

John Locke on Religious Toleration: “Sincerity” and Civil Order

Abstract:

In the *Two Tracts on Government* (1660-2), John Locke argued that the *toleration* of diverse religious practices would inevitably lead to conflict and disorder; in his 1667 *Essay Concerning Toleration* (and his 1689 *A Letter Concerning Toleration*), he argued rather that it was the *suppression* of religious practice that provoked such disruptive behaviour. The aim of this paper is not to *explain why* Locke came to adopt the language of religious toleration after arguing for imposition. My aim is rather to better *understand* the nature of the change, and what it can tell us about Locke’s mature position on toleration with an eye to the scriptural exegetical work he dedicated himself to in the 1690s. I first explore the changing meaning and significance of freedom for Locke based on his observations of the strong need to *feel free* in individuals, particularly in respect to their religious convictions. I further flesh out this psychological insight of Locke’s by reference to his 1693 educational treatise, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. I then highlight the limitations Locke places on what constituted legitimate religious practice and their justification in his definition of religion and his vision of Christianity. Locke’s exclusion of disruptive behavior from “sincere” religious worship, justified according to the divinity of civil order, enabled him to emphasize freedom of religious practice and support a limited toleration without neglecting his ongoing concern with civil peace. My paper ultimately emphasizes that Locke’s advocacy of toleration depends on such demarcations which are rooted in Locke’s own theological commitments.

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[L]et him look some years back [and] he will find that a liberty for tender consciences was the first inlet to all those confusions and unheard of and destructive opinions that overspread this nation.

John Locke, *The First Tract on Government*, p.160.

I may grow rich by an Art that I take not delight in; I may be cured of some Disease by Remedies that I have not Faith in; but I cannot be saved by a Religion that I distrust, and by a Worship that I abhor.

John Locke, 1689 *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, p.31.

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

Martin Luther, *On Christian Liberty* (1520).

In the *Two Tracts on Government* (1660-2)¹, John Locke argued that the *toleration* of diverse religious practices would inevitably lead to conflict and disorder; in his 1667 *Essay Concerning Toleration* (and his 1689 *A Letter Concerning Toleration*), he argued rather that it was the *suppression* of religious practice that provoked such disruptive behaviour.² In the early 1660s, the freedom required to obey God in a way that satisfied personal belief was restricted to liberty of “conscience,” entirely internal and consistent with performing particular devotional acts imposed by the magistrate.³ In 1667 he argued, against this position, that internal belief could not be separated from external practice and thus that the imposition of religious practice was inconsistent with the individual’s quest for salvation. A crucial element of this shift is the characterisation of religion which Locke emphasized from

¹ The *First Tract* [the English Tract] was finished by 11 December, 1660. The *Second Tract* [the Latin Tract] composed 1661-2. See ed. Phillip Abrams, John Locke: *The Two Tracts on Government*, Cambridge University press, 1967, p. 16-17. The title *Two Tracts on Government* was given by Abrams.

² Hereafter referred to as the 1667 *Essay*, and the 1689 *Letter*.

³ I follow Ian Harris in using freedom and liberty interchangeably in this paper, although I acknowledge that Locke in the *Two tracts* and the 1689 *Letter* predominantly uses the word “liberty”.

1667 onwards and which expanded the scope of religious freedom yet not at the expense of civil peace and order – his perennial concerns. Religion for Locke, who in his texts on toleration is talking *to* and almost exclusively *about* Christians, centred on the recognition of a superior being, God, whose basic injunction for “mankind” *could* be discerned through reason.⁴ For Locke, “sincere” (genuine) religious practice, the outward expression of love and respect for God, could not destabilise civil society, an institution willed by God to preserve mankind. This particular understanding of religion and the work of “sincerity” enabled Locke to emphasize freedom of religious practice and support a limited toleration without neglecting his ongoing concern with civil peace.

The aim of this paper is thus not to *explain why* Locke came to advocate for religious toleration after arguing for imposition. This could have been a result of his first-hand experience of the harsh policies of imposition in England and then of toleration in the Netherlands, his increasing intellectual maturity or the radical influence of Lord Shaftesbury, and is likely a combination of these and other factors. My aim is rather to better *understand* the nature of the change, and what it can tell us about Locke’s mature position on toleration with an eye to the scriptural exegetical work he dedicated himself to in the 1690s. Namely, acknowledging the limitations Locke places on what constituted legitimate religious practice and their justification in Locke’s vision of Christianity. My paper ultimately emphasizes that his advocacy of toleration depends on such demarcations that are rooted in Locke’s own theological commitments.

⁴ Though Locke does mention Judaism and Islam, his intended audience is Christian and the texts are based on Christian assumptions, a Christian framework and employ a largely Christian vocabulary.

The mode by which Locke shifts the terms of his argument and defines the concepts at his disposal indicates a recognition of the insufficiency of a theory that neglected the psychological facet of individual freedom. This reflects Locke's growing recognition of the individual's strong desire for freedom of religious practice that needed to be balanced against the disruptive tendency for religious belief to be exploited for political gain. Locke increasingly came to believe that impinging directly on freedom, particularly in regard to religious belief, led rather to civil strife than peace. I first demonstrate the shift in emphasis from the *Two Tracts* to the 1667 *Essay* and 1689 *Letter* from a highly restricted understanding of "Christian liberty" to one considerably expanded in light of the potency of an individual's subjective relation to God. To further flesh out Locke's "psychology of freedom" I briefly look to his more mature work, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, composed primarily in the 1680s, whose main themes pertain directly to this issue.

