

# **John Locke and the Moral Value of Toleration**

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## **Abstract**

The concept of freedom of conscience is in the religious affairs and political affairs at the core of Locke's understanding of tolerance. He redefined the church and the state accordingly. Even the effects of the church's discipline, and the way the state's laws have to be conceived and implemented, are seen from the perspective of tolerance. I argue that tolerance is the main lens through which Locke understands the identity and the relationship of the two. He builds a society with tolerance in view. Tolerance is the attitude that offers the context for freedom and peace.

**Keywords:** tolerance, religious freedom, Church and State

## Introduction

John Locke published his *Letter* (1689) in a particular context: post Reformation, post Counterreformation, post peace at Westafalia (1648). These events changed much of Europe. The religious and political landscape is very different from what it was before 1517 (the year Reformation begun). I mentioned these because I consider Locke's towering contribution to understanding of toleration in society as being built on the accomplishments of these events, and, especially on his theory of government<sup>1</sup> (the *Second Treatise*), his puritan background (as he goes against it), the influences of Bacon and Shaftesbury (as he follows them), and the lessons of history in his own country (the English Civil War; the Edict of Nantes, 1685)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed study on the structure of the argument of the *Letter* in tandem with the *Second Treatise* see Mark Michael, "Locke, Religious Toleration, and the Limits of Social Contract Theory," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* Vol. 20, No. 1, 22-27; the question of development of Locke's thinking on toleration is addressed by Maria Van Der Schaar, "Locke on Judgment and Religious Toleration," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* Vol. 20, No. 1, (2012). 43-44.

<sup>2</sup> For the historical context of the *Letter* see, Maria Van Der Schaar, "Judgment". 41-44. Pevnick defends the strength of Locke's arguments for tolerance against a variety of critics; see Ryan Pevnick, "The Lockean Case for Religious Tolerance: The Social Contract and the Irrationality of Persecution," *Political Studies* Vol. 57, (2009). 848-846.

## **Church, State, and Toleration**

Lockes's distinction between church and state is not new in the European thought.<sup>3</sup> It was advanced first by the Anabaptist movement in the 16th century (the radical wing of the European Reformation)<sup>4</sup>. This basic distinction is essential for his argument about toleration. Here are the details of his argument.

### **The Church**

His understanding of the church as a 'voluntary society' is also indebted to the Anabaptists; there is no such idea in Catholicism, Lutheranism, or Anglicanism (in every one of these branches of Christianity someone's religion is not a fact decided by the individual person). When the church is understood as a 'voluntary society' the toleration is a distinctive mark of it. And Locke says that this is in accordance with the

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<sup>3</sup>. Lorenzo argues for the need to ground the affirmations of toleration and separation on the free expression rights and separation principles, David J. Lorenzo, "Tradition and Prudence in Locke's Exceptions to Toleration," *American Journal of Political Science* Vol. 47, No. 2, (2003). 257.

<sup>4</sup>. For historical details of Protestant nonconformists see the detailed study of Scott Sowerby, "Forgetting the Repealers: Religious Toleration and Historical Amnesia in Later Stuart England," *Past and Present* No. 215, (2012). 85-90.

Gospel and reason. The Gospel teaches that someone's religion is a fact of his own choice. Nobody can coerce anybody in matters of faith.<sup>5</sup> To believe in Christ and to be loyal to him is a matter of freedom and honesty. To be accepted by God is based on the sincerity of faith.

Nobody can rule over others in matters of religion. Faith is not involuntary.<sup>6</sup> The church has its role in the areas of worship and eternal life; all decisions and internal laws need to have these in view. The church cannot coerce anyone to believe anything; it can advise, admonish but not force (at this point he is head on against Augustine). When someone is disobedient he can be excommunicated from the congregation but that fact will not affect his status in society or his property and goods.<sup>7</sup> Force does not accomplish anything in matters of religion because force cannot lead to personal convictions. Nobody is saved by a faith s/he disagrees with. Someone has to be free to believe whatever s/he wants and that fact does not affect him as a citizen in a society.

