

ADAM DROZDEK

LOCKE AND TOLERATION

The forty—second volume of *Sbornik* includes an interesting and insightful paper, *John Locke und die Toleranz* by Petr Horák. In the present note I would like to make some observations concerning certain issues brought up in the paper.

1.

In his four *Letters* concerning toleration, Locke outlined the spheres to which government and the church should limit their interest and influence. Locke's concern was to limit the magistrate's, as Locke calls it (i.e., state's or government's), influence to the areas for which it was designed, and certainly religious belief was not one of these areas. Religion is a matter of personal conviction or individual choice guided by the voice of conscience. Therefore, Locke wanted to exclude the magistrate from making this decision to each member of society by requiring, for example, a membership in a national church or an official statement of faith in accordance with the magistrate's rules. The magistrate was to limit his activities to politics and economics without requiring by law that citizens comply with an official religion. Decision concerning one's beliefs should be left to each individual.

Granted that toleration is an important and desirable element of civil life, we can ask a somewhat naive question: Why? Why should we be concerned about toleration and require it in society? Maybe it is just a nice extra, or maybe it is something that can do more harm than good. After all, Jonas Proast, Locke's critic, was not very fond of toleration. Therefore, again, why toleration?

The first reason is epistemological: because our knowledge is limited. Certainty of knowledge has very limited scope, "whatsoever we can reach with our eyes and our thoughts of either of them [the intellectual and sensible worlds] is but a point, almost nothing in comparison with the rest" (Essay 4.3.23). We know most things with some probability only, thus we should admit that we are ignorant in many things, and that we can provide indisputable ground for only very few of our convictions. Hence, "we should do well to commiserate our

mutual ignorance, and endeavour to remove it in all the gentle and fair ways of information” (4.16.4).

Knowledge consists of self—evident propositions and propositions that can be proven; belief, on the other hand, is of different nature. It is a matter of conviction, i.e., opinion, or persuasion, hence — from the standpoint of knowledge — it is only probable since supporting it does not lend itself to methods proper to science. There is an interplay between the two, and, as a matter of fact, the *Essay* is concerned in the extent to which our reason is competent in tackling the “principles of morality and revealed religion.”¹ In particular questions of religious significance such as the nature of God, immortality, afterlife and the like are beyond the ken of knowledge, that is, certainty, and we should not presume that it is otherwise. Quoting Plato, “who of all the heathens seems to have had the most serious thought about religion,” Locke says that “it is impossible for human nature to know any thing certainly about these matters” (*Letters* p. 157; cf. p. 558).²

Closely related to the foregoing is the second reason for promoting tolerance, namely peoples’ reliance on authorities and tradition, in which Locke adapts Bacon’s theory of the idols. People are deceived by common opinions and pronouncements of authorities, by tradition and customs (*Essay* 4.20.17). But simply rejecting authorities and only relying upon one’s own reason is not a solution. If it were required of “every poor protestant ... in the Palatinate” to examine all the elements of doctrine of particular churches to compare them and determine which is true, then “the countryman must leave off plowing and sowing, and betake himself to the study of Greek and Latin; and the artisan must sell his tools, to buy fathers and schoolmen, and leave his family to starve” (pp. 101—102; cf. p. 410). This problem is not limited to religious matters only. Locke admits that “many men, of common discretion in their callings, are not able to judge when an argument is conclusive or no” (p. 105). Even when a proposition can be demonstrated, e.g., that some number $n = m / k$, the proof may be far from clear to most people. Establishing such truths may thus require “more time, books, languages, learning, and skill, than falls to most men’s share to establish them therein” (p. 298, cf. p. 425). Similarly, some propositions of geometry can be understandable only to “some men of deep thought and penetration,” but obscure to most people, even to “no novices in mathematics” (p. 537). The role of authority is, thus, difficult to suppress and it is practically impossible to require of everyone to start rediscovering all truths with a clean slate. Locke, however, may reply that in religion the number of basic truths, that is, those necessary for salvation, is very small and accessible to everyone. These are truths very basic for the whole of everyone’s life.