I then demonstrate the divinity of order as a perennial theme in Locke's corpus. God willed order and the preservation of men through the institution of civil society. This is the basis of his frequent exhortations that "sincere" worship and praise of God could not undermine civil society and the justification for the exclusion of various modes of worship and religious groups from toleration. The general tendency is to read Locke's transition as accepting that there is no way to determine whether a particular mode of religious worship is "sincere" or not as it is a purely subjective state. Based on the above formulation I suggest that for Locke there are external *signs* indicating the "sincerity", not the *truth*, of a particular expression or belief.

This conception of "sincerity" and the work it does in regulating religious expression is intimately connected with Locke's conceptualization of Christianity to which he would devote much of the 1690s to developing. In the 1689 *Letter* he repeatedly asserts the

necessary peacefulness of Christianity and Christian worship and the mutual toleration required by the “true” church. Of course such external signs do not eradicate the need for interpretation. In Locke’s mature conception of toleration considerable scope in interpreting what was legitimately *religious* remained with the civil magistrate. Although the magistrate was required to provide a robust rationale for imposition, ultimate judgement of his actions still remained with God.

(Christian) Liberty for John Locke:

According to Ian Harris and Timothy Stanton, Locke is far more concerned with obedience and authority than with individual freedom. Stanton emphasizes that for Locke, authority and freedom are not antithetical but are both rooted in God: “the natural freedom and equality that Locke understood people to possess were rooted in subjection: their capacity for self-direction presupposed their direction by God”.⁵ Harris argues that for Locke public worship was a *duty* not a *right*. The end of mutual toleration was obedience to the ends and duties required by God. It was not about freedom for self-development or free choice but the obligation derived from natural law to please God.⁶ Indeed, emphasizing Locke’s consistent concern with the obligations due to God and the sanctity of hierarchical relations in society is of central importance. Freedom *is* the freedom to *obey* God. Without wanting to affirm the “traditional” reading of Locke as the father of modern liberalism, I do want to begin

⁵ Stanton rejects a reading of Locke’s transition between the *Two tracts* and his later writings on toleration as Locke’s move from an “authoritarian” to a “liberal”. “Authority and Freedom in the Interpretation of Locke’s Political Theory”, *Political Theory*, 39(1); 2011, p. 15.

⁶ Ian Harris, “John Locke and Natural Law: Free Worship and Toleration” in ed. Jon Parkin and Timothy Stanton, *Natural Law and Toleration in the Early Enlightenment*, Oxford University Press, 2013. pp. 89-90.

by exploring freedom as it is distinctively understood by Locke and how freedom operates in his approaches to toleration.

Locke's *Two Tracts* is read as a rather conventional and (in comparison to his later works) unsophisticated solution to the problem of sectarian violence and civil instability in England. Locke in these texts is grappling with a quintessential post-Reformation dilemma: balancing "Christian liberty" with civil order. Broadly, the question of "Christian liberty" concerned the locus of authority on religious matters, the relationship between an individual and God and the requisite freedom necessary for an individual to perform acts of faith. More specifically, Locke in the early 1660s is engaging with the hotly debated question of whether matters indifferent⁷ in religious worship, those not explicitly decreed by God concerning the time, manner and place of worship, should come under the authority of the magistrate.⁸ He is responding to his fellow student at Christ Church, Oxford, Edward Bagshaw, who had written a popular pamphlet arguing that "Christian liberty" precluded the magistrate or any other individual from determining things indifferent in religion for another Christian.

Locke's position in 1660-2, vehemently opposed to Bagshaw's, is to consider all outward action of a religious nature to be indifferent and therefore to fall under the authority of the magistrate: "the liberty God hath naturally left us over our exterior, indifferent actions

⁷ Things indifferent, 'adiaphora' is explicated in Locke's *Essays on the Law of Nature*, in which he states that 'There are things of which the outward performance is commanded, for example the outward worship of the deity', but that those 'circumstances accompanying' such worship are left 'indifferent'. Locke, 'Essays on the Law of Nature', (1664) in Mark Goldie (ed), *John Locke: Political Essays*, p. 123.

⁸ Even more specifically, Locke is reacting to the controversy over the new requirements for dress and ceremony at Locke's (and Bagshaw's) college, Christ Church, Oxford. See Phillip Abrams, *John Locke: Two Tracts on Government*, Cambridge University Press, 1967, p. 30.

must and ought in all societies be resigned freely into the hands of the magistrate”.⁹ “Christian liberty” is here restricted to the “inward man.”¹⁰ Indeed, in the early 1660s he goes to great lengths to reconcile the “prick of conscience” with obedience to magisterial imposition on indifferent religious matters, arguing that liberty of the “will” can be removed, without infringing on liberty of the “conscience.” An individual can remain faithful to God through internal assent to His injunctions, while performing acts of worship imposed by the magistrate.¹¹ In this separation of the will and intellect,

[t]he service of the inward man which God looks after and accepts may be a ‘free will offering’, a sincere and spiritual performance *under what shape soever of outward indifferent circumstances*; the heart may lift up to heaven, whilst the body bows.¹²

This absolute separation of belief from outward action is considered by some to be the least convincing aspect of Locke’s argument for imposition. Indeed, Locke’s position was extreme

⁹ Locke, *The First Tract*, p. 179. Locke argues that whether the magistrate receives authority from good or from popular consent, he has a power over indifferent things, civil and religious.

