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# THE THEOLOGY OF TOLERATION: A READING OF LOCKE'S *THE REASONABLENESS OF CHRISTIANITY*

Richard Sherlock

*This study offers a new, more political, view of the intentions, structure, and meaning of Locke's masterpiece *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. It argues that Locke's work is not to be viewed as another in a long line of seventeenth century works purporting to offer a "rational" basis for the Christian religion. Rather Locke's purpose is to reinterpret Christian doctrine in order to make it "safe" for liberal regimes. Locke's Jesus is not the Divine mediator nor focus of God's revelation to humankind. Rather he is a moral teacher who provides the religious imprimatur for the virtuous behavior of the masses that liberalism requires.*

By now it is a commonplace of Locke scholarship that his masterpiece, an *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, had its genesis in a discussion among Locke and his friends during the winter of 1670-71 concerning the epistemological status of religion and morality. Likewise, even the most naive reader can see the appeals to Christian and quasi-Christian beliefs that pervade the *Second Treatise*. At several crucial points this rhetoric even seems necessary to render the argument superficially plausible. Though these are admitted as biographical and textual facts, the pervasive nature of Locke's

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concern with religious questions is not yet widely understood or appreciated.<sup>1</sup>

The Holy Scripture is to me and always will be the constant guide of my assent and I will always hearken to it as containing the infallible truth relating to things of the highest concernment. And I wish I could say there are no mysteries in it; I acknowledge that there are to me and I fear there always will be. But where I want the evidence of things there yet is ground enough for me to believe, because God has said it.

John Locke to Edward Stillingfleet, Bishop of Worcester

By knowledge I mean the effect of strict demonstration and by believing or opinion I mean any degree of persuasion, even to the highest degree of assurance....I urge that the magistrate hath nothing else to determine him in the use of force for promotion of any religion one before another but his own belief or persuasion of it.

John Locke, *A Fourth Letter Concerning Toleration*

## The Context of *The Reasonableness*

The centrality of religious questions in Locke's mind is evidenced in a modest way simply by the extent of his published works supposedly devoted to explaining and defending Christian doctrine. *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, the *Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*, and the *Discourse on Miracles* are all explicitly theological in character. To these may be added the *First Treatise*, with its trenchant critique of the Bible as a source of Divine revelation, and the works in response to Edward Stillingfleet's critique of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

Stillingfleet had been stirred to his criticism by what he saw were the theological implications of Locke's epistemology, implications that were being drawn by deists like John Toland. Hence, Locke's replies had to address the theological implications of his teaching about the sources, nature, and limits of human knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

The published corpus of extensive writings, however, only provides the barest indication of Locke's intellectual concerns. His first serious manuscript that has survived was devoted to religious toleration, and the material published posthumously by Lord King is largely devoted to religious matters. Moreover, much of the unpublished corpus of essays, notebooks, and letters are devoted to

religious and theological subjects. The sheer volume of such material is surely evidence of Locke's absorption in theological questions.

All of this writing falls generally into one of three categories. First, there are those works that are primarily devoted to explaining or analyzing the essential tenets of Christian belief; chiefly, *The Reasonableness of Christianity* and the *Discourse on Miracles*. Second are those works devoted to responding to his critics with respect to religious or theological matters — chiefly, the first and second *Vindication(s) of the Reasonableness of Christianity*, and the three responses to Stillingfleet's criticism of the theological implications of the *Essay*. Finally, there is Locke's biblical commentary chiefly contained in *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*, though foreshadowed in important ways by the manner in which the Bible is treated in the *First Treatise*.

Although these writings are extensive, they are not at all clear or unproblematic. At key points Locke is either plainly untruthful about his real opinion or is silent in the face of strenuous critical objections. This is a point that is widely admitted by Locke scholars. Even when they do not share the more general thesis advanced by Leo Strauss, Richard Cox, Thomas Pangle, and others that Locke was a devious or deceptive writer in general, most students of Locke are forced to admit that he was not entirely open about his theological beliefs or unbelief.<sup>3</sup> What, after all, is one to make of Locke's claim to Stillingfleet that he had always taken Scripture to be an "infallible guide" in religious matters, when the whole burden of Book 4 of the *Essay* is that infallibility cannot be attained in matters of religious belief.<sup>4</sup>

In this respect Locke was not alone. Few seventeenth century thinkers were ever completely honest in what they wrote on religious matters, and those who were, like Spinoza, suffered bitter hostility and persecution for their trouble. Though the debate among political philosophers over the question of what has been called "esotericism" has been substantial and often bitter, among students of the promulgation of unorthodox religious ideas it is hardly news at all. Virtually every student of the promulgation of unorthodox religious ideas in early modern Europe has recognized the covert and "esoteric" manner in which such ideas were promulgated for at least three centuries, from the Reformation to the early decades of the nineteenth century. For three centuries, intellectually astute and scientifically aware writers had entertained various doubts about portions of the received corpus of Christian orthodoxy. Aside from a few like Hobbes or Spinoza or Spinoza's Catholic follower, Richard Simon (all of whom were bitterly persecuted), none of the theologians were willing to state their doubts openly. They preferred a

rhetorical strategy designed to preserve their reputations for orthodoxy while letting their doubts be understood by the few who were able to read between the lines.<sup>5</sup>

In general, two moves were available for this purpose. First, they could hide behind the ruse of biblical or theological commentary. Thus, they could be pretending merely to explicate the meaning of the Bible. When the appropriate passages came up for review, they would simply point out that the traditional understanding of specific doctrines was not supported by Scripture. A second move was to publish a compendium of essential Christian beliefs, from which those the author found unacceptable were omitted.<sup>6</sup>

Locke himself employed all of these techniques to make clear his departures from Christian orthodoxy even as he paid homage to its forms by pretending commentary on the Bible. In general, Locke's various expositions of Christian doctrine followed a similar pattern. Almost always he begins with obeisance to the conventions of Christian orthodoxy. He quotes Scripture, as well as esteemed doctors of the Church, and he sets his initial arguments in a theological framework that appears perfectly acceptable on a cursory reading. Later, Locke invariably shows how far from orthodoxy he was prepared to depart.

Broadly speaking, Locke employs three means to reveal his differences with traditional theological orthodoxy. The first and most obvious is silence. In some cases Locke just does not treat a particular belief at all. In his commentaries on St. Paul he simply passes over in silence passages that plainly teach beliefs that he wishes to subvert. For example, in his published corpus Locke simply ignored the traditional belief about heaven and hell. He did discuss the afterlife in general, but not the specifics of where the souls of the just or wicked would go and what their fate would be.<sup>7</sup> Like many seventeenth century thinkers, Locke had privately concluded that the belief in an "eternal torment" for the wicked was simply unsustainable either on scriptural or moral grounds.<sup>8</sup> He was unwilling to publish his views, however, and only the barest hints of what was on his mind exist in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* and the *Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*. Material from Locke that was posthumously published by Lord King, however, clearly demonstrates his disagreement with orthodox theologies of hell.<sup>9</sup>

Locke could also ignore those parts of orthodoxy that troubled him by another and more obvious device: claiming that these beliefs or their scriptural sources were not part of essential Christian belief. This maneuver is most in evidence in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* and its two *Vindication(s)*, in two ways. First, Locke argues that

the specifically Christian beliefs that are necessary for salvation may be reduced to one belief — that Jesus is the Messiah.<sup>10</sup> We shall explicate the full meaning of this limitation below. Here we may observe only that this limitation placed on necessary Christian belief does omit from consideration and theological controversy a substantial portion of what Christians have always thought was important.<sup>11</sup>

Secondly, underpinning Locke's argument about the essentials of Christian belief was his disparagement of large portions of Christian Scripture. Again, we shall treat this point more fully below. We may note here, however, that in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* and its *Vindication(s)*, Locke makes it clear that the only portion of the Bible that is essential for Christians are the words of Jesus contained in the four Gospels. Though the other parts of the Bible might be an edifying addition to the whole, they are, at bottom, either plainly superfluous or non-essential.<sup>12</sup>

Thirdly, Locke employs the time honored technique of reinterpretation, often under the guise of commentary. This is especially true in the studies of St. Paul, where on some key issues Locke does not want his readers to understand Paul's theology in the ways that many Christians have understood him in the past. For example, Locke was never enamored of fatalism. He knew that political liberalism cannot survive a widespread belief in fatalistic views of current and future events. Thus, he consistently reinterprets those passages in Paul that were traditionally used to support the theological version of fatalism — predestination.<sup>13</sup>

## Locke's Version of Christianity

Though there were obviously points on which Locke wished to be silent or extremely cautious, even a relatively casual reader of his religious treatises cannot fail to note the unorthodox religious views which appear on practically every page. Below we shall analyze the structure and character of the most important statement of his religious views. At this point it may be useful to simply note the general teaching of the whole body of work and the points on which Locke is at odds with traditional Christian orthodoxy.

