

Liberal Read

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A Letter Concerning Toleration

BOOK REVIEW

JOHN LOCKE

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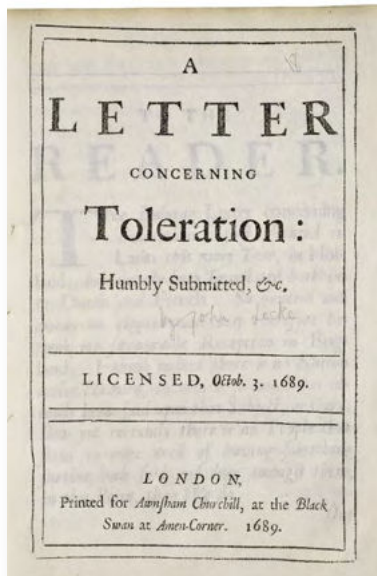
1689

By Nayeli L. Riano

A series of crises has put many liberal ideas under question. Inspired by a popular commercial concept, Liberal Reads are packaged in an easily accessible format that provides key insights in 30 minutes or less. The aim of Liberal Reads is to revisit and rethink classical works that have defined liberalism in the past, but also to introduce more recent books that drive the debate around Europe's oldest political ideology. Liberal Reads may also engage critically with other important political, philosophical and economic books through a liberal lens. Ideological discussions have their objective limits, but they can still improve our understanding of current social and economic conditions and give a much needed sense of direction when looking for policy solutions in real life problems.

Liberal Read

A Letter Concerning Toleration



Toleration is a concept that we consider commonsensical today. Religious toleration, moreover, is a fundamental concept that many of us would consider essential for the human right to worship freely. However, this was not always the reality. What we recognize as a general custom of humanity has evolved from years of debate over what it means to be tolerant and toward whom. Also, we as a society still have a long way to go in this quest for toleration, yet, though it may still be imperfect, toleration is a concept that has been broadened largely through thinkers in the liberal tradition.

Something that merits reiteration for this review, then, is the fact that one of the most noted political thinkers on the liberalism of the seventeenth century contributed to our understanding of what toleration means, namely, *religious* toleration. Published in 1689, John Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration* is a short work with a huge impact, for it is an influential essay on the role of toleration in Christianity from both a theological and a political standpoint. Locke's *Second Treatise on Government* might be more popular, but both works—as many scholars of Locke will testify—must be evaluated together if we are to gain an overarching holistic depiction of the thought of this eminent liberal thinker. Locke's *Second Treatise* might be more familiar to readers of political thought, while his *Letter*, alongside *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), might be read more commonly by theologians or readers of what we call Christian political thought. The focus of this essay, however, is Locke's *Letter* for its important commentary on matters both religious and political, and because it has been influential to our understanding of the relationship between these two dimensions.

Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration* can be considered the more difficult work to critique because it is the product of both his theological thought and his political thought. Readers will notice Locke's profound knowledge of Scripture and extensive use of it to substantiate his arguments. Consequently, we gain insight into Locke's theological mind—that is, his understanding of Christianity and its message—by analyzing how he reads and understands Scripture. In these same pages where he discusses Christianity, we also see Locke dedicate much attention to the role of what he calls the "Civil Magistrate." The adjective "civil" is meant to distinguish the remit of this magistrate from ecclesiastical matters. Indeed, it is in this work that we see Locke draw a clear distinction between that which is *civil*—pertaining to political (civil) society and its government—versus that which is *ecclesiastical*—pertaining to the Church and its representatives (bishops, clergy, etc.) and their concerns about religious doctrine. Locke's ideas on toleration were influential in developing liberal thought and importing fundamental liberal principles into the intel-

lectual debate. On the one hand, the concept of tolerance described raised controversial questions and challenged liberal reasoning. On the other hand, it has restored tolerance as the basic principle for a liberal society.

Despite this notable distinction between the political and the religious, we should not confuse this result with the process by which Locke comes to this conclusion: the *Letter* demonstrates how Locke arrives at certain principles about the limits of the civil magistrate against the personal religious beliefs of citizens through a dual analysis of theology and political philosophy. For Locke, the two concepts go together, which his *Letter* demonstrates, if we are to understand how these two realms of people's lives—their diverse religions and their collective belonging to a particular commonwealth—are to play out practically in everyday life without resulting in civil strife or warring factions.