¹⁰ “[T]he freedom of Christ’s subjects being of the same nature with the kingdom whereof they were subjects, that is, not of this world or of the outward but inward man” (*The First Tract*, p. 133).

¹¹ “All that God looks for in his worship now under the gospel is the sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart, which may be willingly and acceptably given to God in any place or posture, but he hath left it to the discretion of those who are entrusted with the care of the society to determine what shall be order and decency” (*The First Tract*, p. 146).

¹² *The First Tract*, p. 146. Further explanation for this comes in the *Second Tract*: “the liberty with which we are concerned here is also twofold: a liberty of the judgment, and a liberty of the will. (i) Liberty of the judgment exists when the approbation of the judgment is not necessarily required that this or that is in its own nature ‘necessary’; and in this consists of the whole liberty of the conscience. (ii) Liberty of the will exists when the assent of the will is not required to this or that act; and this can be removed without infringing the liberty of the conscience” (*The Second Tract*, pp. 238-239). See also, pp. 146 and 239 on the magistrate’s rights to rule on all outward action without affecting inward belief.

even compared to other Anglicans justifying magisterial imposition of indifferent actions in religious worship.¹³

Locke abandons this tenuous separation of belief/intellect and action in his 1667 *Essay Concerning Toleration*, which informs his 1689 *Letter*:

in speculations and religious worship every man hath a perfect, uncontrollable liberty, which he may freely use, without, or contrary to, the magistrate's command, without any guilt or sin at all, provided always that it be all done sincerely and out of conscience to God, according to the best of his knowledge and persuasion.¹⁴

A notable change is thus apparent in the considerable enlargement of what constituted "Christian liberty" (to include the form and manner of worship). Locke comes to pay more attention to the potency of an *individual's subjective relation to God*. Furthermore, in the 1667 *Essay*, he argues that while things might in themselves be indifferent and therefore amenable to temporal imposition, they are not seen as such by the individuals imposed upon.

Locke explicitly counters his own argument of *Tracts*, writing that:

'Twill be said that if a toleration shall be allowed as due to all the parts of religious worship it will shut out the magistrate's power from making laws about those things over which it is acknowledged on all hands that he has a power, viz. things indifferent,

¹³ See (ed) Abrams, John Locke: *The Two Tracts*, p. 10. As has oft been noted, this is a position strikingly reminiscent of Hobbes' "because a Common-wealth hath no Will, nor makes no Lawes, but those that are made by the Will of him, or them that have the Sovereign Power; it followeth, that those Attributes which the Sovereign ordaneth, in the Worship of God, for signs of Honour, ought to be taken and used for such, by private men in their publique Worship". Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Richard Tuck (ed), Cambridge University Press, 1996 [1991]), p. 253. Cranston, in particular, emphasises the Hobbesian nature of Locke's argument in *Two Tracts*, 'it is not a good crib, but it is unmistakable cribbed', Maurice Cranston, *John Locke: a Biography*, Longmans, London: 1966 [1957]) p. 62. See also Goldie, 'In a less palatable form, it was also Hobbes' view, for *Leviathan* was a deliberate reduction of the adiaphorist position, in that what is jure humano [by human law] almost entirely occludes what is jure divino [by divine right].' Goldie (ed), *John Locke: Political Essays*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. xviii.

¹⁴ John Locke, 1667 *Essay*, p. 140.

as many things made use of in religious worship are ...To which I answer, that *in religious worship nothing is indifferent*.¹⁵

That is, nothing is *felt* as indifferent by the individual who believes that God enjoins them to perform a specific mode of worship. Locke recognizes from 1667 onwards that this necessity of *feeling free* to perform one's duty to God must be taken into account as he abandons his position of the *Two Tracts* that men will be satisfied with inner conviction and outward conformity.¹⁶

For Harris and Stanton a primary part of their elevation of authority and obligation in Locke's theory is emphasizing the critical importance of natural law as divinely ordained rules of conduct accessible via reason (I will further explore this relation below). For Harris, Locke's argument for free and tolerated worship arose from natural law.¹⁷ Stanton suggests that it is the injunctions of natural law to uphold civil society that conceptually allow Locke to reject the need for magisterial imposition on religious worship.¹⁸ Considering Locke's transition within an almost exclusively legal framework elides his acute awareness of the power of psychology in human behavior. I have demonstrated that the elevation of subjective feeling in regards to the expression of faith became for Locke a key factor in his theorizing on toleration and his justification for restricting magisterial imposition.¹⁹ In the following section

¹⁵ John Locke, 1667 *Essay*, p. 139 [emphasis added].

¹⁶ Cf. the *Second Tract*: "God, indulging the weakness of mankind, left his worship undetermined, to be adorned with ceremonies as the judgement of men might determine in the light of custom; and he no more judges his worshippers by these things than a king judges his subjects by their physical condition or the style of their clothes..."(p. 218.)

¹⁷ Harris, "John Locke and Natural Law", pp. 95 & 98.

¹⁸ Stanton, "Natural Law, Nonconformity, and Toleration", pp. 45-47.

¹⁹ Locke is acutely aware the extent to which faith and religious conviction is constituted by one's surroundings and adopted reflexively.

I extrapolate on the location of this elevation, not in relation to natural law, but in Locke's observations of human behaviour.

“Dearly Beloved Freedom”: *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* and the early attachment to *feeling free*.

