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LOCKE'S INHERITORS:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE THEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS
OF THE *LETTER CONCERNING TOLERATION* AND ITS IMPLICATIONS
FOR THE MODERN DILEMMA OF RELIGIOUS TOLERATION

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Abstract

My study is an examination of the political theology of seventeenth-century English philosopher John Locke. Beginning with his early career in 1660, I trace a course of Locke's intellectual development on the theme of religious toleration. With particular emphasis on the *Letter Concerning Toleration*, I argue that the evolution of Locke's theory was based as much on his sincere theological concerns as it was on his (more well-known) secular arguments. Approaches to Locke's theory are therefore necessarily diminished if they fail to recognize the significance of his religious beliefs.

Turning to the present, I look at some of the ways in which Locke's theory has been applied in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and make the claim that his dual emphasis on the importance of finding a moral-centre while stressing the difficulty of attaining absolute "truth," has much to offer for our current dilemma of religious toleration.

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Introduction

My study of Locke is perhaps best termed a political theology, as it seeks to situate his philosophy in the context of seventeenth-century religious thought, as well as speculate as to what implications Locke's political theology may have for the present. In what is to follow, I will trace a course that outlines some of the major developments in the evolution of Locke's theory of toleration. My purpose will be to provide a necessary yet minimal overview of Locke's personal and philosophical development so as to set the stage for my examination of the *Letter Concerning Toleration* and its implications for the modern dilemma of religious toleration. Accordingly, the chapter breakdown will run as follows: chapter one will detail some of the major biographical events in Locke's life, including some historical background on religious persecution in seventeenth-century England and on the continent; chapter two will look at his early *Two Tracts on Government* (1660), the "Essay Concerning Toleration" (1667), and the "Critical Notes" on Edward Stillingfleet's *Mischief of Separation* and *The Unreasonableness of Separation* (1680), in order to highlight the trajectory of Locke's intellectual development on the road to his mature

theory; chapter three will propose that Locke's theory of toleration cannot be understood apart from his theological understanding and will include an analysis of the *Letter Concerning Toleration*; and, finally, chapter four will put forward some possible directions for applying Locke's political theology to the present.

Chapter one will serve as a staging ground for my examination of the theological implications of Locke's theory of toleration. A brief overview of the *Letter Concerning Toleration* will be followed by the requisite historical, educational, and political background that helped to shape Locke's sensibilities, such as the legacy of the English Civil War (1642-48), his time at Oxford under Puritan control, and the restoration of Charles II in 1660, when Locke first began his intellectual career. In providing this short historical outline, my purpose will be to illustrate how these various influences were to shape Locke's early thinking on the question of toleration, and later to set him apart from mainstream opinion, often at the expense of his own interest and personal safety. In this respect, it will be of particular importance to note the uniqueness of Locke's intellectual career - namely, that of a thinker whose ideas on moral and political philosophy were shaped by not only his engagement with

theoretical questions, but by his active role in the political intrigues of his day. His experiences at home and abroad helped shape the main principles of his theory of toleration, from his complex theological understanding on the role of Scripture in politics, to his nuanced position on the question of tolerating Catholics and those of other faiths.

The second chapter will provide a more detailed analysis of the evolution of Locke's views on toleration, starting with his early *Two Tracts on Government* (1660), and followed by the "Essay On Toleration" (1667) and the "Critical Notes" on Edward Stillingfleet (1680). The purpose of this chapter is to show how Locke understood and negotiated the question of toleration throughout his intellectual career, and to deconstruct some of the core theological and political questions on which the question hangs. Drawing on the influence of Thomas Hobbes and others, I will demonstrate how Locke's early preference for authoritarian government was less the result of religious intolerance on his part, and more a reaction to the difficult question of how to secure civil peace amidst the chaos of sectarian strife. Moreover, in considering Locke's earlier work on the question of toleration, we are better able to situate and appreciate the complexity of the *Letter*

Concerning Toleration. By tracing some of the main factors that were to influence Locke's views, such as his friendship with Robert Boyle, his trip to Cleves in 1665, and his relationship with Lord Anthony Ashley Cooper, a clearer picture begins to emerge on the evolution of Locke's theory. These influences are important since factors such as Locke's realization that absolutism suppressed the psychological needs of conscience and his view that matters of worship were not 'indifferent' but necessary to people's beliefs, show how he struggled to reconcile the realities of religious plurality, conflict, and the rule of law, with the ever-changing situation around him. Furthermore, we are able to see how the development of Locke's theory of toleration was an example, writ-small, of his lifelong pursuit to unite faith and reason, and how it would only be with the *Letter* that Locke would bring these two realms - the theological and the practical - neatly together.

Chapter three will move into the crux of the argument by examining the *Letter* itself, and argue that the moral implications of Locke's theory of toleration must be based on a firm theological ground. Looking first at materialist approaches to Locke's philosophy, such as those put forward by Leo Strauss and his epigones, I will demonstrate how

secular interpretations fail to recognize the significance of Lockean toleration by neutralizing both the moral authority and the theological foundations that he requires for the basis of human equality. Moreover, I will emphasize how a theological reading of Locke is necessary in order to understand his quest to balance the divide between knowledge and values in the construction of a just and responsible civil authority. Finally, looking to the *Letter* itself, I will suggest that it is only with a theological understanding that Locke's theory of toleration takes on universal significance by adding a necessary moral dimension that it is otherwise lacking.

For the fourth and final chapter I will explore some of the ways in which Locke's theory of toleration might be resuscitated in a post-9/11 world, while pointing to those aspects of his theory that require a necessary grain of salt. I am less interested in proving the "truth" of Locke's theory; my real concern will be to demonstrate how the "essence" or intent of his argument (for example, his attempt to unite a belief in absolute truth with an unyielding insistence on human fallibility that stresses the difficulty of ever attaining that truth) offers a fitting model for the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Chapter One

John Locke is perhaps best known as a philosopher, economist, political theorist, and founding figure of the Enlightenment. What is less celebrated and much less understood, perhaps, is his pioneering role in modern theories of toleration. In 1689, Locke penned his famous tract *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, in response to political developments that had occurred in both England and in France.¹ In the *Letter*, Locke sought to prove his claim that toleration was the chief characteristic mark of the true church,² and denounced those who would promote Christianity by the use of force. He argued that the church was a voluntary society chosen freely by individuals for the purpose of salvation, and maintained that the magistrate was in no better position to know the true church than anyone else. Locke promoted indulgence for a variety of religious communities, except for Catholics, whom he believed were outside the state because they

¹ Although probably written in 1685, the *Letter* was not published until 1689, where it appeared anonymously in Latin. The *Letter* was written in order to combat the increasing intolerance of Catholic monarchs such as Louis the XIV of France, who had revoked the Edict of Nantes and denied tolerance to Huguenot Protestants. See Kim Ian Parker, *The Biblical Politics of John Locke* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press), 26.

² John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* in *The Selected Political Writings of John Locke*, Paul Sigmund, ed. (New York: Norton, 2005), 126. All future references to the *Letter*, will be to this edition.

offered their allegiance to a foreign power (i.e., the Pope), and atheists, who forfeited all claims to morality by denying the existence of God. While many of these points had been argued before, the *Letter* had an especially significant impact coming, as it did, from one of the most powerful philosophers of the seventeenth-century. In the next century, Voltaire would claim the *Letter* to be the essence of Locke's politics and relevant to life everywhere on earth.³ Likewise, the American revolutionaries would draw inspiration from Locke's work, as when Thomas Jefferson paraphrased the *Letter* in a bill enshrining religious freedom in Virginia.⁴

John Locke was born in 1632 at Wrington, Somerset, in the west of England, and was given a Calvinist upbringing by his father, John Sr., who was a reasonably successful attorney. At the age of fifteen, John Jr. was admitted to Westminster School on the recommendation of Colonel Alexander Popham, a wartime friend of his father. It was here at Westminster that Locke was first exposed to different religious and political viewpoints, and where he began his training in classics and biblical languages,

³ Cited in John Dunn, *Locke: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 43.

⁴ See Barbara Arneil, *John Locke and America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 168.

which provided him with the necessary tools for scriptural exegesis and theological commentary. In 1652, at the age of twenty, Locke entered Christ Church, Oxford, where he was exposed to the political and religious tensions that would follow him for the rest of his life.⁵

Like most philosophers, John Locke was a product of his time. He engaged directly with the most pressing questions of his day, and was deeply affected by his personal experiences. Unlike many philosophers, however, Locke was directly involved with the politics, parties, and policies that would help to shape his moral and political philosophy. When one surveys the events of Locke's life, one is struck not only by the intrigue of his political adventures (worthy of a Hollywood blockbuster, no less), but by the way in which he adapted himself to new situations and evolved from his experiences. Locke was only ten years old when the tensions between the Stuart monarchy and the Puritan-controlled parliament erupted into the English Civil War (1642-48). Six years later, King Charles I would be executed and a commonwealth established under Oliver Cromwell. Locke's initial experience at Christ Church would be marked by religious tension, as Oxford

⁵ Parker, *Biblical Politics*, 9.

remained Puritan during his undergraduate years (1652-56), and expelled those who did not conform. During this period, Locke was exposed to the sermons of the dean of Christ Church, John Owen, who often made the case for religious toleration, and noted that the Bible did not advocate the punishment of heretics.⁶

After the death of Cromwell in 1658, Locke was so shaken by how easily England fell back into chaos he welcomed the restoration of Charles II to the throne. As William Spellman has noted, "for Locke in 1660 the monarchy could still stand for something above the vertiginous and fatal enthusiasms of individual political actors."⁷ During this period, questions of toleration for Locke were centred on the problem of finding a correct way to interpret Scripture, and the need for a peaceful civil order. In his *Two Tracts on Government* (1661), Locke held that the sovereign must have absolute power over all the indifferent actions of her/his people.⁸ In searching for principles of moral authority, Locke sided with the conclusions of Thomas Hobbes, who saw life in a state of nature as solitary, nasty, brutish, and short, and advocated a social contract that gave absolute authority to the magistrate in exchange

⁶ Ibid, 10.

⁷ See William Spellman, *John Locke and the Problem of Depravity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 49.

⁸ Parker, *Biblical Politics*, 12.

for her/his protection. Moreover, the political turmoil following Cromwell's death seemed to confirm to Locke that the human tendency toward violence, coupled with the common misuse of religion, necessitated a central and all-powerful governing authority. As John Marshall points out:

Religious sectarianism had then created what Locke described as a 'great Bedlam' England, with individuals claiming to be the second Christ or claiming personal inspiration in ways that Locke described to his moderate Presbyterian father as 'hot-headed' and 'mad.'⁹

A possible turning point in Locke's thinking on toleration may have come in 1665, when he was chosen for a diplomatic mission to the elector of Brandenburg at Cleves, in northern Germany, and observed the mutual good relations between Calvinists, Lutherans, and Catholics. Two years later he would write his "Essay on Toleration," which showed a notable change from his earlier *Tracts*. The composition of the "Essay" was preceded by Locke's appointment as the part-time physician, secretary, and speech writer of Anthony Ashley Cooper, later the Earl of Shaftsbury and founder of the Whig party.¹⁰ When Locke composed the "Essay" in 1667, Shaftsbury was a part of the

⁹ John Marshall, *John Locke: Resistance, Religion and Responsibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 21.

¹⁰ Sigmund, *The Selected Political Writings of John Locke*, xiv.

Cabal administration responsible for advising the king on toleration. Under Shaftsbury's influence, Locke had changed his earlier views, arguing that magistrates were only to enforce morality in cases of injustice, injury, and threats to national security. Furthermore, he argued that the oppression of religion caused sedition, and that toleration is what united people to their sovereign.¹¹ Like his earlier work, Locke remained skeptical toward Catholics, maintaining that one must first preach toleration in order to be tolerated.

In the late 1660s, Locke became close with influential Latitudinarian Christians whose progressive doctrine emphasized toleration, a minimalist creed, and the centrality of reason. These relationships would further influence Locke's ideas of toleration and reason as seen in his later works such as the *Letter and the Reasonableness of Christianity*. As Greg Forster notes:

Locke blends elements drawn from diverse theological traditions, ranging from theologically conservative Calvinism to what we might now call the 'liberal' movement of Anglican Latitudinarianism, into an alloy that stands apart from standard theological classifications.¹²

In 1675, an anonymous tract was circulated in England

¹¹ John Marshall, *Resistance*, 19.

¹² Greg Forster, *John Locke's Politics of Moral Consensus* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2.

entitled, *A Letter from a Person of Quality to His Friend in the Country*. The letter was a critique of the abuses of the monarchy under Charles II, such as the passing of the Test Act, which required holders of public office to be members of the Church of England. Many had thought that Locke was the author of *A Letter*, though it is more likely that he co-wrote it with Shaftsbury.¹³ The king ordered *A Letter* to be publicly burned, and Locke left England for France shortly thereafter where he would remain for the next three and a half years.

While in France, Locke visited with many Huguenots and took detailed notes on the history of their oppression. As John Marshall writes:

By 1679, [Locke] was recording that 'The Protestants within these twenty years have had above three hundred churches demolished, and within these two months fifteen more condemned'... Locke recorded on many occasions other new restrictions placed on Protestants, such as his note in 1676 that Protestant ministers were 'forbid to teach above two scholars at once'.¹⁴

By 1679, Shaftsbury had regained his political power, and Locke returned to England to join with his collaborator. While Locke kept a low profile for the next four years, he was clearly affected by his experiences in France. He kept abreast of the further measures taken against the

¹³ See Parker, *Biblical Politics*, 20.

¹⁴ Cited in John Marshall, *Resistance*, 35.

Huguenots, and wrote in their defense in an unpublished manuscript that is now known as the 'Critical Notes on Edward Stillingfleet.'¹⁵ Over the next two years, Shaftsbury was involved in a national movement that attempted to exclude James, the Catholic brother of Charles II, from the English throne. Known as the Exclusionist Crisis, it resulted in the dissolution of parliament in 1681, which was to last for the remaining 4 years of Charles's reign. As Kim Ian Parker points out, the crisis was a significant turning point for matters of toleration:

The Exclusion Bill brought the issues of authority and political obligation clearly to the fore. If James became King, were Protestants who did not obey the Catholic monarch in danger of being branded 'heretics' and therefore subject to persecution?¹⁶

Around the same time, Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha* was published, which advocated hereditary succession and the divine right of kings. In the midst of this political turmoil, Locke would have to flee the country once again, this time bound for the Netherlands.

Holland provided shelter for many political and religious refugees during the 1680s, and was considered the most religiously tolerant society in seventeenth century Europe. A large number of Huguenots fled to Holland after

¹⁵ Locke, MS c. 34. cited in John Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 36.

¹⁶ Parker, *Biblical Politics*, 97.

the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, an edict which had provided toleration to French Protestants for 87 years. It was this event more than any other that compelled Locke to write his *Letter Concerning Toleration*. The recent Catholic violence against Huguenots and Waldensians in France raised similar questions about the prospects for Protestants in England under James II. In 1685, 200,000 Huguenots fled from France, while the 700,000 that remained were forced to convert to Catholicism. Those who resisted were enslaved, imprisoned, or executed.¹⁷

In the case of Waldensians, their long and protracted history of persecution became a rallying point for Protestant dissenters all over Europe. As Marshall notes, "the... persecution of Waldensians was... often cited in the 1680s... as clear evidence of the international commitment of contemporary Catholicism to persecution."¹⁸ Less than two months after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, the Duke of Savoy, in Piedmont, renounced toleration for 14,000 Waldensians in his territories.¹⁹ Publications of persecution against the Waldensians appeared in such places as London and Amsterdam from 1686-88 from writers like Pierre Jurieu, who published

¹⁷ See Marshall, *Toleration*, 2.