¹ This is a phrase a Locke’s friend, James Tyrrell, put down on the margin of his copy of the *Essay*, where in *The Epistle to the Reader* Locke explains his reasons for writing the *Essay*, cf. Alexander C. Fraser’s footnote in J. Locke, *An essay concerning human understanding*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1890 [reprint, New York: Dover 1959], v. 1, p. 9.

² All four *Letters* are included in J. Locke’s *Works*, London 1823 [reprint, Darmstadt: Scientia 1963], v. 6, and page numbers refer to this edition.

However, although reliance on authority — whether in science or in everyday life — seems unavoidable, this should not mean that we are excused from searching for the truth on our own. Granted, we cannot discover and rediscover everything, but it ought not to bar us from the quest, at least for the basic truths. This, by the way, is a feasible enterprise since everyone is born free and equal, which is an assumption and oft-repeated statement in Two treatises of government³. Everyone is thus endowed with reason that can be molded in proper ways by educational process. This molding and self-molding are a continuous enterprise and ceasing it results in an attitude characterizing intolerance and narrow-mindedness. “Laziness and oscitancy ... aversion for books, study and meditation,” and “lazy ignorance” (Essay 4.20.6) are not only harmful for those exercising these vices, but also to others, who become victims of intolerance of the lazy.⁴

In spite of validity and importance of the foregoing arguments in favor of toleration, the most important reason for Locke appears to be of purely religious character⁵. For Locke, toleration was not simply a matter of leaving everyone in peace to pursue their goals at will; it was not a desire of reaching a state of tepid *lessez-faire* so that every member of society can have his way. What was on Locke’s mind was bringing everyone to the Christian faith, and it was only possible if appropriate conditions were created. This goal is a leitmotiv through all of Locke’s writings. Locke was a firm believer, and although he was convinced that Christian faith — as any faith — is a private matter, it did not mean that it should be kept privately. The goal of each Christian was to bring this faith to others in a way delineated in the New Testament. But because the goal does not justify the means, Christianity should be spread in a Christian way. Using force to this end and having the magistrate do it *ex officio* was an untenable method.

First of all, because everyone has an immortal soul, its destiny should be on everyone’s mind at all times, “because there is nothing in the world that is of any consideration in comparison with eternity” (Letters p. 41). Therefore, the problem of “the means of bringing souls to salvation ... certainly is the best design anyone can employ his pen in” (p. 137). For Locke there was no doubt what is the way to this salvation. All of his life he was a sincere Christian, if only of an unorthodox cast. In all of his writings bringing people to the truth of the Gospel was his primary concern, particularly when he “employed his pen.” In words of his biographer, Locke exhibited “almost child-like confidence in

³ It probably would be more proper to say after Horák that the assumption that men are free, as well as rational, “is not an assumption, [but] it is a strong conviction that is base upon Christian revelation,” p. 15.

⁴ It is thus a great deal of truth in the statement that “Locke has transformed the physical work—ethic of Protestantism into a morality of mental labor. Mental as well as physical idleness is sin.” Neal Wood, *The politics of Locke’s philosophy*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1983, p. 141.

⁵ Thus, John Dunn is correct in stating that “Locke’s reasons for insisting on religious tolerance were distinctly religious”, *op. cit.*, p. 17. It is somewhat ironic that Proast accused Locke of promoting in the *Letters* atheism and scepticism (p. 415).

the guidance of the Scripture.”⁶ He saw relevance of the Christian religion in all domains of life, and all his analyses were conducted from its stance. Not surprisingly, also in the Letters he wrote about a true religion and equated it with Christianity, that is, with “the truth of the Gospel” (pp. 63, 76, 144, 356).