Before exploring Locke's central arguments in the *Letter*, certain clarifications must be made. Locke is writing in the context of a crisis in the seventeenth century to provide a rational solution to the problem of morality and the role of religion in public life. We should not, however, read this work anachronistically by imposing our understanding of religious toleration on Locke's. The work advocates *Christian* toleration toward *other* Christian sects, as he calls them, which is further demonstrated by his use of Christian scripture to strengthen his claims. The *Letter*, then, is written from the perspective of a Christian thinker writing for other Christians. Certainly, Locke's support of toleration is not without exceptions, namely, atheists and Catholics, who are excluded from his plea for toleration. We would risk making a historical error if we claimed that Locke is advocating for total religious toleration. Thus, Locke's *Letter* is not in favor of toleration of every and any religious belief, or even the lack of religious belief; rather, it is a plea for toleration for what concerns the "inward" or private elements of religious belief that are rooted in people's conscience.

It would also be incorrect to read the *Letter* as an indictment of Catholicism. Although we tend to think that the Protestant Reformation was in favor of the religious freedom we so value today, Locke lived through a time when this sentiment was contradicted and which demonstrated that one dogmatic epoch was oftentimes simply replaced by another. Numerous examples detail how Luther, Calvin, Queen Elizabeth I, the early Stuarts, and Presbyterians—to name a few examples—exhibited the same types of violence and exclusions against other religious groups that they had once faced.¹ For this reason, the contents of Locke's *Letter* cannot be divorced from the historical context in which it was written: a time of ubiquitous religious persecution from and by all branches of Christianity.

This form of religious intolerance came from both Protestant and Catholic traditions. The violence and exclusionary acts that came with the Protestant Reformation were themselves a reaction to years of that same treatment from the Roman Catholic Church. This idea of religious intolerance was more than a social sentiment against people of a different religion, however. The *Letter* should not be read as simply advocating for toleration as a personal matter; that is, as a dispositional change of heart one should have toward those of a different faith—although this is certainly an effect. The concept of religious tolerance is, rather, connected to the idea of what it means to be a part

1 Cf. John Locke and Mark Goldie, *A Letter Concerning Toleration and Other Writings*, The Thomas Hollis Library (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010), ix.

Locke presents three central arguments against persecution: first, it is not the task of the civil magistrate to care for souls; second, force is a poor means to engender genuine conversion and to guarantee the subsequent salvation of the souls of those who convert; and third, true salvation is rendered less probable when religious conversion is the result of force because the individual has converted without spiritual guidance.

of *political* society, or, as in Locke's time, a commonwealth. Toleration is a collective rule; in other words, that can only work when it is instituted as a part of civil law.

Persecution was rampant during Locke's time, but he was not, of course, the first to advocate in favor of religious toleration as an end to persecution. Still, his *Letter* remains one of the most influential works on the subject, and we must now explore its contents. From the outset, Locke introduces the "mutual Toleration of Christians in their different Professions of Religion..." The *Letter* is relatively short, compared to his other works, and gets to the heart of his argument quite quickly. Locke presents three central arguments against persecution: first, it is not the task of the civil magistrate to care for souls; second, force is a poor means to engender genuine conversion and to guarantee the subsequent salvation of the souls of those who convert; and third, true salvation is rendered less probable when religious conversion is the result of force because the individual has converted without spiritual guidance.

Locke also raises important points about religion being a vessel for morality, going so far as to say that the inculcation of morality (specifically, toleration) is *the* central element of Christianity; he writes, "I esteem that toleration to be the chief characteristical mark of the true Church," implying that fervent faith, the opposite of toleration, masks the striving for power. As Locke explains in his introduction to the reader, "Our Government has not only been partial in Matters of Religion; but those also who have suffered under that Partiality, and have therefore endeavored by their Writings to vindicate their own Rights and Liberties, have for the most part done it upon narrow Principles, suited only to the Interests of their own Sects."

Much of Locke's initial statements regarding toleration read as moral commands of what he believes Christians are called to obey. For example, he writes that people ought to be charitable, meek, and kind to all; people should also assess and attend to their own moral state before judging other people; and people should also condemn violent acts of persecution in the name of religion when the people of that religion are filled with malice. Locke's writing tone is strong and resolute and includes poignant statements, such as "It would be hard for one who appears careless about his own salvation to persuade me that he were concerned for mine..." and "God has never given any such authority to one man over another as to compel anyone to his religion."

Locke's rhetorical strategy, moreover, relies on an analysis of the actions of Christ himself as an exemplar of what ought to be the path of Christians in their behavior toward others.