Locke's perception of the strong psychological drive to freedom in people that came to inform his attempt to manage, rather than impose upon, religious freedom is illustrated by a brief consideration of his popular 1693 educational treatise, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education (Some Thoughts)*. Though there is a significant time gap between Locke's earliest writings advocating toleration and this work, I posit that the main themes of *Some Thoughts* encapsulate the psychological desire for freedom that he had so inadequately dealt with in the *Two Tracts*. *Some Thoughts* was based on letters Locke wrote to his friend, Edward Clarke, between 1684-1691 advising him on the education of his children. Even though the advice pertains to the education of the gentry and thus should not be read as Locke's broad principles regarding education, his remarks on the inclinations of children give considerable insight into the “raw material” which education serves to mold and shape.

An early and strong penchant for (*not* innate knowledge of) liberty comprises a major theme of *Some Thoughts*.²⁰ Locke identifies in children a need to *feel* free in their thoughts and actions: “Children have as much a mind to show that they are free, that their own good actions come from themselves, that they are absolute and independent, as any of the

²⁰ “[T]he claim that human beings are predisposed to sort the things they encounter in one way rather than another is in no way inconsistent with the denial of innate ideas. What would be innate is not an idea at all but rather a capacity.” Ott, L. *Locke's Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge University Press, p.71. Though this sense is disputed, see Tully, “Governing Conduct” in James Tully, *An Approach to Political Philosophy: Locke in Contexts*, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

proudest grown men”.²¹ Children for Locke are early aware and protective over a “natural freedom” which they acutely feel the want of if too egregiously denied them.²² According to Locke this liberty, “alone which gives the true relish and delight to their ordinary play-games,” ought to be used strategically in a child’s education to cultivate self-mastery. An oft repeated precept of education is never to present a lesson as a burden or constraint upon the child.²³ A lesson ought not be imposed lest an aversion to learning develop, rather pains should be taken to ease the child into a disposition favorable to the task. Likewise, learning ought to be presented as an attractive option that a child would willingly *choose*, inculcating a love of learning *and* satisfying “their dearly beloved freedom.”²⁴ Sufficiently satisfying the strong desire for freedom in children ought to be incorporated into the task of education and the development of self-control. Freedom is a powerful force over individuals and must be to a certain extent manipulated to render significant internal and external limitations acceptable.

The dynamic between authority and freedom, dependence and independence is a consistent theme of Locke’s corpus. What is especially clear in *Some Thoughts* is that the positive expression of individual freedom for Locke consists in adherence to reason through the cultivation of good habits. Strengthening an individuals’ ability to follow reason over instinct and passion is requisite for avoiding “slavishness”. Indeed, virtue for Locke is found in self-denial:

²¹ Ed. Ruth Grant and Nathan Tarcov, John Locke: *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, Hackett Publishing Company, 1996, p. 51; see also pp. 52,53 & 113.

²² Locke, *Some Thoughts*, p. 52.

²³ Locke, *Some Thoughts*, p. 51.

²⁴ Locke, *Some Thoughts*, p. 53.

All virtue and worth is placed in this, that a man is able to *deny himself* his own desires, cross his own inclinations, and purely follow what reason directs as best though the appetite lean the other way.²⁵

This self-denial is a “power” improved by the practice of foregoing desires and resisting cravings.²⁶ A child must be taught early to “submit his will to the reason of others” in order to develop the self-discipline to “submit to his own reason” later.²⁷ Indeed, Locke oft uses the words “submission” and “obedience” to describe the process and end goal of education as the minds’ mastery and dominion over itself.²⁸ Tully, in his fine essay “Governing Conduct”, suggests that Locke here is laying out his educational program to train the gentry to suspend and examine “the solicitations of present unease” – *unease* being the great motivator of action as laid out in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. This power, Tully writes, “is the freedom of the will and the foundation of liberty.”²⁹ The freedom to resist immediate temptation to examine and judge the quality of the good pursued is for Locke the key to happiness. Indicating the connection between self-rule and freedom is the alternative to self-rule through reason: enslavement to ones’ passions and desires., equating such a state with

²⁵ Locke, *Some Thoughts*, p. 25 ,[emphasis added]. See also pp. 29, 32, 38, 53, 152).

²⁶ Locke, *Some Thoughts*, p. 29.

²⁷ Locke, *Some Thoughts*, p. 27.

²⁸ Though he certainly advocates against too harshly disciplining children and too rigorously curbing their spirit, see for instance, Locke, *Some Thoughts* p. 33 & 53.

²⁹ Tully, “Governing Conduct”, p. 218. What determines the will, for Locke, “must be something present, and this is uneasiness” *Ibid.*, p. 217. See Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II, XXI, §51 and Raymond Polin, “Locke’s Conception of Freedom” in ed. John W. Yolton, *John Locke: Problems and Perspectives*, Cambridge University Press; 1969: “The freedom of an intelligent being consists in this: the end of our freedom is the achievement of the reasonable good we have chosen”, p. 3.

the absence of virtue and industry.³⁰ For Locke, the free individual is reasonable *and* industrious.

Locke's conceptualization of freedom, reason and authority in his educational treatise sheds light on the inadequacy of his early position on religious imposition. Furthermore, as I explore below, the nature of managing and disciplining this desire for freedom aligns with Locke's management of religious practice in his proposal for limited toleration and his conceptualization of "sincere" religious belief. First I return to the question of natural law and its adequacy for grounding Locke's transition to the language of toleration.

