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Locke on Toleration

A Letter concerning Toleration

My distinguished friend,

You ask me for my opinion of mutual toleration among Christians. I reply in a word that it seems to me to be the principal mark of the true church. Antiquity of titles and places of worship which some people boast of, the reformation of doctrine that others stress, the orthodoxy of one's faith that everyone claims (for everyone is orthodox in their own eyes) – these things are likely to be signs of competition for power and dominion rather than marks of Christ's church. A person may have all of them and still not be a Christian, if he lacks charity, gentleness, and goodwill toward all human beings and toward those who profess the Christian faith in particular.

'The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them,' says our Saviour to his disciples, 'but ye shall not be so' (Luke 22: [25], 26). True religion has a different object. It did not come into the world in order to establish outward pomp and ecclesiastical domination and violence, but to ground a life of goodness and piety. Anyone who wishes to enlist in Christ's church must, more than anything else, declare war on his own vices, on his own pride and lust. Without holiness of life, purity of morals, goodness of heart, and gentleness, any aspiration to the name of Christian is unjustified.

'When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren,' said Our Lord to Peter (Luke 22: 32). For one will hardly persuade other people that he is truly concerned for their salvation if he neglects his own. No one can sincerely strive with all his strength to make other people Christians if he has not yet truly embraced the religion of Christ in his own mind. For if we are to believe the Gospel and the Apostles, no one can be a

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Christian without charity and without the faith that works by love¹ and not by violence.

Do those who beat and torture people on the pretext of religion, and rob them of their property and put them to death, do all this in a spirit of friendship and goodwill? I appeal to their conscience. I shall believe it myself when I see these fanatics inflicting the same chastisement on those of their friends and associates who openly sin against the precepts of the Gospel, and when I see them attacking with fire and sword those of their own partisans who are stained and corrupted by vice and who will certainly perish if they do not reform and bear better fruit, and when I see them expressing their love and longing for the salvation of *their* souls with every form of cruelty and torture. For if, as they claim, their only motive in seizing people's goods, mutilating their bodies, ruining their health in filthy prisons, and taking their lives, is charity and zeal for their souls, in order to ensure their faith and salvation, why do they allow their own followers to indulge, freely and with impunity, in fornication, fraud, malice, and all the other vices, which, as the Apostle declares (Romans 1: 28–32), are blatantly pagan? Such actions as these are more contrary to the glory of God, the purity of the church, and the salvation of souls than any mistaken conviction of conscience that falls foul of ecclesiastical decrees, or any failings in outward worship if they are combined with innocence of life. Why, I ask, does their zeal for God, the church, and the salvation of souls – which burns so fiercely it even burns people alive – why does it ignore, and not correct or punish, the vices and moral faults which everyone agrees are diametrically opposed to the profession of Christianity? Why does it insist on penalizing beliefs which are often too subtle for most people to understand or on imposing fine points of ritual? Why is this its driving ambition?

It will only finally become clear which of the parties to the conflict, the triumphant party or the vanquished party, has the sounder view on these matters, and which one is guilty of schism or heresy, when final judgement is given on the cause of their separation.² For no one is a heretic who follows Christ, and embraces his teaching and puts on his yoke, even if he does leave his mother and father and the usual ceremonies

¹ Galatians 5: 6: 'faith which worketh by love'.

² The Last Judgement. On 'separation' see 'Postscript: heresy and schism'.

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and religious practices of his family and country and any other persons whatever.³

If sectarian divisions are so inimical to the salvation of souls, 'adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry' and so on are no less 'works of the flesh', on which the Apostle pronounces an explicit sentence that 'they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God' (Galatians 5: [19]–21). Anyone who is sincerely concerned for the kingdom of God and seriously committed to working for its extension, needs to put as much care and effort into eliminating these vices as into eliminating sects. If he acts otherwise, if he is ruthless and implacable against people of different beliefs, but indulgent toward sins and immoralities unworthy of the name of Christian, he plainly shows that for all his talk about the church, it is some kingdom other than God's that he is building.

I marvel, as others also surely do, that anyone could accept that a person whose soul he ardently desires to save should die of torture in an unconverted state, but I simply cannot conceive that anyone would ever believe that such behaviour could be motivated by love, benevolence, or charity. If people are to be compelled by fire and sword to accept certain doctrines, or if they are forcibly driven to adopt some form of external worship without any concern for their morals, and if anyone converts heterodox persons to the faith in the sense of compelling them to profess what they do not believe, while permitting them to do what the Gospel forbids to Christians and the believer forbids to himself, I do not doubt that he wants a great many people to profess the same beliefs as himself, but who can believe that what he wants is a Christian church? No wonder, then, if such people use weapons inappropriate to the service of Christ, since, whatever their pretensions, they are not fighting for true religion and the Christian church. If they sincerely desired the salvation of souls, as he did who is the Captain of our salvation, they would walk in his footsteps and follow the excellent example of the Prince of Peace. He sent out his troops to subdue the nations and compel them to come into the church not with swords or spears or any other weapon of violence, but with the Gospel, with the message of peace and with the exemplary force of holiness.⁴ If force of arms were the right way to convert unbelievers, if

³ Cf. Matthew 11: 29–30; Luke 14: 26.

