

Unlocking John Locke's Idea of Religion and its Relation to his Political Ideas

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Abstract: John Locke is known as a philosopher that was a proponent of empiricism, or the theory in which all knowledge begins and comes from experience. He is one of the most popular philosophers when it comes to the idea of empiricism, and is considered to be one of the most influential empiricists in the Enlightenment period. That being said, he is a British Empiricist, along with the likes of George Berkeley and David Hume. He is most known for his ideas of man having an empty mind or an empty cabinet as he would call it, but unknown to many, he also has ideas concerning religion as well, as he was able to write a book entitled *The Reasonableness of Christianity: As Delivered in the Scriptures*. Due to the increasing threat of Catholicism that was invading England, he wrote *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. This paper will talk about the issue of Religious Toleration and what John Locke has to say about it, especially that he was able to experience it first-hand because of the increasing interest of the said issue in Europe. This would also talk about the events in Jonestown, Guyana and its relation to the religious idea of John Locke and what his religious thought has to do with his political thought.

Keywords: Church and State, Christianity and Religious Toleration.

“Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people he chose for his inheritance.”

—*Psalm 33:10*

I. Introduction

When we speak of John Locke, the thing that first comes to our mind is that of his idea of the mind being an empty cabinet or the mind being a *tabula rasa* or a clean slate. Many people would also know him as the author of many popular books like *Two Treatises on Government*, and *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. These books would prove to be an influence to the philosophers that came after his time. But in this case, we would not be

writing about those popular books of his. Instead, we shall focus on the religious ideas of John Locke and his ideas concerning Christianity, particularly in his letter entitled *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. This particular letter is about the beliefs of John Locke in regards to the Christian religion and that is exactly what we would be talking about in this paper. Of course, we would know his ideas, but we should be able

to know who John Locke was. Now who was John Locke?

The Life of John Locke

John Locke was born in 1632 in a small village in southwestern England named Wrington to a well to do family. His father, who was also named John, was a legal clerk and served in the Parliamentary forces in the English Civil War. Having lived his childhood in the Western Country, when he was a teenager he studied in Westminster School in London. Being successful at Westminster, he was able to establish a place in Christ Church, Oxford where he remained from 1652 until 1667. He learned scholastic philosophy in Oxford and although he did not like it, he became successful there and soon after graduating in the undergraduate program, he was able to hold several positions in the college. He soon left his post in Oxford to go to London, where he was acquainted to the family of the Earl of Shaftesbury. His association with the Earl has been good news for Locke as it was because of the Earl of Shaftesbury that he was able to hold multiple government positions. It was during this time also that Locke was able to begin writing *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, his most famous work.¹ He went on to travel to France but when he returned, the politics in England was already different from what it was before. Around the time of his return, his association with Ashley has become a liability due to the Earl being out of favor. We would also take note that it was also around this time that he was able to finish his famous political work entitled the *Two Treatises Concerning Government*.² After the death of Ashley, he moved to the Netherlands in order to escape political persecution due to his association with Ashley.

In the latter part of his life, John Locke would turn his focus towards theology in which his major work in this aspect is the book entitled *The Reasonableness of Christianity: As Delivered in the Scriptures*. This work however would prove to be controversial because in here, he criticized some of the beliefs of Christianity and called some of the traditional beliefs of Christianity to be unnecessary.³

John Locke suffered health problems in his later life, particularly respiratory problems that he got while he was in London due to poor air quality. It became worse in 1704 and on the October 28 of that same year he died.

II. John Locke's Idea of Religion

Now we shall proceed to the main topic of this paper which is the religious thought of John Locke. As what is stated earlier in this paper, John Locke has a religious idea and we shall also note that he was also a Christian. He is known for his book on Christianity that was titled *The Reasonableness of Christianity: As Delivered in the Scriptures* and his letter that was titled *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. He also had an idea of religious toleration and that is the main topic that we will tackle in his religious thought.