Thus toleration should be the law of the land since using force to promote faith goes against New Testament principles. The New Testament, a revealed word of God, “contains in it all things necessary to salvation” (p. 153). Thus, if the use of force were necessary to bring people to true faith, this method would be at least mentioned in the New Testament, “and not left to the wisdom of man”; however, the New Testament is completely silent about it, therefore, the use of force is not admissible since it is not the way to spread the faith prescribed by God (pp. 493, 501–513, 519–520).

Also, faith is a result of God’s grace. Should we, then, suppose that the use of force will accomplish what can only be the work of this grace? Therefore, if the magistrate punishes people for not embracing a faith, he punishes them for what is not in his power. If people do embrace the faith, the magistrate forces them to make, most likely, an insincere profession of faith, thus, “he punishes them for what is not for their good” (p. 496).

Thus, an important argument against imposition of a particular religion by the magistrate and the use of force is that this method is counterproductive: Christianity “grew, and spread, and prevailed, without any aid of force, or the assistance of the powers in being; and if it be a mark of the true religion, that it will prevail by its own light and strength,” unlike false religions (pp. 63, 439). Thus, toleration gives Christianity a better chance to prevail than enforcing it by the government⁷. If unhindered by the political forces, Christianity can by itself prevail because it is a true religion, and only truth can be victorious, only truth can set the world and each individual free. Locke, in essence, agrees that letting a thousand flowers bloom is not a danger to the true religion. On the contrary, this gives it an advantage, so that eventually only one flower will flourish and others will wither away by the sheer force of the presence of truth in Christianity and lack thereof in other faiths. The atmosphere of toleration not only al-

⁶ Thomas Fowler, *Locke*, New York: Harper 1902, p. 113. A long argumentation about that in the *Essay* and other writings Locke was primarily concerned about Christian religion is presented in an excellent paper by Richard Ashcroft, Faith and knowledge in Locke’s philosophy, w J. W. Yolton (ed.), *John Locke: problems and perspectives*, Cambridge: At the University Press 1969, pp. 194–223. Therefore, Book iv which discusses, *inter alia*, the problem of knowledge vs. faith and the existence of God, is the center of gravity of the *Essay*, as phrased by Nicholas Wolterstorff, *John Locke and the ethics of belief*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996, p. xiv. Cf. also my book, *Moral dimension of man in the age of computers*, Lanham: University of America Press 1995, p. 67–68.

⁷ Locke is even more specific, by mentioning that this atmosphere of toleration would allow “the doctrine of the Church of England to be freely preached” (p. 64; cf. pp. 320, 326). The mention of this particular denomination is not surprising in someone, who was a member of the Church of England from its reestablishment in 1662 to the end of his days, John Marshall, *John Locke: resistance, religion and responsibility*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994, p. xix.

lows Christianity to blossom, but it also shows its superiority by having other beliefs collapse under the weight of their artificiality and disappear because they are not tapped to the source of truth, which is the Gospels. Therefore, Locke challenges his opponent to find a place or time since the inception of Christianity, when upon treating all religions on a par, Christianity “lost so plainly by it, that you have reasons to suspect the members of a Christian commonwealth would be in danger to be seduced to” any of the non-Christian faiths, “if they should lose no worldly advantage by such a change of their religion, rather than likely to increase among them?” (p. 232). Thus, it is obvious to Locke that if the case was that no individual could be prosecuted because of his faith, that is, in case of losing “no worldly advantage,” he would naturally lean toward Christianity rather than toward other religion. True religion exercises by its nature a drawing power sufficient enough to be accepted by people upon (maybe repetitive) hearing. This, to be sure, is an empirical question, and it may be argued that toleration in the United States allows many religions, such as Islam or the new age movement, to surface and gain power, but Locke could retort that in the long run the scale will tip in favor of Christianity.

