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Locke and the Politics and Theology of Toleration

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Locke's theory of toleration has been understood to rest on the claim that persecution was insufficient to instil either (i) true or (ii) sincere belief in people. Although Locke did indeed make both these claims, neither was fundamental to his theory. Locke was principally concerned to deny that persecution was necessary to instil true or sincere belief; its insufficiency to those ends he, and his contemporaries, took for granted. His denial of the necessity of persecution presupposed that human beings were, in principle, naturally adequate to the discovery of God's wants for them. The same presupposition, which derives from natural theology, underwrote the views in politics and revealed theology that complete his theory and supplied its moral content. Contemporary theories of toleration purposing to proceed on Lockean assumptions are morally and philosophically impoverished by their failure to see the requirements laid on an adequate theory of toleration by genuinely Lockean terms.

Sometimes it happens that a philosophical theory becomes so well known that the concerns that first motivated its articulation recede into relative obscurity. When this happens, it becomes difficult to distinguish the claims that answer to these concerns specifically – and, by opposing, end them – from those that are complementary but have no functional role in the theory itself. One consequence of this can be that a particular claim comes to be treated as the hub of the theory, when in fact it plays only a supporting role: the real work is done elsewhere.

So it has been with Locke's theory of toleration. Recent discussions have variously identified the claim that persecution is ineffective as a means of instilling true belief or the right intentions in people as the 'principal consideration' that animates this theory (Waldron, 1988, p. 67; Bou-Habib, 2003, p. 611). We cannot doubt that both claims figure prominently in Locke's writing on toleration. Yet in an important sense, their *centrality* has been taken for granted: discussion has focused on the meaning and character of these claims in the confident presumption that Locke's 'subordinate' claims fall into a pattern of subservience in relation to the fundamental (Waldron, 1988, p. 62; Bou-Habib, 2003, p. 612). This presumption narrows disagreement to the question of which of the claims really *is* fundamental.¹ Once made, we are drawn ineluctably into discussions of the meaning and character of particular claims and the lines of argument that support them. It is no longer possible to consider all of Locke's claims as elements of a *theory*, that is, a systematic attempt to understand and make explicit the presuppositions of the practice of toleration.



We need not share this presumption. It is, after all, a peculiarly recent one. Over a century ago, D. G. Ritchie (1894, p. 175) 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 scepticism as to the possibility of attaining complete certainty in such deep matters

are all necessary preliminaries to accepting Locke's theory of toleration. Call these preliminaries P₁, P₂, P₃ and P₄, respectively. The 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 power. In short, it suggests that Locke offers a genuine theory and not a merely eclectic composition.

At the same time, it explains why toleration was a central item in Locke's political theory. On recent readings, toleration turns for Locke on a question of fact – does persecution produce a particular result? This reduces the argument about toleration to a term in a means–end relationship, with deeply unsatisfactory consequences. But Locke's theory in fact provides a paradigm for toleration as an aspect of a genuinely philosophical view of the human mind and the human situation. 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. In reconnecting Locke's treatment of toleration to his political thought, new light is cast on his claims about persecution, and a rather broader set of considerations than has been supposed is seen to inform his theory. These considerations respond directly to the view Locke was opposing.

Locke's Target

Locke's target was an influential view of Christianity, which took the proper purposes of government to include the repression of false doctrine and the promotion of the true. On this view, church and state were implicated in a complicit spiritual enterprise. Their complicity was necessary because the Fall of man had left people incapable of self-direction and made needful the provision of direction by the heads of church and state, upon whom God had bestowed His grace. This view was widely held in the medieval period and its influence persisted into the seventeenth century and beyond. It was ecumenical, for it was held alike by the Roman Church, the Church of England and most Protestant Dissenters,² which may sound surprising but is explicable enough, because it turned on shared assumptions made in revealed theology – assumptions which relied on certain venerable philosophical doctrines – and applied these to political thinking. Within this consensus, there was scope for disagreement about the kinds of direction necessary and the efficiency of some means of repression, but nearly all

believed that the magistrate had both the right and the duty to establish true religion within his territories, order the outward form of the church and punish those who refused to conform (see at length Coffey, 2000).

This view was uncongenial to Locke. In *An Essay Concerning Toleration* (1667) he assaulted it directly, laying down ‘for a foundation, which I think will not be questioned or denied’ the premise that the state was a purely secular organisation which had no business either to promote or repress religious doctrine (Locke, 1997, p. 135). Over the next 20 years, he developed a series of views that explained the foundation he had laid down and, in doing so, articulated the theory of toleration that in time became liberal orthodoxy. By assuming that people were naturally adequate to self-direction, explaining this adequacy in terms of their ability to adhere to the precepts of natural law, Locke bypassed the older view. This assumption enabled him to rewrite the received characters of church and state – in particular, to explain the secular character of the latter – and thereby set their relations in new terms. These terms underwrote his mature theory of toleration.

The theory Locke developed altered the bearings of toleration by making it the matter of purely civil significance we nowadays take it to be. A more detailed account of the steps by which he came to this view, as he diverged progressively from the older view, will help us to see why, for all its familiarity, the Lockean theory of toleration is more complex than we may readily suppose.