⁴ Jesus sending out his disciples: Matthew 10: 1ff.; Mark 6: 6–13; Luke 9: 1–6. For 'compel', cf. Luke 14: 23.

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armed soldiers were the best means of recalling blind or stubborn people from their errors, he had at hand a whole army of heavenly legions, in comparison with which the troops available to even the most powerful protector of the church are a mere squadron.

Distinction of church and commonwealth fundamental⁵

Toleration of those who have different views on religious questions is so consistent with the Gospel and with reason that it seems incredible that people should be blind in so plain a matter. I do not want to blame either the arrogance and ambition of the one party or the bigotry and fanaticism of the other that knows nothing of charity and gentleness. These are vices that will probably never be eliminated from human affairs, though they are such that no one wants to be openly accused of them himself; anyone who has been led by them to act badly almost invariably seeks to preserve his reputation by giving them an honourable disguise. But I would not want anyone to use a concern for their country and obedience to its laws as a pretext for persecution and unchristian cruelty; I would not want anyone to seek moral licence and impunity for their crimes under the name of religion; I would not want anyone to deceive themselves or others that they are faithful subjects of the prince or sincere worshippers of God.

In order to avoid these things, I believe that we must above all distinguish between political and religious matters, and properly define the boundary between church and commonwealth.⁶ Until this is done, no limit can be put to the disputes between those who have, or affect to have, a zeal for the salvation of souls and those who have a real or affected concern for the safety of the commonwealth.

What is a commonwealth?

A commonwealth appears to me to be an association of people constituted solely for the purpose of preserving and promoting civil goods.

⁵ The section headings within the text are supplied by the translator.

⁶ The equivalent of *res publica* in Locke's English *Letters* is normally 'commonwealth', but sometimes 'state'. In this translation, for the sake of consistency with the other *Letters*, we have normally used the word 'commonwealth'.

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By 'civil goods' I mean life, liberty, physical integrity, and freedom from pain, as well as external possessions, such as land, money, the necessities of everyday life, and so on.

It is the duty of the civil ruler⁷ to guarantee and preserve the just possession of these things which relate to this life, for the people as a whole and for private subjects individually, by means of laws made equally for all. If anyone has a mind to violate the laws, contrary to right and justice, his reckless impulse has to be checked by fear of punishment. Punishment consists in the confiscation in whole or in part of those good things which he could and should otherwise have enjoyed. Since no one voluntarily gives up any of his goods, let alone his liberty or his life, the ruler is armed with force to inflict punishment on those who violate the rights of others, and this force consists in the united strength of his subjects.

The whole jurisdiction of rulers is concerned solely with these civil goods. All the right and authority of the civil power is confined and restricted to the protection and promotion of these civil goods and these alone. It should not, and cannot, be extended to the salvation of souls. I believe the following arguments demonstrate these points.

First, the civil ruler has no more mandate than others have for the care of souls. He has no mandate from God, for it nowhere appears that God has granted men authority over other men, to compel them to adopt their own religion. And no such power can be given to a ruler by men; for no one can abdicate responsibility for his own eternal salvation by adopting under compulsion a form of belief or worship prescribed to him by another person, whether prince or subject. For no one can believe at another's behest, however much they try to do so; and the force and effectiveness of true and saving religion lies in belief. No matter what you profess with your lips or what external worship you offer, if you are not inwardly and profoundly convinced in your own heart that it is both true and pleasing to God, it not only does not assist your salvation, it positively hinders it. For in addition to the other sins which your religion must expiate, you are adding a pretence of religion itself and a contempt of the Deity, for you are offering the great and good God a form of worship which you believe is displeasing to him.

⁷ In the other *Letters* Locke normally uses 'magistrate' as the English equivalent to *magistratus*, but he also occasionally uses 'ruler'. We have preferred normally to translate this word as 'ruler'.

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Secondly, care of souls cannot belong to the civil ruler, because his power consists wholly in compulsion. But true and saving religion consists in an inward conviction of the mind; without it, nothing has value in the eyes of God. Such is the nature of the human understanding that it cannot be compelled by any external force. You may take away people's goods, imprison them, even inflict physical torture on their bodies, but you will not achieve anything if what you are trying to do by this punishment is change the judgement of their minds about things.