In brief, Locke holds that the Christian religion contains one essential belief: that Jesus is the Messiah.<sup>14</sup> This is the one and only article of the Christian faith which is necessary for believers. To this must be added a belief in God and the immortality of the human soul, which are theistic but not specifically Christian beliefs.<sup>15</sup> Locke's

theism, however, goes no further than this. Nothing more is required of Christians and less is necessary to be taught to children as a support for morality.<sup>16</sup> In some ways Locke's one article of faith resembles the "sola fides" principle which dominated the theological position of Reformation Christianity. However, as Locke's perceptive critics immediately saw, his position denies the necessity or relevance of most of traditional Christian theology, including that promulgated by the Reformation.

First, Locke specifically denies that Jesus can be called a "son of God" and nothing in his work lends any support to the traditional trinitarian concept of God or to the christological settlement of chalcedonian orthodoxy (two natures, one person).<sup>17</sup> Locke's denial on this point can be seen in a telling comparison with the broad church Anglicans with which he is usually grouped. Locke's religious critics complained often that his philosophy provided no room for a traditional belief in the trinity and that he (Locke) did not believe in such an essential belief of Christian faith. Locke never answered the charge directly. He merely professed his orthodoxy on all essential beliefs. His friend and supposedly fellow exponent of broad church rationalism, Archbishop John Tillotson, was accused of the same heresy on broadly the same grounds, namely, that the empiricist denial of classical notions of substance rendered impossible the traditional credal formulations. When so charged, Tillotson responded by explicitly endorsing a belief in the trinity and offering an extensive, if not wholly successful, defense of such a belief. Locke never made any such defense or endorsement.<sup>18</sup>

Secondly, Locke denies that any belief in the idea of Jesus' atoning sacrifice on the cross is required of Christians. This was widely thought to be an essential part of Christian theology. Locke's critics challenged him on this point and, as was his practice, he simply asserted his orthodoxy without ever answering the charge. Furthermore, either of the traditional views of the atonement make sense only if the biblical view of human origins and the fall of man is accepted. Locke's political philosophy, however, is premised on a fundamentally different picture of the natural condition of humankind.<sup>19</sup>

Fourthly, Locke denies the necessity or relevance for Christian faith of precisely those scriptural sources of the beliefs that he disputes. For Locke, the only part of the Bible that is significant as containing the essentials of Christian faith are the words of Jesus contained in the four Gospels. The rest is either irrelevant or simply an amplification of the essential message. For example, Locke believed that Paul's letters contained edifying material that supported the essential message of Christianity, but the epistles were written

in such a confusing style, with so many "obscure" passages and concepts, that they could not be relied upon to establish the fundamentals of Christian belief.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, Locke simply does not believe in the concept of the predestination of individual souls nor in Divine providence controlling human affairs. Locke knew that any plausible concept of political liberty cannot coexist easily with a belief that man's attainment of the satisfaction of his desires is at the mercy of Divine whim. In his commentaries on Paul and in his replies to his critics, Locke's theology is consistently enamored of human freedom and he plainly rewrites the predestinarian passages in Paul to this end.<sup>21</sup>

In sum, whatever we may believe about Locke's personal religious commitments, his public theological teaching is, at the very least, both arminian and socinian. He has no use for the arcana of theological speculation and, in defiance of theologians past and present, he tells Christians that they should not believe what they cannot comprehend. Though he always wanted to appear as a sincere and orthodox believer, it is clear that he was not. As Locke himself complained of a critic: the gentleman simply claims the truth of his assertions without proving them to be correct.

### ***The Reasonableness: Setting, Structure, and Teaching***

To conclude, what was sufficient to make a man a Christian in our savior's time is sufficient still, viz. Taking him for our Lord and King, ordained so by God. What was necessary to be believed by all Christians in our savior's time as an indispensable duty which they owed to their lord and master was the believing of all revelation as far as they could understand it. Just so it is still, neither more nor less.

John Locke, *A Second Vindication of the Reasonableness of Christianity*

The centerpiece of Locke's extensive religious writing is an extremely interesting work. What appears on the surface to be a conventional theological tract is, on closer analysis, a richly textured attempt to tame Christian theology in the service of liberalism. From the title, the seventeenth century reader would almost certainly expect another addition to the enormous literature of rational theology that permeates the scholarly writing of the period. Locke knew this literature intimately as is evidenced by his extensive library



holdings of books purporting to provide a rational argument for theism in general and Christianity in particular.<sup>22</sup>

The general character of these works may be grasped from two examples, both of which Locke owned. The first is from Locke's friend and teacher at Oxford, John Wilkins. Wilkins was part of the group that founded the Royal Society in the 1660s after having been dismissed from his post at Christ Church College in the Restoration. Later he was named Bishop of Chester at a time when the government was more moderate than it was when Parliament was adding ever more intolerant provisions to the Clarendon code. As a rather typical academic/divine of the seventeenth century, Wilkins wrote in his later years a large manuscript entitled *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*. It was published after his death by his friend and fellow exponent of rational theology, John Tillotson, who added his own preface.<sup>23</sup>

In the work itself Wilkins attempted to demonstrate the grounds of rational assent to theism in general and the Christian faith in particular. The argument begins in a manner that is superficially similar to Locke's discussion of knowledge, belief, and assent in Book Four of the *Essay*. After showing that much of what we believe cannot possibly involve the immediate certainty of sense perception or the demonstrations of logic and mathematics, he proceeds to show that theism is, nevertheless, an eminently reasonable belief. It has at least as much to be said for it as beliefs to which human beings regularly and reasonably assent, even though they have neither the certainty of immediate sense perception nor the demonstrations of deductive sciences on which to base such assent.

Wilkins' procedure is to show first the reasonable grounds of belief in God by employing the traditional proofs of: 1) the universal assent of mankind, 2) the necessity of a first cause or creator of the world, 3) the evidence of design in nature, and 4) evidences of providential governance of the world. Next he attempts to argue that since these proofs of God's existence are sound, then God must have specific attributes. For example, a God who has designed the world in such a beneficent and beautiful manner must, Himself, be the embodiment of perfect love. Finally, the argument is that Christianity is the most perfect embodiment of this natural theism.<sup>24</sup>

It is also a religion based on a Divine revelation, the authority of which is demonstrated by history, prophecy, and miracles.<sup>25</sup> The Old Testament, according to Wilkins, is a perfect history of the earliest ages of human history and its pages supposedly contain numerous prophecies that are fulfilled only in the New Testament.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, we may be assured of the Divine authority of Jesus and the early apostles by the evident and astonishing miracles that they

performed. Whether Wilkins' argument is sound is not at issue here. His method as well as many of the specific arguments (e.g., the argument from miracles) was extremely common in seventeenth century religious discourse, especially in England.<sup>27</sup>