The Politics of Intolerance

To appreciate the complexity of Locke’s theory, we need to understand the view it was designed to overcome. The obvious alternative to conceiving the state as a secular organisation is to suggest that it is not limited to secular purposes, but includes within its terms the provision of assistance to people in their spiritual lives, even if this assistance is directed at the way they conduct themselves on earth. This assistance could be conceived necessary if it were supposed that, without it, people would be unable to conduct themselves in the manner required by God. *This* supposition would make sense if there were postulated some pervasive incapacity in people that made such conduct impossible without institutional support, that is, the combined support of the church and the state. Considered in these terms, the state might be understood as a Christian organisation, one implicated in a central Christian purpose. So understood, its purposes would not be confined to protecting people in this life but would extend to preparing them for the next.

The implications of this for the question of toleration are not far to seek. Toleration is usually understood nowadays as the attempt by the state to manage a *modus vivendi* between different and sometimes conflicting opinions about the good life. The state is conceived as the neutral arbiter of these conflicts (see

Mendus, 1989; MacIntyre, 1990, pp. 133–55). But ‘the Question of Toleration’, as Locke understood it, was ‘whether the Magistrate shall tolerate different Churches’ (Locke, 1681, f. 7); and the assumed complicity of church and state in upholding Christian truth suggests a negative answer to this question. The state has a responsibility to use the means at its disposal to extirpate false doctrine and promote salvation: it has a spiritual purpose, which it serves by upholding the true church. This makes toleration intellectually problematical, because the spiritual purpose of the state necessarily would be crossed were indulgence granted to those who professed false doctrine.

The obvious response to this problem from those seeking toleration was to indicate that they asked it only for those who, like themselves, professed true doctrine, not those who professed the false. At least, this was the response of those who, in Locke’s day, found insuperable obstacles in conscience to their communicating with the Anglican Church: we find John Owen insisting that ‘[i]t is only the liberty and protection of the children of God as such that is pleaded for’, and Richard Baxter demanding toleration only for ‘Protestants that fear ... guilt ... should they do that which [the Anglican Church] confess *indifferent*’ (Baxter, 1680, p. 107; Owen, 1965–68, Vol. VIII, p. 422). But why should they need the indulgence that toleration granted them when they were already communicants in the true church? This was the question that Roman Catholic apologists had persistently asked of the Church of England since the Reformation, and that the Church of England’s apologists now asked of the Dissenters. To allow them to separate was to condone and, by implication, to concede the ground of ecclesiastical truth: in Samuel Parker’s words, to convict the Church of England ‘of illegal and unwarrantable Usurpation and allow the Pleas of the Dissenters just and reasonable’ (Parker, 1684, p. 175). The established church could not alter its practices without throwing its own claim to truth into doubt; in a like way, the tolerant magistrate would be admitting his failure to uphold the true church in his kingdom even as he brought down the wrath of God upon it. Thus Roger L’Estrange could write that ‘for the Dissenters to desire *Toleration* is to ask a thing, which it were impious to allow, and which they have sworn to hinder all they can, a thing that sets up the Kingdom of Hell’ (L’Estrange, 1685, p. 6). Similar intuitions have been operative since.

L’Estrange assumed that the Church was in possession of the truth. The Anglican claim was that God had settled the Church of England in its present form under the headship of Christ, and that from this source gracious benefits were received. These were passed, in the first instance, to those He had deputed to govern the Church; those who were outside this Church could receive no benefit. Because marked by objective evidences of its truthfulness (see Woodhouse, 1954), those who remained outside could not but be guilty of some moral or intellectual defect. This defect, evidently, made them incapable of guiding themselves properly. Consequently, the civil power should guide them, if necessary by force, into its gracious bosom.

These terms naturally suggest a paternal account of government, for if people are reckoned to be like children, lacking the capacities for rational self-direction necessary to conduct themselves well, direction has to come from somewhere else. 'The Prince, whom you may justly call the Father of the country', wrote Jean Bodin, was 'ordained and sent unto us by God' to provide for the temporal and spiritual needs of his whole people, while John Overall argued that '[a]s it was then the duty of Parents, so by the law of nature, was it of good kings and civil magistrates, to bring up their children and subjects in the true service and worship of God' (Overall, 1844, p. 29; Bodin, 1949, p. 325). Absent on this account is any notion of express consent by those directed. Instead we find the pervasive presumption that people do not choose to be members of a particular church but are born into it, as in Roger Coke's claim that Charles II's subjects were 'Born and Baptized in a Christian Church' and Edward Stillingfleet's casual reference to 'the Church we live in' (Coke, 1660, sig. A. 2; Stillingfleet, 1687, p. 11).³

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. This is why William Sherlock could attribute to 'the Providence of God' the blessing of 'a wise and virtuous Prince' (Sherlock, 1684, p. 120). His direction was necessary because the Fall had left people unable to conduct themselves in the manner God required out of their natural resources. The gift of grace enabled the magistrate to guide people into an external conformity with God's wishes. This guidance might well extend to the use of coercion in religion, in enforcing conformity to the church into which they were born.

We might think that coercing people into religious observance contradicts the requirement revealed in the Decalogue and epitomised in the golden rule that actions be performed out of a loving disposition, that is, with the right intentions. But if it were supposed that the Fall had so deranged people's moral perception that they were unable to turn themselves towards the good unassisted, coercion might be usefully employed to direct them towards it, whereupon, it was to be hoped, God's intercession would bring about the appropriate disposition in their soul through the gift of His grace. Thus coercion could be a useful ancillary to Christian belief, where the internal inclination to the good in people was lacking (Harris, 2002, Vol. I, p. 194).

