

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGIOUS REINTERPRETATION TO
LOCKE'S THEORY OF RELIGIOUS TOLERATION

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ABSTRACT

John-Paul Petrash: The Significance of Religious Toleration to
Locke's Theory of Religious Toleration
(Under the direction of Jeff Spinner-Halev)

Political theorists in recent decades have largely overlooked John Locke's efforts to reinterpret theology and religion and the significance of these efforts to his theory of religious toleration. In this paper I argue that an important insight ties Locke's writings on theology and religion with his writings on religious toleration: that religious toleration requires religious reformation. I consider four ways in which Locke reinterpreted Christian theology in his efforts to demonstrate that the Christian religion was essentially tolerant. I also argue that Locke adhered to a particular method while engaging in religious reinterpretation. Using this method, Locke was able to articulate religious arguments for toleration that could resonate with the more religiously-devout. Today, Locke's project of reinterpretation can still inform contemporary theorizing about religious toleration as well as considerations about the role of religious arguments in justifying values such as religious toleration.

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INTRODUCTION

Political theorists in recent decades have engaged in considerable handwringing about the theological¹ element in John Locke's political thought but have largely overlooked his extensive efforts to reinterpret theology and religion and the significance of these efforts to his work on religious toleration. While some² have attempted to “bracket” the theological element in an effort to salvage Locke's political arguments, the more mainstream view seems to be that Locke's theology is in fact essential to his political thought: Locke's political thought rests on a theological foundation, and attempting to bracket this theological foundation renders Locke's political thought incoherent (De Roover & Balagangadhara, 2008; Dunn, 1969; Harris, 1994a; Marshall, 1994; Schwartzman, 2005; Waldron, 2002). In his seminal study of Locke's political thought, Dunn (1969) has remarked that one of his [Dunn's] central expository points is “the intimate dependence of an extremely high proportion of Locke's arguments for their very intelligibility, let alone plausibility, on a series of theological commitments” (p. xi). To Dunn, Locke was not merely “a thinker who just happened to be a Christian”; he was “a Christian thinker” (Dunn, 1990, p. 10). More recently, Waldron (2002) has argued that Locke's theological content “cannot simply be bracketed off as a curiosity”; such content “shapes and informs the account through and through” (p. 82). Schwartzman (2005) has claimed that Locke's case for toleration is incoherent except in relation to its religious content (p. 682).

¹ While there is certainly a distinction between theology and religion, I do not make much of that distinction here. I am concerned in a more general sense with the relationship between Locke's views on theology *and* religion, taken as a whole, and his theory of religious toleration.

² See, for example, Alex Tuckness, “Rethinking the intolerant Locke,” *American Journal of Political Science* 46(2) (2002): 288-298.

Different conclusions have been drawn about what this theological element means for the relevance and applicability of Locke's political thought today. Waldron (2002) has suggested that Locke's notion of equality, for example, is more securely grounded than contemporary liberal notions *because of its religious foundations*. While acknowledging that Locke's political thought rests on theological foundations, Schwartzman (2005) has argued that Locke's religious arguments are salient because they can help strengthen agreement "about the moral legitimacy of tolerant political institutions" (p. 679). But a more prominent conclusion has been that Locke's political thought is limited in its contemporary application because it is based upon—and inseparable from—a narrow, Protestant theology. De Roover and Balagangadhara (2008) have argued that efforts at bracketing this theological element are both impossible and nonsensical: Locke's political thought is "Christian to the core" and therefore Lockean political ideas make little sense in countries without a Protestant background (p. 540). More strongly, Dunn (1990) has argued that most of Locke's political thought (with one limited exception) is "dead" due to "the deeply Christian imaginative frame of Locke's ethical and political thinking" (p. 12). Indeed, the mainstream view seems to be that Locke's political thought has limited applicability today (or none at all) due to the Achilles' heel of its Protestant theological influence. As Perry (2005) has wryly observed, Locke's Christianity "has often been seen as a flaw that the modern reader does well to look past, his theological commitments being inappropriate for today's pluralistic society" (p. 269).

But amidst handwringing about the theological element in Locke's political thought a crucial phenomenon has been largely neglected: Locke was engaged in a decades-long project of reinterpreting Christian theology. He was not simply articulating his political views based on fixed theological convictions but he was adjusting these convictions through serious theological

inquiry and reinterpretation. More importantly, I will argue that Locke's project of reinterpretation was strongly related to his theory of religious toleration. Locke's guiding conviction was that religious toleration required religious reformation³. Religious toleration as an ideal could be realized only if certain features of religion were reformed; such reform could be brought about through religious reinterpretation. *The issue is therefore less about the Protestant roots of Locke's religious toleration and more about the importance of religious reformation to Locke's religious toleration.* We should pay more attention to how Locke sought to reinterpret Christianity and how such efforts relate to his work on religious toleration. This is an important insight that has not received enough attention.

My first point of emphasis, therefore, is that Locke thought that religious toleration required religious reformation. My second point of emphasis is that Locke engaged in extensive efforts to reinterpret Christian theology in order to show how Christianity could be properly reformed—and he adhered to a particular method in doing so. This reinterpetive effort is evident throughout Locke's rather extensive writings on religion. Locke did not simply call for religious toleration through religious reformation but he also gave us a template for how religious reformation could and should occur. To Locke, the path to religious toleration did not involve subverting or castigating religion but rather reinterpreting it. Perhaps recognizing that mere calls for religious toleration were as ineffective as they were common, Locke underwent a decades

³ I should clarify my understanding of two words that I use extensively: reinterpretation and reformation. I do not make a hard distinction between these words, and in my mind there is significant overlap between the two. But, for clarity, I understand reinterpretation to mean engaging with theological and religious beliefs and rethinking or refashioning these beliefs in some way. I understand reformation to relate more to changing religious practice. Of course, beliefs and practice are strongly related. My main claim is this: Locke wanted to reform Christianity as it was being practiced; therefore, he reinterpreted Christian theology.

long effort to reinterpret Christian theology in order to demonstrate that Christianity was essentially⁴ tolerant and that toleration was a Christian imperative.

Locke's writings on religion and religious toleration go hand-in-hand. The thrust of much of Locke's writings on religion was to show that authentic Christianity as revealed in Scripture was essentially tolerant—it was “the most modest and peaceable religion that ever was” (Locke, 1983, p. 54). But Christianity as it was being practiced was largely intolerant due to the deliberate misinterpretation and misappropriation of Scripture. Christian theology had been tainted with philosophy, while Christianity had been improperly mixed with and corrupted by politics. Locke therefore set out to reform Christianity by exposing and excising the elements that he thought were making Christianity and Christians intolerant.