He writes, for example,

If, like the Captain of our Salvation, they sincerely desired the Good of Souls, they would tread in the Steps, and follow the perfect example of that Prince of Peace; who sent out his Soldiers to the subduing of Nations, and gathering them into his Church, not armed with the Sword, or other Instruments of Force, but prepared with the Gospel of Peace, and with the Exemplary Holiness of their Conversation. This was his Method.

Locke contrasts methods of conversion that are “armed with the Sword” with those that contain the “Gospel of Peace.” It is clear that for Locke, then, any forceful or violent measure by which to yield religious conversion is contradictory to the purpose of Christianity because it is contradictory to the actions of the “Captain of our Salvation,” i.e., none other than Christ himself. If Christ never exemplified such violent persecution, then how did it come about that sovereigns and states took it upon themselves to carry out this cruel task?

While Locke does not provide a direct answer to this question, he hints at the response. He writes that toleration is something so “agreeable” to both the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to the “genuine Reason of Mankind” that it appears “monstrous” that men would be so blind as to ignore this fact. He acknowledges that men have “pride” and “ambition,” which the “religious” ends of persecution mask. He adds, furthermore, that this reality—that men will always mask their vices, “their own irregular passions” through violent acts such as persecution—is hard to overcome, for such is human nature.

What *can* be prevented, however, is the condoning of religious persecution (and “unchristian Cruelty,” he adds) “under the pretense of Religion” as an alleged means to ensure “Care of the Publick Weal, and Observation of the Laws.” What can further be prevented, Locke argues, is the permission of people to seek “Impunity for their Libertinism and Licentiousness” under the “Pretenses of Loyalty and Obedience to the Prince, or of Tenderness and Sincerity in the Worship of God.” To paraphrase, Locke tells us that while it is never possible to stop men from individually using allegedly noble tasks as pretexts for their personal gain, it is possible to stop using religious persecution as a pretext for looking after the public wellbeing and for demanding obedience to a state’s laws and to stop people from distracting attention from their own sins by masking religious persecution as a form of loyalty to their king or their God. To stop both of these acts, Locke posits a solution that becomes one of the most important elements in his *Letter*. He writes,

I esteem it above all things necessary to distinguish exactly the Business of Civil Government from that of Religion, and to settle the just Bounds that lie between the one and the other. If this be not done, there can be no end put to the Controversies that will be always arising, between those that have, or at least pretend to have, on the one side, a Concernment for the Interest of Mens’ Souls, and on the other side, a Care of the Commonwealth.

Several points are worth highlighting in the above excerpt. Locke tells us that a distinction can be made between the “business”—the actions and matters of concern—of “civil government” and “religion.” Implicit in this statement is the notion that Locke believes

the two things to be *different* and, therefore, in need of distinction, hence the need to “settle the just Bounds” between them. What is more, Locke warns us that refusing to identify the line that divides government and church will result in perpetual “controversies” between those who care for men’s souls and those who care about the commonwealth.

By this statement, Locke advocates for a sense of what we would recognize better today as the separation of church and state, since his conclusion of the problem which

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has led to state-sponsored religious persecution is one of teleological incongruity: the ends of the state are not the ends of religion—while the former is concerned with the present world and living together with other beings as virtuously and peacefully as possible, the latter is concerned with caring for one’s soul in preparation for the afterlife. The combination of these two incompatible and incommensurable things had already resulted in years of religious persecution and civil strife. We can contrast Locke’s points here to those of Thomas Hobbes, who famously argues in *Leviathan* that people must adhere to the public religion of the state regardless of personal convictions. This argument stems from Hobbes’ belief that the civil sovereign must also be the head of the Church to avoid division in their subjects’ allegiances. Locke, however, takes the opposite view: while Hobbes believes that the division of church and state is what leads to civil factions, Locke argues that the *unity* of church and state is what will most likely guarantee perpetual problems.

The solution for Locke, then, is to separate church and state but first, to explain why it is that government and religion are entities with dissimilar concerns. Locke defines a commonwealth as “a Society of Men constituted only for the procuring, preserving, and advancing of their own *Civil Interests*.” Civil interests, moreover, are comprised of “Life, Liberty, Health, and Indolency of Body; and the Possession of outward things, such as Money, Lands, Houses,

Furniture, and the like.” Locke argues that the civil magistrate must secure these things, and only these things, for his people. Missing from this list is what Locke calls “the Salvation of Souls.”