John Locke and Religious Toleration

In the 17th century, the issue of religious toleration was very much widespread in Europe. Because of the Reformation, Europe was divided into contending religious camps, and when these kinds of things happen, civil war will surely emerge, and also religious persecutions. Now it was during this time that John Locke stayed at the Dutch Republic, and at that time, the Dutch republic was a secular state and would allow religious differences.⁴ During the time, Catholicism was persecuting the Protestants but when the Calvinist church rose

to power, it was them who persecuted the other Christian sects.

Back in England, John Locke's country, religious conflict was well alive as well. During the Protectorate, the Anglican Church was abolished. Charles II restored the Anglican Church:

After the Restoration of Charles II, Anglicans in parliament passed laws which repressed both Catholics and Protestant sects such as Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers and Unitarians who did not agree with the doctrines or practices of the state Church. Of these various dissenting sects, some were closer to the Anglicans, others more remote.⁵

We can now see the tension between these religious sects as they would persecute each other and seeing this, one could say that they would seek vengeance to those who would persecute them before.

Moving on, what was the stance of John Locke towards these events? It is said that Religion and Christianity have been a big influence in the philosophy of John Locke. But we now ask the question what kind of Christian was John Locke? According to William Uzgalis:

Locke's family were Puritans. At Oxford, Locke avoided becoming an Anglican priest. Still, Locke himself claimed to be an Anglican until he died and Locke's nineteenth century biographer Fox Bourne thought that Locke was an Anglican. Others have identified him with the Latitudinarians — a movement among Anglicans to argue for a reasonable Christianity that dissenters ought to accept. Still, there are some reasons to think that Locke was neither an orthodox Anglican or a Latitudinarian.⁶

It is also said in the article that John Locke was able to influence Sir Isaac Newton into writing his powerful anti-Trinitarian pact. Upon seeing this development, we may be able to confer that

John Locke was an Arian⁷ or Unitarian. His view on his letter concerning toleration is that there must be a separation between Church and State, making Locke certainly against a state religion.

The Separation of Church and State

Many editions of the *Letter*, which was originally written in Latin with the title *Epistola de Tolerantia* were published in the nineteenth century and again in the last few decades. It was however, not an original representation of John Locke's 1689 Latin text as it was through the English translation made by William Popple, the nephew of Andrew Marvell.⁸ John Locke's work *A Letter Concerning Toleration* is a letter that was addressed to a certain "Honoured Sir" that was found out to be his Dutch friend Philip von Limborch.⁹ It was originally written in Latin and was published against his will after he returned to England. It was considered to be a very radical document.¹⁰

As what is stated earlier, in this particular work of Locke, he advocates the separation of Church and State. In his primary work he says:

I regard it as necessary above all to distinguish between the business of civil government and that of religion, and to mark the true bounds between the church and the commonwealth. If this is not done, no end can be put to the controversies between those who truly have or pretend to have at heart a concern on the one hand for the salvation of souls, and on the other for the safety of the commonwealth.¹¹

Now why did John Locke mark a clear separation between the affairs of the state and the affairs of the Church? John Locke presents arguments into why the magistrate's¹² rule does not extend beyond civic concerns. It is because the matters of the state should not interfere with the church. He presents three arguments that serve as proof to these.

The **first** would be that the care of souls is not committed to the magistrate. Why would this be? The answer is that God did not give anyone authority to force their own religion towards other people, and that power is not given to the magistrate by the people themselves because people believe their faiths through their own, as he says:

For no man, even if he would, can believe at another's dictation. It is faith that gives force and efficacy to the true religion that brings salvation.¹³

The power of true faith consists in the full persuasion of the mind because faith is not faith without believing.¹⁴

The **second** is that the magistrate cannot take care of the souls because his power would only stretch on the outside force, but faith however, is an inside force that the magistrate cannot control. Punishments, no matter how big, will not change the minds of the people of faith because this is what they believe in. Enforcing the law on them would not make them different because they will only remain as a Christian.