¹⁸ Ibid, 55.

¹⁹ Ibid, 55.

Accomplishment of the Scripture Prophecies (1686), Gilbert Burnet, who wrote *History of the Persecution in the Valleys of Piedmont* (1687), and an anonymous work entitled *A Short Account of the Persecution of the Waldensians* (1688), which quickly became the most popular source on the subject.

Likewise, Joseph Mede's 1627, *A Key to the Revelation*, was of particular interest to Locke, as it discussed the decline of the Pope as the Antichrist in a millenarian chronology that started with Waldensians.²⁰ The importance of the Waldensian persecution could not be underestimated.

As Marshall notes:

Accounts of violence against the Waldensians were also enormously significant to English and Dutch Protestants in the 1680s because in the seventeenth century the Waldensians held a central place in Protestant accounts of their ancestry as the sole 'visible' church preserving the apostolic faith against its Roman Catholic 'perversion' in the Middle Ages, being the only 'heresy' of the twelfth century to survive 'in unbroken continuity into the sixteenth century to... link hands with the Protestant Reformation.'²¹

The Waldensian persecution was connected to other incidents of Catholic violence such as the burning of Protestants in England by Queen Mary, the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 1572, in France, or the 1655 massacre of the Waldensians. The Waldensians persecution was seen as a

²⁰ Ibid, 58.

²¹ Ibid, 57.

continuation of the campaign of Catholic violence against medieval 'heretics,'²² and was especially significant for Locke (and others) as evidence of what would happen in England if a Catholic king were to come to power. Like the persecution of the Huguenots, it provided further impetus for Locke's arguments in *A Letter Concerning Toleration*.

The *Letter* dealt with many of the points that Locke had expressed earlier in his *Essay Concerning Toleration* (1667), while taking on new importance in light of the recent disturbances in England and in France. In the *Letter*, Locke made it his task "to distinguish exactly the business of civil government from that of religion and to settle the just bounds that lie between the one and the other."²³ Approaching his argument tactfully, he devised his strategy in 5 major parts: (1) defining a commonwealth or a state; (2) defining a church and its proper role in relation to the state; (3) considering how far the duty of toleration extends for the church; (4) the magistrate's true role in matters of church and state; and (5) the limits to toleration. Having lived through the vagaries of civil war, exile, and the possibility of execution, Locke's arguments in the *Letter* came from one who knew intimately

²² Ibid, 59.

²³ See Locke, *Letter*, 129.

the follies of religious persecution. As a man of great learning and intellect, he needed only to look at the history of his own country in order to predict the trajectory of religious intolerance. As he writes in the *Letter*:

In the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary, and Elizabeth, how easily and smoothly the clergy changed their decrees, their articles of faith, their forms of worship, everything, according to the inclination of those kings and queens.²⁴

Another cornerstone of Locke's argument in the *Letter*, and one that is no less relevant today, is his appeal to Scripture to justify toleration for religions that are outside the Christian fold. Advocates of religious toleration in the 1680s often argued for toleration of Jews, Muslims, and 'pagans' in an attempt to show the incongruity of Christian nations tolerating 'heathens' while persecuting their co-religionists. Locke argued for the toleration as well as the citizenship of Muslims and Jews in Europe, and for the rights of pagans in his colonial dealings in the Americas.²⁵ Unlike some of his contemporaries, however, Locke justified toleration of all religions as a foundation of Christianity, and denied that rulers had any direct knowledge of the will of the divine.

²⁴ Ibid, 143.

²⁵ See Marshall, *Toleration*, 10.

In the absence of an intrinsically authoritative model Locke could proclaim toleration to be "the chief characteristic mark of the true church."²⁶ To those who would object he reminded his readers that Christ "prescribed unto his followers no new and peculiar form of government," but had simply "taught men how, by faith and good works, they may attain eternal life."²⁷ What is more, he points out "that the true disciples of Christ must suffer persecution" and not "force others by fire and sword to embrace her faith and doctrine."²⁸ Consequently, the only way to win converts to the faith was to follow the example of Jesus, whom Locke calls the "Prince of peace," urging others through "admonitions and exhortations." Such a command was not limited to Christians however, but extended to those of other faiths, whatever they may be. In *A Letter Concerning Toleration* Locke writes:

Not even American (Indians), subjected unto a Christian prince, are to be punished either in body or goods, for not embracing our faith and worship. If they are persuaded that they please God in observing the rites of their own country, and that they shall obtain salvation by that means, they are to be left unto God and themselves.²⁹

Returning to England in 1688, Locke would see a

²⁶ See Locke, *Letter*, 126.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 130.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 131.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 149.

movement toward limited toleration as exemplified in the 1689 Toleration Act, which extended freedom of religion to all Protestant Trinitarian Christians. Locke's theory of toleration would also have an impact on many eighteenth century philosophers such as Voltaire, Hume, and Montesquieu, and serve as an inspiration for the American revolutionaries.³⁰

Locke's colourful career, from his early experience at Oxford, to the political intrigues of his later years, offered a wellspring of practical knowledge that he would use in the construction of his theory of toleration. The *Letter*, born of some thirty-odd years of thought on the subject, would be one of Locke's crowning achievements and, along with the *Two Treatise on Government* and *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, it offered a broad picture on the challenges and conditions for an inclusive view of toleration. Before we get to the *Letter*, however, we must first take a look at Locke's early years at Oxford.

³⁰ As recently as 1984, Nathan Tarcov could write: "There remains a very real sense in which Americans can say that Locke is *our* political philosopher. The document by which we Americans are an independent people, occupying our special station among the powers of the earth, derives its principles and even some of its language from the political philosophy of John Locke. See Nathan Tarcov, *Locke's Education for Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1.

Chapter Two

Locke's earliest attempt to construct a theory of civil government remained unknown for some 300 years. It was only with Philip Abrams' 1967 edition of the *Two Tracts on Government* (1660) that Locke's early work became widely available to scholars. The *Tracts* were markedly different from his later works like the *Letter Concerning Toleration*, showing a preference for authoritarian government and denying toleration to different religious communities. The discovery of the *Tracts* raises some difficult and important questions about the development of Locke's philosophy. Most importantly, it begs the question whether or not his early allegiance to authoritarianism tarnishes his reputation as a 'liberal' thinker and forbearer of the Enlightenment.

Many commentators have noted that Locke's argument in the *Tracts* has a decidedly "Hobbesian" flavour, and have struggled to reconcile this with his later achievements. While it is true that Locke's early writings on civil government did share some characteristic elements with the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, his evolution from absolutism to toleration was more subtle and refined than it appears at first glance. What is most striking in these early developments is that in arguing for absolutism, Locke had

no interest in promoting any one 'true' religion. On the contrary, his main concern in the *Two Tracts* was whether peace and order could ever be achieved if those same factions that had given rise to the civil wars in England and on the continent were permitted to worship in their own fashion. The question then, reconsidered, is not so much how Locke could support intolerance and an authoritarian form of government, but why he could not advocate religious toleration at that period in time.

In this chapter I will begin by looking at the connection between Locke and Hobbes and briefly examine what influence Hobbes may have had on the *Two Tracts on Government*. I will then look at the "Essay Concerning Toleration," as a fundamental shift in Locke's thinking, where he begins to acknowledge the impracticalities of absolutism and argues for the toleration of 'indifferent things' in religious worship as the most practical course of action. And finally, I will take a brief look at Locke's unpublished "Critical Notes" to Edward Stillingfleet's views on the problems of separating church and state, which shows a deepening of Locke's commitment to toleration, and an ever increasing willingness to criticize all forms of hypocrisy, be they Catholic, Quaker, or from his own Church of England.

Thomas Hobbes

It has been standard in Western liberal scholarship to characterize Thomas Hobbes as supporting for authoritarian rule. Indeed, the term "Hobbesian" has come to denote certain ideological qualities that tend toward rigidity, as an abundance of examples readily show. In his 1995 book, *The Unconscious Civilization*, John Ralston Saul argues that the impetus for neo-liberal capitalism finds an ideological partner in Hobbes' theory:

Our reforming elites have rejected the most blatant aspects of Hobbes' fear mongering to keep us in our place, but accepted almost entirely his view of social organization as a control mechanism.¹

Likewise, Paul Sigmund notes this trend in contemporary American politics. He writes:

Locke's political theory has also been invoked in discussion of foreign policy, contrasting the Lockean view of international relations, shared by Presidents Carter and Clinton, as an area where it is possible to develop the rule of law by mutual consent, with the Hobbesian view, adopted by the administration of George W. Bush, which holds that international relations are inevitably characterized by conflict and opposing interest.²

Although these characterizations of Hobbes as a linchpin for reactionary politics are easy to make in a post-liberal

¹ John Ralston Saul, *The Unconscious Civilization* (Concord, ON: House of Anansi Press: 1995, 162.

² Paul Sigmund, *The Selected Political Writings of John Locke* (New York: Norton, 2005), xxxix.

democracy, they evoked a much different response in the mid-seventeenth century. After the publication of *Leviathan* in 1651, many railed against his apparent atheism, including Locke who tried to distance himself from Hobbes in his later writings. While the 'Hobbesian' moniker may be useful in distinguishing the general character of certain theories or practices, like the oft-used phrase 'Machiavellian,' it fails to consider the historical context in which Hobbes wrote, and how his theories were determined in an environment much different from our own. What is more, to tar the young Locke with a 'Hobbesian' brush can have the negative consequence of tarnishing his later accomplishments through association. An understanding of Locke's early "authoritarian" *Tracts* must therefore be assessed on its own terms in order to show: firstly, how it differed from the writings of Thomas Hobbes and; secondly, why Locke felt, at the time of its composition, that authoritarian government was both justifiable and necessary.

Leviathan was composed while Hobbes was in exile in Paris between 1640 and 1651. Having fled England in 1640, before the onslaught of the Civil War, he would remain in France until 1651, the same year his great work was to be published. In this way, *Leviathan* was very much a reaction

to the perils of sectarian conflict, leading him to famously observe that life in a state of nature was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,"³ and to resolve a principle or social contract for legitimate government. Hobbes argued that the equal capacity of humans to kill one another required a covenant of "every man with every man," where all the parties of a contract would agree that whoever is chosen as the people's representative, will be accorded absolute authority in exchange for her or his protection. As he writes in *Leviathan*:

A commonwealth is said to be instituted when a multitude do agree and covenant, every one with every one, that to whatsoever man or assembly of men shall be given by the major part of the right to present the person of them all, that is to say, to be their representative, every one, -as well as he that voted for it, as that voted against it, shall authorize all the actions and judgments of that men or assembly of men, in the same manner as if they were his own, to the end to live peaceably amongst themselves, and be protected against other men.⁴

Hobbes' views caused quite a stir in post-civil war England, inevitably helping to alter the political discussion on where the locus of authority should reside within the state. Most contentious among his claims were his depiction of the state of nature as a state of war, and his contractual theory of government, the latter evoking

³ Thomas Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, William Molesworth, ed., vol. III (London: Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1966), 113.

⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *English Works*, vol. III, 113.

much disdain from proponents of biblical-patriarchal theory. As Stanton points out, "The paternal account supposed that the grace that settled on the magistrate as head of the visible church gifted him superiority in understanding, which in turn entitled him to direct others."⁵ For Hobbes, patriarchal power was not derived from the right of the father, but from the consent of the multitude, who agreed to abide by a specific covenant.⁶ Implicit in this critique was that it removed the necessity of hereditary rule in favour of rule by election. While notions of absolute authority remained in place, the sanctity of a ruler's right, and by extension, the authority of her or his religion, became secondary to the needs of securing the civil state.

In constructing his theory of government, Hobbes drew on a variety of thinkers, including Thomas Aquinas and Richard Hooker, in order to establish what he believed were the determining features of natural right and natural law. As Sigmund writes:

Reformulating the traditional understanding of natural law of Hooker and Aquinas, [Hobbes] distinguished between natural right and natural law, defining natural right as the liberty to do whatever is necessary, including killing, too preserve oneself, and natural law as the rules or laws that can best

⁵ Timothy Stanton, "Locke and the Politics and Theology of Toleration," *Political Studies* Vol. 54 (2006), 88.

⁶ Parker, *Biblical Politics*, 78.

promote self-preservation, if, and only if, generally adopted and enforced.⁷

According to Hobbes, magistrates had no obligation to their subjects save to use their power reasonably. And since the law of nature commanded the imperative of self-preservation, rulers were given a blank check to bring in the reigns of dissent. Notions of limited and mixed government were considered foolish, serving to weaken the purpose of civil power, and lending it a vulnerability that it could scarcely afford.

On a practical level, there is little doubt that Locke and Hobbes shared a strong conviction that anarchy was the worst of evils, and that any form of government that could secure the peace was better than a state of war. Having been educated under the assumptions of traditional scholarship and having lived through two decades of civil strife, it is not surprising that Locke's first articulation on civil government was a defensive one. In an oft-quoted comment from the *Tracts* Locke writes, "I no sooner found myself in the world than I perceived myself in a storm which hath lasted almost hitherto."⁸ To what extent this reaction was 'Hobbesian' is not exactly clear, as the war left most - intellectuals, clergy, and laymen alike -

⁷ Sigmund, *Political Writings*, 241.

⁸ John Locke, *The Two Tracts on Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967) Philip Abrams ed, 119.

in a constant state of fear and uncertainty. It would take Locke several more years of inquiry, debate, and personal experience before he could see beyond the immediate need for security to the long-term value - both practical and scriptural - of toleration.

The Two Tracts on Government

The *Two Tracts on Government* was Locke's first attempt at dealing with the challenges, both theoretical and practical, of establishing civil authority. The first *Tract*, written in English under the lengthy title, *Question: whether the Civill Magistrate may lawfully impose and determine the use of indifferent things in reference to Religious Worship* (1660), was a point-by-point refutation of Edward Bagshaw's *The Question Concerning Things Indifferent in Religious Worship* (1660), where he made the case that individuals should have the freedom to observe or reject religious ceremonies according to their consciences, and noted that the use of force has no scriptural justification as such rites are 'indifferent' and therefore of no moral consequence.⁹ Furthermore, he maintained that the nature of Christianity was to be "free and unforced" and that plurality in worship was "comely and harmonious,"

⁹ See Philip Abrams, "John Locke as a Conservative" in *Two Tracts*, 5.

and encouraged unity among believers. Locke's second *Tract* was written in Latin and made no mention of Bagshaw's work. In both texts, the question at hand was whether or not the magistrate should permit the use of 'indifferent things' (i.e., those things such as the manner, place, and time of ceremony) in religious worship. Both Bagshaw and Locke were in agreement that the forms of worship such as time and place, clothing and posture are 'indifferent,' and therefore unnecessary to salvation. Bagshaw differed from Locke, however, on whether or not they should be regulated, which he maintained was contrary to Christian liberty. Locke would deny this liberty and uphold the right of the magistrate to impose uniformity in 'indifferent' matters, arguing that it was necessary for the cause of civil order and peace.¹⁰

While the *Tracts* represent an anomaly of sorts from the more 'liberal' Locke of the *Two Treatise* or the *Letter*, it is important to note that his general conception of religious authority and his critique of Christianity remained essentially the same throughout his intellectual career. In the *Two Tracts*, Locke rejected the view that the magistrate should establish orthodoxy and legislate morality for the purpose of salvation, observing that

¹⁰ See Robert P Kraynak, "John Locke: From Absolutism to Toleration," *The American Political Science Review*, 74 (1980), 55.

whenever the state would use such authority, it gave rise to the sectarian preferences of ambitious clerics whose cruelty and hypocrisy undermined the Christian message. Locke proffered an alternative conception where the state was not to concern itself with the truth of opinions, but focus instead on their social value in the interest of civil peace. The trajectory of Locke's thinking, therefore, from the *Tracts* to the *Essay* and the *Letter*, reveals a continuity in principle throughout his career. Where he would change over time was in his theological understanding of the Christian message, and in his practical strategy for addressing the role of civil authority in relation to the church and the state. In the case of the latter, Robert Kraynak notes that this strategy can assume two distinct forms:

One form is secular absolutism, in which the state establishes a religion but makes no claim that it is the true religion; it merely imposes an arbitrary uniformity on warring sectarians for the sake of civil peace. In this case, orthodoxy is replaced by a 'positive religion', and the priesthood is clearly subordinated to the prince. The second form of the limited state is liberal toleration, in which the state disestablishes religion altogether and confines itself to protecting civil interests.¹¹

In 1660, Locke opted for the former, although he differed from his contemporaries in several key ways.