The Divinity of Order:

Where, then, do Locke's psychological insights leave us in relation to the centrality that Stanton and Harris give to natural law? Emphasizing the fundamental influence of the natural law tradition over Locke's thinking, Harris argues that rather than reading Locke as a theorist of individual free choice, his primary concern with obligation and obedience should be acknowledged. Stanton likewise brings Locke's conception of natural law to the fore, emphasizing the conceptual innovation Locke was able to make once he had clarified the status of natural law: "[c]onscientious scruples could not very well justify conduct inimical to the order of society if God had disclosed that order definitively through natural law". It is via his contemplations on the nature and content of natural law that Locke is able to divest himself of the necessity of magisterial imposition on religious worship to secure the civil order. I posit a move away from a *body* of natural law deduced from divinely ordained rules

³⁰ "He that has not a mastery over his inclinations, he that knows not how to resist the importunity of *present pleasure or pain* for the sake of what reason tells him is fit to be done, wants the true principal of virtue and industry and is in danger never to be good for anything", Locke, *Some Thoughts*, p. 32.

given Locke's troubled relationship with the tradition and his increasing doubts over the accessibility of a set of moral injunctions independent of revelation. Nevertheless, Locke remained convinced of the divinely ordained injunction to self-preservation and order which indeed forms the basis of conception of religion that facilitates toleration.

Locke was a part of and much influenced by the rich and complex tradition of natural law which theorized the content and nature of human obligation to a set of universal laws. His *Essays on Natural Law*, completed around 1664, remained his most extensive analysis of the subject. There he maintained natural law as "a fixed and permanent rule of morals, which reason itself pronounces, and which persists, being a fact so firmly rooted in the soil of human nature."³¹ Locke never published this work, despite pressure from friends. Moreover, he was accused in later works, primarily *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* [one of the few works he put his name to] of failing to adequately clarify the status of natural law. In a series of letters to Locke in 1690, James Tyrrell cautiously suggested to Locke the dissatisfaction of "some thinkeng men at Oxford" at the *Essay's* remarks on the law of nature, which Tyrrell took to be what Locke called divine law. Tyrrell writes:

...you doe not expressly tell us, where to find this Law, unless in the SS [Scriptures]. and ... it is likewise much doubted by some whether the Rewards and punishments you mention can be demonstrated as established by your divine Law, which I am satisfied is the same with that which others call the Law of nature³²

³¹ John Locke, "Essays on the Law of Nature" 1664, in ed. Goldie, John Locke, Political Essays, p. 124. Cf. "certain definite principals of action from which spring all virtues and whatever is necessary for the proper moulding of morals..." *Ibid.* p. 82. It is important to note that at this point Locke already rejects natural law as innate, though his language in places obscures this. See footnote 37.

³² "James Tyrrell to Locke, 27 July 1690 [1307] in De Beer, *The Correspondence of John Locke* volume IV, p. 107.

Locke did not respond well to the criticism and resisted Tyrell's equation of natural with divine law. However, five years later he did appeal to revelation as the *only generally accessible source of a complete moral code*. He argued in the *Reasonableness of Christianity* that reason unassisted had failed man in determining the law of nature. It was too difficult to establish morality in all its parts by reason alone, a fact compounded by the reality that most people do not have the capacity, time, or the inclination to even try. Nevertheless, Locke's commitment to the universal apprehension of a benevolent God that willed the preservation of his most sophisticated temporal creation remained a presupposition throughout Locke's life.

We see in Locke's writings throughout the 1660s (and beyond) a consistent concern with civil *order*, achieved by preserving hierarchical relations of authority and subordination. For Locke, order was divine: "God wished there to be order, society and government among men. And this we call the commonwealth."³³ Order is understood as "that general injunction of the divine law that requires decency" and is intimately entwined for Locke with the preservation of hierarchical social relations in society.³⁴ This assertion, expressed in the *Two Tracts*, that society is willed by God, is one that Locke would adhere to throughout his life, despite an increasingly ambiguous relationship to natural law. However, the implications of this position would change. In the *Two Tracts*, it meant for Locke that all matters indifferent (not ruled on explicitly by God) in the civil and religious spheres were to be given over to the

³³ Locke, *the Second Tract*, pp. 231-2.

³⁴ Abrams, John Locke, *Two Tracts*, p. 41. See also John Dunn in *The Political Thought of John Locke* for Locke's commitment to the existing social structure, if not magistrate, of his time.

magistrate to decide.³⁵ Religious toleration is incompatible with civil order given the anarchy such a policy would cause. In his 1667 *Essay* and the 1689 *Letter*, Locke instead used the divinity of order to set bounds to what constituted legitimate religious expression. Given that “order, society, and government among men” is willed by God, no “sincere” act of devotion towards God could undermine civil society. With these definitional bounds set, religious practice is sufficiently neutralized (at least theoretically) to be removed from direct magisterial authority. Despite his equivocations on the accessibility of a detailed set of moral laws derived from the law of nature, Locke remained committed to God’s injunction to men to self-preservation and the preservation of others through the institution of civil society. And it is on this injunction that he rested his revised understanding of religious practice and toleration.

I suggest that Locke’s supposition of the divine origin of order does the work to ground Locke’s definition of religious belief to justify the exclusions as well as to assert the right to religious toleration. The sanctity of order outlived Locke’s confidence in the demonstration of a moral code via reason and is thus a surer base to ground a toleration he remained committed to throughout the 1690s. Furthermore, the centrality of order for Locke can be seen in the above section recounting freedom for Locke as the early and rigorous *ordering* of the self according to reason.