One of my guiding assumptions in this paper is that, as Forster (2005) observes, the relationship between Christianity and Locke's political theory is more complex than many scholars have recognized (p. 36). Widespread failure to recognize this complexity has led to misguided conclusions about the salience of Locke's political thought today. The complexity of this relationship is captured by Harris's (1994b) poignant observation that Locke's Christianity was “moulded by political theory” just as his politics “answered to Christianity” (Harris, 1994b, p. 215). Harris aptly describes the nature of theology and theological explanation: we should view theology as “an idiom capable of bearing many messages” and theological explanations as

⁴ This view is clearly articulated by Locke in *A Letter Concerning Toleration*: “For if this be the Genius, this the Nature of the Christian Religion, to be turbulent, and destructive to the Civil Peace, that Church it self which the Magistrate indulges will not always be innocent. But far be it from us to say any such thing of 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. We must therefore seek another Cause of those Evils that are charged upon Religion” (1983, p. 54). To Locke, the source of intolerance was not to be found in the nature of the Christian religion but rather in external factors.

“liable to interpretation” rather than monolithic (Harris, 1994a, p. 14). In this paper, I will draw on Harris's observation in order to show how Locke reinterpreted Christianity.

My claim that Locke reinterpreted Christianity should not be confused with claims that Locke subverted or politicized Christianity. Such claims are commonplace—and in my opinion misguided⁵. Hahn and Wiker (2013), for example, charge Locke with politicizing Scripture in order to make Scripture serve a merely political goal; in their view, Locke “treated Christianity in terms of its political utility” (p. 484). Contrary to such claims, I will argue that Locke sought to reinterpret Christianity as a committed Christian interested in depoliticizing Christianity and religion. As I will demonstrate, many of the features of Christianity that Locke found problematic were those that did not comport with, or even contradicted, the clear sense of Scripture. I echo Nuovo's (2000) sentiment that Locke did not have subversive sympathies. Nor did Locke use theology simply for the sake of appearances (Locke, 2002). Rather than viewing Locke as trying to subvert Christianity, I follow and develop Nuovo's suggestion that Locke may in fact be seen as “one of the last of the Protestant reformers” (Locke, 2002, p. lvii). I will suggest that Locke's interest in reinterpreting Christianity may very well have been fueled by his sincere religious convictions. The fact that Locke attempted to reinterpret Christianity should not cause us to conclude that he was attempting to politicize or subvert Christianity.

My argument should make at least three contributions within the field of political theory. The first contribution is interpretive: it concerns how we should interpret Locke's theory of religious toleration. We can understand Locke's theory of religious toleration in a different light

⁵ See, for example, Thomas Pangle's *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 176, 145, 186; Paul Rahe's *Republics Ancient and Modern* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), pp. 295, 311; Michael Rabie's “The Reasonableness of Locke, or the Questionableness of Christianity,” *The Journal of Politics* 53 (1991): 933-57. For evidence that contradicts these claims in a compelling fashion, see Kim Ian Parker's *The Biblical Politics of John Locke* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2004).

once we recognize his concern with reinterpreting and reforming religion. With some exceptions, political theorists have largely neglected Locke's concern with religious reformation and have failed to grasp the relevance of this concern to his theory of religious toleration. Locke aimed at something much higher than for people of different faiths to simply tolerate each other. He wanted people of different faiths (particularly Christians) to critically examine and even reinterpret their theological and religious commitments. He was less interested in preserving intolerant religions and more interested in making religions tolerant through reinterpretation. Through critical examination and reinterpretation, Locke seemed confident that people would discover that religious intolerance was not essential to "true" religion. Moreover, Locke's theory of religious toleration hinges not so much on Christianity in any traditional sense but on *Locke's* Christianity, a Christianity that Locke reinterpreted in significant ways.

The second contribution is methodological: Locke reinterpreted theology in a deliberate, particular way. We can draw lessons from the method Locke used to reinterpret religion. While Locke used his method to reinterpret Christianity specifically, such a method might inform and guide efforts to reinterpret other religions as well.

The third contribution follows from the previous two. In light of Locke's project, we can better appreciate the role of *religious* reasons in justifying values like religious toleration and in appealing to (and challenging) religiously-inclined individuals who might find *non-religious* arguments for religious toleration unconvincing. As Schwartzman (2005) has argued, "Religious arguments are important from a liberal perspective because they make it possible for some citizens to see the value and significance of liberal political institutions" (Schwartzman, 2005, p. 681). My argument should brighten our understanding of the role of religious arguments in justifying values such as religious toleration.

The structure of this paper roughly follows the sequence of these three contributions. In the first section, I describe four interrelated ways in which Locke reinterpreted Christianity: laying out a particular method for biblical interpretation; emphasizing a minimal, essential faith; disentangling church (religion) and state (politics); and arguing for pure religion unmixed with politics and philosophy. My goal in this first section is to give us a clear view of *Locke's* tolerant Christianity and to show how this is significant to Locke's religious toleration. In the second section, I focus on the question of Locke's *method* of reinterpretation and his *motive* for engaging in such reinterpretation. I defend my claim that Locke's reinterpretation of Christianity should be understood as a project of reformation—fueled by sincere religious convictions—rather than as the intentional subversion or politicization of Christianity. In the third section, I argue that Locke's method allowed him to articulate religious arguments for religious toleration that could appeal to a specifically religious audience. I then briefly consider the appeal of religious arguments today. Lastly, in the way of a conclusion, I acknowledge an important limitation of Locke's religious toleration and then reiterate my claim that Locke's project of reinterpretation can still inform contemporary theorizing about religious toleration and the role of religious arguments in justifying values such as religious toleration.

LOCKE'S TOLERANT CHRISTIANITY: THE FRUIT OF LOCKE'S REINTERPRETIVE EFFORTS

Hand wringing about the Protestant theological element in Locke's political thought has distracted us from appreciating Locke's project: to reinterpret Christianity in order to show that authentic Christianity was tolerant. Locke was clear that religious toleration demanded religious reformation. The issue is therefore less about the Protestant roots of Locke's religious toleration and more about the importance of religious reformation.

In articulating the ways in which Christianity could—and should—be reformed, Locke significantly reinterpreted Christian theology. This is what I refer to as Locke's reinterpetive project. By this I do not mean that Locke propounded previously unheard of theological views. To the contrary, a number of Locke's theological views parallel or echo views of others. But, as Marshall (1992) observes, Locke characteristically “assaulted the acceptance of authorities and claimed a personal catholicity of approach” (p. 274). It did not matter to Locke what the divines and theologians around him believed, as he was not concerned with defending any one particular system of theology or religious sect. While in various ways Locke's theological views parallel or echo views espoused by Latitudinarian, Socinian, Arminian, and perhaps Puritan thinkers, Marshall aptly characterizes Locke's eschewal of any direct identification with these sects as an example of his “eclectic pursuit of truth” (p. 274).