The **third** is that it is not the magistrate's overall job to take care of the souls of the people because even though the laws and punishments that they will enforce *might* change the minds of the people, it would not help the salvation of the people at all because:

For there being but one true religion, one way to heaven, what hope is there that most men would reach it, if mortals were obliged to ignore the dictates of their own reason and conscience, and blindly accept the doctrines imposed by their prince, and worship God in the manner laid down by the laws of their country?¹⁵

Through their own reason, people may choose what religion they may believe in and it is not the magistrate's job to dictate what religion

would save them and bring them to eternal life. Another reason of his argument is that different countries profess different religions.

John Locke originally wanted to give more examples that prove that the state should not mingle with church affairs but he believes that the examples that he has stated is enough to show that the magistrate's power should only focus to catering the public good, and its powers have nothing to do with the world to come.¹⁶ We can truly see that religion has an influence to his thought, even by just looking and reading that part of his *Letter*.

Atheism Should Not Be Tolerated

We also know John Locke to be a social contract theorist and he believes that the legitimacy of the government relies on the consent of the citizens through the basis of equality.¹⁷ John Locke's equality is not only limited to the political realm, but also in the religious realm as well. He promoted religious toleration but he did not tolerate atheism, it being the only exception. Why should the atheist be not tolerated for Locke? It is because Locke believes in a strong connection between religion and morality. He also says that atheists should not be tolerated because of these factors:

Promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon or sanctity for an atheist; for the taking away of God, even only in thought, dissolves all. Furthermore, a man who by his atheism undermines and destroys all religion cannot in the name of religion claim the privilege of toleration for himself.¹⁸

Locke was also against the persecution of other sects and beliefs because even though there are mistakes in their beliefs, he believes that they will be peaceful and harmless if not persecuted.

I agree on John Locke with this because I believe that even though there are other beliefs that are against my own or do not go on against my beliefs, they will not harm me. Of course he adds in his letter that they are tolerated if they do not aim civil impunity or domination over others (much like the extremists).

Although a strong advocate of toleration, John Locke made atheism an exception of what is to be tolerated because of his strong religious faith. For John Locke, without accepting God, or any supreme being as a basic truth, the ethics and morals of that person would be questionable.¹⁹

Incompatible Doctrines and the Story of "Jonestown", Guyana

Aside from atheism, he also presented more arguments on which the magistrate should not tolerate. One argument would be that the magistrate should not tolerate doctrines that are contrary to the good morals and the preservation of society. Locke says that there should be no incompatible doctrines. He says that even though they are existent, they are rare because:

For no sect is likely to reach such a degree of madness as to think fit to teach, as doctrines of religion, things which manifestly undermine the foundations of society, and are therefore condemned by the judgement of all mankind, and which would endanger its own interest, peace and reputation.²⁰

But such rare occasion of madness happened in Jonestown, Guyana on the 18th of November, 1978. That event on that fateful day is now known as the Jonestown Massacre. Jonestown was founded by the Peoples Temple, which was a racially integrated church that focused on helping those who are in need.²¹ Jim Jones, the church's founder, had communist thoughts in

his mind. He thought of a community in which everyone²² lived together in harmony and everyone worked toward the common good. Jim Jones would be able to make this vision to reality while still in California, but he dreamed of a bigger community that was outside the control of the United States Government.²³ Jones was able to find a suitable location that would fulfil this dream. It was located in the South American country of Guyana, where in 1973 he leased some land from the Guyanese government and sent workers to start clearing off the jungle.²⁴ In 1977, its population was still only about 50 people. Everything changed when Jim Jones relocated to Jonestown and many of his followers followed him to Guyana.