Locke marks an important distinction that is central to the development of liberal thought: the distinction between what he calls the “inward” and “outward” dimensions of an individual’s life. The former concerns an individual’s private and personal beliefs, and the latter concern the individual’s role in public life. As he indicates, “the Care of Souls is not committed to the Civil Magistrate any more than to other Men.” Locke writes,

[T]he care of Souls cannot belong to the Civil Magistrate, because his Power consists only in *outward* force, but true and saving Religion consists in the *inward* persuasion of the Mind, without which nothing can be acceptable to God. *And such is the nature of the Understanding, that it cannot be compelled to the belief of anything by outward Force*²

Notice how Locke brings to our attention three elements in this statement, namely, the limits of the civil magistrate (which we can substitute with government in general); the nature of (true) religious belief as an inward “persuasion”; and the nature of the human mind. The problem with a civil magistrate who involved themselves in the affairs of the Church is that it entangled these three distinct elements, such that it ignored a reality; the latter two elements are *inward* projects, which government cannot possibly shape since it is, by its nature, an entity of outward persuasion. Therefore, all of the measures a civil magistrate would take, in the form of religious persecution against people of a different religion were unjust and invalid: “Confiscation of estate, imprisonment, torments, nothing of that nature can have any such efficacy as to make men change the inward judgment that they have framed of things.” Coercion, Locke ensures, even if it yields adherence and obedience, does not itself lead to the salvation of souls since the considerations of civil government are limited to people’s civil interests, and does not concern itself “with the world to come.”

As a result of these assertions, Locke introduces the concept of a free and voluntary society—a description connected to his *Second Treatise*—where the mandatory inheritance of a religion would be as “absurd” as the inheritance of a “temporal estate.” He concludes that “no man by nature is bound unto any particular Church or sect” but joins “voluntarily to that society in which he believes he has found that profession and worship which is truly acceptable to God.” Much like Locke’s ideal state, the church is a free and voluntary society because the best and only true way to convert people is through open and peaceful persuasion, not coercion.

In Locke’s free and voluntary society, then, where the duties of the civil government are different from those of the church, liberty plays a central role because it is the principle that allows Christians not only to worship freely but also to extend toleration toward those who worship differently from them. In assessing the duties of toleration, Locke provides us with three principles: first, he argues that “no Church is bound by the Duty of Toleration to retain any such Person in her Bosom, as, after Admonition, continues obstinately to offend against the Laws of the Society”; second, “no private Person has any Right, in any manner, to prejudice another Person in his Civil Enjoyments, because he is of another Church or Religion”; and third, the authority of the Clergy “since it is Ecclesiastical,” ought “to be confined within the Bounds of the Church, nor can it in any manner be extended to Civil Affairs; because the Church itself is a thing absolutely separate and distinct from the Commonwealth.”

By now we can certainly discern how much of Locke’s thought on this subject of toleration has influenced liberal thought, namely, through his distinction between matters of church and state. Locke’s argument, as it is presented in his *Letter*, presents him, first and foremost, as a moral thinker, from which his political and theological thought stems. Unlike Hobbes, for example, Locke is not concerned with the problems that civil strife between church and state would cause *for the sovereign*; rather, he is concerned with

2 Emphasis on mine.

the problems that civil strife between church and state would continue to cause *for the people*, which often took the form of religious persecution, replete with violence and suffering that Locke considered inhumane from the tone with which he chastises it.




Locke's argument in his *Letter* is itself elucidated by his reading of scripture, and it might lead us to ask whether or not his inchoate separation of church and state is itself a principle he devised from his understanding of Christianity; indeed, his use of scripture gives us reason to believe that much of his "political" thought cannot be divorced from his Christian thought. The question this statement raises for contemporary readers of Locke, particularly those interested in the history of liberalism and modern liberal thought, is how much of Locke's political thought owes its substance to his (Christian) religious conviction. That said, even if Locke's political thought is influenced by his Christianity, he managed to produce a political philosophy from it that advocates for liberty and toleration which lingers with us to this day. After all, we must note that in Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), he does not mention religion or the salvation of souls—a telling sign, indicative of what he believes is, and is *not*, the role of the state. In *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, we see Locke map out the distinction between these two separate entities, church and state, and correct what he sees as the flawed historical entanglement between them. While his more theological work, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, conveys Locke's thought on religion, his *Second Treatise*, to which we will subsequently turn in our next review, focuses on his political thought on civil society.



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