With the disruptive potentials of religious practice (theoretically) nullified the elevation of individual conscience over external authorities did not pose the same disruptive

³⁵ Things indifferent, ‘adiaphora’ is explicated in Locke’s *Essays on the Law of Nature*, in which he states that ‘There are things of which the outward performance is commanded, for example the outward worship of the deity’, but that those ‘circumstances accompanying’ such worship are left ‘indifferent’. Locke, “Essays on the Law of Nature,” p. 123.

threat as it did formerly. Locke brings “sincerity” to the fore as the necessary condition for the extension of toleration to expressions of religious belief. It is to this formulation of religious practice that I now turn.

Managing Free Religious Practice:

The divinity of order and the rational capacity of humankind lie in stark contrast with Locke’s observations of actual human behavior. Crucially in Locke’s argument on toleration everyone is equally capable (or incapable) of determining God’s will regarding the specific requirements for their salvation.³⁶ Rather than habitually defer to authorities we can discern for ourselves the appropriate mode of honoring God. However, despite rejecting a doctrine of the Fall and hereditary sin, Locke retained a strong sense that people will all too often fail to utilize this capacity, misuse it or exploit it.³⁷ His pessimism regarding the irrationality and partiality of humans softened somewhat as he matured yet it was a constant source of frustration for Locke and at times undermined his normative commitment to the equal capacity of adults for rationality.³⁸

³⁶ “For their being but one Truth, one way to heaven...” There being one way, but no certainty of determining which is the right way other than inner conviction obliging, for Locke, mutual toleration for the inevitable variety of beliefs. Locke, 1689 *Letter*, p. p. 14.

³⁷ See for example: “For there are some who make no use of the light of reason but prefer darkness and would not wish to show themselves to themselves.” Locke, “*Essays on the Law of Nature*”, p. 115.

³⁸ This of course is exacerbated by Locke’s prejudices. Pritchard argues that Locke’s language of universalism masks his exclusions from toleration and instances where coercion is justified: “Locke regards Indians and Africans as not yet capable of consent and thus they cannot be said to be forced.” Likewise, Locke considers “idleness” an violation of property and justifies coercion of “able-bodied” poor caught begging. Elizabeth Pritchard, *Religion in Public: Locke’s Political Theology*, Stanford University Press, 2014, p. 102.

Locke across his texts remained acutely concerned that those who justified disruptive behaviour by appeals to religion would not be extended toleration. Theoretically, Locke is able to abandon magisterial imposition on things indifferent in religious worship by how he came to define religious practice generally and Christianity in particular.³⁹ This is not to take a cynical approach to Locke's commitment to toleration. Despite ultimately offering a qualified toleration of religious belief, Locke certainly came to argue fervently against magisterial imposition. I want to look at the mechanics of Locke's transition to advocating religious toleration because viewed in light of his larger corpus it offers a fascinating insight into his changing perceptions and strategy regarding his perennial concerns – order and security. What Locke lacked in the *Two Tracts* was a means to separate the “tender-hearted Christians” from the “crafty men” eager to recruit followers for nefarious ends: “but who shall be able to distinguish them [the tender-hearted Christians], and if a toleration be allowed as their right who shall hinder others who shall be ready enough to lay hold on the same plea?”⁴⁰ Locke's method of distinguishing the “tender” from the “crafty” in his 1667 *Essay* and 1689 *Letter* was to declare that genuine religious practice could not threaten the civil sphere:

Religious worship, being that homage which I pay to that god I adore in a way I judge acceptable to him, and so being an action or commerce passing only between God

³⁹ Locke's relationship with prominent tolerationist, Lord Shaftesbury, his observation of the Dissenter's refusal to conform from 1662-67, and experiences in the Duchy of Cleaves in 1666 (which proved to him ‘that toleration could work in practice if it were based on true Christian beliefs’) all contributed to Locke's waning support of imposed uniformity. This paper, however, emphasizes how he was able to translate these experiences into a theory of toleration that could not be exploited to undermine the establishment and maintenance of civil peace.

⁴⁰ Locke, *the First Tract*, p. 160.

and myself, hath in its own nature no reference at all to my governor, or to my neighbor, and so necessarily produces no action which disturbs the community.⁴¹

Locke is concerned to sever the possibility of legitimately connecting religion and disruptive behaviour (the magistrate retained the right to repress modes of worship deemed disruptive).

In the 1689 *Letter*, he wrote that

no sect can easily arrive to such a degree of madness, as that it should think fit to teach, for Doctrines of Religion, such things as manifestly undermine the Foundations of Society, and are therefore condemned by the Judgment of all Mankind: because their own Interest, Peace, Reputation, every Thing, would be thereby endangered.⁴²

Note that in the first quote, Locke stresses the *individual's* relation to God and subjective determination of what is an appropriate form of worship to offer. In the second quote, Locke focusses on collectivities—sects—organized around a particular mode of worshipping God. However, in each case the limiting factor is harm to civil society. It is thus not the distinction between “private” religion and what is deemed “public” that is important, but the *character* of religious worship.