¹¹ Ibid, 55.

Throughout the *Tracts*, Locke draws on a variety of thinkers such as Hooker and Sanderson, in support of his arguments for civil government. Indeed, Locke was echoing the likes of Sanderson and Parry¹² when he stated that only an outsider to England could think that such things as "the time and place of worship" were insufficient causes for civil strife. Such "liberty for tender consciences" had been "the first inlet" to all the chaos that had spread throughout England. What is more, such liberty only emboldened those who were disgruntled and ambitious and susceptible to "zealous mistakes and religious furies," being "inspired" with the dangerous ideas of "crafty men." Indulging pleas for liberty was therefore seen as a gateway to "contention, censure, and persecution" and "the tyranny of religious rage."¹³ On a practical level, Locke denied that "toleration might promote a quiet in the world," by arguing that claims of 'liberty of conscience' would be used as a pretext for persecution. This was because "conscience is nothing but an opinion of the truth" and a "private judgment," and therefore unable to secure

¹² John Parry was an acquaintance of Locke's at Oxford in the late 1650s and early 1660s. Influenced by Robert Sanderson, a revered Anglican authority, Parry was a staunch defender of the imposition of indifferent matters in worship. See Marshall, *Resistance*, 10-11.

¹³ John Locke, *Two Tracts*, 120.

the civil peace.¹⁴ While Locke agreed with Bagshaw that 'indifferent things' are undetermined by natural law, he was led to the conclusion that magistrates must legislate 'indifferent things', precisely because they are indifferent. Since 'indifferent things' were not based on Scripture, they fell into the realm of civil concerns and were left to the discretion of the sovereign on the condition that her or his judgment was arbitrary and removed from any precepts of religion. The magistrate only errs, Locke writes, when she or he:

presses doctrines or laws upon the belief or practice of men as of divine original, as necessary to salvation, and obliging the conscience, when they are no other but the ordinance of men.¹⁵

The judgment of the magistrate in such matters is therefore expedient requiring only an outward conformity, and can hold no claim on the inward beliefs of her or his subject's. In this respect, Locke parted from many of his contemporaries. As Marshall observes, "Locke did not adopt the theory to be popular with many Anglicans throughout the Restoration, that penalties could make men consider and thus change their beliefs."¹⁶ Locke's position was, on the contrary, that the magistrate's rulings on religion obliged subjects "to act but not to judge; and, providing for both

¹⁴ Ibid, 138, 238.

¹⁵ Ibid, 171.

¹⁶ Marshall, *Resistance*, 16.

at the same time, unite a necessity of obedience with a liberty of conscience."¹⁷ In advancing this liberty of judgment, Locke allowed for divergent understandings, but not divergent practices, thus enabling him to present the *Tracts* as enlivened by "no less a love of liberty" than a respect for authority.

Underlying Locke's position here was his recognition of the boundaries between the church and the state. Although he does make mention in the *Tracts* that the Church of England is the "purest church of the latter age," he gives no indication of his preferred form of church government. Avoiding the question of the divine right of kings Locke asserts that:

To meddle with that question whether the magistrate's crown drops down on his head immediately from heaven or be placed there by the hands of his subjects, it being sufficient to my purpose that the supreme magistrate of every nation what way soever created, must necessarily have an absolute and arbitrary power over all the indifferent actions of his people.¹⁸

Locke's position in the *Tracts* can thus be seen as an assortment of some of the leading theories of his day, read through his own lens, blending authority and liberty, as he readily maintains. As Abrams notices, Locke "picks the purest of all available versions" to represent all

¹⁷ Locke, *Two Tracts*, 172.

¹⁸ Ibid, 122.

patriarchal arguments in the *Tracts*, and "the most thoroughgoing statement of social contract theory."¹⁹ For example, following Sir Robert Filmer, who wrote unabashedly in defense of the divine right of kings, Locke proceeds as though he could be arguing from the patriarchal idea of a direct grant of power to the heads of families by God, in order to legitimize the will of the sovereign.²⁰ But as the previous quote reveals, he was not at all comfortable with this line of reasoning. Since his theory would appease those who held a patriarchal position anyway, Locke did not need to go into further detail.

In arguing against Bagshaw it was not surprising that Locke would echo the arguments of Thomas Hobbes, since his was one of the most widely articulated theories of absolute government at the time. Locke shared with Hobbes the belief that civil society must control those 'primitive liberties' that are so common to humans in a state of nature, and that the only way to do so was by granting absolute power to the sovereign. He disagreed with Hobbes, however, in Hobbes' claim that one's private liberty of judgment should be restricted and resemble the will of the magistrate. In Locke's conception, the surrendering of freedoms was not to be undertaken for oneself or for a particular religious

¹⁹ Abrams, "The Politics of Conservatism," in *Two Tracts*, 74.

²⁰ Locke, *Two Tracts*, 74.

worldview but for the preservation of social order.²¹ From this it followed that the magistrate should not be able to impose 'necessary things' (i.e., things that she/he deems necessary for worship), since force cannot change inner belief, although she/he retained the right to judge what is 'necessary' or 'indifferent.' If the sovereign legislates 'indifferent things' as necessary, however, she/he commits a sin before God, but must nonetheless be obeyed.²²

Ultimately for the young Locke, it was not the rational instinct of self-preservation, as Hobbes would have it, that maintained the social order, but the unrestricted ability of the magistrate to impose her or his law, unimpeded by the politics of religious wrangling. The advantage of this strategy allowed Locke to use the weight of Hobbes' argument to support his theory, while eliminating those elements that could undermine his notion of a morally guided universe. As Kaynak puts it:

This perfects Hobbes' theory by making preservation the end of government, while creating an obligation to obey beyond self-preservation; and it removes the natural right to self-preservation as a pretext for disobedience. Such a foundation is the culmination of Locke's 'persistent strategy' to remove all appeals to divine or natural law-in the name of the true religion, moral virtue, or self-preservation-above the arbitrary will of the magistrate.²³

²¹ Ibid, 77.

²² Locke, *Two Tracts*, 150.

²³ Kraynak, "From Absolutism to Toleration," 59.

In the end, for the young Locke, the restoration of peace and order trumped the liberty of conscience. As he writes:

Such a condition makes men realize that the disadvantages of government... [are] far less than are to be found in its absence, as no peace, no security, no enjoyments, enmity with all men and safe possession of nothing, and those stinging swarms of miseries that attend anarchy and rebellion.²⁴

As important as it was for Locke to draw in the reigns of anarchy, the need for peace and security did not exceed the individual's liberty of judgment, nor did it proclaim that the magistrate's authority was given by divine right. Locke would soon change his view on 'indifferent things' when his former assumptions failed to hold, as he voiced his new position in the *Essay Concerning Toleration*.

The Essay Concerning Toleration

Shortly after he wrote the *Two Tracts on Government*, Locke began to change his position on toleration by arguing for limited magisterial power over worship and by modifying his view of human nature. While much was to transpire in the seven years between the *Tracts* and the *Essay*, it will be enough to briefly outline some of the major factors that contributed to Locke's transition from absolutism to a more inclusive form of toleration. Among the developments that

²⁴ Locke, *Two Tracts*, 156.

would factor into this important change in Locke's thinking was his association with Robert Boyle, his trip to Cleves in 1665, and his relationship with Lord Anthony Ashley Cooper.

In the early 1660s Locke became friends with Robert Boyle, who had played a hand in Peter Pett's *Discourse on Liberty of Conscience*, a tract that argued in favour of comprehension in religious ceremonies.²⁵ This friendship with Boyle seems to have had an impact on Locke, as they began a correspondence on a variety of matters, including issues of social order and toleration. As Marshall notes, "Boyle's personal influence in the years after 1660 was probably pushing [Locke] away from seeing rigid uniformity as necessary to order."²⁶ Writing to Boyle from his diplomatic mission to Cleves in 1665, Locke reported good relations between the Calvinist, Lutheran, and Catholic populations.²⁷ He wrote

²⁵ Robert Boyle was a friend of Locke's at Oxford, who later became renowned for his contributions to science. Today he is largely regarded as the first modern chemist and the first scientist to keep accurate experiment logs. Pett's *Discourse on Liberty of Conscience*, was published with Boyle's encouragement. As Marshall notes, "The *Discourse* argued, in common with most Anglican works of the period, that liberty of conscience was preserved as liberty of belief despite enforced *adiaphora*, but it also pleaded energetically for comprehension in ceremonial." He further argues that the *Discourse's* emphasis on the centrality of Christian morality likely helped Locke "gain an early awareness of the 'Latitudinarian' views." See John Marshall, *Resistance*, 46.

²⁶ Marshall, *Resistance*, 46.

²⁷ In 1665 Locke was commissioned to the post of secretary to the diplomatic mission of Sir Walter Vane to Brandenburg. He was sent to

[They] quietly permit one another to choose their way to heaven; and I cannot observe any quarrels or animosities amongst them upon the account of religion. This good correspondence is owing partly to the power of the magistrate, and partly to the prudence and good nature of the people, who (as I find by enquiry) entertain different opinions, without any secret hatred or rancour.²⁸

While highlighting the obvious benefits of travel, these letters show that Locke was grappling with the nuance of religious worship as it was practiced in different places, and trying to reconcile these observations with his own experiences. In addition, he further observed that Catholicism in Cleves was "a different thing from what we believe it in England," and that he had not met "soe good naturd people of soe civill as the Catholick priests."²⁹ While not all of Locke's correspondence was favourable toward Catholics during this time, it does show a change of tact by acknowledging the possibility of peace without uniformity, a theme he would take up two years later in the *Essay*.

Locke met with Anthony Ashley Cooper in the summer of 1666, one of the most influential figures in the court of Charles II. Cooper would later lead an opposition party

Cleves to pled England's case for either the neutrality of Brandenburg against the Dutch or their favour on the side of the British. See Parker, *Biblical Politics*, 14.

²⁸ John Locke, *The Correspondence of John Locke*, E.S De Beer, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976-89, 8 vols.), 1:175.

²⁹ Ibid, I: 177, 180.

that would plot armed resistance against the King, and would serve as a mentor to Locke for the next 17 years. Locke's early association with Lord Ashley was an important influence on the development of the *Essay*, which he composed in Ashley's residence in 1667, advising the King on matters of toleration. Matters of trade also factored into their position, since religious indulgence was considered a boon to economic development, as the examples of the Dutch and the large number of dissenters who traded in England clearly revealed. As Marshall writes:

Although trade was often cited as one reason for toleration, and 1667 saw a trade depression that made this a particularly pressing issue, it is difficult indeed to believe that the primary influence on the 'Essay' here was not that of Ashley himself. Ashley pressed upon the King the legitimation of the Declaration of Indulgence of 1672 by proclaiming it necessary for the encouragement of trade.³⁰

Having confronted a living model of toleration at Cleves, and challenged his old theories through his association with the likes of Boyle and Lord Ashley, Locke came to a new articulation on the question of indulgence in the *Essay Concerning Toleration*. Ultimately, he was led to the conclusion that absolutism was impossible since it suppressed the psychological needs of conscience and led to sectarian warfare. Furthermore, his position that worship

³⁰ Marshall, *Resistance*, 70.

was no longer 'indifferent' but rather necessary to people's beliefs, meant that the regulation of sects and opinions needed to be undertaken if the king was to maintain the civil peace. In short, Locke came to see the right of conscience not as a matter of religious principle, but as a pragmatic solution for the effective management of the state.³¹

In the *Two Tracts*, Locke had maintained that personal convictions could not be altered by the use of force. In the *Essay*, he went a step further by arguing for a provisional toleration of religious practice. This shift in thinking seems to have come from his growing recognition that human beings tended toward their own happiness or preference in matters of religious worship. Consequently, when humans were forced to conform to 'indifferent things' they became alienated, and sought out others to join them in rebellion. As Marshall puts it:

It seems probable that the example of thousands of dissenters in England who were accepting persecution and damage to their civil interests, and the influence of an increasing number of hedonic analyses of men being developed in the Restoration... had led Locke to think that his theory in the *Two Tracts* of the alienation of religious decisions was simply not a sustainable basis for a regime, either in political theory or in practice.³²

³¹ Kraynak, "From Absolutism to Toleration," 60.

³² Marshall, *Resistance*, 66.

In addition to his changed view on how best to control religious dissent, was a change in perspective on the natural capacities of human beings. In the *Two Tracts*, Locke had argued that the masses were little more than 'beasts' in their appetites, while in the *Essay* he acknowledged that all people contained an inherent spark of reason, and held the magistrate to be as fallible as her/his 'fellow-men'. Reversing his earlier claims, Locke wrote that "human nature... preserve[s] the liberty of that part wherein lies the dignity of man, which could it be imposed on, would make him but a little different from a beast."³³ This elevation of human nature was a crucial step toward toleration, and would characterize much of Locke's later work.

Robert Kraynak observes that Locke's tact in the *Essay* is to forge a kind of middle ground between Aristotle's view of human beings as rational creatures, and Hobbes' belief that humans are utterly vain. "In avoiding Aristotle's idealism and Hobbes' cynicism" he writes, "Locke is led to a new interpretation of human partiality as man's pride in his reason or his sense of dignity as a rational animal."³⁴ This insight helped Locke to explain the

³³ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Toleration*, J.R. Milton and Philip Milton, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 287.

³⁴ Kraynak, "From Absolutism to Toleration," 61.

impossibility of absolutism: since people believe that their opinions are *necessary*, and *necessary* beliefs cannot be changed by the use of force, toleration or liberty of conscience must therefore be permitted. But because this was often the cause of sectarian strife, Locke needed to mitigate this freedom with certain checks and balances that would allow for liberty of practice without impinging on matters of civil peace. Accordingly, he maintained that it was not human compulsion that was the correct way to heaven, "but the voluntary and secret choice of the minde," and that it is "only between God and my self, hath in its owne nature no reference at all to my governor or to my neighbor, & soe necessarily produces no action which disturbs the community."³⁵ Ultimately, it would seem that it was practical rather than religious reasons that led Locke to his particular conclusions in the *Essay Concerning Toleration*, as this privatization of religion - a theme he will further develop on the *Letter* - clearly reveals.

Locke's fruitful experience in Cleves, and his patronage under the likes of Boyle and Ashley, helped him to refine his insights on the dilemma of toleration and develop a new perspective on the indifference of religious worship, and on speculative opinions in general. As Locke

³⁵ Locke, *Essay*, 274.

brings the *Essay* to a close, he is careful to point out that that toleration is only acceptable if it conduces "the majority of one minde and incourages vertue in all." Thus, Locke's refined perspective in the *Essay* was still one that clung to the possibility of religious unity, with the "termes of church communion as large as may be."³⁶ It would take several more years for Locke see that unity was no more probable under the Church of England than under a Catholic monarch, and move toward a genuine theory of the separation of the church from the state.