Locke's pursuit of truth was indeed eclectic. In this paper I am less interested in how Locke should be labeled (ie. Socinian, antitrinitarian) or in the roots of and influences on Locke's theological views and more interested in one of the main claim issuing from Locke's eclectic pursuit of truth: that authentic Christianity was tolerant. As I will show, Locke's reinterpretation of Christian theology pointed strongly to this one claim. By reinterpreting Christian theology, Locke sought to show that authentic Christianity as revealed in Scripture was in fact tolerant, “the most modest and peaceable Religion that ever was” (Locke, 1983, p. 54).

In this section, I show how Locke sought to reform Christianity in four significant ways: by laying out a new method of biblical interpretation; by emphasizing the essential, minimalist aspect of the Christian faith; by redefining the church in order to show that church and state properly conceived were separate, parallel entities; and by arguing for a purer Christianity unmixed with politics and philosophy. How do each of these relate to Locke's views on religious

toleration? Interpreting Scripture using his method of biblical interpretation would thwart the religiously intolerant from using Scripture to legitimize their intolerance and diffuse theological speculation that often fueled religious intolerance. Emphasizing the essential, minimalist aspect of the Christian faith would reduce the grounds for religious intolerance among various Christian sects. Reconceptualizing the proper relationship between church and state would make it more difficult for attitudes of religious intolerance to translate into actions of intolerance via state power. Lastly, a purer Christianity unmixed with politics and philosophy would offer fewer incentives to those seeking to gain material, this-worldly advantage through religious intolerance.

Laying the Foundation—Locke’s Particular Method of Biblical Interpretation

Locke founded his reformation of Christianity on his own particular method of biblical interpretation⁶. I agree with Forster (2005) that Locke's interpretive method is the most important thing about his account of Christian theology (p. 142). His interpretation of Christian theology issues from his particular approach to Scripture. While some features of Locke's method of biblical interpretation seem in line with those of Reformation-era exegetes, other features seem to anticipate the advent of historical-critical approaches to Scripture, “which try to arrive at the objective truth of a passage by determining the author's intention through historical factors, such as the time and place of writing and the audience to which the original text was intended, that may have influenced the work” (Parker, 2004, p. 47). While Locke's method is itself an eclectic blend of borrowed and innovative principles and assumptions about biblical interpretation, my point in discussing his method is simple: Locke thought much religious dispute and conflict

⁶ In my correspondence with Victor Nuovo, he was helpful in pointing out that Locke's method of biblical exegesis might be thought of as innovative in the sense that Locke was "very skillfully employing philological and historical critical methods" rather than in the sense that Locke was pioneering a method that was altogether new (V. Nuovo, personal communication, March 30, 2015).

would be diffused if his method of interpretation was adopted; Christians might more easily tolerate each other if only they would interpret Scripture correctly. I hope this point will not be lost as I consider Locke's method in more detail.

Some of the most important components of Locke's method of biblical interpretation are best laid out in his later writings on religion, namely *The Reasonableness of Christianity* and *The Understanding of St. Paul's Epistles*. To Locke, it was clear that there was “one Sense of the Scripture”; Scripture had a true, and single, meaning (Locke, 2002, pp. 57, 63). If Scripture had only one true sense, it follows that interpretations of Scripture contrary to this sense were simply false. The meaning of Scripture was not reader-dependent; it did not hinge on the subjective interpretations and considerations of the reader.

How could the true and single sense of Scripture be known? Locke emphasized the need to understand both the literary context and the plain sense of Scripture. Scripture was to be understood “in the plain direct meaning of the words and phrases” as understood by the authors according to the language of their “Time and Country” (Locke, 2002, p. 91). In short, the Bible was to be taken literally. Attention was to be paid to the plain, literal sense of the meaning of the words of Scripture; this left little room for allegorical interpretations (Parker, 2004).

In Locke's view, understanding Scripture literally meant understanding what the writers of Scripture actually intended to say. In reading Paul's epistles, for instance, the goal was to ascertain what Paul actually meant. Locke urged the reader to “understand [Paul's] Terms in the Sense he uses them, and not as they are appropriated by each Man's particular Philosophy...” (Locke, 2002, p. 65). The “sober, inquisitive” readers of Scripture would have “a mind to see nothing in St. Paul's Epistles but just what he [Paul] meant” (p. 56). Locke assumed that what

Paul meant to say was expressed clearly in the plain text of Scripture; he thus eschewed the interpretive difficulties that would arise if what Paul meant to say was, at times, expressed allegorically or figuratively.

In order to understand the true sense of Scripture as made clear in its plain text, Locke stressed that Scripture should be read in a particular way. This way is encapsulated in Locke's "rule": that of reading a whole epistle through "from one end to the other, all at once, to see what was the main Subject and Tendency of it" (Locke, 2002, p. 59). Reading Scripture according to this rule would allow the reader to "look into the drift of the Discourse, observe the coherence and connexion of the Parts, and see how it is consistent with it self, and other parts of Scripture" (p. 205). Individual verses were to be understood "as a part of a continued coherent Discourse," and the sense of these verses was to be limited by "the Tenour of the Context" (p. 55). Keeping such a rule would also prevent, or at least lessen, the misinterpretation of Scripture.

In emphasizing the need to understand the true sense of Scripture by reading Scripture properly, Locke lashed out against two interrelated phenomena that he found both common and pernicious: that of seeing in Scripture only what we please and that of taking verses out of context (Locke, 2002, p. 56). Locke resented the fact that many brought "the Sacred Scriptures to their Opinions, to bend it to them" rather than bringing "their Opinion to the Sacred Scriptures to be tried by that infallible Rule" (p. 56). In Locke's view, many people were willfully neglecting the true sense of Scripture and, instead, misappropriating Scripture for the purpose of "maintaining their Opinions, and the Systems of Parties by Sound of Words" (p. 55). Such ones could misappropriate Scripture by taking advantage of "loose Sentences" and picking and choosing verses selectively in order to serve their turn (p. 55). In short, they could bend Scripture to their opinions by snatching verses out of their appropriate context.

Why did it matter to Locke that people were misinterpreting the Bible? In Locke's view, misinterpretation of the Bible was fueling religious intolerance. Numerous Christian sects were willfully misinterpreting Scripture in order to build up a "great Magazine of Artillery" and "Spiritual Weapons" that they could use to fight one another (Locke, 2002, p. 55). Interpreting the Bible in the right way would thus diffuse much of the conflict among Christians that Locke found so abhorrent. Locke was convinced that those taking the lead in theological disputes would be stripped of their "artillery" if only they would stick to the proper rule of interpretation that he outlined. If misinterpretation of Scripture was fueling and legitimizing religious intolerance, Locke was convinced that proper interpretation would diffuse much of this intolerance.