Locke's position entailed affirming his own natural theological principals covered above that as the creations of God we are obligated to Him in seeking our own and others' preservation. However, is not just that society, as necessary for our preservation, could not legitimately be threatened in the name of religion (cf. Stanton). There were clear *signs* of “sincere” (and “insincere”) religious practice centered on this relation of religion to the civil sphere. Contra Phillip Abrams' argument that “sincere” religious belief was entirely a subjective determination there was in fact a way to measure the “sincerity” (*not* the truth) of

⁴¹ Locke, 1667 *Essay*, p. 274 [emphasis added]. This quote is also interesting to compare to his definition in the 1689 *Letter*, which emphasizes the communal character of religious worship. See Locke, 1689 *Letter*, p. 32.

⁴² Locke, 1689 *Letter*, p. 50 [emphasis added].

a religious belief according to this (for Locke theologically determined) end of civil society. That is “sincere” religious belief, according to Locke, would be benign, non-threatening and non-coercive.

Locke is acutely aware of the tendency for people to use religious justifications for acts against the state. In the first *Tract* he laments that:

none ever went about to ruin the *state* but with pretence to build the *temple*, all those disturbers of public quiet being wise enough to lay hold on religion as a shield which if it could not defend their cause was best like to secure their credit.⁴³

The violence and disorder that so ravaged seventeenth century Europe flowed from the corruption and exploitation of Christianity for seditious purposes. Locke’s distrust of “enthusiasm” and politicized Christianity is an enduring aspect of his thought. Rather than imposing on all external acts of religion, from 1667 Locke uses his texts on toleration to prevent “crafty” and “ambitious” men from legitimizing their “cause” by associating it with Christianity.⁴⁴ Indeed, any sedition evident in an ostensibly religious gathering is for Locke caused by corruptive non-religious sources. When zealous individuals impose their beliefs on others and lead assaults on established power, “tis not the fault of the worship” but “the product of depraved ambitious human nature”.⁴⁵ Likewise, when factions initially drawn together for a religious cause become too large and threatening, Locke is explicit that “Religion i.e. this or that forme of worship, being the cause of their union, & correspondence;

⁴³ Locke, the *First Tract*, p. 160.

⁴⁴ Locke’s strong desire for stability is perhaps best reflected in his opening remarks to the *First Tract*: “I no sooner perceived myself in the world but I found myself in a storm, which hath lasted almost hitherto, and therefore cannot but entertain the approaches of a calm with the greatest joy and satisfaction”, p. 119.

⁴⁵ Locke, 1667 *Essay*, p. 275.

not of their factiousnesse, & turbulancy."⁴⁶ For Locke, as a devout Christian, it is not religious belief itself which generates disorder, but primarily its misuse and exploitation.

Often overlooked by elevating Locke's conception of natural law (Stanton, Harris) or of positive law (Phillip Abrams⁴⁷) or his despair at the human tendency to irrationalism (Ingrid Creppell) is the centrality of Locke's vision of Christianity to his account of toleration. Against a century rife with religiously fuelled violent conflict between competing Christian sects, Locke is reimagining Christianity as essentially and originally harmonious. Throughout the 1689 *Letter*, Christianity is presented as unconcerned with political power, indeed, relatively unconcerned with the affairs of the temporal world as such.⁴⁸ Furthermore, Christianity is eminently peaceful, expressed as "that Religion, which carries the greatest opposition to Covetousness, Ambition, Discord, Contention, and all manner of inordinate Desires; and is the most modest and peaceable Religion that ever was" (59, *LCT*).⁴⁹ Locke's enterprise becomes not just to argue for the religious and civil realms to be separated according to their fundamentally different ends⁵⁰, but is also productive in a different sense in that he is setting

⁴⁶ Locke, 1667 *Essay*, p. 286 [emphasis added].

⁴⁷ For Abrams, Locke rejects reason as a stabilizing force for society, individuals are just too prone to partiality. Rather, the source of order must be in positive law. See Abrams, John Locke: *Two Tracts*, pp. 92 & 95.

⁴⁸ "The Business of True Religion is quite another thing. It is not instituted in order to the erecting of an external Pomp, nor to the obtaining of Ecclesiastical Dominion, nor to the exercising of Compulsive Force; but to the regulating of Mens Lives according to the Rules of Vertue and Piety" Locke, 1689 *Letter*, p. 8.

⁴⁹ See also Locke, 1689 *Letter*, pp. 8-9, 50, 55.

⁵⁰ Locke's advocacy of toleration from 1667 onward rests on a strictly demarcated separation of the religious from the civil sphere. Harris stresses the different ends which separate the two spheres. The temporal sphere is concerned with the protection of an individual's property and person, civil interests, whereas the religious sphere is concerned with the fate of an individual's soul. The different

out what it is for something to be considered legitimately religious (Christian) and therefore deserving of toleration.

Locke's anxiety at expunging the violent and disruptive (though alien) tendencies of religious belief unites Locke's writings on the subject of toleration from the early 1660s to the 1689 *Letter*. Yet Locke's understanding of religious corruption changes (and doesn't change) in interesting ways that reflect his shifting perceptions of authority and individual conscience in religious matters. In the *Two Tracts* Locke had no faith in "men generally" to self-regulate who:

when their fears are removed and [they] have a free exercise of their religion allowed, are apt to grow wanton and know not how to set *bounds* to their restless spirits if persecution hang not over their heads.⁵¹

The "ignorant and passionate multitude" are furthermore characterized as gullible and easily whipped into a violent frenzy.⁵² This reflects Locke's assessment in 1660-2 that individuals were generally unable to manage freedom, even that minimal freedom left after the acknowledgement of dues owed to God, and thus the necessity of magisterial imposition.