Then United States Congressman Leo Ryan decided to visit Jonestown after hearing reports of bad things that were happening there. Along with an NBC film crew and concerned relatives of Peoples Temple members, Ryan went on to Jonestown personally. When the congressman arrived, everything seemed completely fine until that evening; someone secretly passed a note with names of the people who wanted to leave to one of the men from NBC. It then became clear that some people were being held against their will in Jonestown.²⁵

On the 18th of November, 1978, Congressman Ryan told the people that he was willing to take anyone who wished to leave and return to the United States. Due to the fear of the people to Jones' reaction, only a few accepted the offer. A Temple member attacked Ryan but failed to cut his throat. Aware of the dangerous situation that surrounded them, he went with the truck and decided to leave. As they were about to ride the plane, several Peoples Temple started shooting at the group. Five people, including Congressman Ryan, were killed in the tarmac, while the others were severely injured. Back at Jonestown, Jim Jones gathered everyone to

assemble at the pavilion. Jones told everyone about the attack on Congressman Ryan's group and said that the United States government will react strongly to the said attack. Jones then said that the only way for the people to escape this was through revolutionary suicide. After the attack on the airfield, Jones received the report:

When it was announced that Ryan was dead, Jones became more urgent and more heated. Jones urged the congregation to commit suicide by saying, "If these people land out here, they'll torture some of our children here. They'll torture our people, they'll torture our seniors. We cannot have this."²⁶

It is said that 912 people died from the poisoning and 276 of them were children. Jim Jones died from a gunshot through his head. Counting the deaths at the airstrip, it was 918 people who lost their lives on that fateful day in Jonestown, Guyana.

Now upon seeing this, we can totally agree with John Locke and his disapproval of doctrines that harm the preservation of society. The given example above was just an isolated case and it harmed the preservation of society and it truly endangered the reputation of the Peoples Temple. John Locke was correct in not letting the magistrate tolerate such doctrines that were incompatible to human society because if we can imagine this kind of event happening in an entire country, then that country will be erased from the map. We now fully understand the thought of John Locke in regards to the first argument.

Intoleration against Churches with Subversive Claims

Another factor that the magistrate should not tolerate in a state is a church that makes subversive claims. It is when one religion hides their true intention, which is not good for the

society and state, in flowery and glittery words. Such examples of hidden words are: (1) that men are not obliged to keep promises that they say²⁷, (2) that monarchs may be thrown down from position by those people who have different religious beliefs to him, and (3) they alone have dominion of all things. But of course such statements and ideas must be hidden in plain sight so that the magistrate may not be able to see them because if this happens, it will surely attract the magistrate's attention and the commonwealth would stand guard against the evil that is lurking. He has this to say:

Nevertheless, we find people saying the same things in other words. For what else do they mean, who teach that faith need not be kept with heretics? Their meaning, of course, is that the privilege of breaking faith belongs to themselves; for they declare all who are not in their communion to be heretics, or at least they may so declare them whenever they think fit.²⁸

From what I can see, we can relate this to the acts of the Roman Catholic Church during that period. In those times, the Church had absolute power and what they dictate almost immediately happens. Let us remember that in the time John Locke has written this, exists a religious persecution. The statement "the privilege of breaking faith belongs to them" may be attributed to the actions done by the Roman Catholic Church during that time. When the Church accuses you of heresy, you are sure to find that you will be in big trouble. That was how strong the Church was, and how abusive it was back then. Their word was the law. Of course this all changed because of the reformation. The magistrate must not tolerate such act from any church because it may threaten even the government of that particular state.

Against a Church That Pledges Allegiance to a Foreign Prince

Of course this is common sense. With just reading this, one can conclude that this should always be the case. The magistrate should never allow any church that makes its members pledge allegiance to another monarch. This argument still applies today. They should not allow a church that lets its members pledge allegiance to another leader/country. Why is this so? In here Locke states:

For on these terms the magistrate would make room for a foreign jurisdiction in his own territory and cities, and allow his own people to be enlisted as soldiers against his own government.²⁹

We must remember that during the time of Locke's writing of the *Letter*, the Roman Catholic James II was sitting at the throne. John Locke was thinking of a situation in which the magistrate would allow a church to a foreign monarch or power because that was how the Roman Catholic Church was, and James II himself was a member of the Catholic Church. John Locke fears that his country might suffer that fate, in which the king would bring some of France's brutal ways of suppressing Protestants. This book was written in 1685, but published later in 1689, after James II was dethroned as the King of England.