A much more extensive and slightly different version of the same argument was advanced in two lengthy works by Samuel Parker. Parker was a political arch-royalist who had stirred up a substantial controversy when he published a rather venomous defense of the persecution of religious dissent in 1669. In the first of the two works we are considering here, Parker sought to demonstrate the truth of theism, largely with versions of the cosmological and design arguments much as Wilkins had done. The second work, *A Demonstration of the Divine Authority of the Law of Nature and the Christian Religion*, had a twofold purpose. First, Parker attempted to show that the moral law which is known through an analysis of human nature, is of Divine origin and contains natural sanctions for obedience or defiance, sanctions established by Divine providence.<sup>28</sup>

The second part of this work is an attempt to demonstrate the Divine character of the Christian religion. Essentially, Parker employs versions of an argument from miracles and an argument from providence similar to those employed by Wilkins. According to Parker, the miracles recorded in the New Testament simply would not be continuously asserted by the early apostles if they had any reason to doubt them. This is certainly true when they faced death for their beliefs.<sup>29</sup> No one would willingly risk death by continuing to make claims that are *prima facie* absurd or unreasonable unless that person really did believe that what they claimed really did happen. Secondly, Christianity would not have survived the persecutions that it endured without Divine assistance in the affairs of humankind. Christian belief is too fantastic and the early attacks were too severe for Christianity to have survived without the assistance of Divine providence. Hence, Christianity must have the imprimatur of Divine authority and the assistance of Divine power.<sup>30</sup>

When compared with the sort of theological apologetics offered by Wilkins, Parker and dozens of others, Locke's text is striking. Locke's *Reasonableness of Christianity* does not begin with or presuppose a "natural theology" of any sort whatsoever; nor does Locke purport to demonstrate the "rational basis" of Christian faith in any serious fashion. Locke is interested in explicating what he conceives to be the essentials of Christian belief, not in providing rational justification for these beliefs.

Moreover, though Locke's text is not that of Christian natural theology of the early modern period, it is also much different than the patently irreligious biblical criticism of Hobbes, Spinoza, and the

few who may be said to have followed them such as Richard Simon. Nowhere in the text does Locke undertake an overt criticism of the veracity of Scripture or the articles of the Christian faith. He may have sought to alter drastically the content of Christian belief, but he did little to tamper overtly with the form in which this content was delivered.

To the reader familiar with Locke's corpus or with the general tenor of sophisticated religious writing in the seventeenth century, the most striking feature of *The Reasonableness* is its overtly theological character. Locke begins by assuming that Christian belief is revealed by God and then proceeds to articulate what he considers the core of the revealed faith to be. Locke never tries to justify theism itself in *The Reasonableness*. Even in the *Essay*, the supposed "proof" of the existence of God does not attempt to demonstrate to any neutral inquirer the existence of a God who would either be capable of or interested in providing to man a specific revelation of His will, even granting that the proof itself is sound on its internal merits.<sup>31</sup>

The most that Locke tries to do is offer a superficial demonstration of the necessity of Divine revelation on moral and epistemological grounds.<sup>32</sup> It is not a God who reveals that the proof demonstrates, however, but the human need to believe in revelation. This argument is clearly suspect even within the context of Locke's own text. Even the attempt to show the necessity of revelation comes at the end of the work, not where one would expect to find it (and where it was found in scores of works like those of Wilkins and Parker written by Locke's contemporaries) — at the beginning. Thus, Locke begins by asserting what ought to be proven, namely, the revelatory character of the Christian Scriptures. This assumption underlies the whole conventional character of *The Reasonableness* itself as a work that maintains a conscious connection to the traditional forms of Christian piety.

*The Reasonableness* was not divided by Locke into sections or chapters, but the careful reader will notice definite divisions in the development of the argument. Essentially, there appears to be seven parts to the work, including a conclusion, which briefly recapitulates the message of the whole. Of these sections, the first four articulate the fundamental beliefs of Christianity as Locke views it, and the last three treat the necessity of revelation, the nature of the epistolary writings in the New Testament, and a concluding summary. As we shall see, this division is hardly adequate to a full understanding of *The Reasonableness*, but it is a useful beginning.

The opening section describes the necessity of a Divine "redeemer" for mankind, due to the effects of the fall of Adam. Though this section treats primarily the fall of Adam, it is almost wholly

devoid of references to the Old Testament. There are only five references to Genesis in the whole of the text and all of them are in this first section. What predominates in the first section, however, are references to the four Gospels and the epistles of Paul, especially those that articulate the nature and consequences of the fall of man as described by Paul. These are primarily references to Paul's letter *To the Romans*, which for many Christian writers is the best single epitome of the Christian doctrine of the fall and redemption of man in the whole of the Bible.<sup>33</sup>

This starting point is extremely interesting, for it begins with a part of the Bible that Locke will later renounce as having anything to do with teaching the essentials of Christianity; both the Old Testament and Paul's epistles directly fall into this category. If the latter view is granted, then it appears that the whole teaching about the fall of man, and the subsequent argument for the necessity of a savior, is not part of the essential theology of Christianity. Later we shall see that at a crucial point Locke gives another and much more radical argument for the necessity of belief in the revelatory status of Jesus, an account that presupposes no need for salvation from an ontological or metaphysical fall at all. It is sufficient to note here that Locke begins with superficial obeisance to orthodoxy that looks much less sound when carefully parsed out.

The fall of humankind is said by Locke to be a fall from a state of justice otherwise defined as "strict obedience to Divine will." The result of this disobedience is claimed to be death (i.e., the ceasing to be of the individual). Furthermore, this fall does not result in some change such that people now deserve to be punished even though they have done nothing evil. Locke makes this point in his usual cautionary fashion. After quoting several New Testament passages describing the effects of Adam's fall, he simply notes "that there is no condemnation of anyone for what the father had done which is not likely should have been omitted if that should have been a cause why anyone was adjudged to the fire with the devil and his angels."<sup>34</sup>

Locke is plainly on the verge of arguing a pure pelagianism in which salvation is earned by virtuous acts. What he believes saves him is the claim that since human beings never deserved the immortality of Eden, they had no reason to think of themselves as being punished by biological death. Since they were not punished by being deprived of Eden, they are not to think of themselves as deserving immortality for good behavior. This is specious and Locke knew it. Claims about God's justice in Eden are simply irrelevant to questions about how it is that man is saved, supposing, as Locke superficially does, that man needs a savior or special redeemer.

This is even more apparent for Locke because of his desire, hinted at in the opening section, for connecting salvation with ethics, a connection that will hardly be persuasive to the masses who are in need of Christianity (according to Locke) unless good morals has some essentially pelagian connection with the redemption of humankind. That seems to be why, despite his protestations, the essential view in the first two sections of *The Reasonableness* is that if we want to have the reward of immortality, then adherence to Christian belief and the concomitant moral activity is necessary.

The second section of *The Reasonableness* is devoted to an account of those beliefs to which Christians must adhere if they are to achieve the goal of immortality. Locke, of course, claims only to be providing an exegesis of Christian revelation. In fact, however, Locke limits his exegesis to the four Gospels and Acts. There are only two references to any other text of Scripture and they only exemplify a point. They do not add anything essential to the argument.<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, Locke's exegesis is extremely selective even in the portions of Scripture he does regard as essential. For Locke, the essence of Christian belief may be reduced to one proposition: "Jesus is the Messiah." To reach this conclusion he focuses entirely on the direct statements of Jesus himself and the preaching of the early apostles recorded in Acts. Such an exegesis omits most of traditional Christianity, even as contained in the Gospels alone. Three examples of this point may be noted. First, he simply ignores the claim that runs through the Gospels, especially Matthew, that the life of Jesus fulfills prophecy. This has always been a favorite point of Christian apologists and was available to Locke in many other seventeenth century versions. Locke ignores it entirely. Secondly, he never discusses at all the prologue to the Gospel of John, which is the source of much of traditional incarnational and trinitarian theology which Locke thought was nonsense.