Locke's method of biblical interpretation also allowed him to bypass centuries of theological disputes and to engage directly with Scripture. Rather than entering the fray of theological dispute, Locke sought to avoid taking sides with any particular "System" by dealing directly with Scripture alone (Locke, 2002, p. 166). In this aspect, Locke moved away from an assumption shared by the Fathers, medieval doctors, and Reformation-era exegetes and their 17th century successors: that "the primary intention of the text demanded a churchly locus of interpretation and a reading of the text in conversation with the exegetical tradition rather than the isolated, scholarly encounter in the confines of academic study" (McKim, 1998, p. 128). Locke seemed confident that Scripture could be rightly interpreted through private study outside of the confines of a "churchly locus" and the exegetical tradition.

McKim (1998) notes that one characteristic of hermeneutical change from the Middle Ages to the Reformation was that the three spiritual senses of Scripture (allegory, tropology, and anagogy) were increasingly presumed to have their foundation in the literal sense of Scripture. There was thus "an increasing interest in the literal meaning as the primary meaning of the text"

(p. 128). But McKim observes that this increasing interest in the literal or historical sense of the text was not merely “a bare literal understanding of the text but rather an understanding that took into consideration the larger theological context and specifically the meaning of the divine author as presented in the Bible as a whole” (p. 129). With Locke, however, the stress seems to be less on locating the spiritual senses of Scripture within the literal sense and more on the literal—and simple—text of Scripture. While Locke acknowledged that Scripture contained “profound mysteries of divine things,” he reasoned that such mysteries were beyond human comprehension due to the “imbecility” of the human mind (Locke, 2002, p. 71).⁷ To Locke, the focus should be on what *was* made clear in Scripture.

In laying out his new method of biblical interpretation, Locke seemed aware that questions of biblical hermeneutics were themselves a major source of disagreement and division among Christians. He thus made clear that he was not “pretending Infallibility” and was not seeking to impose his particular interpretation of Scripture on others (Locke, 2002, pp. 65-66). Recognizing that he himself was liable to error, Locke simply commended his method of biblical interpretation, and the interpretation of Scripture that followed from such a method, to those who might receive help from it. Of course, these disclaimers may simply be occasions of rhetorical posturing and may therefore hold little weight. But it is worth noting that Locke anticipated that others might charge him with asserting his method of biblical interpretation as the right method.

⁷ In an untitled manuscript given the simple title, *Infallibility*, by Victor Nuovo, Locke asserts the following: “Holy Scripture contains within it profound mysteries of divine things that absolutely surpass human understanding, which, even if they are obscure, cannot have an interpreter, for, since to interpret is just to elicit the meaning of obscure utterances and to explicate less ordinary discourse in plain everyday speech, it is certain that interpretations of these mysteries are impossible, because God has proclaimed in clearest words and with the greatest perspicuity what he wants men to know and what to believe” (Locke, 2002, p. 71). This passage indicates that Locke acknowledged that Scripture contained “profound mysteries” but that these mysteries could not be known due to the limits of human understanding, or what Locke referred to as “the imbecility of the human mind” (p. 71).

Quite importantly, Locke's method did not lead to a rejection of Scripture but to a rejection of dubious claims about biblical text (Parker, 2004, p. 3). It was argument over these very dubious claims that Locke saw as so problematic; such arguments fueled the very religious intolerance that Locke sought to diffuse. If the cause of such disputes was misinterpretation and misappropriation of Scripture, the remedy in Locke's view was to interpret Scripture the right way according to its plain meaning.

By laying out a new method of biblical interpretation, Locke gave himself the liberty to engage directly with Scripture (rather than with theological systems or traditions) and to demonstrate from the “plain text” of Scripture that the Christian faith as revealed in Scripture was in fact a tolerant one. Based on his new biblical method of interpretation, Locke presented his view of the Christianity revealed in Scripture as essentially tolerant, a Christianity that was based on a simple, essential proposition, that was altogether separate from the state and the commonwealth, and that was pure and unmixed with politics and philosophy. I now elaborate on this reformed view of Christianity.

Emphasizing the Essential—Locke’s Minimalist Christianity

I have shown how Locke developed a new method of biblical interpretation that, if adopted, would diffuse many of the religious conflicts that he found so repugnant. I now show how Locke's use of this interpretative method led him to conclude that the crucial content of the Christian faith was in fact strikingly simple. The essential Christian faith required belief in only one simple proposition: that Jesus was the Messiah. Locke asserted, “That Jesus was the Messiah...was all the Doctrine they [the apostles] proposed to be believed” (Locke, 2002, p.

128). In *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke repeatedly stressed the sufficiency of believing this one Proposition and made heavy use of Scripture to demonstrate his point.

In addition to believing the one great proposition, Locke stated that believing in Christ's resurrection was also "a necessary Article" (Locke, 2002, p. 104). To Locke, then, the "Fundamental Articles of Faith" were simple and clearly (and repeatedly) laid out in the New Testament. What was essential to the Christian faith, encapsulated in one "great Proposition," was made clear through the plain text of Scripture (p. 104). Believing that Jesus was the Messiah and that he was resurrected were sufficient to make one a Christian. Locke warned against adding to the fundamental articles of the Christian faith that, in his view, were laid out so clearly in the Gospels (p. 208).

It is worth noting that a number of Anglican divines had argued that the things necessary for Christian salvation were clearly contained in Scripture. William Chillingworth, for instance, was a more prominent proponent of this notion. However, as Greer (2006) notes, in his writings Chillingworth "refuses to supply a catalogue of the necessary points of scripture" (p. 47). Therefore, it was not uncommon to claim the sufficiency of scripture in revealing what was necessary to salvation while failing to clearly identify what these necessary articles were. Locke, however, was more straightforward in identifying these articles and in emphasizing them (perhaps *ad nauseum*) in *Reasonableness*.

In stressing the minimalist content of the fundamental articles of the Christian faith, Locke seemed to extend the concept of *adiaphora* (things indifferent) beyond matters of religious worship to matters of Christian doctrine. Things indifferent were those things not necessary to salvation. Of course, recourse to the concept of *adiaphora* begged the question of

just what things counted as indifferent. As Perry (2005) notes, “one of the most obvious features of the controversy over things indifferent is that those who oppose freedom on a given point of indifference never believe the matter in question is indifferent”; in light of this dilemma, “recourse to adiaphora rarely resolved disputes and usually led to confusion” (p. 272). But in *Reasonableness*, Locke stressed that what was necessary to salvation was made abundantly clear in the plain text of the Gospels and the Acts. What was essential to salvation could be known by paying attention to what both Jesus and the apostles said on the matter. There was therefore no need to speculate⁸ about what things were essential to salvation, as these things were laid out clearly in the plain text of Scripture.