"Critical Notes"

In leading up to our discussion of the *Letter Concerning Toleration* in chapter three, we have thus far looked at two of Locke's better-known attempts to deal with the subject. A third, and lesser-known work that also deals with toleration is Locke's "Critical Notes" on Edward Stillingfleet's *Mischief of Separation and Unreasonableness of Separation*. Composed in 1680 in response to Stillingfleet's defense of legislating Anglican conformity, the "Critical Notes" is, in Mark Goldie's estimation, "the most important of Locke's works not yet published."³⁷

³⁶ Ibid, 302.

³⁷ Mark Goldie, *Political Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 372.

In his *Mischief and the Unreasonableness*, Stillingfleet argued for the legal establishment of the Church of England, as he believed that it resembled the true and primitive form of church government. Unwilling to expand his rigid view of revealed theology, Stillingfleet's thesis very much resembled that of the young Locke in his *Two Tracts of Government*: he saw freedom of conscience in terms of Christian liberty, maintained a measure of indifference when discussing the relations of conscience and civil order, and assumed the necessary co-direction of church and state due to the frailty of human nature.³⁸ As with his "Essay on Toleration," Locke opposed such notions in the "Critical Notes," pointing out that the use of force in matters of worship served only to join people together in opposition. Likewise, he continued his support for toleration of other religions and for various Protestants who were outside of the Church of England, and increased his attack against both dissenters and Anglican clerics. As Marshall observes:

[Locke] condemned unequivocally both their own pretensions to *jure divino* authority and their compulsion of other Christians and even of their own church members. Attacking both Anglican and dissenting clergy, the 'Critical Notes' raised the anticlericalism voiced in the 'Letter From a Person of

³⁸ Stanton, "Politics and Theology," 97.

Quality' to a level unparalleled in its venom by any of Locke's other works.³⁹

While Locke had his suspicions of dissenters and non-conformists, he was also committed to helping them find a compromise with the Church of England. He pointed out how both the dissenters and the Anglicans had contributed to the problem of civil strife and even noted, in the case of the latter, the "apprehension of many sober Protestants of the Church of England, that the setting up of all these outward formalities... and narrowing the terms of Communion" at the "King's happy restoration" had contributed more to the vulnerability of Protestantism than "the miscarriages of our dissenters, who I will not deny to have had their share in it".⁴⁰ Locke's ire was thus directed as much at his own church as a source of Protestant weakness.

Responding to Stillingfleet, Locke argued that toleration would "lesse cause endless contentions, than the imposeing uniformity" unless used to "extirpate all dissenters", which was not "agreeable to the Christian tradition." Believing that toleration was the path to true unity, he upheld the notion that "it suffices for the union

³⁹ Marshall, *Resistance*, 98.

⁴⁰ MS Locke c34, 8-9; 144-5. Cited in Marshall, *Resistance*, 99.

of Protestants that they keep up a Friendship under different formes and modes of worship".⁴¹ Here Locke was echoing his psychological argument for peace through sectarianism that he had developed in the "Essay." As he writes:

The readiest way to bring men to their wits, and so back again to a reasonable conformity (next to kind usage) is to let them wander until they are weary for I think opposition and rigor work nothing upon them.⁴²

Persuasion and not force was therefore the best way to stem the tide of separation.

While Locke still maintained hostility toward Catholics, his criticism was tempered with a distinction between one's political allegiance and the rights of worship: "If the papists are punished for anything but for being subjects to a prince that hath a declared enmity and war to us I think they have hard usage."⁴³ Locke will develop this line further in his treatment in the *Letter*, as we shall come to see in the next chapter.

Where Locke's argument ultimately falls short is in its failure to complete the picture of toleration as both a practical and a scriptural imperative. As Marshall observes:

⁴¹ MS Locke c34, 142-145. Cited in Marshall, *Resistance*, 99.

⁴² MS Locke c34, 148. Cited in Marshall, *Resistance*, 109.

⁴³ MS Locke c34, *Ibid*, 26.

The 'Critical Notes' pointed out the incongruity of the use of force to institute ritual observance when Christianity was a religion of peace and immorality was not punished, but even though it had been hinted at as early as the end of the first draft on toleration and was present in some detail in the 'Critical Notes', Locke still did not mount a full argument that toleration was a duty of Christianity; that was not to come until the opening pages of the *Letter Concerning Toleration* in 1685.⁴⁴

The addition of Scriptural arguments in support of toleration would be a significant contribution to the *Letter Concerning Toleration*, adding the necessary moral authority to Locke's various pragmatic concerns.

Locke's transition from authoritarianism to toleration was a subtler shift than it appears at first glance. In his early academic career, he advocated authoritarian government for the sake of civil peace, while opposing any attempt to legislate morality for the purpose of salvation. His transition toward a more tolerant outlook came from his experiences with various scholars in England and abroad, and in having witnessed an example of peaceful interaction first-hand. With the *Essay on Toleration*, Locke was able to argue in favour of the use of 'indifferent things' having realized that inward belief was a necessary component of religious practice. His insistence that, in preventing such modes of practice, the magistrate was only inciting

⁴⁴ Marshall, *Resistance*, 107.

dissenters into rebellion showed a new and powerful psychological dimension to his argument. With his *Critical Notes*, Locke was able to take his case a step further by labeling his own church as complicit in the weakening of Protestant unity, and thus advancing a critique that gave to his theory a near-universality in character. As we will see in the next chapter, Locke will take a dramatic leap with the *Letter Concerning Toleration*, moving beyond his native England to France, Constantinople, and even the New World, while offering both a practical and a moral argument for the dilemma of religious toleration.

Chapter Three

Locke's theory of toleration and the separation of church and state has been borrowed, applied, and reworked from such thinkers as Voltaire, to Thomas Jefferson, to Carl Becker and Leo Strauss. What value the *Letter* may hold for contemporary discussions on toleration is a matter of considerable debate. I will attempt to address this issue in the fourth and final chapter. In this chapter, I wish to highlight some of the divergent commentary that the *Letter* has evoked, and explore how that commentary has effected interpretations of Locke's theory of toleration.

It should be emphasized that few scholars have dealt with the purely theological underpinnings of the *Letter Concerning Toleration*. Indeed, Locke scholarship in the twentieth-century has often been at odds with such interpretations, relying heavily on secular arguments for explaining his theory of toleration. Kim Ian Parker speaks to this point when he writes:

Though a number of scholars have stressed the religious influences on Locke ... few have devoted themselves entirely to Locke's use of Scripture in the development of his political thought.¹

¹ Parker, *Biblical Politics*, 1.

As was noted in the first chapter, the modern rise of interest in Locke's political philosophy was sparked by the purchase of the *Lovelace Collection* by Oxford University in 1947, which allowed scholars access to many of Locke's unpublished works for the first time. In chapter two, we saw how a hitherto unknown "conservative" Locke attracted scholarly attention in Philip Abrams 1967 edition of the *Two Tracts on Government* (1660). Prior to this time, scholars were at a great disadvantage in their quest to divine the evolution of Locke's theory of toleration, as they lacked several key documents that shed light on his early political and religious understanding. Since the availability of the Lovelace Collection to scholars, some have taken it upon themselves to go beyond a purely materialist reading of Locke, and to stress the importance of engaging with his deeply held religious convictions. Some of these scholars include: John Dunn and Richard Ashcraft, who first broached the subject of Locke's religious influences; John Marshall, who wrote two books (1994, 2006) detailing the political and religious milieu of seventeenth-century England and its impact on Locke's theory; Jeremy Waldron and Greg Forster, who stress the importance of a theological understanding of Locke's philosophy; Joshua Mitchell, who argues that Locke's

purpose in the *Letter* is to unveil a dialectic of biblical history; Kim Ian Parker, who explores whether or not Locke's politics is dependant upon his biblical exegesis; and Timothy Stanton, who reexamines Locke's theological motivations for denying persecution and offers a valuable model for dealing with Locke in the present.

Taking my cue form this colourful group of thinkers, I will argue that a sound theological understanding of the *Letter Concerning Toleration* is essential to understanding the moral implications of Locke's theory. Moreover, I will propose that a reanimation of Locke's moral criteria in the *Letter* is vital to contemporary debates on toleration and the separation of church and state. To limit oneself to a secular interpretation of the *Letter* is not only to err, but to overlook what I would argue is its most enduring and fundamental appeal - namely, an honest and compelling attempt to bring rational, dispassionate argument into the realm of religion, while denouncing hypocrisy, and displaying respect for the importance of divergently held religious beliefs. While some of Locke's prescriptions prove difficult for the contemporary world, such as his views on atheism, the "essence" or core principles of his theory speak very much to the modern dilemma of religious toleration. In a post-9/11 world, where political,

religious, and secular wrangling threatens to tear civil society apart and escalate the already fragile state of global security and peace, a theory such as Locke's, which was forged in the midst of civil conflict, offers a unique and constructive model as we look to the problems that face us in the twenty-first century. What is more, a theological understanding of Locke's theory of toleration forces scholars to engage with diverse religious viewpoints, and come to some understanding of how they shape the politics and morality of their adherents. While such a line does not guarantee that secular-minded political scientists (among others) will approach theological positions with respect, it may help broaden the debate on the role of religion in politics and society by forcing critics to address the difficulties and challenges that are posed by religious toleration with a greater awareness and sensitivity to both their secular and their spiritual dimensions.

The Materialist Reading of Locke

If there is a single influence that one can point to in the modern era that has marked the propensity to read Locke in secular terms it is that of Leo Strauss. Strauss was a German émigré who taught at the University of Chicago, and developed an influential theory of Locke in

his *Natural Right and History* (1953). He argued that Locke had covertly deviated from the traditional natural law teaching in his writings for fear of censorship, and had, in actuality, followed Hobbes' thinking on the centrality of self-preservation. To prove this, Strauss points to Locke's belief that reason could not demonstrate the existence of an afterlife, which belies his theological concerns. For instance, Locke maintained that divine revelation was the only source for the law of nature. On the other hand, Locke also argued that, in order for a law to be a law, it must not only be given by God, but must also sanction divine rewards and punishments in another life. Yet if reason cannot demonstrate the existence of an afterlife, then rewards and punishments can have no hold. Hence, the law of nature cannot be revealed. In Strauss's interpretation of Locke, therefore, it followed that, "Natural reason is therefore unable to know the law of nature as law."² From this Strauss claims that since the state of nature is a condition of "pure anarchy," and since all human beings have a "want of society," the first and strongest desire that God gave to human beings was that of self-preservation. The desire for personal happiness or the "right of nature" is therefore innate in all humans and,

² Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). Quoted in Sigmund, *Selected Political Writings*, 275.

unlike the law of nature, necessarily precedes it as its foundation.³ Through this shift from natural duty to natural right, the individual becomes the centre of the moral world. Strauss writes:

According to Locke, man and not nature ... is the origin of almost everything valuable: man owes almost everything valuable to his own efforts. Not resigned gratitude and consciously obeying or imitating nature but hopeful self-reliance and creativity become henceforth the marks of true nobility.⁴

Strauss declared, therefore, that, "Locke is a hedonist."⁵ In order to achieve happiness a shift away from the state of nature is required, with human beings as its prime movers.

While Strauss' interpretations of Locke have been widely challenged and largely discredited, they have nonetheless had an impact on subsequent research in the field.⁶ Paul Sigmund has phrased the point well:

Despite the rejection of Strauss's view by scholars of Locke, his interpretation of Locke's thought as secular, hedonist, relativist, and egoist continues to be influential, especially among conservatives.⁷

In the 1980s, for example, Thomas Pangle, following Strauss, argued that Locke's writing revealed a covert

³ Strauss, quoted in Sigmund, *Ibid*, 277.

⁴ Strauss, *Ibid*, 279.

⁵ Strauss, *Ibid*, 281.

⁶ Sigmund, xxvii.

⁷ Sigmund, 273.

opposition to Christianity. Similarly, Michael Rabieh writes, in his essay "The Reasonableness of Locke or the Questionableness of Christianity", that Locke's interpretation of Christianity was a minimalist creed that helped "take God off of people's minds," by basing human behaviour on rewards and punishments, and promoting a rational and self-interested morality. He writes:

The Reasonableness of Christianity refashions Christianity into not only a support but a justification for a mercenary morality by presenting Jesus himself as an exemplar of mercenariness. *The Reasonableness of Christianity* for Locke thus consists in the political effectiveness of a properly interpreted Christianity, and in nothing more than this.⁸

Rabieh goes on to remark that Locke's model of the law of nature was little more than a thinly veiled hedonism that helped to bring about the secular state.

While Rabieh sees Locke's Christianity as an expedient for its "political effectiveness", Peter C. Myers, another Straussian, argues in his book *Our Only Star and Compass* (1998), that Locke offers a scientific and historical approach in his conception of the state of nature:

The state of nature in Locke is neither Biblically rooted nor a mere heuristic contrivance, but rather represents an application of Locke's natural-

⁸ Michael Rabieh, "The Reasonableness of Locke, or the Questionableness of Christianity," *The Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 54 (1991), 937.

scientific or natural-historical approach to the study of human nature.⁹

While these and other such examples are rather explicit in their recognition and indebtedness to Struass' theory of Locke, several other interpreters, who neither mention Strauss's influence nor follow his conclusions, have continued in the secularist/materialist tradition of ignoring the significance of Locke's deeply held religious views. Robert Kraynak's essay, "John Locke: From Absolutism to Toleration" offers a case in point.

Kraynak argues that Locke's intellectual/political development - from absolutism to toleration - was not a dramatic one, but rather an evolution by degrees that allowed him to maintain the general assumptions of his theory on civil government, while modifying the specific requirements for the church and the state. He maintains that Locke uses a "political analysis of religion" in the *Letter*, "to show why the disestablishment of opinions is necessary for civil peace."¹⁰ To do this, he argues that Locke needed to strike a balance between cynicism and dogmatism in his understanding of morality and to "find a middle ground of 'moderate skepticism' which serves as the

⁹ Peter C. Myers, *Our Only Star and Compass: Locke and the Struggle for Political Rationality* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield: 1998), 26.

¹⁰ Kraynak, "Absolutism to Toleration," 45.

basis for a liberal conscience and complete disestablishment" of religion.¹¹

The advantage of Kraynak's approach is that it allows for an interpretation of Locke that diminishes his earlier preference for absolutism to one of necessity and circumstance. More importantly, it portrays Locke as an architect of civil government who was able to read into the dividing lines of church and state and construct a balance that could sustain competing conceptions of the good. While Kraynak's approach is useful for its astute political assessment, it ultimately falls short in its failure to recognize the authoritative role of Scripture in Locke's theory. By ignoring the moral and divine mandates that give Locke's works their inspiration and their authority (in the eyes of their author and in believers), secular interpretations do not take into account the ontological support system that enabled them to make sense in the first place. To put it differently, how can we take seriously a theology such as Locke's if there exists no authority on which to place his claims? More troublingly, if Locke was a covert atheist, as Strauss maintains, then his moral writings rest on an insincere foundation. Writing on the

¹¹ Ibid, 45.

differences between traditional and modern worldviews,
microbiologist Jacques Monod offers a fitting observation:

No society before ours was ever rent by contradictions so agonizing. In both primitive and classical cultures the animistic tradition saw knowledge and values stemming from the same source. For the first time in history a civilization is trying to shape itself while clinging desperately to the animistic tradition to justify its values, and at the same time abandoning it as a source of knowledge.¹²

Monod's purpose here, though not addressing the question of toleration specifically, speaks to a fundamental difference between Locke's time and our own. It forces us to consider whether it is possible to use Locke's theory to justify present-day codes of conduct without considering the intimate link between knowledge and values in Locke's time. If we are to regard Locke's theory of toleration as anything more than a historical curiosity, then it is crucial that scholars contemplate how the theological climate in seventeenth-century Europe has impacted political thought (both then and now), and how it provided both the motivation and the backbone for thinkers such as Locke to uphold their moral theories.