Thirdly, Locke does not discuss traditional eschatological themes about the end of the world. Even if he does not regard the *Book of Revelation* as essential, these themes have still been found in the four Gospels themselves, e.g., Matthew 24. These are direct quotations from Jesus which are supposedly the foundation of the faith. In his only mention of the eschatological passages in Matthew, he simply asserts that Jesus' discussion was deliberately framed in deference to the "common opinion" of his apostles who were still imbued with literalistic Jewish eschatological thinking.<sup>36</sup>

After describing what he believed to be the essence of the overt teaching of the Christian faith, Locke takes the third and longest section of the work to provide what appears to be a tedious review of the Gospel story apparently designed to show that this one article

is all that Jesus required of his followers. This is not, as we have noted, a traditional commentary on Scripture. Most of the four Gospels are not even discussed. It is a highly selective attempt to describe the core of Christianity. We may note four features of this description.

First, the whole of the teaching of the four Gospels is either ignored or interpreted as an example of the one essential belief. His miracles, for example, are said to be done for the purpose of convincing his listeners of his messianic status. When noting passages that seem to describe the apocalypse, Locke unfailingly ignores eschatology and stresses instead Jesus' continuing assertion of his own Divine mission. Secondly, Locke simply does not refer to other portions of the New Testament or to the interpretive statements made by the evangelists themselves, such as Matthew's repeated assertions that the activities of Jesus are done to fulfill Old Testament prophecy.<sup>37</sup>

Thirdly, Locke does not try to expand the definition of "messiah" beyond "king" or "ruler." In fact, all other titles for Jesus, especially "son of man" or "son of God," are said to be equivalent to the more general term "messiah." The key terminology that might support traditional theological speculation is either ignored or reduced to "messiah" in Locke's exegesis.<sup>38</sup>

Fourthly, the concept of "messiah" or "king" has superficially no political import in Locke's exegesis. As befits one whose concept of toleration was far more advanced than that included in the Toleration Act of 1690, Locke does not want his version of Christian teaching to have practical political implications of the sort that both Catholics and Puritans may have desired. One crucial method of demonstrating this is to show how careful Jesus himself was to disavow any political intentions for himself or any political import to the concept of his messianic status.

The most intriguing feature of Locke's review of the four Gospels, however, is not the overwhelming quantity and explicit character of Jesus' announcement of his messianic status. Rather, what Locke finds and must explain is hiddenness and concealment, not openness. Like any astute reader of the New Testament, Locke finds precious few statements by Jesus explicitly announcing his coming as messianic, and even when he performs miracles he most frequently cautions the recipient not to spread the news around. Silence, not openness, is a central mark of Jesus' claims about the divinity of his mission and/or the revealed character of his message. It is not without reason that Locke devotes large portions of this longest section of *The Reasonableness* to analyzing this puzzle.

The fact of Jesus' secretiveness is obvious and a large body of modern scholarship has been devoted to explaining what is now called the "messianic secret," which especially seems prominent in the synoptic Gospels and less so in John. For Locke, this fact poses a special burden. The underlying premise of his interpretation of Christian doctrine is that Christians can be required to believe only the core doctrines that Jesus taught. Since the Old Testament was directed to the Jews and apostolic writings were sent to those who were already Christians, neither of these parts of the Bible can articulate the necessary and sufficient beliefs, adherence to which would make one a Christian in the first place. If so, what happens to Christianity when Jesus himself proves to be such an elusive spokesman for its essential tenets?<sup>39</sup>

The largest burden of Section 3 is finding a solution to the concealment problem. First, Locke argues that Jesus did not need to proclaim himself openly, since his miracles could do this for him, especially for those with perceptive eyes. This is hardly sufficient and Locke knows it. The disciples who saw the greatest number of his miraculous deeds were, even at the end of his life, still largely in the dark about his special messianic role. Locke alleges that this was deliberate on his part. They were even chosen so that they could be kept in the dark. But if those who saw them first hand are not enlightened sufficiently by miracles, of what use are they to those of us who live thousands of years later? Moreover, the most explicit evidence of secretiveness on the part of Jesus involves precisely the performance of miracles. A miracle is performed and Jesus counsels the recipient to tell no one what has happened. If this advice was followed, then the record of such in the Gospels (which is crucial to a rational defense of Christianity in the view of Locke's contemporaries and friends like Parker and Wilkins) must involve at best tenuous hearsay evidence.<sup>40</sup>

Secondly, Locke tries to explain Jesus' concealment, not deny it, in two ways. First, he notes the politically disastrous consequences of any open proclamation by Jesus that he was the Messiah. Both Jews and Romans would have viewed him as dangerous and would have moved much more quickly to execute him. It would have been an act of defiance that Rome certainly would not have tolerated, especially if throngs had started believing it. Concealment is political prudence, the wise and judicious move under the circumstances. Secondly, concealment enhances Jesus' moral standing by avoiding the blemish of an illegal challenge to ruling authority.<sup>41</sup>

There had been no room left to see and admire the wisdom as well as the innocence of our savior if he had rashly everywhere

exposed himself to the fury of the Jews and had always been preserved by a miraculous suspension of their malice or a miraculous rescuing him out of their hands....[I]f to the miracles he did he had openly added, in express words, that he was the messiah and king they expected to deliver them, he would have more followers, and warmer in the cause, and readier to set him up at the head of a tumult.

In other words, if the miracles were too numerous, they would cease to be wondrous and lose their probative value in Locke's argument; but if Jesus had proved to be a troublemaker, only a constant stream of miracles would have saved him.

But what about the apostles, surely they must have known? On the contrary, the apostles were selected not for their wisdom in deciphering the parables and circumlocutions by which he revealed his message and his mission, but precisely because they were illiterate, unlearned, and therefore credulous men, who would be easily convinced by miracles but who would not ask too many questions. They would trust in him and obey his every command without needing to have a clear idea of what was going on.

In other words, the apostles seem to be part of the "vulgar and mass of men" to whom Christianity is directed on Locke's account. They are credulous enough to be convinced by wondrous events and trusting enough to follow Christian morals without question.

To this design and method of publishing the Gospel was the choice of the apostles exactly adjusted — a company of poor, ignorant, illiterate men, who as Christ himself tells us, Matt. 11:25 and Luke 10:21, were not of the wise and prudent men of the world; they were in that respect mere children. These, convinced by the miracles they daily saw him do, and the unblamable life he led might be disposed to believe him to be the messiah...without being too inquisitive after the time, manner, or seat of his kingdom, as men of letters, more studied in their rabbins, or men of business, more versed in the world would have been forward to have been.<sup>42</sup>

The dialectic of hiddenness and openness dominates Part 3 and cleverly points away from Jesus as a supernatural "messiah" to the moral Christianity offered by Locke himself in the latter sections of *The Reasonableness*. Jesus' life exemplifies moral character while his studied ambiguity with his apostles simply allows their credulous minds to conclude that he is Divine, though they did not fully reach this conclusion until after he was dead. In other words, if the



teaching of Jesus is the only explicit and axiomatic belief of Christianity, then good character becomes the base and his being a savior the secondary and credulous appellation of those who first saw the morals and the miracles, but even then could only draw the messianic conclusion with hesitation. The appellation "messiah" was a conclusion of credulous followers, of the "vulgar and mass of men" who require the covering of divinity for the tough pill of Christian morality.

Though Locke did not want his version of Christianity to have political import, he did want it to have a connection with morality. Religion is primarily necessary for the common man as a support for virtue. Hence, after finishing the exegesis of the "one necessary article" in the four Gospels, Locke immediately turns to the moral import of Christianity in Parts 4 and 5 of *The Reasonableness*. In these sections Locke covertly reverses most of what he has just taught about the essence of Christianity. To be a Christian is to accept Jesus as one's "messiah" or "king." But one becomes a subject of a king by agreeing to be obedient to the laws of said king and living accordingly. Hence, what makes one a Christian is not belief in metaphysical propositions, but repentance (i.e., agreeing to be bound by Christian morals) and obedience to the pure moral law announced by Jesus. In a move that mirrors much of modern theology, Locke teaches that one is a Christian if one acts like a Christian.