Locke's emphasis on the essential content of the Christian faith was a crucial step in his attempt to reinterpret and reform Christianity in order to render it more tolerant. If Christians would recognize the simple, essential content of the Christian faith, they would also recognize that many of the theological disputes that led to Christian in-fighting and religious intolerance were over matters not essential to the Christian faith. In Locke's view, “most matters of Christian doctrine were ancillary to the salvation of souls” (Forster, 2005, p. 151). If such matters were recognized as being inessential, Locke seemed to hope that Christians would be more willing to exercise tolerance, and even charity, toward those holding different views on inessential doctrines. Christians could tolerate one another because they all at least agreed on the one great proposition, and it was believing this one proposition that defined what it meant to be a

⁸ See J. Judd Owen, “Locke’s Case for Religious Toleration: Its Neglected Foundation in the Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” *The Journal of Politics*, 69(1) (2007): 156-168. Owen argues that Locke intended to “enervate theological speculation” because, to Locke, “God has not provided us with faculties suited to theological speculation” (p. 167).

Christian.⁹ As Higgins-Biddle (1999) observes, Locke's emphasis on the fundamental articles of faith “allowed all people to be Christians on a common basis and to tolerate secondary differences” (p. cxiv).

While Locke stressed the simplicity of the Christian faith as regards belief, he laid heavy stress on the demands of the Christian faith as regards virtuous living. Believing Jesus to be the Messiah (faith) and a good life (repentance) were “indispensible Conditions of the New Covenant to be performed by all those who would obtain Eternal Life” (Locke, 2002, p. 169). Faith was to be followed by repentance, and repentance meant living a “a good life in obedience to the law of Christ” (p. 83). Such a good life was in fact a “principle of Christianity” and “the right and only way to Saving Orthodoxy” (p. 83). Locke equated the laws of the kingdom which Jesus preached with a “good life, according to the strictest Rules of Vertue and Morality” (p. 121). He baldly asserted that those who willfully disobeyed these laws would not be received “into the eternal bliss of His [Jesus's] kingdom, how much soever they believe in him” (p. 182). After stressing the adequacy of believing the one great proposition, Locke rather curiously asserted that such belief was inadequate unless one was obedient to the laws of morality revealed in the Gospels. Nuovo (2000) rightly observes that Christianity in Locke's view was “essentially a moral religion” (p. 199), and Locke went to great pains to stress the moral standard—and demands—of Christianity.

As this emphasis on morality has been treated adequately by others (Higgins-Biddle, 1999; Nuovo, 2000; Forster, 2005), I have mentioned it only briefly here. It should be noted that Locke's emphasis on the “duties of morality” allowed him to cast toleration as a Christian

⁹ On this point, Locke seems similar to Chillingworth, whose “minimalist understanding of what is necessary for salvation functions in the interest of concord and liberty” (Greer, 2006, p. 46)

virtue—and a moral imperative (Locke, 2002, p. 201). As Locke asserted in polemical fashion in the introduction of *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, toleration was “the chief Characteristical Mark of the True Church,” and “charity, meekness, and good-will” were essential qualities of “a true Christian” (1983, p. 23). Locke not only characterized true Christianity as a moral religion but also laid out which specific virtues were essential for the true Christian. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these virtues comported nicely with Locke's religious toleration. Tolerance was a Christian virtue demanded by Scripture.

Disentangling Church and State—Locke's New Ecclesiology

A considerable part of Locke's effort to reform Christianity involved his attempt to disentangle church and state. Many of the problems that Locke observed issued from the entanglement, the jumbling together, of church and state. This entanglement allowed religious disputes to easily spill into the political realm. Religious matters became political matters, and political matters became religious matters. Locke decried the myriad problems and abuses that issued from this confusion of the religious and the political. This confusion also enabled people to easily translate their *attitudes* of religious intolerance into *acts* of intolerance via political power.

A crucial part of Locke's reinterpretation of Christianity, then, involved his attempt to disentangle these entities by showing that they consisted of two separate spheres. Demonstrating his argument proved no easy task for Locke. In the process of trying to disentangle church and state, Stanton (2006) rightly observes that Locke effectively “rewrote the characters of church and state” (p. 86). In rewriting the characters of church and state, Harris (1994a) notes that Locke had to discount a number of claims about the church that were commonly held at the time (p.

114). The Anglican doctrine that Locke was combatting declared “that the Church of England was a divinely warranted vessel of God's grace; that God's grace united its members into one with God; that the civil government should uphold the church, if need be by force; and that to leave the church was schismatic” (p. 166). Given this ecclesiology, church and state were inextricably linked, with the state protecting and upholding the true church.

Challenging the predominant Anglican view of the close relationship between church and state, Locke set out to prove that church and state were not in fact “complicit in a spiritual purpose” (Stanton, 2006, p. 90). Instead, they were parallel and separate (p. 93). To prove this, Locke had to narrowly define the proper role of civil government. As Locke's view of civil government is well known, I will not detail this view here. It is sufficient to bear in mind that, to Locke, civil government was concerned only with things of the present life such as the protection of life, liberty, and property.

Locke also had to significantly redefine the church. The key move for Locke was to redefine the church as a voluntary association. In *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, Locke asserted that a church was “a voluntary Society of Men, joining themselves together of their own accord...” (1983, p. 28). Locke repeatedly emphasized that the church was a free and voluntary society. Given his view of the church, Locke argued that people should be free to enter into and go out of a religious society at will (p. 28). Locke therefore advocated “the liberty of choosing” what church to be a part of (p. 29). Later in the *Letter*, Locke also stated that churches should be treated like other (civil) assemblies.

Not only was the church a voluntary association, but it was also an association with a narrow and specific purpose. This purpose, to Locke, was clear and simple: “The only business

of the Church is the Salvation of Souls” (Locke, 1983, p. 39). Religious society existed for the “acquisition of Eternal Life” through the “Publick Worship of God” (p. 30). Given this limited purpose, the business of the church did not overlap with that of the commonwealth or its members, and the churches were to have no jurisdiction in worldly matters and no power of the sword (pp. 39, 32).

Locke's reinterpretation of the Christian church was motivated by his desire to show that church and state properly understood were completely separate. Locke's new ecclesiology enabled him to show that, in fact, church and state were “absolutely distinct and separate” (Locke, 1983, p. 33). The boundaries between the two were “fixed and immovable”; church and state were “perfectly distinct” and “infinitely different” in their “Original, End, Business, and in every thing” (p. 33). If only church and state would keep their proper grounds, Locke was confident that “discord would be impossible” (p. 55). Perry (2005) rightly observes that Locke defined the church in such a way that conflict between church and the state would be “theoretically impossible”; given Locke's reinterpretation, “true Christianity, by definition, never touches the state” (p. 288).