The Theological Reading of Locke

¹² Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972). Quoted in Huston Smith, *Why Religion Matters* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 41.

A theological reading of Locke should in no way be seen in contrast to a materialist reading. It is, rather, a supplement that can broaden our understanding of *why* his theory of toleration has been so influential, and provide deeper insight into *how* it can be interpreted today. One of the problems that we find with a materialist approach to Locke is that it situates his argument as a means-end relationship, and reduces it to little more than an "eclectic composition" rather than as a paradigmatic theory of toleration. When we consider the latter, writes Timothy Stanton, Locke's theory takes on a whole new meaning:

The theory explains why toleration is the political consequence of our knowledge and our moral position, not simply the default that follows from the failure of persecution- should it fail.¹³

This twofold emphasis of knowledge *and* morality, recalling Monod's distinction between knowledge and values, lends a depth to Locke's theory that is otherwise lacking. By ignoring Locke's requirements of a divine authority, people are apt to use his theory selectively, neglecting to include the ethical imperatives that gave his philosophy its strength in the first place.

Timothy Stanton's recent essay, "Locke and the Politics and Theology of Toleration," makes the bold claim

¹³ Stanton, "Politics and Theology," 85.

that Locke, more than any other thinker, offers an "articulation of the range of questions necessary for identifying the scope" of the solution to the problem of toleration.¹⁴ In order for this to happen, he argues, an approach must be devised that situates his theory on "genuine Lockean terms." Such terms, Stanton points out, were first observed by D.G Ritche, and are worth quoting here at length:

Over a century ago, D.G Ritche was able to notice, if not explain, how '[a] change in the notion of what constitutes a Church, and a change in opinion as to what is essential in religious belief and what is not, and furthermore, a diminished sense of the importance of correct intellectual conceptions about the nature of God ... with, perhaps, some skepticism as to the possibility of attaining complete certainty in such deep matters' are all necessary preliminaries to accepting Locke's theory of toleration... This article takes its cue from Ritchie and argues that these, together with a changed view of human capacities (P5), are correlated conditions sine qua non, without which Locke's theory is deprived of its comprehensive explanatory power¹⁵

With these criteria in mind, Stanton seeks to contest the popular claim that the main consideration that guided Locke's theory of toleration was the notion that "persecution is ineffective as a means of instilling true belief."¹⁶ The problem with such an approach, Stanton argues, is that it reduces Locke's political theory to a

¹⁴ Stanton, 99.

¹⁵ Ibid, 85.

¹⁶ Stanton, 84.

'means-end relationship,' and ignores the fact that it was founded on a sincerely held philosophical view that he based on the human condition. As with Mitchell, Stanton points to Locke's belief that people were naturally capable of self-direction and therefore able to abide by the precepts of natural law. In this manner, Locke was able to overcome the older, paternalistic view of government,¹⁷ which had held that the state depended on divine grace for its sustentation. Locke understood that human capacities were neither limited to the judgment of any one individual nor to the confines of any one "true" church. Church order was the product of human invention and "embodied no intrinsically authoritative model, only the dispositions of those who constructed it."¹⁸ Civil society, for its part, implied a "correlative treatment," though it was only with the *Letter* that Locke came to a definitive interpretation. As Stanton explains:

The premise had been a brute assertion in 1667, but the status now attributed to the church decisively altered its relation to the state and made an explanation possible. It did so because it implied that the state had no business to promote or to protect religion, true or otherwise. If questions of revealed truth *did not bear directly on the relations of the church and state*, a role for the state in upholding such truth would be impertinent (*italics added*).¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid, 85.

¹⁸ Ibid, 89.

¹⁹ Ibid, 90.

Stanton's last point here is one that has often escaped notice in Lockean scholarship. For Locke, the separation of church and state did not mean that all matters pertaining to religion should be excised from civil authority. It meant, rather, that those things that were not explicitly mentioned in Scripture - indifferent things - could not be used by the church or state to be forced onto others. The state's purpose was seen more in terms of owing certain divine requirements, while keeping to a strictly secular bearing: "Because the intentions were God's, the authority of the state was secured; because they concerned only life on earth, its secular character was guaranteed."²⁰

Take, for example, Locke's view on property, where God's design required that humans expand their dominion - to "be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth (Gen. 1:28)." Since natural law provided these purposes as rationally apprehensible to all, and since these faculties were identical in all human beings, "a common dominion over the earth was posited on this basis." Absolutism was therefore precluded, and a form of civil government was implied that was to protect life, liberty, and property, on the condition that God's purposes were pursued.²¹ This

²⁰ Ibid, 90.

²¹ Ibid, 91.

canceled out the older view of human depravity on which the advocates of persecution laid their claim. God's requirements, instead, implied a separation of church and state. All things considered, Stanton concludes, the link between coercion and persecution - and hence toleration - only makes sense when people are assumed to be capable of directing themselves as God requires. More importantly:

Such an assumption is necessary to taking the cognitive claims of religion consistently seriously: people must be supposed able to form true and sincere beliefs out of natural resources and capacities common to all if those beliefs are to be regarded (in principle) as equally worthy of respect. Without this assumption, *it is difficult to explain why the limits of toleration should extend in principle to every human being* (italics added).²²

For Stanton, as for Mitchell and others, it is the principles drawn from natural theology, which underscore the natural capacities of human beings and the end for which civil government is created, that give Locke's theory of toleration its explanatory power. Thus conceived, Locke's theory takes on a whole new dimension that requires scholars to take note (as Parker observes) "that his political teaching is *integrally dependant upon...* his biblical exegesis."²³ Turning now to the *Letter Concerning*

²² Ibid, 95.

²³ Parker, *Biblical Politics*, 1.

Toleration, I will examine Locke's biblical politics with these features in mind.

In his essay, "John Locke and the Theological Foundations of Liberal Toleration: A Christian Dialectic of History", Joshua Mitchell holds that Locke's theory of toleration "is best understood in the context of his larger argument about the political significance of Christ."²⁴ He maintains that liberal toleration is founded on a Christian dialectic of history, of which Locke's interpretation plays a crucial role. To fully understand this, writes Mitchell, one must first understand the significance of the New Dispensation, which runs something like the following: Prior to Christ, the use of force was condoned (i.e., in the Old Testament) as a way of eliminating idolatry. With the New Dispensation, however, reason and not power became the true foundation of duty, which transformed the use of political force from a necessary measure into a hindrance to both civil peace and salvation. As Mitchell observes: "And it is because of this radically new situation that Locke concludes that religious affairs ought not to be impinged upon by political power."²⁵

²⁴ Joshua Mitchell, "John Locke and the Theological Foundations of Liberal Toleration: A Christian Dialectic of Christian History," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 52, 1 (Jan., 1995), 64.

²⁵ Mitchell, *Theological Foundations*, 66.

In the *Reasonableness of Christianity* (1696), Locke observed that many pre-Christian societies, such as those found in ancient Greece or in China, were inspired by the light of reason, though they remained morally deficient without a clear revelation from God. As Locke writes, "[but it was] too hard a task for unassisted reason, to establish morality, in all its parts, upon its true foundation with a clear and convincing light."²⁶ Since this use of reason was not founded on divine authority and, moreover, was limited to the privileged few, it could not assume a universal quality. It was only through Christ's revelation that reason became the cornerstone of faith by extending virtue "to those who previously could not have attained it; cure[d] the defects of local versions of morality and supplant[ed] it with a universal morality."²⁷ Being tolerant then, was an admission that Christ came to clarify the Old Testament law so that *all* humans could exercise their God given reason and discover the light within. It is for this reason, Mitchell writes, that Christian truth demands that local differences be tolerated. In this way, Locke's theory offers a vision of toleration that is critically dependant upon a biblical understanding. According to Mitchell, the New Dispensation is seen to provide not only the moral

²⁶ Mitchell, *Ibid*, 72.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 73.

authority for toleration, however, but also a teleological impulse that suggests a universal significance for the course of human history. As Mitchell writes:

By its authority, revelation was able to accomplish what the philosophers could not: extend the rule of reason to those who previously could not have attained it; cure the defects of local versions of morality and supplant it with a universal morality; and finally, level differences in knowledge between those who once had the leisure to know and those who did not. Now both groups stand before the revealed truth and are informed by it.²⁸

If Mitchell is right, Locke's theory takes on a universal significance precisely because God has played her hand and transformed history. In the absence of this mandate, Lockean toleration would have no more weight than the great philosopher's who, in Locke's words, through unassisted human reason, "failed men in its great and proper business of morality. It never," he continues, "from unquestionable principles, by clear deductions, made out an entire body of the law of Nature."²⁹ It is worth repeating here that secular interpretations of Locke's theory of toleration remain both morally and conceptually bankrupt without a firm grounding in his theologically informed biblical politics. Once considered, questions of Locke's legacy and his relevance for contemporary politics get turned on their

²⁸ Ibid, 73.

²⁹ John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity, with a Discourse of Miracles and part of a Third Letter on Toleration*, L.T Ramsey ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1958), 56.

heads, forcing scholars to contemplate how seventeenth-century European Christian-centric political philosophy should be understood in the present and how it may or may not apply in a multi-religious and secular world.

Summary and Analysis of the Letter Concerning Toleration

After a short introduction by William Popple, who credits Locke for having laid forth a theory of toleration "more exact than any we have yet seen,"³⁰ Locke opens the *Letter* with a clear declaration of his intentions. Appealing to the Christian sensibilities of his audience he launches into a rhetorical barrage of provisos meant to illustrate the marks of the "true church," in order to distinguish precisely what the church *is* from what it *is not*. Using the Gospels as his guide, Locke seeks to support his claim that the 'true church' is one of "charity, meekness, and goodwill," and show that, contrary to the use of "ecclesiastical dominion" and "compulsive force," a true Christian must "make war upon his lusts and vices" and follow the example of Christ who sought to persuade others only through "admonitions and exhortations" in the ways of the true church. As a means of asserting these claims,

³⁰ Locke, *Letter*, 126.

Locke will repeatedly point to the hypocrisy of many so-called Christians who, while eager to "persecute, torment, destroy, and kill" in the name of God and salvation, ignore the vices of "whoredom, fraud, malice, and such like enormities" amongst their friend's, family, and in themselves.³¹

Playing to the Christian sensibilities of his audience, Locke's opening remarks serve to point out not only the hypocrisy of those who claim to be righteous, but also to warn Christians that those who indulge in such vices "'shall not inherit the kingdom of God' (Gal. 5:21)."³² It is in these opening lines that we see the emergence of two important themes that will characterize much of Locke's argument: *the prevalence of hypocrisy and lust for power in the temporal realm, and the consequences of this behaviour in the world to come*. These two themes, what John Perry has called Locke's "dichotomy between this world and the next," constitute the primary convergence of his theory of toleration, supplying it with both a practical/political fecundity, and a sound theological foundation. The first theme, as we have seen, has had a significant impact on political theorists in search of a justification for the separation of church and state.

³¹ Ibid, 127.

³² Ibid, 127.

Within this framework, Locke's theory is made, as Robert Kraynak attests, "in order to remove the establishment of orthodoxy as a pretext for domination."³³ Sweeping religion aside, the materialist approach values Locke's theory on strictly pragmatic grounds, and considers his theology (if it is considered at all) as little more than a practical expedient to establish religion as private good and a public evil. The second theme speaks to rewards and punishments and the question of morality in general. This is what Greg Forster had in mind when he wrote that the *Letter* was a work about salvation disguised as political theory.³⁴

It is worth noting that this question of the "world to come" can be viewed in two distinct ways. The first, as we have seen with the materialist argument, is as an expedient. Its usefulness, therefore, is directly proportional to the extent that it can convince people that toleration is truly the word of God. The implication of this approach, though not addressed by the materialists, implies that Locke uses Scripture to manipulate religious belief in the interests of a specific political end, suggesting an insincerity of belief. If this is in fact the case, then Locke's theory of toleration is predicated on a

³³ Kraynak, "From Absolutism to Toleration," 63.

³⁴ Greg Forster, *John Locke's Politics of Moral Consensus*, 162.

lie, which calls into question a whole new range of difficulties. If, on the other hand, Locke's religious views are sincere, then we must consider how it is that they were a product of their time, and how, in light of present-day concerns (and if we agree that Locke's theory is anything more than a historical curiosity), we might substitute or update his ideas accordingly.

There is little doubt, after reading the opening lines of the *Letter*, that Locke grants special importance to the New Testament. Quoting Scripture three times in the first thirty lines, Locke's argument is teeming with a theological impulse that submerges the reader in the teachings of the Gospels. His insistence on the duty of charity speaks to a moral imperative, in the absence of which hypocrisy and lust for power will surely prevail. John Marshall speaks to this point in his book *John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture*:

Although political scientists nowadays tend to pass by Locke's argument in the *Letter on Toleration* on the basis of charity and concentrate more on political arguments, there is no question that for Locke, as for his contemporaries arguing for toleration, the duty of charity was a crucial argument for toleration as charity was the most important duty of Christianity, and also polemically central in order to reply to the contemporary argument for intolerance from 'charity'.³⁵

³⁵ Marshall, *Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture*, 656.

By elaborating on the historical framework in which Locke constructed his theory, where theological concerns were given the highest regard, Marshall situates Locke's polemic on both materialist and theological grounds. The effect of this, as we will come to see, is a considerably different interpretation of Locke's theory of toleration.

Defining the State

In order to clarify his case for the separation of church and state, Locke defines what it is that makes both realms unique, and asserts that each sphere will be better served by restricting itself to its own separate domain. Accordingly, the role of the state becomes limited to the temporal realm of civil affairs:

It is the duty of the civil magistrate, by the impartial execution of equal laws, by laws imposed equally on all to secure unto all the people in general, and to everyone of his subjects in particular, the just possessions of these things belonging to this life.³⁶

Thus confining the magistrate's power to the things of this world, Locke makes clear from the start that authority of the sovereign has no business in matters of salvation.

The laws of the state, says Locke, are made for the purpose of equity and justice and are to serve and protect

³⁶ Locke, *Letter*, 130.

these ends. It is because of this, he writes, that the extent of the magistrate's "civil power, right, and dominion," is limited to preserving the temporal good and "it neither can nor ought in any manner to be extended to the salvation of souls."³⁷ This is so for three main reasons. The first is that the care of souls cannot be entrusted to the magistrate any more than to the common citizen, since God never granted any such authority to one person over another. Perhaps in a veiled allusion to Hobbes, Locke takes his point further, affirming that no such power can "be vested in the magistrate by the consent of the people," since doing so would mean that individuals would abandon the care of their own salvation to another. Such a state of affairs would be contrary to the true religion, which Locke insists is dependant on the "inward persuasion of the mind."³⁸ This distinction between the interior realm of faith and the outward realm of force is what Joshua Mitchell has called "the cornerstone of Locke's call for toleration."³⁹ From this Locke's second reason naturally follows. The magistrate's power to use force has no bearing on the true and saving religion. While it is true that she/he may use force in civil matters, her/his

³⁷ Ibid, 130.

³⁸ Ibid, 130.

³⁹ Mitchell, "Theological Foundations of Liberal Toleration," 65.

domain does not extend to articles of faith, dogma, or forms of worship. Locke's third and final reason that the care of souls cannot belong to the magistrate is because force and penalties are contrary to the goal of salvation. Thus he inquires, if there is only one truth, why do the princes of the world differ so greatly in matters of religion? Appealing to logic and to history (what Robert Kraynak and others have called Locke's "psychological argument"), Locke reasons that if there was only one truth then only one nation on earth would be in the right and "men would owe their eternal happiness or misery to the places of their nativity."⁴⁰ As we saw with Kraynak earlier in this chapter, the separation of the state from the church was enacted "in order to remove the establishment of orthodoxy as a pretext for domination."⁴¹ This is why, as Locke attests, "The business of the law is not to provide for the truth of opinions, but for the safety and security of the commonwealth."⁴² For Kraynak, Locke's "psychological argument" provides a political analysis of religion that he promotes in order to supply the necessary safeguards against the priestly ambition to establish orthodoxy, which allows him to put forward a program for liberal toleration.