The key to the whole work is the transition in Part 4 from what appears to be orthodoxy, albeit of a Laudian variety in Part 3, to what is clearly not even tenable in broad church terms in Part 5. The section begins when Locke has finished the comprehensive selection of quotes from Jesus, Peter and Paul, each seemingly attesting to the centrality of the one belief in Jesus as the Messiah for Christian faith. This view is open to an immediate objection which Locke notes: "To this it is likely it will be objected by some that to believe only that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah is but a historical, not a justifying or saving faith."<sup>43</sup> One could very well believe that Jesus was the "messiah," especially on Locke's definition of the term, without coming close to a belief that he was "God incarnate" or that one has been saved for heaven by his dying and rising.

At first Locke responds to such an objection with a display of orthodox indignation that borders on *ad hominem* attack. The point is that those who make such an objection "must have care how they deny it to be a justifying or saving faith when our savior and his apostles have declared it so to be." This does not answer the question, it merely restates Locke's view. He well understands that the objection is not so lightly dismissed. Those who do not consider

themselves Christians may yet assent to this one proposition for, as Locke notes, "such a faith as this the devils may have."

Now Locke shifts ground. Devils cannot be Christians because they have not proclaimed their willingness to be ruled by Jesus as the lawgiver of the Christian community; that is, they have not repented. For Locke, repentance is an act of moral commitment in which the individual admits that he has not lived according to Christian standards and resolves to do better in the future. In other words, Locke has moved from an insistence on belief as necessary for Christianity to an insistence on proper behavior. By claiming that assent entails repentance and then defining repentance in terms of moral behavior, Locke is on the way to the purely moral view of Christianity provided in Part 5.<sup>44</sup>

The moral Christianity to which the connection between assent and repentance points is reinforced in Part 4 in two ways. First, Locke is at pains to point out the sorts of moral behaviors that are required of repentant Christians. For the most part these are vaguely defined homilies such as "charity," "temperance," and "justice," which are rhetorically useful and practically useless for public purposes.

Furthermore, there is embedded in Parts 4 and 5 a much more radical, even Hobbesian, understanding of the notion of immortality or "eternal life." As we noted above, Adam's fall was described in moral terms, a fall from a "perfect state of righteousness." If overcoming the effects of the fall is accomplished, as it should be, by a process of moral regeneration described in Parts 4 and 5, then the ultimate goal itself (immortality) might be thought to have a deeper moral meaning.

There are a number of hints in Part 4 that this is precisely Locke's covert meaning. The key to this understanding is found in his use of the concept of "imago dei" in a manner superficially similar to but fundamentally different than its use in Calvinism. Adam was originally created in God's image insofar as his existence perfectly reflected Divine righteousness. His disobedience distorted that image and it can only be restored by moral regeneration and continued obedience. After describing this use of the concept of the soul as a kind of mirror of Divine righteousness in mankind, a use with distinct Calvinist echoes, Locke makes a move that is pregnant with a much more controversial meaning. The image of God in Adam, the first man, and to which Christians will be conformed, is what is meant by "immortality and eternal life."<sup>45</sup>

In the same sense the Apostle seems to use the word image in other places, viz. Rom. 8:29 "whom he did foreknow, he also did

predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the first born among many brethren." This image to which they were conformed seems to be immortality and eternal life.<sup>46</sup>

Individually, such passages as these can be given an interpretation that is superficially consistent with orthodoxy. However, when they are combined with the moral view of Adam's fall given in Part 1 and the moral view of Jesus' messianic status argued in Part 5, a deeper and much more radical meaning potentially seems to be involved.

The moral meaning of Christianity is even more directly described in Part 5. This section, too, begins with a query that Locke supposedly answered in Part 1: why does man need a savior? Instead of repeating the superficially orthodox teaching of Adam's fall and humankind's subsequent need for redemption, Locke makes the moral connection explicit. The question of human salvation is immediately rephrased into the question of why human beings need revelation and this, in turn, leads directly to monotheism and morality. Human beings did not know God before Jesus' revelation because monotheism was limited to one insignificant geographic spot called Palestine. Natural religion (i.e., the imprint of God in nature) does support monotheistic belief, but human desire and inattentiveness corrupted the minds of human beings such that "darkness and ignorance" were pervasive and dominant.<sup>47</sup>

The importance of monotheism, however, lies in its connection to morality. The revelation about the one true God is significant because it leads man to know the one true morality of this God, which answers to the moral confusion of the average man. Locke's central concern is with Jesus as a teacher of true morality as against the debauched practices that dominated the moral life of the "vulgar" masses of mankind then and since. He carefully avoids claiming that human beings are *per se* incapable of knowing moral truth. What he claims is that true morality was unavailable for the "vulgar and mass of mankind" for two reasons.

First, the epistemic and metaphysical foundations of morality were different in different sects and schools of philosophy. A common person might be attracted to some simple maxims from the stoics, epicureans, and Aristotle. But knowing the epistemic and metaphysical foundations of each maxim to be different, he is left utterly confused about which moral teaching to follow. Secondly, none of these moral beliefs claims to be connected to the Divine as a source of encouragement and motivation to virtue. What the common masses require is a moral teaching that is stripped of

incomprehensible and contradictory metaphysical foundations, simple enough to be followed tolerably well, and carrying the imprimatur of the Divine to motivate its adherents. Seemingly, the moral homilies of Jesus fill this bill very nicely.<sup>48</sup>

All of Locke's claims for the necessity of a savior for the great body of humankind center on ethics. In Part 6 the supposed importance Jesus' critique of Jewish ritual lies in the manner in which ornate ceremonies do not promote that personal piety which is necessary for virtue. Likewise, his teaching about the promise of assistance (i.e., the doctrine of the holy spirit) is said to be significant because of its connection with moral motivation and encouragement.

To a man under the difficulties of his nature beset with temptations and hedged in with prevailing custom it is no small encouragement to set himself seriously on the course of virtue and practice of true religion, that he is, from a sure hand and an almighty arm, promised assistance to support and carry him through.<sup>49</sup>

At the heart of Christian faith as described by Locke now appears a teaching about virtue; specifically religious beliefs are supportive adjuncts to this teaching. The beliefs are necessary insofar as they motivate believers to act virtuously. The concept of a "kingdom of God" presided over by a "king" (i.e., Jesus) is now radically privatized into a concept of personal virtue. When one acts according to the virtuous laws of the kingdom, one becomes a member. The content of this morality is sufficiently vague and simple that almost any benevolent behavior will qualify and any common man can live up to its terms. The believer must abstain from the grossest of evils, for example, theft and murder; for the most part, however, Locke describes the content of Christian morality with terms that are so general as to be meaningless, e.g., "good works," "love thy neighbor," or admonitions not to practice "ostentation in charity." This version of Christian morality focuses entirely on private behavior, articulated in such a fashion that even the most unlettered common man can understand his duty to be decent and the reward that awaits a sincere attempt to live up to the terms of this morality.<sup>50</sup>

Locke, of course, does not teach a stern pelagianism in which men earn their way to heaven by moral perfection. This would be as morally enervating as its predestinarian opposition. What he teaches is that individuals must try to be decent people who have tamed for the most part their grossest desires. Then, according to Christian belief, God will reward them with "eternal life," i.e., a state of

perfect peace, justice, and immortality sufficient to satisfy man's most significant desires and allay his worst fears. This is, of course, a theistic hedonism that is fully consistent with Locke's hedonist moral teaching in general.<sup>51</sup> Christian theism simply makes it more attractive to the common man in two ways. It makes human happiness appear more desirable when clothed in a trans-human glory and it makes its eventual achievement more certain when it is guaranteed by God.