Perry (2005) also seems right in his observation that Locke “styles his argument for toleration as merely descriptive of the church as it was meant to be, not prescriptive of what he wanted it to become” (p. 286). In Locke's view, the common understanding of the church was the wrong (unorthodox) understanding of the church. Locke thus sought to describe the church in a way that was more in keeping with orthodoxy. Here, again, we can view Locke's reinterpretation of the church as an attempt to reform Christianity.

In seeking to demonstrate that Christianity was essentially tolerant, Locke saw disentangling church and state as a crucial and necessary move. As I have shown in a cursory way, disentangling church and state required a rather drastic reinterpretation of the church. Locke could not show that church and state should be separate without advancing a new ecclesiology. In making his case for separation he therefore “advanced a new theory of the church and its relations” (Harris, 1994a, p. 185). This new theory conceived of the church as having a narrow purpose and as having no overlap whatsoever with the state or the concerns of the commonwealth. Locke rewrote the received characters of church and state and “set their relations in new terms” that “underwrote his mature theory of toleration” (Stanton, 2006, 86). Locke's mature theory of religious toleration is therefore founded on a substantial reinterpretation of the proper relationship between church and state, religion and politics.

Excising Philosophy and Politics—Locke’s Case for Pure Religion

Underlying Locke’s argument for the separation of church and state is his concern that Christianity had been corrupted by politics and philosophy and wrongly used toward secular ends. Throughout his writings, Locke argued extensively in favor of a purified Christianity. Locke thus attempted to reform Christianity by making the case for a purer, simpler Christianity unmixed with politics and philosophy.

Locke repeatedly warned against mixing philosophy with Scripture. In his commentary on St. Paul's epistles, Locke noted with an approving tone that Paul's writing revealed “no Ornaments borrow'd from the Greek Eloquence; no Notions of their philosophy mix'd with his Doctrine to set it off” (Locke, 2002, p. 61). Observing that, “Philosophy also has its part in misleading Men from the true Sense of the Sacred Scripture,” Locke bemoaned the fact that

“every ones Philosophy regulates every ones Interpretation of the Word of God” (p. 65).¹⁰ Locke also cautioned against placing too much trust in reason at the risk of neglecting faith, disregarding the “mysteries of the gospel,” and embracing “philosophy instead of religion” (p. 72). While Locke recognized that there were mysteries in the Christian gospel, he warned against resorting to philosophy in attempting to understand these mysteries.

Locke also argued strongly against misappropriating Christianity and religion for improper ends such as political gain or self-advancement. He railed against the prevalent use of “pretence of Religion” in order to invade the civil rights and worldly goods of others (Locke, 1983, p. 33).¹¹ Religion, in his view, was often used as a pretense for all manner of cruelty and abuses (p. 25). Religious disputes about outward worship, places and names, and claims of orthodoxy were “Marks of Men striving for Power and Empire over one another” (p. 23). Locke placed special blame on the clergy, who often used their power only “to serve the secular ends of their ambition” (p. 78). True religion, in contrast, involved “the regulating of Mens Lives according to the Rules of Vertue and Piety” and had nothing to do with politics or with the struggle for power or “Ecclesiastical Dominion” (p. 23). True religion, in short, was apolitical. The mixture of religion with politics was an ugly phenomenon in Locke's view—and one that resulted in all manner of evils.

Lastly, Locke also warned against mixture in a more general sense, observing that, unlike “all the Sects of Philosophers, and other Religions,” Jesus and His apostles did not mix any

¹⁰ Of course, Locke seemed to assume that this observation did not apply to him. The more cynical reader might ask: If every one's interpretation of Scripture was regulated by her philosophy, what would make Locke the exception? Perhaps Locke might retort that he simply understood Scripture according to its literal, and obvious, sense and therefore there was no room for his philosophy to influence his interpretation.

¹¹ For an illuminating discussion of Locke's concern with pretense, see John Perry, *The Pretenses of Loyalty: Locke, Liberal Theory, and American Political Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

conceits, wrong rules, self-interest, pride, vanity, ambition, or ostentation in their morality. Instead, their morality was “all pure, all sincere” (Locke, 2002, p. 201). If Christianity had been corrupted by nefarious elements like pride and self-interest, Locke sought to expose and excise these elements by arguing that the true Christianity as presented in the New Testament was pure and sincere. Locke thus attempted to reform Christianity by arguing that authentic Christianity should be unmixed with philosophy, politics, and anything of self-interest or ambition. A purer Christianity unmixed with politics and philosophy would offer fewer incentives to those seeking to gain material, this-worldly advantage through religious intolerance.

Rethinking Locke’s Religious Toleration

I have shown how Locke sought to reform Christianity in at least four significant ways. Taken together, Locke’s reformed Christianity would: 1) stick more closely to the plain, direct meaning of Scripture 2) emphasize the essential faith while allowing space for differences on inessential doctrines 3) be altogether separate from politics and the commonwealth 4) have nothing to do with philosophy, politics, and other secular elements. Locke believed that the Christianity demanded by Scripture was essentially tolerant but that Christianity as practiced in history had become intolerant through misinterpretation and misappropriation of Scripture, leading to the mixture of Christianity with philosophy, politics, and other pernicious elements such as ambition and self-interest. Locke argued that it was these elements that had made Christianity intolerant, and he thus sought to expose and excise them.

Once we recognize Locke’s concern with reinterpreting and reforming religion, we can understand Locke’s theory of religious toleration in a different light. Locke aimed at something much higher than for people of different faiths to simply tolerate each other. He wanted people

of different faiths (particularly Christians) to critically examine and even reinterpret their theological and religious commitments. *He was less interested in preserving intolerant religions and more interested in making religions tolerant through reformation.* Moreover, Locke's theory of religious toleration hinges not so much on Christianity in any traditional sense but on *Locke's* Christianity, a Christianity that Locke reinterpreted in significant ways. This point has been largely missed by political theorists in recent decades who have expressed concern about the Protestant complexion of Locke's political thought.

REFORMATION, NOT SUBVERSION: ON LOCKE'S METHOD AND MOTIVE

I have shown at least some of the ways in which Locke attempted to reinterpret Christianity in order to show that authentic Christianity was tolerant. The fact that Locke engaged in such a project of reinterpretation, however, should not cause us to cast doubt on the authenticity of his religious convictions or lead us to conclude that Locke was seeking to subvert Christianity in some subtle way. Such claims have been made by a number of Straussian critics. William Bluhm, Neal Winfield, and Stuart Teger, for instance, have claimed that "Locke's theological position was one of 'complete skepticism,'" while Thomas Pangle has argued that "the refutation of the biblical tradition" is in fact "the bedrock of all his [Locke's] philosophizing" (in Sigmund, 2009, p. 412). As Sigmund (2009) observes, these scholars have reinterpreted Locke's religious beliefs "to support his supposed ethical hedonism and political secularism" (p. 415). But such reinterpretation seems misguided. I argue that Locke's writings on religion and political theory are more coherent if we view Locke as, in Nuovo's words, "one of the last of the Protestant reformers" interested in reinterpreting Christianity in order to render it more tolerant and therefore more true to Scripture (Locke, 2002, p. lvii).