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<sup>5</sup> Locke rejects the government attempts to pursue a particular religious conception which do not grow from the commitments of a particular religious view. Cf. Ryan Pevnick, "Religious Tolerance". 846

<sup>6</sup> See also the argument on faith, judgment and reason given by Maria Van Der Schaar, "Judgment". 47-53.

<sup>7</sup> When the problems arise within a religious diverse community the solutions are not political. Mark Michael, "Religious Toleration". 22.

## **The State**

For Locke to understand the state as distinct from the church was a great step forward in the direction of tolerance and harmony in society. Because of the mixture between the two, Europe experienced the crusades, religious wars and the Inquisition.

The state is seen as a society that exists for the civil interests of its citizens. The magistrates have to make sure that the laws are applied objectively and that everyone is granted the rights of having what is needed for living this life. The state and the church do not cross the lines of each other; their jurisdictions and instruments are distinct. The prince does not know better in matters of religion than the personal individual. The things related to the soul are not in the jurisdiction of the magistrate; everyone is responsible for his own soul. Someone's salvation cannot be made against his own will; not even God can do that. The ruler has no jurisdiction over the church and its rites. The laws of the state do not have anything to do with the truth or falsity of some doctrine; these laws exist for the security and protection of the citizens. The state protects the wealth and the peace of its citizens; the religious persecution is almost irrational.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed argument on the irrationality of coercing belief, see Ryan

When there are laws that coerce people in joining a particular religion or form of worship the citizens should not obey them; every man has to act according to his own conscience. The state should not use the idea of 'the public good' as a reason to interfere in the matters of the soul.

## **Toleration**

Locke, in his own times, argues for toleration by keeping the church and state distinct. He does this in such a way that in the end everything is redefined: the true church, the state, and the status on the individual in society. For Locke toleration is a sign of the true church of a certain type of commonwealth. These two do not intersect each other; they have very distinct areas of responsibility: to care for the soul (the church), to care for the people's prosperity and peace (the state). These are his basic premisses. Toleration is possible because of this distinction.

## **Evaluation**

Locke's argument is build in a religious context. This fact can be uneasy for the contemporary reader, but toleration, historically, was

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Pevnick, "Religious Tolerance". 857-860.

thought in a religious context. I believe that Locke gives us what we want in terms of the substance. The concept of freedom of conscience is in the religious affairs and political affairs at the core of his understanding of tolerance. He redefined the church and the state accordingly. Even the effects of the church's discipline, and the way the state's laws have to be conceived and implemented, are seen from the perspective of tolerance. So, I argue that tolerance is the main lens through which Locke understands the identity and the relationship of the two. He builds a society with tolerance in view. Tolerance is the attitude that offers the context for freedom and peace. According to Locke, tolerance is guaranteed in a reciprocal manner both at the level of individuals, and of the two main institutions of his day: state/commonwealth and the church. The freedom is exercised without interfering in the matters related to 'the care of the soul' and 'the care for the property' and the limits for this are in place at the level of physical harm. Even the most radical differences in matters of faith or soul do not affect the status of someone in society or his properties. We are all equal before the law and have the liberty to believe whatever we want and to live the way we want but without harming others.

Locke's understanding of tolerance does not address other different orientation (in the areas of sex, family, ethics) found in today's socie-

ty<sup>9</sup>. But his dealing with issues in the church can inform our understanding. His analysis of bad deeds provided his position with the point that even when someone is heretic or practices idolatry, the church and the state do not have the authority to punish him. As long as those practices do not harm others in a physical way s/he has to be allowed to practice them. The exercise of personal freedom and tolerance have to prevail. Everyone<sup>10</sup> is responsible for his own life and behavior. The 'harm principle' has to be kept at the 'physical' level, not uploaded at the 'moral' level. We do not burn anyone at the stake.

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<sup>9</sup>. It should be seen that Locke's exclusion of Catholics and atheists is based on his prudential and practical judgments. See the argument in David J. Lorenzo, "Tradition". 248-249; Locke did not offer a complete general defense of religious tolerance, Mark Michael, "Religious Toleration". 38.

<sup>10</sup>. There is the need to work with an explicit description of human nature; spirituality is necessary to a fully human life but dangerous when mixed with state affairs. David J. Lorenzo, "Tradition". 257.

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