Christianity can prevail also when the magistrate uses force, but it is a significant difference between this situation and the one just discussed. The problem with the use of force is that it has no “proper efficacy to enlighten understanding, or produce belief” (p. 68), and if upon using force an apparent conversion of the affected people takes place, it is what it is, an apparent conversion, not genuine; it is compliance, but not engendering true conviction. Faith would be accepted with lips, not with hearts, which would make it an empty enterprise helping no one. Faith must be accepted sincerely, and true victory of Christianity is when it takes roots in people’s hearts, not just in outward allegiance. Faith must be accepted individually, and no political force can supplant it. Christianity could be outwardly a leading religion, but, in reality, it would have no relevance to the salvation of the souls, thus it would count for nothing. Compliance is not conversion, hence existence of a religious facade does not mean that religion has an impact on people. Appearances can be kept, but eternity thereby is not touched. “Faith only, and inward sincerity, are the things that procure acceptance with God” (p. 28). And, to be sure, God’s displeasure will have dire consequences to the soul.

But it can be even worse, if the magistrate uses force to enforce erroneous convictions. This can happen even in the situation, when people would be inclined to consider Christianity as the religion of their choice. However, if forced to accept it, they would turn their backs on it, if only because the force was used: “for care is taken by punishments and ill treatment to indispose and turn away men’s minds, and to add aversion to their scruples” (p. 303). This aversion may turn their minds in different direction, far from Christianity and this, to Locke’s mind, ought not to be treated too lightly since unbelief means eternal damnation of the soul, and outward worship does not bring anyone nearer to eternal happiness. Thus, enforcing any practices by the magistrate “is in effect to command them [people] to offend God.” Therefore, free exercise of

religion is an indispensable prerequisite to salvation. Thus, thwarting such free exercise “appears to be absurd beyond expression” (pp. 29–30).

2.

Toleration was to be as broad as possible, but, as Horák remarked (p. 16), to Locke, absolute toleration was never a viable option. Toleration had its limits, not to become “destructive toleration” (Baudelaire).

First, atheists are not to be tolerated, since “promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold on an atheist” (Letters p. 47). It is an empirical question, whether atheists break promises more often than believers. But for Locke it is important that atheists, by definition, reject existence of God who is the guarantor of moral laws as spelled out in the New Testament, hence they may feel no qualms about breaking promises when they see it fit: they do not expect to be punished (now, or in the hereafter) for behaving immorally, i.e., for breaking moral laws, and their sense of obligation to others is based on a tenuous foundation, namely on their own, human word, and not on God’s law. They can thus be expected to change their minds and break moral laws any time it pleases them, hence coherence of the society would be constantly in danger to be disturbed by them. Thus, as rightly interpreted by John Dunn, for Locke, “atheism is not simply a speculative opinion. It is also a ground for limitless amoral action.”⁸

There is here also a bit more of a somber twist. According to Locke, the existence of God is not just a statement of faith, because it can be proven rationally. Existence of God is an example of truth according to reason, thus, it is provable, as opposed to truths above reason — for which revelation is indispensable — and truths contrary to reason (Essay 4.17.23). If so, atheists are the ones who are under either a spell of constant delusion so that they cannot use properly their rational powers to derive this basic tenet of religion, or their reason is simply incapable of functioning properly at all, which would put them on the same level as children or the mentally impaired⁹. As such, they would require intensive education, as children do, or they would have to be confined to asylum. Excluding them from the privilege of toleration is, in effect, confining them outside the bounds of the tolerated ones. Moreover, because “religion . . . should most distinguish us from beasts, and ought most peculiarly to elevate us, as rational creatures, above brutes” (4.18.11), atheists do their best in bringing themselves to the level of beasts, whereby the status of the tolerated should be withdrawn from them.

⁸ John Dunn, *Locke*, Oxford; Oxford University Press, p. 58.