III. Conclusion and Reflection

Now seeing this, we can now go back to the part of this paper where Jon Locke talks about the separation of Church and State. For John Locke there must be a separation because there are some factors in the Church that is beyond the control of the magistrate, and there are some factors in the State that the Church has no right to mingle with. Religious toleration must be maintained in the state because this will

produce peace and harmony in regards to the state. John Locke has also presented strong arguments in this publication. For me, I think that John Locke really made a strong point here. From what I can see, the church must not mingle in the state's affairs and the state must not mingle with the church's. We also saw the religious idea of John Locke throughout his letter. We can say that his political thought is connected to his religious beliefs. He also believes that someone without a religious belief or is an atheist must not be tolerated by the magistrate but that idea of his may not be compatible of the ideas that the people of today are thinking. People nowadays are more liberal thinkers and therefore accept atheism in a state. We have also discussed the events in Jonestown in this paper. It is because it was an example that supports John Locke's idea that the government should not tolerate churches with those kinds of ideas. These might harm the reputation of a state as well as its people. That event was the greatest single loss of American civilian life in a non-natural disaster before September 11. Although written a long time ago, some of its contents are still applicable even to this day and age. From what I think, this particular work also formed the various political and religious beliefs of a modern state. For example, we can apply his intolerance towards the church that allows foreign allegiance in today's time because, again, this may harm the safety of the state as this would allow people from your own state to pledge allegiance of another state. This would be saddening when during the time of war; someone from your own state will fight against you. Again we see John Locke's idea of separation of the church and state. This may look like a political paper overall, but the main point of this paper is to show that through his political works, John Locke can also express his religious beliefs and ideas.

¹ Connolly, Patrick, “John Locke (1632—1704)”. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Accessed August 29, 2015, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/locke/>

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Uzgalis, William, “John Locke”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Accessed December 10, 2015, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke/>

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Arius rejected the notion of the trinity by stating that Jesus was created by God the Father and therefore subordinate to the Father. He was declared a heretic.

⁸ Locke, John, *Epistola de Tolerantia*, ed. Raymond Klibansky (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), vii.

⁹ “A Letter Concerning Toleration”, *Modern Political Thought*, Accessed December 11, 2015, <http://modernpoliticalthought.wikispaces.com/A+Letter+Concerning+Toleration>

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Locke, John, *Epistola de Tolerantia*, 65.

¹² John Locke exhaustively used the word magistrate here because such word and position was common in those times. A magistrate is someone who makes enforces the laws of the state. It may be kings, monarchs, magistrates, judges, and so on and so forth.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁴ This was an addition of William Popple.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁷ Broers, Adalei, “John Locke On Equality, Toleration, and the Atheist Exception”, *StudentPulse*, Accessed December 11, 2015, <http://www.studentpulse.com/articles/75/john-locke-on-equality-toleration-and-the-atheist-exception>

¹⁸ Locke, John, *Epistola de Tolerantia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 135.

¹⁹ Broers, Adalei, “John Locke On Equality, Toleration, and the Atheist Exception.”

²⁰ Locke, John, *Epistola de Tolerantia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 131.

²¹ Rosenberg, Jennifer, “The Jonestown Massacre”, *About Education*, Accessed December 11, 2015, <http://history1900s.about.com/od/1970s/p/jonestown.htm>

²² “Everyone” means including African-Americans. During the time of the establishment of the Peoples temple, America was still a segregated country and African-Americans would be victimized racially. Jim Jones wanted to help these African-Americans.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ “that faith need not be kept” as what is stated in this version of the *Epistola*. Cf. Locke, John, *Epistola de Tolerantia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 131.

²⁸ Locke, John, *Epistola de Tolerantia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 133.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.

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