On this line of thought, indeed, the coercive direction provided by the magistrate is vital, because without it even the civil order might not be sustained. Grace is thus the precondition to any rational conduct whatever, including conduct that upholds civil society. In this sense, true religion could be thought to support the state quite as much as the state was conceived to support true religion. By the same token, unless the state did its part of the bargain and upheld the true religion, the support it needed from that quarter would not be forthcoming. 'To forsake the true God of heaven' wrote Richard Hooker, 'is to fall into all such evils upon the face of the earth, as men either destitute of grace divine may

commit, or unprotected from above endure' (Hooker, 1855, Vol. I, p. 431). Man's 'worldly estate', Hooker indicated, was dependent upon divine grace and so dependent too upon the support the state provided to the true church, not least because the terrestrial benefits that it provided turned on its being true: God was unlikely to provide benefits to a body that did not promote His religion. Thus Baxter could complain that 'their doctrine is trayterous and intolerable who affirm ... That the Magistrate have nothing to do with matters of Religion, but are to leave all men to their consciences, and govern us as men, and not as Christians, Churches or Ministers' (Baxter, 1994, p. 171). Once an understanding of the church as a repository of divine truth into which man is born is allied to a conception of the state as a body dependent upon the workings of divine grace for its sustentation, it is difficult to deny that the magistrate has a direct interest in spiritual matters.

The Politics of Toleration

Locke denied this interest. He could do so because he understood the church differently (P₁). He indicated that people were not simply born into churches: all were in principle capable of guiding themselves in their choice of church; indeed, this responsibility they could not cede to another. As he put it in 1681, it was 'part of my liberty as a Christian & a man to choose of what church or religious societie I will be as most conducing to the salvation of my soule of w^{ch} I alone am judg & over w^{ch} the magistrate hath noe power at all' (Locke, 1681, f. 74), a view which implied that the choice of joining, indeed of forming a church could be made by people's natural endowments: coercion by the magistrate was unnecessary. The claim to possession of truth by the church was countered with the suggestion that this truth could not be known to be the possession of one particular church. To claim knowledge of revealed truth *ex hypothesi* was unreasonable, as it could not *be* known with certainty (Locke, 1990, pp. 63–5). Equally, no one individual was naturally better placed than another to come to a definite judgement about it: the magistrate and the clergy did not enjoy better access to revealed truth than the laity (P₄).

This was not to deny the existence of such truth. That there was a true religion Locke seems never to have doubted, but it was not the exclusive possession of a particular church. When pressed on this point by Jonas Proast, Locke's reply was tortuously worded to avoid, as it seems, any direct admission that the Church of England was the one true church (Locke, 1823, Vol. VI, p. 326).⁴ As he had observed elsewhere, *all* churches claimed truth to themselves, '& upon the same authority, for they are all men that say it endowed with like facultys to know themselves & subject to the same frailtys of mistakeing or imposeing' (Locke, 1681, f. 87). On this basis, claims that the order of a particular church had been instituted by God and reflected His intentions were ripe for revision. Locke implied that church order was the product of human invention. It embodied no intrinsically authoritative model, only the dispositions of those who constructed

it. This explains his otherwise unintelligible assertion that ‘the chief characteristic mark of the true church’ was toleration (Locke, 1963, p. 6).⁵

Locke’s reflections undercut not only the Anglican case but also that of the Dissenters who shared Anglicanism’s understanding of the church and its relation to the state, though not its assessment of what the visible form of that church should be. But their implications for the view of the state that completed this case were not less telling. If God’s gracious support were supposed unnecessary to the construction and maintenance of ecclesiastical society, why should it be supposed necessary to the construction and maintenance of civil society? If people’s natural powers were adequate to one, it made sense to assume that they were adequate to the other. This, at any rate, was the assumption that lay behind Locke’s explanation of the secular character of the state in *Two Treatises of Government*. Thus Locke’s treatment of ecclesiastical society implied a correlative treatment of civil society. This treatment explained, as opposed to merely premising, the secular nature of the state.⁶ 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 church and state, a role for the state in upholding such truth would be impertinent.

This was not to say that God’s requirements were irrelevant to the state. It was, however, to insist that the *relevant* requirements were not spiritual, which meant that church and state could not be thought complicit in a spiritual purpose. Instead, the state’s purposes could be conceived in terms of divine requirements with a purely secular bearing. This conception enabled Locke to locate his long-held assumption that the conditions of terrestrial existence and the individual’s inability to master these alone pointed the need for civil government (Locke, 1954, p. 210) in an explanatory framework in which God’s intentions figured centrally. 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.