By 1667 in *Essay*, Locke came to emphasize rather that *the magistrate* was unqualified to make decisions for his subjects on the expression of religious belief for "[w]hat ever evil I suffer by obeying him [the magistrate] on other things he can make me amends in this world, but if he force me to a wrong religion, he can make me noe reparation in the other world."⁵³

ends implied different means. To achieve the former, the civil magistrate required coercive capacities over citizens, while in the realm of religious belief, coercion was futile.

⁵¹ Locke, *the First Tract*, p. 169. See also p. 211: 'And hence follows the belittling of the magistrate, the violation of laws; all things sacred as well as profane are held as nothing and *so long as they march under the banners of liberty and conscience*, those two watchwords of wonderful affects in winning support, they assert that each may do what he will.'

⁵² Locke, *the Second Tract*, p. 211.

⁵³ Locke, 1667 *Essay*, p. 272.

This theme only intensified in the 1689 *Letter* where “[t]he one only narrow way which leads to Heaven is not better known to the Magistrate than to private persons; and therefore I cannot safely take him for my Guide, who may probably be as ignorant of the way as myself, and who certainly is less concerned for my Salvation than I myself am.”⁵⁴ Thus, Locke emphasized from 1667 onwards the magistrate’s inadequacy regarding matters of personal salvation other than his own.

What stays constant, however, on the question of the corruption of religious belief is Locke’s anticlericalism. The *Two Tracts*, as Rose notes, while conventional in its support for magisterial imposition, is rather more heterodox in its anti-clericalism.⁵⁵ While the ignorant mob is quick to burn it takes “the overheated zeal of those who know how to arm the rash folly of the” multitude “with the authority of conscience” to kindle the blaze.⁵⁶ Indeed, “all those flames that have made such havoc and desolation in Europe, and have not been quenched but with the blood of so many millions, have been at first kindled with coals from the altar, and too much blown with the breath of those that attend the altar”.⁵⁷ In Locke’s later writings on toleration, he emphasized the hypocrisy of clerical leaders seeking to increase their temporal power by claiming a concern with people’s souls: “whilst they [church authorities] pretend only Love for the Truth, this their intemperate Zeal, breathing nothing but Fire and Sword, betray their Ambition; and shew that what they desire is Temporal

⁵⁴ Locke, 1689 *Letter*, p. 29.

⁵⁵ Jacqueline Rose., “John Locke, ‘Matters Indifferent’, and the Restoration of the Church of England”, *The Historical Journal*, Vol 48: 3, p. 617. “What is significant is not just the vehemence which Locke expresses, but also that he justifies imposition by the civil magistrate, not by the clergy; his case is not only traditionally anti-sectarian but also unusually anticlerical,” Rose, 617.

⁵⁶ Locke, the *Second Tract*, p. 211.

⁵⁷ Locke, the *First Tract*, p. 160.

dominion.”⁵⁸ This reminds us that a considerable anxiety for Locke was not just, or even most significantly, the *magistrate* interfering in matters spiritual, but an ambitious, “crafty,” and *insincere clergy* exploiting religious feeling to accrue temporal power.⁵⁹

Indeed, it remained the magistrate’s prerogative to determine which practices claimed as religious worship constituted a threat to civil society. The onus is now on the magistrate to carefully consider and debate whether such imposition tends to the peace, safety or security of his people.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, ultimately he is accountable to none but God for his decision. Nowhere in his arguments regarding toleration does Locke sanction anything more than passive resistance whereby each should listen to their own conscience and follow it “as far as without violence they can”.⁶¹ Thus there remains a singular, authoritative interpretation ultimately accountable to no man. While Locke avoids discussion over the potential ambiguities of determining “sincere” from “insincere” religious practice he of course does not eliminate the necessity of interpretation entailed in such classification.

Conclusion:

Locke’s work on toleration is radical in the sense that it is attempting to change how readers (whether subject or sovereign) saw the relation between civil and religious spheres and between individual conscience and an authoritative conscience. It is complex in that it acknowledges and elevates individual conscience in matters of religious practice yet does

⁵⁸ Locke, the 1689 *Letter*, p. 26; see also pp. 10, 22 & 40; and p. 83 in the *Third Letter*.

⁵⁹ On this subject in relation to Locke’s *Two Treatises*, see Mark Goldie, “John Locke and Anglican Royalism”, *Political Studies*, XXXI, 1983, pp. 61-85.

⁶⁰ Locke, 1667 *Essay*, p. 278.

⁶¹ Locke, 1667 *Essay*, p. 279.

considerable work excluding a potentially wide range of practices. Exclusion from the category of “religious” sanctioned the use of civil force, reminding us that it was not just Catholics and atheists who were denied toleration for Locke. Locke’s writings on toleration, particularly the 1689 *Letter*, aim to convince readers of the advantages of toleration and to inculcate a particular mode of religious (Christian) belief and practice (rational and peaceful; not enthusiastic and disruptive). Part of his strategy is setting bounds to what constituted legitimate religious belief. Locke’s definition of religion should not be deemed unimportant or tangential in his political project of advocating toleration. In the early 1660s he feared that a policy of religious toleration would be exploited by factions hungry for political power. Theoretically, at least, his strategy becomes subtler. His preclusion of disruptive behavior from sincere religious practice neutralizes it making it possible to exclude magisterial imposition from that sphere entirely. Locke is thus able to correct his neglect of the powerful need to feel free in individuals, especially regarding religious worship, whilst embedding in his policy of toleration precise limitations on what religious practice looked like backed up by the force of the magistrate.

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