⁴⁰ Locke, 132.

⁴¹ Kraynak, "From Absolutism to Toleration," 63.

⁴² Locke, 132.

For all its practical purposes, Kraynak's analysis ignores Locke's attention to Scripture as a source of sincerely held religious conviction. More troublingly, it implies that Locke is insincere, using religious language and arguments in order to manipulate his readers into taking up his position. Alternatively, Joshua Mitchell argues that it is the political significance of Christ that provides the greatest substance for Locke's theory of toleration, where the coming of Christ transformed the use of political force from a necessary unpleasantness into a hindrance to both civil peace and to salvation. As he writes: "And it is because of this radically new situation that Locke concludes that religious affairs ought not to be impinged upon by political power."⁴³ This belief in the New Dispensation supplies Locke with his moral imperative, for it upholds the right of all human beings to use their God given reason to direct themselves, without necessary recourse to the directives of the state.

Defining the Church

Locke defines the church as a "voluntary society" that people choose to join for the public worship of God. He shared this position with other prominent 17th century

⁴³ Ibid, 66.

theorists who also understood the church as separate and voluntary. As Marshall observes:

Aubert's *Pacific Protestant* argued that religion was a voluntary obedience and sacrifice of the heart which could not proceed from force... Bayle's *Philosophical Commentary* argued that the 'inward disposition' was the 'essence of religion' and that the gospel required men to follow it through reason rather than be forced as a 'slave'. Crell's *Vindication* quoted Lactantius in arguing that 'nothing is so voluntary as religion, which if the minde of him that sacrificeth dislike, then it becomes none at all.'"⁴⁴

For Locke, "nobody is born a member of any church," since belief, unlike property, cannot be inherited. People must choose the society that they believe is most acceptable to God, with the expectation of eternal life being the only tie that unites them to this end.⁴⁵ As he writes in the *Letter*, "No member of a religious society can be tied with any other bonds but what proceed from the certain expectation of eternal life."⁴⁶ This is because the New Dispensation (following Mitchell and Stanton) reveals that all humans must use their God given reason to determine the truth for themselves.

Responding to the common objection that the "true church" must have a Bishop or a Presbyter, Locke quotes Matthew 18:20, to support his claim that Christ had imposed

⁴⁴ Marshall, *Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture*, 651.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 132.

⁴⁶ Locke, 132.

no order upon his church - "For the promise he has made us, that wheresoever two or three are gathered together in his name, he will be in the midst of them."⁴⁷ This limitation precludes the call for ecclesiastical authority and makes Scripture the essential precondition for the establishment of church order:

If it not be more agreeable to the church of Christ to make the conditions of her communion consist in such things, and such things only, as the Holy Spirit has in the Holy Scriptures declared, in express words, to be necessary to salvation? I ask whether this be not more agreeable to the church of Christ, than for men to impose their own inventions and interpretations upon others, as if they were of divine authority; and to establish by ecclesiastical laws, as absolutely necessary to the profession of Christianity such things as the Holy Scriptures do either not mention, or at least not expressly command.⁴⁸

Locke's rule of thumb is therefore prescriptive - when in doubt air on the side of Scripture.

In two short, lesser known essays, *Sacerdos* and *Error*, dated approximately 1698,⁴⁹ Locke had written on the evolution of the priesthood and the concept of orthodoxy arguing that the first Christian communities had been focused on how to live a moral life, and did not concern themselves with forms of worship, speculative opinions, or

⁴⁷ Ibid, 133.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 133.

⁴⁹ Lord Peter King. *The Life and Letters of John Locke* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1972; first published 1830). Quoted in Kraynak, 54.

matters of church hierarchy.⁵⁰ Instead, Locke writes, the first churches were developed by the Apostles, who had left behind local leaders (bishops or presbyters) in the cities they had converted to Christianity. Shortly thereafter, these various congregations became united "upon pretense of preventing schism and heresy, and preserving the peace and unity of the church." It was only after this that churches became "subjects of power and matters of ambition," and gave rise to "metropolitans and archbishops" until one "true church" was created.⁵¹ In sum, the practices of excommunication and the punishment of heresy came about as a way to consolidate church hierarchy and not because of any requirements laid forth in Scripture. In a similar vein, Locke concludes in the *Letter* that since there have always been divisions amongst churches, it follows that choice and deliberation are necessary and that each church should be able to choose its ruler(s) from as long or short a succession as they see fit.⁵² The end of a religious society is therefore the worship of God, and the use of force to be employed by the magistrate alone.

⁵⁰ Kraynak, 68.

⁵¹ King, *Ibid*, 54.

⁵² Locke, *Letter*, 133.

The Duties of the Church and State

After defining the rightful boundaries of the church and state, Locke turns to examine the magistrate's duty toward questions of outward worship and articles of faith. Comparing the terrestrial health of a subject to the care for her/his soul, he asks, "Shall it be provided by law that he consult none but Roman physicians, and be bound to live by their prescriptions?"⁵³ Reasoning that such matters are indifferent, Locke concludes that choosing one's church is like the choosing of a doctor, and should be left to the judgment of the individual. Just as the magistrate cannot prescribe the one and only remedy for an unknown illness, she or he cannot claim to have care of a subject's soul.⁵⁴ Implicit in this logic is a denial of the divine right of kings, which leads Locke to conclude, "Princes, indeed, are born superior unto men in power, but in nature equal."⁵⁵ For those who would object, Locke reminds his readers how history is filled with examples of the church being swayed by the lure of princely power:

How the church was under the vicissitude of orthodox and Arian emperors is very well known. Or if those things be too remote, [our] modern English history affords us fresher examples, in the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary, and Elizabeth, how easily and smoothly the clergy changed there decrees their

⁵³ Ibid, 139.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 141.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 141.

articles of faith, their form of worship, everything according to the inclination of those kings and queens.⁵⁶

While it is clear that all people are to enter into some religious society for the public worship of God, and in such a one that is appeasing to their consciences, it is not so clear what guidelines should regulate the outward rites of worship and articles of faith. And while it is true that the magistrate does hold power over 'indifferent things,' Locke makes it clear that in such a case, "The public good is the rule and measure of all law-making."⁵⁷ The magistrate has no power to enforce certain rights and ceremonies if they are outside of her or his lawful jurisdiction, as this would constitute an offence to God. This is so because 'indifferent things' are not able to propitiate the deity, and therefore cannot be mandated by human authority. Although it is within the magistrate's authority to order that all infants be washed for the prevention of a certain disease, she or he may not make the same pronouncement if it is done for the salvation of souls.⁵⁸ The former is a political obligation, while the latter is indifferent.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 143.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 145.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 145.

As for articles of faith, Locke makes a distinction between those opinions that are practical and those that are speculative, noting that none should be forbidden so long as they don't interfere with the civil rights of an individual.

If a Papist believe that to be really the body of Christ, which another man calls bread, he does no injury thereby to his neighbor.⁵⁹

In the same paragraph, Locke tactfully disassociates himself from such opinions, thus showing a model for how one may, in the tradition of Voltaire, disagree with what a person says, while defending their right to say it:

I readily grant that these opinions are false and absurd; but the business of laws is not to provide for the truth of opinions, but for the safety and security of the commonwealth, and of every particular man's goods and person.⁶⁰

In such a manner, Locke answers the objections of his detractors by exemplifying his edict that belief cannot be legislated, and that coercion in such matters is not only contrary to the "true church," but corrupts all those who would partake in it. As Robert Kraynak has observed, Locke's strategy here is to maintain "the possibility of orthodoxy, while creating doubt, but not total cynicism about discovering it." This reminds people, he continues,

⁵⁹ Ibid, 152.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 152.

"of human fallibility; it suggests that the truth coexists with many errors and is difficult to possess with certainty."⁶¹ Combined with Mitchell's observation on the necessity of heterodoxy, and the moral implication thereunto, we see with Locke the makings of a genuine theory of toleration.

On the question of idolatry, Locke rejects the common appeal to the Law of Moses to justify persecution on the grounds that it does not apply to Christians. He admits that those pre-Christian apostates who were "initiated in the Mosaic rites, and made citizens of the commonwealth [of Israel]" were guilty of treason. This is because the commonwealth of the Jews "was an absolute theocracy: nor was there, or could there be, [as after the birth of Christ], any difference between that commonwealth and the church."⁶² With the New Dispensation, it is revealed that reason is the true foundation of duty, which allows for differences to diminish over time as the universal message of Christ becomes available to more and more people. This is what Joshua Mitchell had in mind when he called Locke's theory of toleration "A Christian Dialectic of History." Mitchell's purpose here is worth repeating: "The distinction between the interior realm of faith and the

⁶¹ Kraynak, "From Absolutism to Toleration," 64.

⁶² Locke, *Letter*, 151.

exterior realm of power is the cornerstone of Locke's call for toleration."⁶³ This is so because Christ message was universal and could only be realized if reason was free to gain hold. As Mitchell writes, "To persecute the heterodoxy of others ossifies the relationship of 'otherness' which the universality of the Christian message can overcome, provided reason is given the latitude to discover it."⁶⁴ It is for this reason, for the sake of Christian truth, that Christians are required to accept heterodoxy and reject the use of force.

It is instructive to note how Mitchell references the *Reasonableness of Christianity* to illustrate this point, observing how it is only through a theological reading of the *Reasonableness*, that the significance of the unconcealment of Christ can be properly understood. He writes:

By its authority, revelation was able to accomplish what the philosophers could not: extend the rule of reason to those who previously could not have attained it; cure the defects of local versions of morality and supplant it with a universal morality; and, finally, level differences in knowledge between those who once had the leisure to know and those who did not. Now both groups stand before the revealed truth and are informed by it.⁶⁵

⁶³ Mitchell, *Theological Foundations*, 65.

⁶⁴ Mitchell, *Ibid*, 66.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 73.

Perhaps it is not surprising why a text entitled *The Reasonableness of Christianity* would not elicit closer attention outside of religious studies departments. In the absence of this deeper analysis of Locke's philosophy, it is not difficult to see how scholars (and in particular political scientists) might miss the underlying significance of Christ for Locke's theory of toleration. Greg Forster speaks to this point when he observes that the *Reasonableness*, although written for less politically urgent reasons, is of "great interest to the construction of moral consensus along the lines suggested in the *Letter*."⁶⁶ The fact that it was composed some ten years after the *Letter*, and served to fill-in some of the theologico-political gaps left in his earlier works, should be reason enough to secure its value as a source of insight for understanding Locke's political theory.

The Problem of Atheists and Catholics

Where Locke has no doubt gotten into trouble among modern scholars of political philosophy is with his seeming intolerance toward atheists and Catholics. Consider the following statement by Anne Philips: "That the principles did not extend to either atheists or Catholics further

⁶⁶ Forster, *Moral Consensus*, 131.

confirms that Locke was not in the business of being even-handed."⁶⁷ This assumption that Locke employed a double standard in matters of toleration has sometimes been used to discredit his standing in the Western liberal tradition. How can he really be "liberal", it is asked, if his vision of toleration only extends to Protestant Christians? As we will see in the next section, Locke's theory did in fact extend beyond Protestants to pagans (polytheists), Jews, and Muslims alike. Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that it is political considerations, and not any objection to religion (in the case of Catholics) that Locke finds problematic. On the question of atheists and Catholics Locke writes, "No opinions [doctrines] contrary to human society, or to those moral rules which are necessary to the preservation of civil society, are to be tolerated by the magistrate."⁶⁸ The question of tolerating Catholics was one of considerable debate at the time of the *Letter's* composition. As John Marshall notes, the Catholic position that belief did not need to be kept with heretics "was cited frequently by Protestants as one reason that Catholics had revoked the Edict of Nantes." Moreover,

⁶⁷ Anne Philips, "The Politicisation of Difference: Does this Make for a More Intolerant Society?," In *Toleration Identity and Difference*, John Horton and Susan Mendus eds., (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 128.

⁶⁸ Locke, *Letter*, 156.

Marshall observes that the Catholic question was not a simple one and required careful attention to nuance within the faith:

It seems probable that in writing the *Letter* Locke thought that at least some Catholics in England and in the Netherlands were politically as well as religiously tolerable, as they did not hold that faith did not have to be kept with heretics, nor that excommunicated kings were deposed, and were themselves tolerant and yet at the same time thought that very many Catholics, especially but not merely Jesuits, were indeed intolerable, and wished to register both of these position in the *Letter*.⁶⁹

Locke's purpose was therefore to point out the incongruity of serving two Master's, as was the case of English Catholics who divided their allegiance between the king and the Pope. Placed in the proper context, the nuance of his proposal becomes clear, which amounted to more of a contingency than an outright command. As Forster has noticed, "It was not the religion of Catholicism or Islam that Locke finds intolerable, but the violent and subversive political use to which those religions were put."⁷⁰ To put it simply, toleration for Locke is limited to those who are willing to tolerate others.

On the question of atheists, Locke writes that, "Promises, covenants, and oaths... which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist. The taking

⁶⁹ Marshall, *Early Enlightenment Culture*, 692.

⁷⁰ Forster, 174.

away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all."⁷¹ Behind Locke's furor here lay the assumption that atheism itself is a form of intolerance because it denies the moral and theological ground upon which society can be maintained. An unpublished manuscript that Locke composed in the 1690s called *Ethica B*, explains the point further: "If a man were independent he could have noe law but his own will noe end but himself. He would be a God to himself, and the satisfaction of his own will the sole measure and end of all his actions."⁷² Such a line was commonplace in seventeenth century Europe, as atheists were seen as 'profligate wretches' and 'libertines' who lived their lives in hopes that their deeds would go unpunished.⁷³ James Tully puts it thusly:

For Locke, as for almost all his contemporaries, only belief in a God who punishes the wicked and rewards the virtuous in an after life provides most individuals with the motive- self-interest - sufficient to cause them to act morally and legally.⁷⁴

If Locke's concern with "rewards and punishments" seems antiquated, one need only to consider the plague of moral relativism that has marked the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries to understand his concern. Add to

⁷¹ Ibid, 158.

⁷² Locke, cited in Marshall, *Early Enlightenment Culture*, 696.

⁷³ Ibid, 696.

⁷⁴ James Tully, *A Discourse on Property: John Locke and his Adversaries* (Cambridge: 1980), 8.

this the fact that belief in a Christian God was nearly unanimous in 17th century Europe, and we can better grasp the logic of his statement. In contrast, Locke held no such restrictions for polytheism, for it, too, offered the rewards and punishments of the divine.

Can Toleration extend to non-Christian Religions?

Locke's argument for the toleration of other religions is perhaps best understood through a theological lens, provided by his understanding of the New Dispensation. As we have seen Lockean toleration finds its greatest limitation with atheists since, as he writes, "The taking away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all."⁷⁵ This is because without a moral code that is binding, promises cannot be kept or made. Locke is therefore able to tolerate pagans, Muslims, and Jews, who all believe in the existence of rewards and punishments, thus enabling the proper requirements for moral behaviour. With the New Dispensation, reason became the standard of duty, canceling out the use of force to root out idolatry. Instead, only "admonitions and exhortations" could bring people to the "true church." As Locke writes in the opening lines of the *Letter*, "These things, and all others of this nature, are

⁷⁵ Locke, *Letter*, 158.

much rather marks of men striving for power and empire over one another than of the Church of Christ."⁷⁶ If reason is inhibited by external force, and this is as true for Muslims as it is for Christians, then salvation cannot prevail for "she will be but the weaker for [she cannot do so through] any borrowed force violence can add to her."⁷⁷

The obverse of this is seen when Kraynak writes, "When orthodoxy is subordinated to sincerity and the priesthood is replaced by individual self-reliance, the climate of opinion has been created for a tolerant personal religion."⁷⁸ While it is true that Locke does place sincerity as the benchmark for true and saving belief, Kraynak's contention runs into trouble when it comes up against the paradox of the New Dispensation - i.e., that universality and heterodoxy are not inconsistent. In light of this requirement, we find pause when he observes the following:

Only such conditions could sustain the delicate inconsistency that one orthodoxy exists, but everyone is orthodox who sincerely believes he is so; or that anyone can be saved by a personal religion which he sincerely believes to be true for himself.⁷⁹

While it may be true that Locke is hesitant to declare what constitutes orthodoxy, he does not maintain that anyone can

⁷⁶ Ibid, 126.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 153.