On Locke’s analysis, those intentions, described in *Two Treatises* as ‘the great Design of God’ (Locke, 1988, p. 170) and earlier as His ‘gracious divine purpose’ (Locke, 1954, p. 156), coincided with the satisfaction of mankind’s natural needs. They involved the increase of humanity as a species and its dominion over the earth and its lower creatures to the degree needed to fulfil this purpose (Locke, 1988, p. 170). Natural law articulated these purposes as rationally apprehensible authoritative commands; the relevant commands were, in principle, apprehensible to all because their intellectual faculties were naturally adequate to infer them (P₅). What is more, these faculties were identical, which suggested that natural superiority of intellectual endowment could not be posited as a ground for holding one individual as fit to direct others better than they could direct themselves (Locke, 1988, p. 287).⁷

In an obvious way, this suggestion follows from the presumed fact that natural law articulates *God's* purposes: because wise, He would not set purposes to people without also supplying the means to their attainment. These included not only the powers of intellect and will sufficient to the task (Locke, 1988, p. 324), but also the rights to life, liberty and property that served these purposes and with which Locke's thought is everywhere associated. And because everyone, ruler as well as ruled, could know and had to answer to these purposes, a form of civil government was implied which protected people's lives, liberties and property. Civil government was limited to specific purposes: it had no authority to pursue others inconsistent with those articulated in the law of nature.

The limits to the authority of government were, so to speak, horizontal and vertical. No government had authority that exceeded either in extent or in degree the limits *God's* purposes set. The second limitation precluded absolutism. As part of the Lockean triumvirate, *God* had granted each individual property in his own person, a grant made on the condition that His purposes be pursued (Locke, 1988, pp. 286–8, 291). This being so, it could not be supposed that anyone had *unconditional* dominion over himself. By parity of reason, it would never be possible for people to give up that degree of control to another human being. 'For no Body', as Locke said, 'can transfer to another more power than he has in himself; and no Body has an absolute Arbitrary Power over himself, or over any other, to destroy his own Life, or take away the Life or Property of another'. This was because 'Men being all the Workmanship of one Omnipotent, and infinitely wise Maker ... are his Property, whose Workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one another's Pleasure' (Locke, 1988, pp. 271, 357; compare Harris, 2002, Vol. I, p. 203). Thus, no terrestrial authority could claim absolute power over them.

The first limitation, which is less often emphasised, justified toleration.⁸ Because civil government was concerned with secular purposes only, matters that went beyond these purposes were irrelevant to its activities. From this, Locke inferred that the coercive powers the civil government had at its disposal could not be properly turned to spiritual affairs. Certainly, coercive powers belonged to a Lockean government, but the conditions on which they were entrusted to it derived from the rights that inhered to each of the governed, and these rights related only to matters secular in character. The duties to self-preservation and the preservation of others under natural law, from which they were inferred, referred to the preservation of terrestrial life (Locke, 1988, pp. 352–3). Therefore, the coercive power of civil government could not be thought applicable to spiritual matters as such. It could be exerted against threats to civil life that claimed a spiritual inspiration, but against the practical threat only.⁹ It is against this background that Locke's infamous denial of toleration to Roman Catholics should be understood. Although nothing in the civil government's powers warranted their application to the religious opinions and practices of Catholics *per se*, politically speaking Catholicism was an international conspiracy bent on subverting

life, liberty and property. *This* made it intolerable. As he wrote, ‘if the Papists are punished for any thing but for being subjects to a Prince that hath declard enmity & warr to us I think they have hard usage’ (Locke, 1681, f. 26; see also Coffey, 2000, p. 186).

In this way, Locke’s explanation of the secular state anchored his view of toleration. This explanation, which confined the state’s jurisdiction solely to the care and advancement of terrestrial goods, told against any account of political authority that included not only secular but spiritual concerns in its terms. Absolutism on the Hobbesian model, which gave the sovereign the right to determine the public profession of religion, and the paternalist model favoured by mainstream Anglicanism, which gave the civil magistrate supremacy over all persons, ‘in all Causes, as well Ecclesiastical as Civil’ were equally objectionable from this perspective (Hobbes, 1651, p. 116; Stillingfleet, 1662, pp. 130–1). On Locke’s account, the terms of civil government did not embrace the spiritual concerns that would make so general an attribution of authority plausible.

In a complementary way, he denied that the civil magistrate had any privileged understanding of ecclesiastical affairs or that his office gave him special access to spiritual truth. In *An Essay Concerning Toleration*, Locke had suggested that between the magistrate and his subjects, ‘in respect of the king of kings, there is but a small and accidental difference’, he ‘not being made infallible in reference to others by being made a governor over them’. The point was repeated, pithily, in *Two Treatises: ‘Absolute Monarchs’*, Locke wrote, ‘are but Men’ (Locke, 1988, p. 276; 1997, pp. 141, 143). His argument presupposed that all men and women had been created with equal intellectual capacities. A common dominion over the earth was posited on this basis. Other things equal, this implied that dominion could not accrue to a single individual in virtue of a natural superiority of understanding. In his writings on the human understanding, meanwhile, Locke had quietly severed the connection between knowledge and grace. Grace, as he conceived it, worked to deepen faith, not to increase knowledge, and so could not be adduced as a basis for postulating *supernatural* superiority of understanding and thence dominion.¹⁰ The monarch’s claim to know better than his subjects was thus dispatched. Without this, it became impossible to infer confidently that an absolute monarch, exercising authority over every aspect of secular and spiritual existence, was necessary.

Coercion, Persecution and Belief

In *Epistola de Tolerantia* (1689) Locke observed that

No peace and security, no, not so much as common friendship, can ever be established or preserved amongst men, so long as this opinion prevails, that *dominion is founded in grace*, and that religion is to be propagated by force of arms (Locke, 1963, p. 38).

