faith set for themselves was to unsettle and to undermine all foundations of faith that did not rest upon human authority. Given the Reformation, it was not longer sufficient (if it ever was) to simply teach that human authority was the ground of faith (and action, because action depends on faith or belief) without engaging with counter-arguments and alternatives. Too many mid-seventeenth-century Englishmen were Protestants. They would not swallow the doctrine of implicit faith easily, and supporters of implicit faith could not ignore this fact.

The rhetorical strategies used by the evangelizers of implicit faith to undermine Protestant arguments in favor of alternative foundations were brilliant from a rhetorical point of view. The evangelizers understood the Protestant assumptions held by their historically-situated audience and they engaged deeply with their assumptions. But the rhetorical strategies they used were fundamentally inconsistent, and consequently mind-boggling to philosophers who championed the law of non-contradiction.

The strategies were contradictory because, on the one hand, evangelizers engaged their mid-seventeenth-century Protestant audience by explaining why the Protestant foundations of belief and action were insufficient and consequently worthy to doubt. That is to say, s*kepticism became their rhetorical strategy*. Evangelizers of implicit faith urged their audience to *be skeptical* of foundations like (self-interpreting) Scripture, private spirit, prophecy, probabilistic reasoning and even logic itself. Exploring how the proponents of implicit faith used this skeptical strategy to undermine the independent authority of scripture, private spirit, prophecy and reason is beyond the purview of this paper. Suffice it to say here that this rhetorical strategy is central to the English Recusant (Catholic) literature of this period.

 But, on the other hand, proponents of implicit faith used the Protestant foundations (the very ones they unsettled) to justify the doctrine of implicit faith. Here they deployed arguments from Scripture, from private spirit, from prophecy and from reason to make the case *for* implicit faith in human authority.[[86]](#footnote-86) Again, developing carefully how proponents did this in each particular case is beyond the purview of this paper. Suffice it say that these kinds of arguments are also central to the English Recusant literature of the period.

I maintain that Thomas Hobbes pursues this same rhetorical strategy in *Leviathan.* On the one hand, he relentlessly casts doubt upon mankind’s ability to invest foundational authority into self-interpreting scripture, private spirit, prophecy, and even reason (as reason is only a rule of prudence and probability provides no certainty; and logic can only offer the conditional truths of language and, given his nominalism, there is no definitive link between language and reality). But on the other hand, Hobbes uses prudential and syllogistic reasoning, Scripture and arguments resting on spirit and prophecy to make a case for implicit faith. That is to say, he tries to persuade subjects to invest implicit faith in a sovereign vested with temporal and spiritual authority. From a historically-informed perspective, the philosophical madness we find in *Leviathan* amounts to a very brilliant, but not unique, rhetorical attempt to justify the doctrine of implicit faith.

**Conclusion**

What I have revealed by situating Leviathan within a historically-informed reconstruction of the doctrine of implicit faith is as follows. First I have revealed that we need not read *Leviathan* as advocating secularism because we may interpret it as advocating the doctrine of implicit faith which grounds authority in human beings, but retains God as an ultimate authority. Second, we need not conceptualize the relationship between subject and sovereign as an exchange relationship where obedience is changed for protection. It is better to conceptualize it as the exchange of implicit faith for protection. We need not conceptualizesovereign authorization as a profession of secular consent. It is better to conceptualize it as an informed profession of implicit faith. Finally, we should not conceptualize Hobbes as a proponent of religious liberty or freedom of conscience (unless we want to maintain that ignorance and the freedom not to apprehend or understand one’s beliefs is a form of liberty). We should conceptualize Hobbes as mounting a forceful attack upon radical Protestants who were advocating for religious liberty so that they could find and understand foundations of faith that did not depend on external mortal authority.

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83. Ames, Williams. 1652*The saints security against seducing spritis.* London: Printed by M. Simmons.Image 3; see also Saltmarsh, John. 1646. *The smoke in the temple wherein is a designe for peace and reconciliation of believes of the several opinins of thest times about ordinances*. London. P.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Cheynell, Francis. *The man of honour, described in a sermon.* 1645. London. Printed by J.R.. P.12-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Saltmarsh, John. 1646. *Some drops of the vial, powred out in a season when it is neither night nor day.* London. P.33-4 [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. According to Vane, for example, “all the place that reason hath in the government of our faith is this, to lead us to believe that testimony which cannot deceive us [the church’s], and to take them upon trust of that testimony, without checking at htem whatsoever they be.” [↑](#footnote-ref-86)