⁷⁸ Kraynak, "From Absolutism to Toleration," 65.

⁷⁹ Kraynak, 65.

be saved for simply believing what is true for themselves. If this were the case, then the most minimal of doctrines that were meant, to quote Michael Rabieh, "to take God off of people's minds"⁸⁰ would suffice for salvation. Instead we see with Locke a consummate unwillingness to concede as to what is the true and saving religion, coupled with an insistence that Christ paved the way for humans to discover the "true church" for themselves. Since Christ erected no church to guide the dictates of the state, religion was necessarily separate, and no coercion in matters of faith was to be employed for any reason. Whether or not Locke believed that those who died a pagan or Jew would not find salvation, he would point out that:

Not even Americans [i.e., American Indians], subjected unto a Christian prince, are to be punished either in body or in goods, for not embracing our faith and worship. If they are persuaded that they please God by observing the rites of their own country, and that they shall obtain happiness [salvation] by that means, they are to be left unto God and themselves.⁸¹

Locke's strategy here is twofold: first, he provides the necessary conditions for civil peace by elaborating that coercion is inimical to salvation. He bases this on the assumption that Christ brought light and reason to the world, the exercise of which was the only way toward salvation. Second, Locke maintained the strength of his

⁸⁰ Rabieh, *The Reasonableness of Locke*, 937.

⁸¹ Locke, *Letter*, 149.

theological convictions by erecting not a minimalist creed, but rather one that required people to engage with the message brought by Christ in the New Testament:

But since men are so solicitous about the true church, I would only ask them here by the way, if it be not more agreeable to the church of Christ to make the conditions of her communion consist in such things, and such things only as the Holy Spirit has in the Holy Scriptures declared, in express words, to be necessary to salvation? ⁸²

Accordingly, Christians are not obliged to be sinless ambassadors of the faith, but are required to be free to discover the truth for themselves. Adherents of other faiths are to be formally tolerated since persecution is contrary to Christ's teaching, and since all people, "when they groan under any heavy burden, endeavour naturally to shake off the yoke that galls their necks."⁸³

In developing his argument, Locke cleverly employs the Gospels to show that if charity and goodwill direct us to look kindly upon those with whom we differ, encouraging exhortations instead of violence, then it is not only different churches we must accept, but those of different religions as well. His requirements for toleration proceed from both a pragmatic impulse based on history and reason, and from a firm theological conviction, which animates his theory and provides it with its moral integrity. Modern

⁸² Ibid, 133.

⁸³ Ibid, 160.

theories of toleration that wish to proceed along Lockean lines must first consider how Locke's theology served as a backbone for his political philosophy. Once this distinction is made clear, an opportunity arises to examine how both the secular and the spiritual combined in the construction of his liberal theory of toleration, thereby creating a space for this necessary interplay to unfold. Moreover, attempting to use Locke's theory for the present requires that scholars make clear what it was that gave it its strength in the first place, so as to situate it on a broader platform for examination.

Chapter Four

The sheer volume of contemporary scholarship on Locke's political and moral philosophy is enough to suggest not only a lingering influence, but also affirms the foundational character of his thought and its continued relevance to the modern world. Precisely *what* this relevance is and *where* it can be applied, is a question that I will attempt to answer in due course. Thus far, my purpose has been look at the evolution of Locke's theory of toleration, starting with his more authoritarian argument in the *Two Tracts*, followed by an analysis of some of the leading proponents for a theological understanding of his moral philosophy. As a foil to the "Straussian" approach, we looked at Timothy Stanton's essay, "Locke and the Politics and Theology of Toleration", which examined Locke's theological motivations for denying persecution, and proposed a model for understanding Locke in the present. Joshua Mitchell, for his part, offered a persuasive argument for the value of the New Dispensation, and proposed that Locke's theory of toleration "is best understood in the context of his larger argument about the political significance of Christ."¹ My point of departure

¹ Mitchell, "Theological Foundations of Liberal Toleration," 64.

has been a critical analysis of the *Letter Concerning Toleration*, while drawing on certain themes and ideas from some of Locke's other works such as the *Reasonableness of Christianity* and the *Two Treatise of Government*. In constructing my argument, I have been less interested in demonstrating the "truth" of Locke's theory of toleration, and more inclined to highlight those arguments that I have found most compelling so as to suggest what might be missing (or at least lacking) in contemporary scholarship.

In light of these considerations, it seems evident that despite a continued interest in Locke's political philosophy, combined with a persistent suspicion that he does indeed have something to say to our present situation, few have been able to effectively argue Locke's position for toleration with his religious argument in tact. The corollary of this, as we have seen most notably with the Straussians, has been the establishment and persistence of a pre-conceived bias that frequently depicts Locke's political philosophy as a thinly veiled hedonism that encourages self-interest and self-preservation as the right of nature and foundation of civil society. Apart from ignoring Locke's firmly held theological convictions, such a line has had the negative consequence of stripping his political prescriptions of their moral content.

This point is perhaps no better illustrated than with Locke's theory of property, which has been generally considered only for its utility in helping to overturn the old feudal order, and providing a justification for the unlimited acquisition of land. If we consider Locke's position from a theological perspective, however, a very different picture emerges. As Parker points out, Locke derives his theory of the natural right to property from the Book of Genesis, where humans are commanded to "be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth" (1:28). For Locke, this meant that property is to be used so long as it is in accordance with the rules of natural law, which restricts the acquisition of land to the needs of individuals and to their families, while ultimately serving the will of God. Crucially, land cannot be withheld if it becomes the cause of another's starvation, nor can it be allocated arbitrarily:

Indeed, in almost all cases, natural rights are limited by the law of nature and by Scripture such that it is more accurate to speak of Locke as advocating a series of obligations rather than individualistic rights, as he is so often taken to have done. These obligations are to be seen in terms of preservation - that is, preservation of God's workmanship and property, rather than the maximization of an individual's pleasure or wealth.²

² Kim Ian Parker, "The Creator, Inalienable Rights, and the Genesis of John Locke's Theory of Property," forthcoming in *Philosophy, Culture, and Traditions*, ed. by William Sweet, 2007, 10,11. Page numbering is to the typescript.

This example of how Locke interpreted his politics through the Bible shows how Scripture served not only as a benchmark, so to speak, for his understanding of the proper role of social and economic policies, but also how it provided both the moral authority and the limitations for its rightful use in the first place. Stripped of its biblical requirements, Locke's philosophy does indeed lend itself to utilitarian and hedonistic conclusions, both of which fail to grasp his original intentions and, more crucially, neutralize his moral/ethical obligations. Although some scholars have made significant inroads in arguing for the importance of Scripture in Locke's political philosophy (i.e., Forster, Marshall, Stanton, and Parker), none have been so ambitious as to embark on an in-depth exploration of the relevance of Locke's theory of toleration for the modern world. The one who comes closest to this is Forster, though to be fair to the others, their attentions were focused elsewhere.

Greg Forster's 2006 book, *John Locke and the Politics of Moral Consensus*, makes the bold claim that Locke's dual emphasis on faith and reason leads to an "ecumenical philosophy of liberalism",³ which he perceives as not only

³ Forster, *Moral Consensus*, 260.

central to Locke's thinking, but also crucial to solving "the violent Scylla of fanaticism and the all-consuming Charybdis of relativism"⁴ as it exists in the twenty-first century. His arguments for a renewed liberalism aside, Forster's book offers some useful insights on the importance of Locke's social philosophy in light of his theological understanding. For him, Locke is "well qualified to fill" the need for a reinvigorated political philosophy "because he shares our fear of the primordial fanaticism that religion can unleash."⁵ This is important because "social principles must be constantly renewed if they are to endure." As liberalism finds its "deepest historical roots" in the religious reforms of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, a "moral doctrine" lies at its foundation, which provides the basis for human equality in the political realm. The effect of this, he notes, was no less than monumental: "It was no longer enough to say that God would treat us all equally; liberals demanded that political authorities follow God's example in this regard."⁶ This condition prevented society from adopting extreme forms of individualism and rationalism, which "are dangerous because government action must have a basis in

⁴ Forster, *Ibid*, 259.

⁵ *Ibid*, 260.

⁶ *Ibid*, 263.

shared moral principles if it is to be accepted as legitimate."⁷ In modern times, the privatization of religion has had the effect of promoting a "feel-good 'spirituality'" on the one hand, and a "dangerously irrational, and illiberal" religious enthusiasm on the other.⁸ As a consequence, we now hang on a tenuous thread of "cultural inertia arising from previous generations of liberal theorists whose moral visions were persuasive in the population at large."⁹

Forster's conclusion has a persuasive power precisely because he is able to recognize the moral vacuum that is created when "society loses the intellectual sources of its principles," recalling Monod's distinction between knowledge and values that was discussed in chapter three. Forster's attempt to reinvigorate the theological foundation of Locke's theory for the present is unique in its depth and breadth, covering a range of Locke's most influential works in order to show how

[his] theory of moral consensus in epistemology, theology, and politics points the way to an effective method of reconciling, in our own time, religious and cultural diversity with the need for social and political solidarity built on a moral foundation.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid, 264.

⁸ Ibid, 267.

⁹ Ibid, 272.

¹⁰ Ibid, 272.

Forster's observations here point to a hitherto unexplored dimension to Locke's philosophy that, while ambitious and hard to pin-down, highlight what is most valuable for the modern dilemma of religious toleration - namely, a theory that is at once critical of the dominant structures of politics and belief while, at the same time, sensitive to the vagaries of human expression and the need for some connection to the divine. Unfortunately, Forster's partiality for a Christian solution to these problems seems to overshadow his goals of ecumenical harmony, despite his objections to the contrary. Near the end of his book, for example, Forster pauses to assure his readers that he is not calling for the "imposition of any one particular set of religious beliefs" which, he rightly concurs, would be illiberal."¹¹ Yet the tenor of his argument throughout the book suggests a preference for religious over secular culture, as is clear from his assertion that "... religious theories of toleration have an advantage over secular theories." The reason for this, he believes, is that religious toleration, unlike its secular counterpart, is not required to maintain neutrality on moral issues, but "can place the necessary limits on toleration without contradicting its own principles." These limits, moreover,

¹¹ Ibid, 268.

"can be justified by appeal to God's law."¹² While Forster is reluctant to state what he believes are the precise requirements of God's law, his argument seems to imply a near-facsimile appropriation of Locke's political theology. This is clearly illustrated by his view on the role of God's law in the political system:

But if the purpose of political power is to protect the God given freedom and equality of individuals, and authorities are required to allow expansive latitude for differing interpretations of God's law whenever possible, then the political system will be liberal.¹³

For Forster, the essential problem is how to balance the need for individualism and rationalism with a morally authoritative philosophy that will provide the proper limits for political society while avoiding extremes. Although certainly a noble goal, Forster's methods for achieving this end seem over-determined by an ambivalent commitment to affirming "God's law" within the overall political structure, and seem to ignore the contemporary realities of a multi-religious and secular world. Consider his argument for the existence of an objective moral authority:

It is one thing to say that individuals are independent moral agents, and quite another to say that individuals are independent moral agents that answer to God in the next life for their sins in this one. This formulation rules out the possibility that

¹² Ibid, 265.

¹³ Ibid, 265.

morality is simply subjective; God is undeniably an objective moral authority.¹⁴

Forster's approach here can be read as reaffirming Locke's oft-quoted line, "The taking away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all."¹⁵ Indeed, the fear of rewards and punishments, along with the unifying character of a genuine and widely held religious belief, do provide a firmer basis for moral consensus than the "heathen philosophers" who, as Locke observed, made laws "who had no other aims but their own power, reached no father than those things, that would serve to tie men together in subjection."¹⁶

The problem with this solution of course (as should be obvious to most contemporary readers), is that we no longer live in a world where such assumptions can gain wide acceptance (or consensus, to use Forster's term). Moreover, it is equally possible, as the Dalai Lama has observed, to "talk about ethics and morality without having recourse to religion."¹⁷ Despite the many insightful observations that Forster makes in his book, offering an invaluable and persuasive argument for the moral foundations of Lockean liberalism, his suggestions for reading Locke in the

¹⁴ Ibid, 265.

¹⁵ Locke, *Letter*, 158.

¹⁶ Locke, *Reasonableness*, 56.

¹⁷ Dalai Lama, *Ancient Wisdom Modern World* (Little Brown and Company, 1999), 28.

present run the risk of further alienating the already abundant reservoir of Locke scholars who either dismiss or reject his theology altogether. When we read, for example, on the final page of his book, that if liberalism is to survive in the long term "it must return to the divine,"¹⁸ a red flag goes up for many who may have otherwise found his argument convincing. While we might agree that Locke's philosophy can offer a method of reconciling religious diversity within the political realm by providing a moral foundation,¹⁹ Forster fails to address how this might play out amongst a world of competing viewpoints, to say nothing of the extremists and relativists of whose disproportionate influence he is understandably concerned. Moreover, he fails to effectively differentiate the "essence" of Locke's prescriptions from their historical/contextual application.²⁰ In other words, he fails to effectively salvage from Locke's theory what is potentially universal and therefore applicable to the present, from what is particular to his time and place.

¹⁸ Forster, 272.

¹⁹ Ibid, 272.

²⁰ By "essence" I mean to suggest those elements of Locke's argument such as his fear of orthodoxy, his insistence on human fallibility, or his commitment to a critical reading of Scripture, that transcend the narrow context of seventeenth-century Protestant England, and can be adapted (with some revision) to both secular and multi-religious contexts in the modern world. In this sense, we might be able to separate Locke's precise requirements (such as his insistence on rewards and punishments) from the response that his criticism is intended to have on his readers.

A possible supplement to Forster's line of reasoning can be found in Timothy Stanton's essay "Locke and the Politics and Theology of Toleration." As noted in chapter three, Stanton makes the bold assertion that Locke offers, more than any other thinker, an "articulation of the range of questions necessary for identifying the scope" of the solution to the problem of toleration.²¹ In his attempt to situate Locke's theory on genuine terms,²² Stanton shows how Lockean toleration is derived from principles of natural theology, which outline the equality of all human beings in their capacities toward reason and their ability to choose a form of government that, in theory, is representative of their opinions, ideas, and interests. Stanton cautions that no modern theorist who proceeds on Lockean assumptions will wish to reproduce him facsimile, but must instead:

Adduce a suitably profane substitute for natural theology, capable of doing the same conceptual work, assuming that the arguments that depend on the former cannot secure sufficient adherents today. Without this, the moral element often attributed to the concept of toleration is lacking: the protections the state affords are morally unspecific and quite unassured.²³

²¹ Stanton, 99.

²² For example, by denying that it is predicated on a means-end relationship where persecution is rejected because it is deemed "ineffective as a means of instilling true belief." Ibid, 84.

²³ Ibid, 99.