These propositions, as he well understood, were aspects of a single picture in which the weakness of human nature called for the gracious support of God. This was taken to involve a condition in which the true church, the vessel of God's grace, required the assistance of the state in its task of salvation, while the state itself needed to engage the services of the true church. Locke's assumption of natural man's adequacy to the construction of civil and ecclesiastical society made this picture redundant. He suggested that church and state were parallel rather than complicit. This required, logically, that they be conceived as independent. Locke could conceive them in this way because he treated both as rational constructions, though constructions answering to different purposes. This treatment was possible, in turn, because the people who constructed these societies had powers of intellect and will sufficient to the task. The contrast with the picture Locke was eschewing could not be clearer. Having said this, two connected points deserve special emphasis.

The first is that the structural relations of the picture Locke rejected should make us wary of casually equating the coercive use of state power with persecution. For coercion in these terms was not the systematic infliction of punishment on people who held a particular religious belief, so much as the application of the external stimuli necessary to direct those who could not adequately direct themselves to the truth. That is to say, it was assumed to be for the good of those directed, for these external stimuli were the means by which they were directed into the church, whose grace was to necessary to their conducting themselves as God required.

These terms nowhere assumed that coercion was the first act in a seamless causal story culminating in the acquisition of either true or sincere belief by the coerced (compare Waldron, 1988, p. 82; Mendus, 1991, pp. 151–5; Bou-Habib, 2003, p. 616). Coercion was supposed a necessary but *insufficient* condition of acquiring such beliefs, because, as its proponents acknowledged, internal states were inaccessible to human authority. Acts of the intellect stood to the will as cause to effect; the will could be deflected by coercive means, but the intellect was disposed in one way or another by God, and could not be compelled by mundane agencies. As Robert Sanderson put it, 'Almighty God has committed to the magistrate the government of the outward man: but He has reserved to Himself alone the knowledge and judgement of internal acts, and the scrutiny of human hearts and sway over them' (Sanderson, 1851, pp. 273–4, my translation). The purpose of coercion was to push the recalcitrant, fallen man into a position in which he might receive the grace that *could* inculcate true and sincere belief. Even on the persecutors' understanding, belief itself could not be coerced. Thus Baxter could write that

[t]hough Magistrates cannot force men to Believe, Love God, and so to be saved, yet they must force them to submit to holy Doctrine, and learn the Word of God, and to walk orderly and quietly in that Condition, till they are brought to a voluntary personal profession of Christianity (Baxter, 1994, p. 163).

It seems strange, then, to suggest that Locke regarded the claim that true belief could not be coerced as a ‘knock down argument against the use of political means for religious ends’ (Waldron, 1988, p. 84), not least because he had made use of this claim himself in an earlier context while arguing for the right of the magistrate to impose religious uniformity.¹¹ In the same context, we may add, he had conceded that God ‘abhors the sacrifice of the hypocritical compliant’, which suggests that he was also happy at one time to acknowledge the importance of the right intentions in people even as he ‘allow[ed] the government to coerce them into its favoured religion’ (Locke, 1967, p. 145; Bou-Habib, 2003, pp. 619–20).

The mistake here is to suppose that Locke’s theory depends upon the epistemological premise that coercion is insufficient to inculcate true or sincere belief; that his defence of toleration proceeded from the claim that persecution was irrational because it could not instil belief – of whatever description – in people at all. As it happens Locke thought that it *was* insufficient to this end, but there again, so did most, if not all of his contemporaries. His concern, rather, was to show that coercion was not a *necessary* condition of inculcating true or sincere belief: to deny that ‘religion is to be propagated by force of arms’. He did this, in general terms, by assuming the natural adequacy of human capacities to the purposes God had set to them. This ruled out of court the view of human depravity on which the necessity of persecution was supposed to rest. But he paused to highlight the incoherence of the persecutors’ position. As he reminded Proast, ‘Force ... without grace, you acknowledge, can do nothing; but joined with preaching and grace, it can prevail. Why then, I pray, is it a more competent means than preaching; or why necessary?’ If ‘the grace of God is the only ... efficacious means, without which all human means is ineffectual’, this in fact excluded ‘all the human means of force from being necessary, or so much as lawful to be used: unless God hath required it by some more authentic declaration than your bare saying or imagining it is necessary’ (Locke, 1823, Vol. VI, pp. 508–9). It was unlawful because natural law circumscribed the powers of civil government, confining it to secular purposes. The positive law of revelation, meanwhile, indicated that religion was to be propagated ‘not by force nor Constraint but by preaching & perswasion’ (Locke, 1681, f. 84; compare 1823, Vol. VI, p. 508). These *were* authentic declarations of God’s requirements.

Put more pointedly, neither the claim that coercion is irrational nor the claim that it cannot instil the right intentions in people is central to Locke’s theory. *Pace* Waldron, it is not the case that Locke is ‘concerned only with the rationality of persecution’, or that his ‘case falls apart’ if force can be shown to be efficacious (Waldron, 1988, p. 81). His theory is meant to show not that coercion is irrational, although he thinks it is, nor that it cannot make people believe sincerely, although he thinks it cannot, but that it is not ‘necessary, or so much as lawful to be used’. It does this by postulating the natural adequacy of human beings to know and pursue God’s purposes, and outlining an understanding of

civil government as limited to certain of those purposes. Because the purposes are secular, civil government cannot lawfully make use of the means at its disposal for ends that are not secular. This has the counter-intuitive, but important, consequence of making *Two Treatises of Government* the decisive 'tolerationist' text in the Lockean canon.¹²

Second and connectedly, the equation of coercion with persecution only makes sense when people are assumed to be naturally adequate to direct themselves as God requires. That is to say, the assumption of a natural adequacy to self-direction is the necessary precondition for explaining why the use of coercion in religion as such is a species of persecution. 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.