I suggest that Locke's project of reinterpretation was fueled, at least in part, by his sincere religious convictions. Locke's efforts at reinterpretation might very well affirm Pearson's (1978) assertion that Locke was "firmly committed to the Christian faith" (Pearson, 1978, p. 256). While we obviously cannot know for certain whether Locke's religious convictions were authentic, my point is that Locke's reinterpretation of Christianity, and his grappling with theological issues more generally, may be evidence of this authenticity rather than the opposite. It should come as no surprise that someone firmly committed to the Christian faith would seek to reform Christianity in order to render it more true to Scripture. As I pointed out in the previous section, many of the things that Locke saw as problematic in the Christianity of his day were beliefs and practices not solidly grounded in Scripture. Locke was trying to expose and excise these problematic elements rather than trying to subvert the Christian faith or the authority of Scripture. Religious (Christian) intolerance was rooted in and sprung from these very elements.

Given Locke's life-long interest in religion and theology, I echo Nuovo's (2002) sentiment that this interest "was neither peripheral nor pursued merely for the sake of appearances" (p. lvii). Nuovo seems right when he observes that, "Locke's theological reflections and judgments follow a continuous line of enquiry that has its own integrity" (2000, p. 183-184). As Parker (2004) notes, Locke was not merely paying "lip-service" to the Bible (p. 5). He was not simply "using" theology in the way of pretense, nor was he simply dabbling in theology for political reasons.

Hahn and Wiker (2013) therefore seem in error when they charge Locke with politicizing the Bible, reinterpreting Scripture "to make it serve a merely political goal" (pp. 9, 13). In their view, Locke treated Christianity "in terms of its political utility"; his main interest was "the utility of the Bible for keeping political order" (pp. 484, 472). While I have argued that Locke

thought properly interpreting Scripture would diffuse religious conflicts that seeped into the political realm, it does not follow that Locke politicized Scripture. More accurate is Harris's (1994b) observation that Locke's Christianity was "moulded by political theory" just as his politics "answered to Christianity" (p. 215). This is unsurprising for someone interested in both political thought and Christian theology. Locke's interpretation of Scripture may well have been influenced by his political views, but, as Nuovo notes, "that Locke may have been influenced by other motives doesn't mean his theological reflections don't have their own integrity" (2000, pp. 183-184). While I have argued that Locke's theological writings are amenable to his writings on religious toleration, I do not mean to insinuate that Locke's theological writings were "at the service of the political order" as Hahn and Wiker indicate (2013, p. 13).

In this discussion I have not meant to draw undue attention to Locke's private beliefs or to invite speculation about the content of these beliefs. I agree with Marshall (2000) that most attention should be given to the "actual concerns of his [Locke's] works" rather than to his "possible private beliefs" (p. 182). In my view, there seems to be little reason to question the harmony between these actual concerns and Locke's private beliefs. To reiterate my main claim in this section: Locke's concern with reinterpreting Christianity in order to show that authentic Christianity was tolerant could have reasonably been fueled, at least in part, by genuine religious conviction.

This claim is important to my overarching argument. I have stressed that Locke not only recognized that religious toleration demands religious reformation but also that he engaged in substantial efforts to reform religion by reinterpreting theology. This reinterpetive effort was not conducted haphazardly or flippantly. On the contrary, Locke was engaging with theology in a serious way while using "the best exegetical instruments" (Nuovo, 2000, p. 198). He did not try

to advance religious toleration by castigating religion or casting doubt on theology itself. Nor did he seek to cast doubt on the authority of the Bible as the basis for the Christian faith.

Locke was not a religious outsider sounding a general call for people of different faiths to simply tolerate each other. Rather, he was a religious insider of sorts concerned with assessing what specific features of Christianity were at the root of religious intolerance. The fruit of Locke's assessment was that Christianity was essentially tolerant but that improper (and perhaps intentional) misinterpretations of Scripture were the cause of religion intolerance. Using Scripture and sound exegetical methods, Locke could engage with theological traditions head-on and could identify areas where misinterpretation of Scripture was fueling religious intolerance. Even if we disagree with the “findings” of Locke's project, I would suggest that there is something to be said for the method that Locke used in carrying out his project, a method marked by sincere efforts at religious reinterpretation rather than by the subversion or castigation of religion. While Locke used his method to reinterpret Christianity specifically, such a method might inform and guide efforts to reinterpret other religions as well.

A KEY IMPLICATION: THE APPEAL OF RELIGIOUS ARGUMENTS

Why does it matter that Locke adhered to a particular method in reinterpreting religion? In my view, Locke's serious engagement with theology and his respect for Scripture lent greater legitimacy and plausibility to his reinterpetive efforts. As Mustafa Akyol has argued in a recent *The New York Times* op-ed, Locke was rare among Enlightenment thinkers “for defending liberty against religious intolerance not by attacking religion—as Voltaire would do in France—but by reinterpreting it. Locke based his case for political and religious freedom on both reason and the Bible” (2015). While Voltaire’s approach may have resonated with those already ill-disposed toward religion, Locke may have gained more of a hearing among religiously-inclined people.

Locke's method allowed him to appeal to those who might reject non-religious arguments for religious toleration but might find religious arguments compelling. These religious arguments might resonate with at least some religiously-inclined individuals *because of the method Locke used*.

As I have shown throughout this paper, Locke went to extensive efforts to reinterpret Christian theology in order to show that such theology, based on the proper interpretation of Scripture, actually demanded religious toleration. In making religious arguments for toleration, and in basing such arguments on Scripture, Locke was able to appeal to a specifically Christian audience and to confront them with a bold "discovery": that true, biblical Christianity was tolerant, "the most modest and peaceable Religion that ever was," and that true Christians displayed tolerance. Committed Christians who disagreed with Locke would need to show that he either "misinterpreted scripture or ignored fundamental tenets of Christianity" (Schwartzman, 2005, p. 696). The onus would be on them to show that, contrary to Locke's claims, religious intolerance was a biblical mandate.