Where Forster assumes that we can simply "return to the divine," Stanton sees this as a stumbling block to Locke's thesis. His five-point methodology or "necessary preliminaries"²⁴ which, he maintains, gives Locke's theory its explanatory power, offer some cues for a potential universal reading of Lockean toleration. In particular, his third, fourth, and fifth preliminaries merit close attention:

'a diminished sense of the importance of correct intellectual conceptions about the nature of God (P3)... with, perhaps, some skepticism as to the possibility of attaining complete certainty in such deep matters (P4)... together with a changed view of human capacities (P5)...' "²⁵

We find a corollary in these Lockean conditions with modern thinkers such as Chris Hedges.

In his recent essay, "Why I don't believe in Atheists,"²⁶ Hedges challenges secular detractors of religion to embrace a more expansive view of the divine, showing parallels with Locke's skepticism on the nature of God in the *Letter* and in several of his other works. As Hedges writes:

God is a human concept. God is the name we give to our belief that life has meaning, one that transcends the

²⁴ See page 53 for Stanton's five-point argument.

²⁵ Ibid, 84.

²⁶ Chris Hedges, "I Don't Believe in Atheists" Truthdig.
http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/20070523_chris_hedges_i_dont_believe_in_atheists/ (accessed May 23, 2007).

world's chaos, randomness and cruelty. To argue about whether God exists or does not exist is futile. The question is not whether God exists. The question is whether we concern ourselves with, or are utterly indifferent to, the sanctity and ultimate transcendence of human existence. God is that mysterious force—and you can give it many names as other religions do—which works upon us and through us to seek and achieve truth, beauty and goodness. God is perhaps best understood as our ultimate concern, that in which we should place our highest hopes, confidence and trust.²⁷

The reader will have noticed that the above is considerably more tolerant than the precise prescriptions offered in anything written in Locke's moral or political philosophy. Indeed, Locke's assessment of other religions in the *Letter* as "false and absurd,"²⁸ is a far cry from Hedges' exhortations. In considering Locke's theory of toleration it is essential that we bear in mind some of the obvious historical biases that one might encounter, so that readers will be less inclined to throw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater, as is so often the case. Most notably, we would need to bracket-off Locke's Christian-centred approach, his emphasis on the power of divine rewards and punishments and the promise of salvation, and deal with the very difficult question of how he perceives religious authority as those things that are revealed by God. Steven

²⁷ Hedges, *I don't believe in Atheist's*, 1.

²⁸ It should be noted, however, that Locke was making a rhetorical point to say that we cannot regulate opinions with which we disagree. Locke, *Letter*, 152.

Forde notices this difficulty when he writes that for Locke, "it appears that the more rational a man is, the more providence becomes necessary to support his morality." This is because "those who think for themselves, who understand the true principles of rational action, need instead a reason for behaving morally."²⁹ Since we cannot assume (much less enforce) the promise of providence today, "a suitably profane substitute," as Stanton urges, is clearly necessary. Yet Hedges' exhortations do find resonance with the "essence" of Locke's critical theology. If one reads Locke's *Letter* with a sensitivity to the nuance and complexity of his religious beliefs, combined with an awareness of just how progressive he was for his time and place, one is better able to appreciate both the difficulty and the value in his attempt to find a balance between faith and reason. Thusly considered, the parallel with Hedges' statement should become clearer.

Consider, for example, Locke's attempt to mitigate between dogmatism and cynicism, what Kraynak has termed Locke's "moderate skepticism" that allows for consistency in belief while maintaining a healthy distrust and suspicion of clerics. Locke's "moderate skepticism" he

²⁹ Steven Forde, "Natural Law, Theology, and Morality in Locke," *American Journal of Political Science*. Vol.46, No.2 (Apr., 2001), 399.

writes, "is the belief that orthodoxy exists and can be discovered, but is difficult to possess with certainty because it's fallible and authorities are untrustworthy."³⁰ While a surface reading of Locke may rightly be interpreted as a relic of the past, a deeper understanding of his theology opens up the possibility for a potentially universal reading of his prescriptions for religious toleration. By showing that orthodoxy does exist and that worship is not indifferent, all the while stressing the difficulty of achieving absolute certainty in such matters, we find a fitting model for the twenty-first century. As Kraynak puts it:

Locke's statement allows readers to believe they are orthodox, but tempers the strength of that belief by pointing, not to the indifference of worship, but to the variety of opinions. This reminds them of human fallibility; it suggests that the truth coexists with many errors and is difficult to possess with certainty.³¹

Locke's critical theology is therefore compatible with present-day struggles - struggles we might better term 'spiritual' or 'existential' rather than explicitly or traditionally 'religious.' The Dalai Lama offers a useful observation when he writes: "since the majority does not practice religion, I am concerned to try to find a way to

³⁰ Kraynak, 64.

³¹ Kraynak, 64.

serve all humanity without appeal to religious faith."³² For this reason he calls his model a spiritual revolution rather than a religious one, concerned less with salvation or the eternal realm, and more with the radical individualism that separates people from the wider community and the responsibilities they have to their fellow human beings. To be sure, in the case of the former, we do find problems with a literal appropriation of the Lockean model. In the case of the latter, however, we see in Locke a partner who is willing to criticize greed and hypocrisy and urge people to live up to the responsibility of their convictions. As he writes at the end of the *Letter*:

It is not the diversity of opinions, which cannot be avoided; but the refusal of toleration to those that are of different opinions, which might have been granted, that has produced all the bustles and wars, that have been in the Christian world on account of religion. The heads and leaders of the church, moved by avarice and insatiable desire for dominion, making use of the immoderate ambition of magistrates, and the credulous superstition of the giddy multitude, have incensed and animated them against those that dissent from themselves, by preaching unto them, contrary to the laws of the Gospel, and to the precepts of charity, that schematics and heretics are to be outed of their possessions, and destroyed.³³

Locke's unflinching criticism of religious authorities is a tradition that is sorely lacking from the contemporary

³² Dalai Lama, *Ibid*, 20.

³³ Locke, *Letter*, 163.

scene. Theologian Richard Fenn makes this point when he criticizes mainstream churches for not condemning religious demagogues and their use of apocalyptic rhetoric against other traditions: "Unless the churches... come together on this, they will continue to make it legitimate to believe in the end as a time when there will be no non-Christians or infidels."³⁴

Ironically, Locke's insistence on the truth of the New Dispensation and of the validity of the Christian message does hold some universal implications. It is not his precise prescriptions for the "mutual toleration of Christians in their different professions of religion,"³⁵ as he writes in the opening lines of the *Letter*, that is important, but rather the example he sets for the acceptance of heterodoxy, despite one's convictions, and his insistence that inner belief be won through the exercise of critical reason. Mitchell speaks to this point when he writes on the value of the New Dispensation:

While a common form of worship within a community gives the appearance that the one true God is being worshiped, unless inner belief is present among the worshipers, outward appearance will be deceptive. It is inner belief that gives substance to outward worship; without the former, a common form of worship is vacuous. Unicity of worship under exterior compulsion does not necessarily indicate a worship of

³⁴ Richard K. Fenn, *Dreams of Glory: The Sources of Apocalyptic Terror* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 60.

³⁵ Locke, *Letter*, 126.

the one true God. God's truth makes its way into the mind of the person whose reason is unconstrained. Proper worship can only follow from this.³⁶

To be sure, Locke's interpretation of the New Dispensation is one that applies specifically to the Christian tradition, and may not find the same kind of reception among other faith traditions (to say nothing of the various Christian theologies and denominations). Where Locke is most strong, however, and where his legacy is perhaps most overlooked in critical scholarship, is in the sincerity of his attempt to unite faith and reason, providing assurance that the truth does exist, while stressing that the fallibility of human beings prevents us from attaining it with absolute certainty. In this sense, the old Talmudic proverb - "You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it" - finds a metonymic likeness in Locke thinking. From this we might conclude that there are certain "strains" or "themes" in Locke's moral and political philosophy that can be applied by both secular and religious believers in our present day and age.

In a post-9/11 world, where secular and multi-religious forces are increasingly coming into conflict with one another, theories of toleration that are not sensitive

³⁶ Mitchell, *Theological Foundations*, 71.

to both the sacred and the profane sensibilities of humankind will only serve to isolate and antagonize whichever side they choose to ignore. By emphasizing the importance of the inner persuasion of the mind, combined with the difficulty of achieving this end, we find a fitting model for all belief systems, be they secular or religious. Moreover, if it is understood, as Schleiermacher attests, that "the spirit of religion can only be understood through itself,"³⁷ then we find a opening for positive or intrinsic tolerance, as Gustav Mensching has termed it. Positive tolerance, he writes, is the "acknowledgement of a foreign religion as a genuine and legitimate religious possibility of encounter with the sacred." Unlike formal toleration or non-persecution, "this type of tolerance is not indifferentism -a tolerance based on unconcern- but rather an attitude of utmost sympathy."³⁸ If secular and religious individuals can concede to the value and validity of a spiritual or existential quest, either within or outside of traditional frameworks, and recognize that faith without uncertainty is the root source of civil or religious conformity, then we might see an opportunity to steal some of the fire that has been sparked

³⁷ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.285.

³⁸ Gustav Mensching, *Tolerance and Truth in Religion* (The University of Alabama Press: 1971), 11.

on the fumes of extremist ideologies. The fundamental problems we face today are not as far removed from the battlefield of seventeenth-century Europe, as we might think. As Locke observed, when the gap between acts of faith - "charity, meekness, and goodwill in general towards all mankind" - and professed faith - "the antiquity of places and names, or of the pomp of their outward worship... of the orthodoxy of their faith"³⁹ - grows out of hand, the greater our delusions become about our own prominence in the world. These are not marks of the "true church" but rather "marks of men's striving for power and empire over on another," which lead us inexorably toward the fire and the sword.

³⁹ Locke, *Letter*, 126.

Conclusion

In this paper I have addressed Locke's moral and political theology in the context of seventeenth-century religious thought. By tracing a course throughout his early intellectual career, from his authoritarian *Two Tracts* to his more liberal "Essay on Toleration," I have attempted to show how the evolution of Locke's theory of toleration represents a pattern of political integrity that consistently denied such things as the divine right of king's or the supremacy of any one "true" religion. Where Locke was to change over time was in his conception of how best to regulate matters of ritual and belief (i.e., 'indifferent things'), eventually arguing for the psychological needs of conscience over and against their lawful suppression. This change in view was not only a pragmatic measure, but came from a deeply held religious belief in Christ's fulfillment of the New Dispensation, requiring Christians to tolerate people of all faiths as a point of principle. With particular attention to the *Letter Concerning Toleration*, I have argued that a theological understanding of Locke's theory is imperative not only in terms of its historical accuracy, but in terms of its moral implications for the present dilemma of religious

toleration. Thusly considered, we see in Locke's theory not a model to be adapted facsimile for the twenty-first century, but rather a valuable example of a wise and prodigious thinker whose struggles to unite faith and reason still speak to us in the present.

In his 1992 book *Technopoly*, cultural critic Neil Postman makes the claim that contemporary education must become attuned to what he calls the "assent of humanity," a belief that humanity's destiny is the discovery of knowledge. This assent necessarily seeks to join art and science, faith and reason, and is illuminated by the unyielding recognition that knowledge of the transcendent is not a final destination, but a never-ending labour of trail and error on the road to self-awareness.¹ It is what Maynard Hutchins once called learning to participate in the "Great Conversation," which, as Postman contends, is "an idea-centered" form of education, and one which "stresses history, the scientific mode of thinking, the disciplined use of language, a wide-ranging knowledge of the arts and religion, and the continuity of the human enterprise." Not engaging in this conversation is to erase our collective history and turn society into a technocratic wasteland.

¹ Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Forst Vintage Books: 1992), 187.

Moreover:

It is to deprive students of a sense of the meaning of what we know, and of how we know. To teach about the atom without Democritus, to teach about electricity without Faraday, to teach about political science without Aristotle or Machiavelli, to teach about music without Haydn, is to refuse our students access to the Great Conversation. It is to deny them knowledge of their roots, about which no other social institution is at present concerned. For to know about your roots is not merely to know where your grandfather came from and what he had to endure. It is also to know where your ideas come from and why you believe them; to know where your moral and aesthetic sensibilities come from.²

The reader, I am sure, is able to anticipate where this is leading. The materialist reading of Locke, which I have critiqued throughout this paper, is committing the very crime that Postman has rightly condemned by excising a fundamental component of the "Great Conversation" that seeks toward transcendence and meaning. While the materialist may be adept at navigating the diverse tributaries of Democritus, Aristotle, or Machiavelli, we might ask what they know of Aquinas, Tillich, or Merton, and how their theological understanding has shaped the modern world? Or are they considered (if they are considered at all) merely as a curiosity, or cautionary example for their "dated" metaphysics? This problem is what Joshua Mitchell had in mind when he writes, quoting

² Postman, *Technopoly*, 189.

Nietzsche, "that the History of Political Thought is an 'atavism of the highest order,'" ³ suggesting that philosophers tend to project their own desires in their search for "truth" or meaning. Pondering the question of how religious interpretations of Locke come about, Mitchell wonders whether what is at issue is "a scholar's sympathy toward religion in general, towards Christianity in particular, and toward the idea that modern secular politics stands on its own as a coherent whole, without the need of religious foundations."⁴ Without venturing into a sociology of percentages, it is safe to conclude that there exists in Locke scholarship (and in scholarship in general) a fundamental disconnect between the past and the present, where religious sensibilities are often seen as a bygone relic with nothing to say our current situation. This disconnect is seen most notably in the gap between knowledge and values that has come about on the heels of the rise in science and the decline in religion as a source of knowledge about our natural world. What a theological reading can add to the conversation (or in this case, to Locke scholarship) is a critical exploration of the religious foundations of liberal philosophy, so that we are

³ Joshua Mitchell, a review of *The Biblical Politics of John Locke* by Kim Ian Parker, *Ars Disputandi* Vol. 7 (2007), 1.

⁴ Mitchell, *Ibid*, 1.

better able to understand *how* it first came into being, *why* it was so influential, and *how* we might modify and expand upon it in a way that is sensitive to the non-rational, meaning-centred enterprise that theology and religious studies seek to offer.

In examining some of the variables that contributed to the evolution of Locke's theory on toleration, such as his experiences abroad, his political alliances, and his deeply held religious beliefs, it should be clear to any fair-minded reader that his was anything but a covert atheism, as the Straussians have maintained. Much less was he a thinker who was insincere about the need for a moral foundation amidst the plurality of belief and the innovations of scientific rationalism. As Paul Sigmund has noted, Locke was a man who read "more books on medicine and science than on any other subject."⁵ And yet this did not seem to affect his beliefs, but rather forced him to struggle with and modify his thinking as new developments, ideas, and innovations came to pass. Indeed, Locke's final work, *A Paraphrase and Notes on Paul's Epistles* (1706), shows that he was concerned with theological questions right up until the time of his death.

If Locke's theory of toleration is to have any

⁵ Sigmund, *Selected Political Writings*, xiii.

relevance for our modern world, scholars must find a way pacify the ingrained religious bias of many political scientists (among others), to show *why* it is important to take his theology seriously, and to show *how* this can be done so that some of his more dated assumptions are understood as a product of their time. Considered thusly, we find in Locke a thinker who differed dramatically from most of his contemporaries, forcing medieval notions of theology, such as a belief in the divine right of king's and the natural depravity of humankind, to step into the age of reason through his condemnation of such practices and insistence on the separation of church and state. Likewise, we find in Locke a thinker who risked not only his position in society, but his very life to denounce such widely held beliefs as innatism and religious enthusiasm (the equivalent of modern-day "fundamentalism") and to find a balance between the vagaries of faith and reason, while stressing the need for a dialectic of tradition and modernity that seeks to bring the former into the latter. It is in this sense, most strikingly, that Locke's hermeneutic speaks to us in the present, which we ignore at our own peril.

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