The Theology of Intolerance

We have seen that a change in the notion of what constitutes a church (P_1), predicated on a decided view of human capacities (P_5) and combined with a cognitively humble approach to questions of religious truth (P_4) are preconditions of Locke's theory of toleration. What of the other conditions identified above? How, it may be wondered, do these relate? The relevant conditions, to recollect, were a change in opinion as to what is essential in religious belief (P_2) and a diminished sense of the importance of correct intellectual conceptions about the nature of God (P_3). Perhaps surprisingly, it becomes apparent that these two conditions (P_2 and P_3) are implied by the other three. To be specific, they follow directly from the deprecation of the church's claim to embody truth and the changed relation between church and state that emerges as its logical pendant. For it turns out to be impossible even to moderate this claim without wreaking havoc in a department of thought we might think unconnected to the relations of church and state, namely, revealed theology. And this brings us directly to P_2 , and subsequently, to P_3 . As yet, this may seem a little opaque. To clarify matters, we should return to original sin.

One account of original sin had it that all mankind was involved in sin through Adam's defection, to the degree that people could not be expected either to direct themselves adequately or to obtain salvation on the basis of their own performances. Therefore, guidance both civil and ecclesiastical was required. That guidance was conceived in terms that implied that God's direct assistance was necessary to uphold civil society, and that the church, because the vehicle of His truth, laid a claim upon the support of the state. As the state was supported directly by God, the complicity of coercion and grace and its central place in the workings of state and church becomes obvious. The assumption of people's

natural adequacy to self-direction bypassed this picture and implied a revision of the relations of church and state. Locke's view of toleration, we have seen, rested on the revision of these relations. The revision entailed treating the church and state as parallel rather than complicit, and *this* was made possible by treating both as rational constructions that did not require divine support. In this way, their relation was set on a different basis.

The implications of this revision for the theological superstructure erected upon the earlier base were no less radical. For the notion of original sin, which underwrote the complicity of church and state, implied corresponding views about other items of Christian doctrine. More exactly, it implied a view of the deity of Christ, and so also of the Incarnation and the Trinity. This will be seen most easily if we briefly survey Edward Stillingfleet's views on these topics.

Stillingfleet insisted that all mankind was involved in sin, in consequence of the Fall. All were involved, because Adam was 'a publick Person ... not merely by Nature' but 'by Representation' (Stillingfleet, 1735, p. 356). This supposed not merely that had human nature been depraved *by* his sin, but that all were *in* him and sinned with him when he sinned, and so were juridically liable for its consequences.¹³ Stillingfleet's theory of atonement suggested that through the work of Christ, and specifically in his death, a satisfaction or reparation was made to God on account of this sin. That is to say, the merits of Christ were taken to be sufficient to atone in some way for the sins of all mankind. 'The blood of Christ,' he wrote, 'is to be looked on as a sacrifice of Atonement for the sins of the World', adding elsewhere that 'Christ did Exercise his *Priestly-Office* in the Oblation of himself *to God* upon the Cross' (Stillingfleet, 1710, Vol. I, p. 86, Vol. III, p. 311, compare pp. 307–8). Christ's priestly office enabled him to offer a sacrifice for sin, while his merits were sufficient to atone for the sins of all mankind because he was at once human and divine. The divinity of Christ turned on his being of one substance (*homoousios*) with God. As Stillingfleet put it, 'the three Persons of Father, Son and Holy Ghost' each had '*distinct Subsistences, and incommunicable Properties, and one and the same divine Essence*' (Stillingfleet, 1697, pp. 111, 119). In the Incarnation, the '*divine Person*' of Christ had '*come down from Heaven and take[n] our Nature upon Him*', by way of a hypostatical union of the sort that 'we all grant to be so between Soul and Body', and suffered for the sins of mankind. In so doing, he had not only released mankind from the captivity of sin and shown that God was willing to receive people 'into favour upon the terms which are declared by the Doctrine of Christ', but had also abrogated the ceremonial Law of the Old Testament (Stillingfleet, 1710, Vol. III, pp. 339, 355–6). In Stillingfleet's words, through Christ's death, 'believers were freed from that Yoke of ceremonies' (Stillingfleet, 1662, p. 17). Thus the freedom enjoyed in matters of religious ceremonial, the central focus of seventeenth-century debates about toleration, was part of people's Christian liberty, that is, the liberty purchased for them by Christ's atoning sacrifice.

Addressing the relations of conscience and the civil order in terms of Christian liberty, therefore, entailed a mode of thought in which the relations of church and state implied a series of definite views in revealed theology. No doubt this helps to explain the interminability of these debates (see Coffey, 2000, pp. 78–196). Few of Locke's contemporaries were inclined to escape this mode of thought. Although examples might be multiplied, Stillingfleet is a typical figure: throughout his intellectual career, he viewed the question of freedom of conscience in terms of Christian liberty, deployed the standard of indifference when discussing the relations of conscience and civil order and assumed the co-direction of church and state demanded by the frailty of human nature (compare Stillingfleet, 1662, pp. 42–6; 1682, pp. lxxxi–lxxxviii; 1735, pp. 346–56).