⁹ George Berkeley observed in one of his sermons that “nothing is more deformed than vice and irreligion ... Nothing is so destructive of society, so contrary to the reasonable nature of man, so utterly inconsistent with all the advantages and satisfactions,” G. Berkeley, *Works*, London: Nelson 1948—57, v. 7, p. 17.

To another category of people not to be tolerated belong those, who “deliver themselves up to the protection and service of another prince” (p. 46). Locke uses Muslims as an example, however, this is a rather clear allusion to the Catholic church, which is evident from his personal predicament (he spent almost six years in exile in Holland during the reign of the Catholic King James II of the English throne) and a political situation, particularly in France (marked by revocation of Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV and persecution of Huguenots) and the many caustic remarks about the Catholic church in many of Locke’s writings.

Catholics are excluded since they claim allegiance to a foreign power. As Locke reasoned, the danger was that in the case of a national emergency the Catholics could become enemies within their own country. However, even in the time of peace they could be a potential center of instability within a state. The magistrate could not rely on them, because they have their eyes turned somewhere else, hence at any time, an illegal action from them could be expected since they would not recognize in the magistrate of the country they live in their highest political and legislative authority. Worse yet, should a Catholic become a magistrate, then, by definition, his first allegiance would be to the pope, thus government would turn into a Catholic government and separation of state and church would be dissolved. This, by the way, was a very important issue during a presidential campaign of John Kennedy. He managed to dispel the fear of turning the U.S. government into a branch of the Vatican, however, the fear itself might not have completely vanished considering the fact that Kennedy was up until now the only Catholic president notwithstanding the fact of a large number of Catholics in the United States.

It may seem that Catholicism is excluded from the aegis of toleration on account of political reasons. The magistrate does not want to have politically unstable groups in the state. However, the deeper ground of this foreign allegiance is religious. The pope is first and foremost a religious authority, and only secondary a political one. Because the Church of Rome, as Locke abrasively states it, “pretends infallibility, [and] declares hers to be the only true way” (p. 90) — which is a religious, not political statement — Catholics ought to be subordinated also to political power of Rome and the magistrates accepted by Rome. Therefore, in Locke’s doctrine, Catholics are not to be tolerated on account of their religion, after all.

Generally, the problem of conditional toleration is far from easily solvable. Should democracy be unconditional? If yes, then, it is possible to elect democratically a tyrant. Similarly with toleration, and this, most likely, was on Locke’s mind when introducing his limitations. If toleration is not limited, then intolerance would also be tolerated, which could lead into turning toleration into its opposite. Locke felt that unbelief in any absolutes is tantamount to intolerance, in the long run. Moreover, allegiance to foreign powers would presumably exploit tolerance for noxious work of the fifth column. Therefore, there must be a proper interplay between the social and individual levels. Society must be inclined toward tolerance if tolerance is to work. It will work, if indi-

viduals are left to “the dictates of their conscience” in deciding between right and wrong, and acting upon the liberty of conscience (pp. 28, 110, 146, 241, 373, 544). “The dictates of the conscience” ought not to be stifled, which requires an atmosphere of freedom in the state. This is mutual strengthening: toleration brings the best out in men, because they, as Locke believes, naturally have a proclivity for the truth, that is, Christian religion, thus people acting in a free society are inclined to reinforce toleration. Toleration brings toleration, and the magistrate’s duty is to make it happen, because “every man has a right to toleration” (p. 212).

LOCKE A TOLERANCE

Autor, profesor Duquesne University v Pittsburghu, využívá podnětů stejnojmenné studie Petra Horáka v SPFFBU B42 k dalším úvahám o této problematice. Na otázku, proč být tolerantní, odpovídá gnozeologickými důvody, protože naše poznání je sice omezené, ale existuje určitý počet základních pravd, které je nutno uznat. Locke byl přesvědčeným křesťanem, ale domníval se, že tolerance dává křesťanství větší šance než vynucování vládou. Autor se věnuje rovněž Lockovu vztahu ke katolicismu.