Finally, in Section 6, Locke responds to the obvious question that traditionalists would pose to his method of exegesis. If the essential doctrines of Christian belief are as narrow as he claims and scriptural sources so limited, of what value is all the rest of the New Testament, i.e., the various epistles and the doctrines contained in them. This is a fundamental objection and Locke knows it. To admit that the epistles teach necessary beliefs is the open door to the very christological, trinitarian, and eschatological beliefs that Locke finds unacceptable. Moreover, it will likely engender a host of disputes about the proper organization of the church that Locke's very limited theology is designed to bypass.<sup>52</sup>

On the other hand, Locke does not want to appear to disparage the epistles or to claim outright that they are not inspired. For the very argument that Locke has already given for supposing the explicit teachings of Jesus in the four Gospels to be revelation, i.e., miracles, will equally well apply to the epistolary literature. If the miracles of Peter are to attest to the truthfulness and revelatory character of his teaching about Jesus in Acts, as Locke implicitly claims by his use of quotes from Peter and Paul for precisely these purposes, they ought to equally well demonstrate the revelatory character of the epistles in his name.

In trying to distance himself from the exegesis of the epistolary literature that so fascinated the reformers, Locke makes two claims. The first is the patently disingenuous argument that since the epistles are directed to those who already are Christians, they cannot contain a statement of what beliefs and/or behaviors would be necessary and sufficient for a person to be a Christian in the first place. It would, he alleges, be superfluous to advise those who are Christians already, how to become Christians.

This will not do even in Locke's own terms. In his political philosophy Locke clearly distinguished between the original agreement of the people to form a government and the subsequent laws established by the government. What makes one a citizen is a continuing willingness to obey the law, insofar as the government continues to perform the fundamental functions for which it was created. If Christ is, as Locke asserts, the ruler of his "kingdom,"

would not his subjects (i.e., Christians) be bound to obey the full range of his "laws," even those in the epistolary literature? In order to make this claim work, Locke must assume that the epistles do not contain revelation. The argument only adds a veneer of plausibility to the assumption itself. But if they do not, then what happens to the argument from miracles that would just as well ground a belief in the revealed character of peterine or pauline teaching as it would Locke's preferred teaching of Jesus? What Locke points to is the rhetorical character of the appeal to miracles to support a teaching that is grounded not in revelation but in the moral sense of everyman.

More significantly, Locke argues that the epistles are written in a complex, often confusing style that is inaccessible to all but the most attentive and diligent readers. Hence, they could not be a proper vehicle for transmitting the essential message of the faith to the "vulgar and mass" of mankind. Again, Locke assumes that the Christian faith must be accessible in an unaided manner to the ordinary person. He does not even bother to consider the Catholic claim that the very esoteric character of Scripture demonstrates the necessity of an inspired and authoritative interpreter. Locke simply concludes that since the epistles are too esoteric to be of use for the Christian masses and since they do not teach anything of necessity of the faith, they may be safely ignored by the common lot of Christians. If so, then Christians may ignore the teaching of man's fall and salvation, that Locke originally based largely on the epistles.<sup>53</sup>

This claim about the esoteric character of the epistles is very curious. It seems as if Locke means to hold that while Jesus' teaching is clear, that of the apostles is so obscure that even he, Locke, cannot fathom its meaning sufficiently well to publish the results of any studies he has conducted on them. But embedded in his earlier treatment of Jesus' ministry is a trenchant attack on the intellectual acuity of the very apostles who are alleged to have written the epistles themselves.

In this discussion Locke tells us that Jesus deliberately chose as apostles a "company of poor, ignorant, illiterate men" whose credulousness would allow Jesus to win their devotion via miracles but whose lack of wisdom would prevent them from asking too many questions and delving into too many mysteries. These are not the sort of people who could be expected to write esoteric discourses designed for the wise and prudent few, an ability which Locke here attributes to them.

In fact, as Locke shows, it was Jesus himself who taught in esoteric terms, designed to confuse the Roman and Jewish authorities. He even hid his real intention from his followers and taught in such parables and with such rhetorical double talk that no one,

perhaps outside of Locke, knew what his true teaching was. If there is a master of esoteric teaching, it is the Master himself, and if one wishes to see how to understand such a teaching, one could do worse than study how Locke reads the synoptic Gospels.

These arguments do not prove what Locke asserts. They do not demonstrate that the epistles are a poor source of Christian doctrine. At most they reveal the import and context of Locke's theological teaching. Locke is not interested in the arcane fine points of creedal orthodoxy. He is interested in a theology which will be sufficient to and available for teaching morality to the common man. The careful manner in which Locke uses and then renounces both the theology of orthodoxy and its sources in Scripture surely reveals as much about the esoteric character of Locke's teaching as it does about the supposedly esoteric character of Scripture, on which Locke places such importance as to present himself as the most competent guide to its contents.

### The Debate over *The Reasonableness*

*The Reasonableness of Christianity* is at the heart of Locke's attempt to tame the political and theological impulses of Christianity. Christ himself has become a moral teacher and Christianity a comforting appendage to a fairly simple morality. This is quite plainly an unorthodox though strikingly modern version of Christianity which, when stripped of the pious assertions of orthodoxy on Locke's part, is a Christian form of deism at its core. One can find versions of this moral Christianity in Rousseau, Kant, and most of nineteenth century Protestant theology. His contemporaries knew that it was not any form of Christian orthodoxy that a seventeenth century theologian would have recognized and they challenged his assertions to the contrary in strenuous and repeated fashion.

The first, and in some ways the most vigorous opponent of Locke's theology, was John Edwards, a Cambridge theologian who accused Locke of socinianism which, he asserted, would eventually lead to atheism. Alarmed by what he read shortly after the publication of Locke's work, Edwards rushed into print. Within months of the appearance of Locke's *Reasonableness*, Edwards published *Some Thoughts Concerning the Several Causes and Occasions of Atheism*. When Locke responded in an unsatisfactory fashion, Edwards published a more vigorous attack the following year in his *Socinianism Unmasked*, to which Locke also responded with a second and much longer "vindication" of his religious teaching.<sup>54</sup>

These two defenses of *The Reasonableness* are among the most intriguing pieces of writing from Locke's hand. Locke did not want to be branded as the heretic that Edwards thought he was, especially since any form of anti-trinitarian belief was a crime in English law until well into the eighteenth century. If Locke stuck to his principles, however, there was little that he could say that would directly refute Edwards's charges. His theology of *The Reasonableness* was about as unorthodox as one could get and still have any hope of calling oneself a Christian with a straight face. At the very least it would have been a scandal to promulgate openly what Locke's text, in point of fact, actually teaches. Hence, Locke must appear to answer Edwards, but the appearances must be sufficiently deceptive to preserve his reputation for orthodoxy while not admitting anything of substance to the charges.

In general, Locke employs most of the classic debaters tricks to preserve his reputation for orthodoxy without actually giving up any of his unorthodox religious teaching. In this regard, Locke's typical manner of responding to Edwards was threefold. First, he sometimes simply ignored what Edwards had to say, passing it by in the night as if it were not there. Secondly, he often simply asserted his orthodoxy on a specific point of theology without any serious demonstration of precisely how Edwards charge had missed the mark or where exactly the orthodoxy in Locke's teaching lay. Edwards, for example, had charged Locke with what was a crime, publishing socinian literature. Locke simply denied the charge: "There is not one word of socinianism in it." But he never takes the trouble to show how Edwards has misinterpreted his teaching. Moreover, he claimed not to be familiar with the writings of socinians, yet we know from the contents of his library and his notebooks that this assertion is false. Locke possessed a number of the most significant socinian works available in seventeenth century England, works of Socinius himself as well as Voelkelius, Schlichtingius, Crell, Nye, and John Biddle, known generally as the "father of English Unitarianism."<sup>55</sup>

Finally, and most apparently, Locke offers specious responses that are almost laughable as serious defenses of his position. For example, Edwards charged that Locke had reduced Christian faith to one essential article, to which Locke replies that he at least has two articles of faith, namely, belief in God and the messianic status of Jesus.<sup>56</sup> In other cases Locke tries to turn the question on Edwards. Since Edwards thinks that Locke has failed to state the essentials of the Christian faith, then he, Edwards, must know what they are.