The Theology of Toleration

In his earliest writings, Locke too made Christian liberty the functional category by which liberty of conscience was assessed. In *Two Tracts* (1660), he wrote of it being 'purchased [Christians] by our saviour', which bespeaks the (probably unreflective) acceptance of a theory of atonement of the sort held by Stillingfleet (Locke, 1967, p. 131). This was matched by a pessimism about the human capacity for good: ever 'since man first threw himself into the pollution of sin, he sullies whatever he takes into his hand, and he that at first could make the best and perfectest nature degenerate cannot fail now to make other things so too'. Clearly, this is an allusion to the Fall, though the liability of original sin and the precise character of its consequences are not explained. Nor did *Essays on the Law of Nature* clarify these matters, Locke remarking that the Fall, whatever its consequences, was irrelevant to the subject he was addressing (Locke, 1954, p. 138; 1967, p. 155).

But from the *Essays* onward, his writings were irreconcilable with any extreme view of people's moral debility on account of the Fall. If human nature had been damaged, the damage was not thoroughgoing, for in principle people retained both the ability to conduct themselves in accordance with natural law and the degree of understanding required to 'Enroll themselves in the Kingdom of *Jesus the Messiah*, and profess themselves his Subjects' (Locke, 1954, pp. 156–8; 1988, p. 324; 1999, pp. 118, 158). The view these writings developed, that every individual was responsible for guiding himself or herself, was incompatible with the idea that Adam could have represented all of mankind at the original point of human history. That representative role was explicitly denied in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (Locke, 1999, pp. 5–11). When he came to address the question of original sin and related items of revealed theology in the 1690s, Locke indicated that the consequences of original sin for Adam's descendents were those specified in *Genesis*, ejection from Eden and physical death, while the ubiquity of 'coviteousnesse pride & ambition' he attributed to 'fashen & example', not to any substantial corruption of human nature (Locke, 1693, f. 113). Besides, Locke's

conception of personhood omitted any positive role for substance, which made it hard to explain how every *person* could have been damaged by the Fall.

The same conception told against the presence of a generic sin in mankind for which Christ could be supposed to satisfy or atone. The role of Christ would therefore need reassessment. Locke argued in 1695 that his role was to restore people to immortality if through their righteousness they ‘might have a Title’ to it. Thus ‘if any of the Posterity of *Adam* were just, they shall not lose the Reward of it, Eternal Life and Bliss, by being his Mortal Issue: Christ will bring them all to Life again’ (Locke, 1999, p. 12). How was this the case? Given people’s inability to abide rigorously by God’s law in practice, and thereby be accounted righteous, He had interposed with a new order of things, the ‘law of faith’, by which, where people were unable to fulfil the obligations of natural law, ‘Faith is allowed to supply the defect of full Obedience; and so the Believers are admitted to Life and Immortality as if they were Righteous’ (Locke, 1999, p. 19). This law of faith completed rather than replaced the law of nature, compensating for people’s defective performance of that law through faith. And the faith which God counted as righteousness was the faith that Jesus was the Messiah sent by Him (Locke, 1999, pp. 22–36).

To believe that Jesus is the Messiah does not require one to take a decided view of his divinity or humanity. Neither does this belief obviously demand that Christ has sacrificed himself in propitiation for our sins, which helpfully alleviates the need to acknowledge his priesthood (of which Locke was uncertain)¹⁴ or to explain his divinity. The minimalism of this doctrine stands in pointed contrast to the baroque architecture of Stillingfleet’s theology; and thus we arrive at P₂. From here, the move to P₃ is straightforward. Christ’s divinity is predicated on his consubstantiality with God: He is of ‘*one and the same divine Essence*’. Once the requirement to explain his divinity is removed, it is unnecessary to adopt a position on just what this essence might be.¹⁵

Concluding Remarks

Locke’s theory of toleration is complex. A view of the church, in its relation to the state, as a product of human devising (P₁), of religion as narrow in its doctrinal requirements (P₂), agnostic about the nature of God (P₃) and modest enough to be functionally independent of the state (P₄), and of human beings as made by God with faculties naturally adequate to the purposes for which He made them (P₅) are its central components. These components, suitably related, comprise a comprehensive liberal theory of toleration. Together, they explain why all beliefs and actions with a purely spiritual bearing ought to be tolerated. This implies at least two considerations, one general and one specific.

The first, and more general, is methodological. The philosophical dividend paid by serious attention to past thought is greatest when emphasis is laid on the complex rather than the linear. The views of all parties to a dispute need to be

considered if the story of one party is to be told properly. We should not forget that if Waldron and Bou-Habib find in Locke's writings the point of departure for wider reflections they purport to be providing accounts of *Locke's* argument against religious persecution along the way, and not in the cavalier spirit that Richard Rorty has invited philosophers to embrace (Rorty, 1984, p. 73). To be sure, their accounts narrate and analyse specific lines of argument in Locke's texts, but they give little attention to his purposes in arguing along these lines, silently presuming that his purpose is to develop out of one fundamental premise or other a theory capable of driving practice. It would be glib to say that the resulting accounts are insufficiently historical. But it is not glib to say that without a broader sense of Locke's purposes, conditioned but not determined by a carefulness for the views of parties and persuasions of opinion he sought to oppose, it is unclear how the meaning or character of a particular line of argument can be adequately understood, still less the connections between different lines.