An important implication follows that I think is highly salient today. In light of Locke's project, we can better appreciate the role of *religious* reasons in justifying and building support for values like religious toleration and in appealing to (and challenging) those religiously-inclined individuals who might reject non-religious arguments for religious toleration. Schwartzman (2005) has made a convincing case for the relevance of Locke's religious arguments for toleration by arguing that, "Religious arguments are important from a liberal perspective because they make it possible for some citizens to see the value and significance of liberal political institutions" (p. 681). While many of Locke's arguments for religious toleration rest on sectarian religious foundations and thus lack universal appeal, it does not follow that

these religious arguments should be tossed out. Rather, as Schwartzman argues, it may well be the case that “insofar as religious reasons are necessary to justify toleration to the religiously devout, sectarian arguments may have a significant role to play in bringing about consensus on liberal political principles” (p. 697). The religiously devout may find religious, theologically-grounded reasons for religious toleration compelling whereas they might reject other “secular” reasons outright.¹²

CONCLUSION

Thus far I have argued that an important insight ties Locke's writings on religion with his writings on religious toleration: that religious toleration requires religious reformation. I have also argued that Locke adhered to a particular method while engaging in religious reinterpretation, and I have suggested that we might view this method as a template that, Locke thought, should guide efforts at achieving religious toleration through the reinterpretation of religion. Religious reformation was to be achieved in a certain way: through a respectful reinterpretation of theology and religion. Using this method, Locke was able to articulate religious arguments for toleration that might resonate with—or at least challenge—religiously-inclined individuals.

Before concluding, I want to address an important concern: How much does Locke's theory of religious toleration rely upon his particularistic conception of Christianity specifically

¹² For more on specifically religious arguments for religious toleration, see Andrew Murphy, *Conscience and Community: Revisiting Toleration and Religious Dissent in Early Modern England and America* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001). Murphy makes the following rather powerful observation: “We should not disregard how Christian early modern toleration debates were. Deeply religious Christians populated both sides of the argument, amassing impressive scriptural arsenals and deploying them vigorously. Seventeenth-century tolerationists, for example, attempted nothing less than a massive reconstruction of what it meant to be a Christian, deemphasizing specific doctrines and liturgies and stressing basic virtues like piety, humility, charity, and purity of heart...Far from being the achievement of disinterested secular rulers, seventeenth-century toleration was embraced by religious extremists as the only way to rid their congregations of the corrupting influence of civil power” (p. 13).

and religion generally? In considering this question, I respond to concerns that Locke's theory of religious toleration hinges on Protestant Christian assumptions and that it therefore favors a kind of Protestant Christian conception of religion. Undoubtedly Locke's theorizing was influenced by certain assumptions about religion that may have a Protestant complexion. But I would argue that Locke's theory of religious toleration hinges not so much on (Protestant) Christianity in any traditional sense but on *Locke's Christianity*, a Christianity that Locke reinterpreted in significant ways and that was "moulded by political theory" (Harris, 1994b, p. 215). As I have pointed out, Locke sought to change traditional understandings of Christianity and challenged numerous traditional assumptions about Christianity. Among other things, Locke challenged prevailing theological understandings about the relationship between church and state and about the nature of the church. He laid out a new (and noticeably thin) ecclesiology in his efforts to work out the appropriate relationship between church and state, religion and the commonwealth. While Locke drew from the theological and religious writings of others, he articulated a Christianity that was characteristically eclectic and that still defies any kind of easy categorization. Locke's theory of religious toleration, then, relies upon *his own Christianity*, a Christianity that he took great liberties to reinterpret and to refashion in order to harmonize it with his political vision.

In what specific ways does Locke's theory of religious toleration rely upon his particularistic Christianity? In my view, the primary way is that Locke's theory relies on a particular *framework* that draws strict boundaries between religion and the commonwealth. This framework derives from Locke's particular conception about the nature of religion and the appropriate place of religion in civil and political society.¹³ Accepting Locke's theory of religious

¹³ Locke's view of the nature of religion and its place in society is clearly laid out in what has been titled, *Critical Notes upon Edward Stillingfleet's Mischief and Unreasonableness of Separation*. There Locke asserted that, "The great businesse of Religion is to glorifie god, & find favour with him." While Locke emphasized that this was "the most intimate & peculiar concerne of every man within himself wherewith his neighbour hath nothing to doe,"

toleration requires accepting this framework. Locke's theory could accommodate people of different faiths with an important qualification: they must accept the structural boundaries that Locke places on religion. Locke's theory does not prescribe certain religious beliefs; one need not be a Christian, for instance, to fit comfortably within the structural boundaries established by Locke. But one must accept the boundaries that follow from Locke's framework.

What this points to is an unpleasant fact, but a fact that must be acknowledged nonetheless: Locke's theory of religious toleration undoubtedly places constraints on religion. More seriously, these constraints are uneven: certain religions might fit easily within the boundaries laid out by Locke while others might collide drastically.¹⁴ A theocrat, for instance, convinced that his or her religious beliefs demanded the unity of religion and politics, or the rule of politics by religion, would obviously feel straitjacketed by the boundaries essential to Locke's religious toleration. Both Christians and non-Christians alike might find these constraints unacceptable and suffocating. In fact, Locke's boundaries might be resisted most strongly by certain Christian sects, as was the case in Locke's day.

There is, in my view, no satisfactory way to resolve this issue. Locke's religious toleration relies on a particular framework that places uneven constraints on different religions. This is a bullet that must be bitten. But in response to objections about this framework, Locke might ask: What is a viable, more attractive alternative? He might argue simply that these

Locke also recognized the associational aspect of religion (Locke, 2002, pp. 73-74. In his view, people entered into religious society for three reasons: edification, the public worship of God, and the propagation of truth and continuation of the gospel.

¹⁴ In "John Locke, Christian Liberty, and the Predicament of Liberal Toleration," De Roover and Balagangadhara (2008) successfully identify the limitations of Locke's framework. Specifically, they argue that Locke's theory of religious toleration relies on a conceptual scheme virtually identical to Martin Luther's two-kingdoms schema. More problematically, the liberal model of toleration today (derived from Locke's theory) is still "constrained by the conceptual schemes it has inherited from its theological background" in spite of its apparent secularization (p. 540). While Locke's conceptual scheme may make sense to Christians, and perhaps Jews and Muslims, De Roover and Balagangadhara argue that it does not make sense to people of other religions.

constraints are necessary for a tolerant regime and for peaceful coexistence among people of different faiths. But they are still constraints that must at least be acknowledged. This is all I have sought to do here: to acknowledge that Locke's religious toleration does place uneven constraints on different religions. Theorizing about what should be done about these constraints is work for another project altogether. The issue I have sought to highlight more than anything is that the assumptions about religion and its place in society are *Locke's* particularistic assumptions; they do not reflect part and parcel any particular Christian tradition or perspective, and they do not necessarily privilege the Christian religion over other religions.

If religious toleration is still an ideal worth striving for today, I have argued that we can learn at least a few things from what I have referred to as Locke's reinterpetive project: Religious toleration requires religious reformation for its realization, and this reformation might best be carried out not through castigating or subverting religion but through reinterpreting it. Moreover, reinterpretation might be carried out successfully and respectfully using a method similar to the one used by Locke in his decades-long effort to reinterpret Christian theology. By adhering to such a method, advocates of religious toleration may be able to discover and articulate religious arguments for religious toleration that appeal to and resonate with the religiously devout specifically.

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