You have found fault with my summary for being short. Is it folly, then, for me to ask from you a complete creed? If it be so dangerous (as it certainly is) to fail in any necessary article of faith: why is it folly in me to be instant with you to give me them all? Or why is it folly in you to grant so reasonable a demand? A short faith, effective in necessities, is no more tolerable in you than in me; nay, much more inexcusable if it were for not other reason than this, that you rest in it yourself: and would impose it on others; and yet you do not yourself know or believe it to be complete.

...If fundamentals are to be known, easy to be known (as without doubt, they are) then a catalog may be given of them. But if they are not, if it cannot be certainly determined which are they, but doubtful knowledge of them depends upon guesses, why may not I be permitted to follow my guesses as well as you yours?<sup>57</sup>

Lastly, on some points, Locke attempts to show that while his language may be different, his teaching in fact agrees with what Edwards demands. In every case, however, Locke deliberately misses Edwards' point. Edwards continually asserts that Locke has ignored the fundamental theological assertions at the heart of Christianity. Locke replies that he has not done so because some passage can be interpreted in a fashion that is superficially similar. What Locke always ignores is the context within which his own and Edwards' passage occurs, a context that invariably shows the immense gap between his and Edwards' starting point with respect to the Christian faith.

The second point on which Locke was challenged was his failure to consider large portions of the Scriptures as essential source material for the development of a sound Christian theology. Locke's response to this charge was direct. In *The Reasonableness* itself, he had already argued that the epistolary writings of the New Testament did not contain anything of necessary significance for Christian theology. In response to Edwards he cannot very well deny the argument. He responds in much the same fashion as he had to the same rhetorical query in *The Reasonableness*, focusing on the one most rhetorical and easily grasped point from the original text: the epistles cannot state the necessary and sufficient essentials of Christian belief since they were written to those who were already Christians. Paul, for example, writes to churches in Corinth, Galatia and Rome, assuming that the audience is already converted to Christianity. Thus, he cannot be stating beliefs that the readers must hold to be Christians to begin with. Edwards was never convinced by this

rhetorical game. The very doctrines on which he accused Locke of heresy were historically derived not from the specific words of Jesus, but from the interpretations of the evangelists and apostles, which, for Locke, were irrelevant. Locke's argument about the epistles, however, does play a crucial role in his argument. It would have been heretical and even, in some cases, criminal for him to openly deny the doctrines of grace, atonement, and christology that Edwards and others pressed on him. Locke, however, never denies specific doctrines. He denies that whole sections of the Bible teach anything essential for Christian faith, and that if necessary articles of belief are mentioned, it is merely a restatement of what is already in the four Gospels. This ends up just where open heresy would, but it does so in a manner that disguises the truth of heresy with pious homage to the founder of the faith.

### **Lockean Toleration and the Limits of Liberalism**

This dignity of man, therefore — the dignity, namely that he is to receive beatitude through the immediate vision of God — is most fittingly shown forth by God by the fact that He Himself assumed human nature. And so the achievement of the incarnation of God is that a great part of men, putting aside the worship of angels, demons, and creatures of whatever sort, and spurning as well the pleasures of the flesh and all corporeal things have devoted themselves to the worship of God alone in whom they expect to find their beatitude.

St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*

When, therefore, death shall be swallowed up in victory, these things will not be there; and there shall be peace — peace full and eternal. We shall be in a kind of city brethren. When I speak of that city, and especially when scandals grow great here, I just cannot bring myself to stop.

St. Augustine, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 84:10

At its most fundamental level, *Locke's Reasonableness* is a profound assault on the core conviction of the Christian faith, the incarnation of God in humankind. This is the scandal to the Jews and mystery to the Greeks which Christian theology seeks to comprehend but which remains its central belief and its deepest mystery.

The incarnation is that point where the Divine manifests itself in human form as the perfect man. In this perfectly just man is Divine

justice itself revealed to humankind. For Christian theology the revelation of God to man is most profoundly the revelation in the person of Jesus Christ, the God-Man, and only secondarily in that text which bears witness to the revelation of the Father in the person of the Son, i.e., the Word made flesh.

Incarnational theology points humankind to that transcendent wisdom which we originally seek from nature but which the restless striving for material acquisition and technological domination cannot ultimately satisfy. The union of the transcendent in the immanent materiality of nature points human beings to their final end as restless souls whose erotic striving for completion will only find rest in Him.

In this way the incarnation points ultimately beyond the earthly city of historical, temporal, and material limitations to that "city of God" which is the true end of humankind. Locke knew that this incarnational revelation at the heart of Christianity was dangerous to liberalism itself. Liberalism is preeminently the city of man, not of God, a city confined to those needs, desires, and capacities of humankind that the incarnation ennobles, transforms, and points beyond. Locke's liberalism deliberately seeks to avert men's eyes from the city of God, and thus from the incarnation itself. The Augustinian vision of the end in which the Divine eros in human beings finds its completion in God cannot be a liberal vision, for liberalism itself is blind to the very soul which cannot be satisfied with a liberalism such as Locke's which seems to deny its very existence.

Locke knows well the centrality of incarnational revelation for Christianity. Thus *The Reasonableness* is a rich attempt to tame Christianity of this commitment, a commitment that is incompatible with the final dominance of liberalism. Christianity may reach a modus vivendi with liberalism such as has occurred regularly in modern times, but it cannot ultimately be at home in the secular regime of Lockean liberalism.

Though profoundly different in its practical effects, *The Reasonableness* is animated by the same purpose as that found in Hobbes' treatment of religion in *Leviathan* — to contain liberalism within the secular limits of liberalism. But the Hobbesian solution to the theological-political problem in liberalism is not finally that of Locke. Hobbes sought to contain religion strictly within the confines of the secular state, turning religion into an instrument of sovereignty. Such a solution implies that in a fundamental sense the religious impulses of humankind can be stamped out, or, what is equivalent, so twisted that they are no longer religious impulses (i.e., they no longer point to a Divine end for the human soul). If a certain version

of politico-religious myth or a certain level of severity in punishing dissent will not be efficacious in suppressing religion, then a revised rhetoric or a tighter turn of the screw may be required. But the lid of secular sovereignty must ultimately contain religion within the vessel of liberalism.

The practical solution to the theological-political problem for which Locke is known to posterity — liberal toleration — implies a fundamentally different conception of the problem. Toleration implies that the religious impulse cannot, finally, be suppressed or contained. To be sure, Locke's toleration is grounded in a profound religious skepticism. The practice itself, however, implies that the impulse to transcend the limits of liberalism cannot be suppressed. Even as it must moderate this impulse, the liberal state must find a space for its proper expression. But this very necessity of the practice of toleration suggests the limits of liberalism and the incompleteness of *The Reasonableness* as a solution to the theological-political problem within it. Toleration implies that human beings will never be satisfied with the relativistic freedoms and material opportunities that liberalism supplies in abundance. As such, no fully political solution exists (contra Hobbes) to a problem which goes beyond the limits of liberal politics.

The most that can be expected, Locke teaches in the writings on toleration, is that the political implication of religion can be moderated by turning the practical ecclesial and theological expressions of religion against each other. The various churches and sects whose energies are unleashed by toleration will carefully watch each other's political activities lest any gain the aid of government in the struggle to save souls. Religion can be employed for its own moderation, but it cannot be stamped out.

This moderation cannot be complete unless the theological expression of religion is turned away from its incarnational center toward a theology in which decorous behavior has replaced transcendent commitment as the most essential religious act of the believer. Toleration is possible because the theology of *The Reasonableness* has come to dominate religion in the West.