This consideration disposes to the second. Locke's theory has comprehensive explanatory power just because it does connect a series of lines of argument. They are connected, ultimately, by principles drawn from natural theology, which underwrite the natural equality of capacity belonging to human beings and the end for which civil government is constructed. If only for this reason, no contemporary theorist will wish to reproduce Locke in facsimile.¹⁶ But any seriously meant contemporary theory that purposes to proceed on Lockean assumptions must find some way to acknowledge the requirements laid on the question of toleration by a *genuinely* Lockean understanding of what it involves. For a start, it will need to adduce a suitably profane substitute for natural theology, capable of doing the same conceptual work, assuming that 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.¹⁷ If the problem of modernity is to show that, in a world characterised by pluralism, persecution is not merely inefficacious but *wrong*, we find in Locke, more than in any other thinker, the articulation of the range of questions necessary for identifying the scope of its solution. To the extent that recent discussions of his writings on toleration obscure this, they do a disservice not merely to Locke but to us all.¹⁸

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Notes

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- 1 Thus Bou-Habib argues for the replacement of one 'principal consideration' – the wrong one – with another (Bou-Habib, 2003, p. 611).
- 2 The Quakers, for example, did not share this view. They understood the church as a purely spiritual body, conceptually and organisationally sundered from the state: 'God hath not a *visible* or *temporall Church in the world*, nor is the Order, or Rule, or Government in the church *visible*, but *spirituall and eternall*' (Farnworth, 1654, p. 7). This understanding set question marks against the relation between church and state assumed on the ecumenical view. In particular, it suggested that the church, because invisible, required no support from the state and should not be subject to its intrusions. Arguments for toleration on this ground are present in the writings of William Penn (1685, p. 3) and Henry Robinson, whose understanding of the church verged on that of the Quakers (Robinson, 1643, sig. A. 3–2). Although these arguments resonate with Locke's views at various points, they proceed on a rather different ground. I am grateful to an anonymous reader for pressing me to clarify this point.
- 3 As Stillingfleet indicated elsewhere, 'an implicate consent is supposed in all such as are born under that authority' (Stillingfleet, 1662, p. 133).
- 4 'I agree', Locke wrote, '... that there is but one only true religion; I agree too that that one only true religion is professed and held in the church of England'.
- 5 For the ideas of true church and true religion in Locke's thinking, see Nicholson (1991) pp. 178–81.
- 6 In other words, this treatment is logically and chronologically prior to the treatment of the state developed in *Two Treatises*. Waldron's speculations about the relation between the two therefore rest upon a misunderstanding (Waldron, 1988, p. 73) and his claim that the secular character attributed to the state is 'the conclusion, not a premiss' of Locke's argument (p. 66) a false opposition: it is both.
- 7 There is 'nothing more evident, than that Creatures ... born to ... the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another without Subordination or Subjection'. See also Locke (1990) p. 101, p. 119.
- 8 The exception is Harris (2002).
- 9 See the distinction in *An Essay Concerning Toleration* between practical actions and opinions rightly subject to the magistrate's control and 'speculative opinions and divine worship', which 'have an absolute and universal right to toleration' (Locke, 1997, p. 136).
- 10 'Thus *Faith* we see is the Gift of God, and with it, when Men by Baptism are admitted into the Kingdom of God, comes the Spirit of God, which brings Life with it: For the attaining this Gift of Faith, Men do or can do nothing, Grace hitherto does all' (Locke, 1987, Vol. II, p. 629n).
- 11 In the first of *Two Tracts on Government* (1660), Locke argued that states of 'assent (whereof God hath reserved the dispose to himself, and not so much entrusted man with a liberty at pleasure to believe or reject) being not wrought upon by force a magistrate would in vain assault that part of man which owes no homage to his authority' (Locke, 1967, p. 127) and on this basis defended the position that imposition in the indifferent things of religious worship did not infringe the individual's Christian liberty.
- 12 For a different gloss, see Waldron (1988) p. 73.
- 13 This view seems to have originated with Saint Augustine's interpretation of *Romans* v. 12, which 'sets aside the supposition that the *in quo* of the Vulgate refers to "sin" or to "death" and infers that it must refer to Adam himself' (Fisher, 1897, p. 186).
- 14 See Locke's notes on the Priesthood of Christ, printed in Nuovo (2002), pp. 238–41.
- 15 Locke was agnostic about the character of substance anyway (Locke, 1990, pp. 1–2), while the language of hypostasis and *homoousios*, in which views on these matters were expressed, was the kind of 'gibberish' that would fall under the censures of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding's* chapter, 'Of the Abuse of Words' (Locke, 1975, pp. 490–508).
- 16 As Locke's revealed theology answers to his natural theology, they stand and fall together.
- 17 This point has been noticed, from a different direction, by Mendus and Matravers (2004) pp. 38–53.
- 18 See Mendus and Matravers (2004) p. 52.

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