*The Reasonableness* is thus a profoundly political book, one which is at least as important and influential as the *Essay* and the *Second Treatise*, for which he is rightly praised. *The Reasonableness* is necessary for the completion of the liberal project. Without the theology of *The Reasonableness*, liberal politics is reduced to a pragmatic bargain for civil peace. On this account, liberalism could not capture the soul of humankind because it could not contain the aspiration for Divine wisdom in its ambit. Locke ultimately seeks to contain

revelation with the limits of liberal reason in order to establish the final dominance of the liberal regime.

## Notes

1. The secondary literature on Locke's religious writing is small and uneven in quality. Most commentators view the religious writing as an extension of themes in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, especially the discussion of knowledge, faith, and belief in Book 4. For reasons that will become obvious, I believe that this interpretive framework, in whatever form it takes, seriously misunderstands Locke's political intention in treating religion. For some of the relevant literature, see Richard Aaron, *John Locke* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971); Richard Ashcraft, "Faith and Knowledge in Locke" in *John Locke: Problems and Prospects*, ed. John Yolton (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969); John Biddle, "Locke on Reasonable Christianity," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37(1976):139-160; William Bluhm, et al., "Locke's Idea of God," *Journal of Politics* 42(1980):414-438; Eldon Eisenach, *The Two Worlds of Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); J.T. Moore, "Locke on the Moral Need for Christianity," *S.W. Journal of Philosophy* 11(1980):61-68; S.C. Pearson, "The Religion of John Locke and the Character of his Thought," *Journal of Religion* 59(1978):244-268; D.D. Wallace, "Socinianism, Justification by Faith and the Sources of Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45(1984):49-66; J.T. Moore, "Locke's Analysis of Language and the Assent to Scripture," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37(1976):707-714; H.J. Machlachan, *The Religious Opinions of Locke, Milton and Newton* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1941).
2. Phillip Abrahams, ed., *John Locke: Two Tracts on Government* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969).
3. For example, see Richard Cox, *Locke on War and Peace* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960); Thomas Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Michael Zuckert, "Of Wary Physicians and Weary Readers: The Debates on Locke's Way of Reading," *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 2(1978):55-66. Even students of Locke who do not share the broader thesis admit that he was not entirely open in his religious writing. For examples, see John Yolton, *John Locke and the Way of Ideas* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956); Maurice Cranston, *John Locke: A Biography* (London: Routledge, 1957). Yolton, perhaps the leading Locke scholar of the past generation, put the point thus: "It is difficult to consider Locke completely sincere in his repetitious assertions of his non-involvement in such important religious doctrines as that of the trinity or the role of reason in faith."

4. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Nidditch (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), Book IV.
5. For examples, see H.J. MacLachlan, *Socinianism in Seventeenth Century England* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951); Robert Sullivan, *John Toland and English Deism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); David Berman, *The History of Atheism in Britain* (London, 1988); Alan Kors, *Atheism in France: 1650-1729* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); David Berman, "Deism, Immortality and the Art of Theological Lying," in *Deism, Masonry, and the Enlightenment*, ed. J.A. LeMay (Newark, Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 1987), pp. 61-78; Paul Bagely, "Esotericism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53(1993):854-863.
6. One example is provided by the emerging seventeenth century discussion of eternal punishment. A number of astute writers of the period had concluded that the concept of eternal punishment could not be squared with Divine justice. A finite being could not commit offenses for which infinite punishment would be fitting. Given the choice, many, including Locke, wanted to preserve Divine justice at the expense of hell. But none of them wanted to promulgate such views openly. Such a belief promoted civic morality, and weakening it, even for such theologically worthy purposes, was not worth the risk to social tranquility. See D.P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).
7. Consider, for example, the manner in which Locke simply avoids any discussion of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus either in *The Reasonableness* or the *Paraphrase and Notes*.
8. Walker, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-75.
9. This is evident in the short essay "Resurrectio" published posthumously by Lord King; see Peter King, *The Life of John Locke* (London, 1830).
10. For example, the nature and attributes of God, the trinity, the chalcedonian christological formula, the nature of or even need for sacramental rituals, etc.
11. *The Reasonableness*, pp. 16-17. There is not yet an adequate critical edition of *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. I have used here the most accessible version edited by George Ewing (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1965). Professor William Braithwaite of the Loyola University Law School in Chicago has in manuscript a much better edition, working from the 1695 edition and correcting it only where indisputable evidence exists from Locke's own hand, chiefly corrections to this or later editions.
12. *The Reasonableness*, pp. 187-190; *Vindication*, pp. 20-25.
13. See Locke's commentary on Romans 7:6 as an example.
14. *The Reasonableness*, *op. cit.*
15. This is the point of Locke's facetious reply to Edwards in the *Vindication*, pp. 12-15.

16. Cf. the teaching on religion in the *Thoughts on Education* where the connection between religion and even the barest form of religion is drawn out.
17. John Tillotson, *A Seasonable Vindication of the Blessed Trinity* (London, 1697); also see Louis Locke, *John Tillotson: A Study in Seventeenth Century Literature* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde, 1954).
18. This is seen most evidently in the manner in which he simply avoids treating the matter in the whole of *The Reasonableness*.
19. The fundamental point here is that Locke's state of nature (like Hobbes') requires a denial of the belief in Divine providence manifest in nature which is at the core of the Jewish and Christian story of human origins.
20. This point is made most powerfully in the famous essay that was printed after his death as a preface to the publication of his *Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*.
21. Cf. *Paraphrase of Romans 8:1 and Galatians 4:4*.
22. Peter Laslett and John Harrison, *The Library of John Locke* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957).
23. John Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion* (London, 1672); see also Barbara Shapiro, *John Wilkins: 1614-1672* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 160-175.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 274-380.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 430-500.
27. For some of the background, see C.F. Allison, *The Rise of Moralism: The Proclamation of the Gospel from Hooker to Baxter* (New York: Seabury, 1966); H.G. van Leeuwen, *The Problem of Certainty in English Thought: 1630-1690* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963); Phillip Harth, *Swift and Anglican Rationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); H.R. McAdoo, *The Spirit of Anglicanism: Anglican Theological Method in the Seventeenth Century* (London: A. and C. Black, 1965); Robert Orr, *Reason and Authority: The Thought of William Chillingworth* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967); G.R. Craig, *From Puritanism to the Enlightenment* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1950); J. Tulloch, *Rational Theology and Christian Philosophy in England in the Seventeenth Century* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1872); Gerard Reedy, *The Bible and Reason* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985); C.J. Betts, *Early Deism in France* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984); David Wooton, *Paolo Sarpi: Between Renaissance and Enlightenment* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
28. Samuel Parker, *A Demonstration of the Divine Authority of the Law of Nature and of the Christian Religion* (London, 1671).
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 420-650.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 600ff.

30. All quotes will be from the Ewing edition of *The Reasonableness*.
31. *Essay* IV:10.
32. *The Reasonableness*, pp. 191-193.
33. *Ibid.* In this section alone there are 22 references to Romans and only five to Genesis.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-122.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 106-107.
37. For example, in the whole work there are only two references to the Apocalypse and four each to the epistles of John and James.
38. *Ibid.*, pp. 108-110, 116-118.
39. Any introduction to modern New Testament Studies will contain references to this problem. The essential starting point for the discussion is William Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis* (Gottingen, 1901).
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 98-101.
41. *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 129-131.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
47. *Ibid.*, pp. 163-164.
48. *Ibid.*, pp. 172-184.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
50. *Ibid.*, pp. 175-177.
51. On Locke's hedonism, see especially the discussion in Fredrick Vaughan, *The Tradition of Political Hedonism from Hobbes to Mill* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1975).
52. *The Reasonableness*, pp. 186-193.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
54. John Edwards, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Several Causes and Occasions of Atheism* (London, 1695); John Edwards, *Socinianism Unmasked* (London, 1696).
55. The evidence is clear in Laslett and Harrison, *op. cit.*; for the socinian writers, see Machlachan, *op. cit.*
56. Locke, *A Vindication of the Reasonableness of Christianity* (London, 1696).
57. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-15.