But you will say:⁸ a ruler can make use of arguments to bring heterodox persons to the truth and assure their salvation. True, but he shares this approach with others. In teaching, instructing, and using arguments to recall a person who has gone astray, he is certainly doing what a good man should; a ruler is not required to cease to be either a man or a Christian. However, it is one thing to persuade, another to command, one thing to use arguments in a dispute, another to issue decrees. The latter belong to the civil power, the former to human goodwill. It is open to anyone to advise, exhort, convict of error, and bring a person to their way of thinking by rational argument; but to command by edicts, to compel by the sword are exclusively the tools of the ruler. This then I say: the civil power should not use the civil law to prescribe articles of faith (or doctrines) or the manner in which one should worship God. For laws have no force if no penalties are attached; and if penalties are prescribed, they are completely inappropriate and unsuited to persuasion.

To accept a doctrine or a form of worship for the salvation of one's soul, one must believe sincerely that the doctrine is true, and that the form of worship will be acceptable and pleasing to God, but no penalty has any force to instil this kind of conviction in the mind. It is light that is needed to change a belief in the mind; punishment of the body does not lend light.

Thirdly, salvation of souls cannot be any business of the civil ruler. For even granted that the authority of laws and the force of penalties *were* effective in changing people's minds, yet this would have no effect on the salvation of their souls. For since there is only one true religion, one way which leads to the heavenly home, what hope would there be for the majority of mortals to get there, if they were obliged as a condition to

⁸ Throughout the *First Letter* Locke makes use of the literary form of an academic *disputatio*, in which possible objections to Locke's thesis are attributed to an imaginary opponent.

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discard the dictates of their reason and conscience and blindly accept the doctrines of their prince and worship God as the laws of their country required? Given the great variety of religious beliefs held by princes, it would follow that the narrow way and the strait gate that leads to heaven would be open only to a very few people who would all be living in one particular place; and the most absurd consequence, totally unworthy of God, would follow, that eternal happiness or torment would depend solely on the accident of birth.⁹

Many other arguments could be made on this question, but these seem to warrant the conclusion that the power of the commonwealth is concerned only with civil goods and is restricted to the things of this world and does not extend in any way to those things that look to the future life.

What is a church?

Now let us see what a church¹⁰ is. A church appears to me to be a free association of people coming together of their own accord to offer public worship to God in a manner which they believe will be acceptable to the Deity for the salvation of their souls.

It is, I stress, a free and voluntary association. No one is born a member of any church; otherwise the religion of one's father and forefathers would pass down by hereditary right along with their estates, and one would owe one's faith to one's birth. Nothing more absurd can be imagined. The truth is that no one is bound by nature to any church or tied to any sect. Of his own accord he joins the association in which he believes he has found true religion and a form of worship pleasing to God. The hope of salvation that he sees there is both the sole cause of his entering the church and the sole reason why he remains. And if he finds anything wrong with its doctrine or unseemly in its ritual, he must have the same liberty to leave as he had to enter; no bonds can be indissoluble but those attached to the certain expectation of eternal life. It is from members so united, of their own accord and for this purpose, that a church is formed.

⁹ Cf. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J.B. Bury (London, 1909): 'Even the imperceptible sect of the Rogatians could affirm, without a blush, that when Christ should descend to judge the earth, he would find his true religion preserved only in a few nameless villages of the Caesarean Mauritania' (ch. 21, vol. II, p. 355).

¹⁰ *ecclesia*.

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It follows that we should ask what the power of a church is, and to what laws is it subject.

No association, however free, however insignificant its purpose and activities, can survive without the risk of speedy dissolution if it is completely without laws. This applies equally to an association of learned persons to pursue philosophy, of businessmen for commerce, or even of men of leisure seeking conversation and entertainment. Therefore a church too must have its laws. A schedule must be made of the time and place at which meetings will take place; conditions have to be published for admission to the association and exclusion from it; the various duties and the order of business have to be determined, and so on. But since people have come together to form this association of their own accord (as I have demonstrated), free of all compulsion, it necessarily follows that the right of making laws lies solely with the association, or at least – and this comes to the same thing – with those whom the association itself has approved by its own consent.

But you will say: it cannot be the true church if it does not have a bishop or presbytery endowed with an authority to govern that descends all the way from the Apostles themselves in continuous and uninterrupted succession.

First, I ask you to point to the edict in which Christ laid down this law for his church. And in a matter of such importance, it will not be asking too much to require an explicit statement. The saying ‘where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them’ (Matthew 18: 20) appears to suggest otherwise. You can see for yourself whether a gathering which has Christ in its midst can fail to be a true church. Certainly, nothing essential to true salvation can be missing there, and that is enough for our purpose.

Secondly, I beg you to notice that those who claim that the governors of the church were instituted by Christ and must follow in unbroken succession disagree with each other right from the start. Their disagreement necessarily permits freedom of choice, with the consequence that everyone is at liberty to join whichever church they prefer.

Thirdly, you may have the governor you set over yourself, the one you believe to be inescapably designated in such a long succession, while I likewise commit myself to the association where I am convinced I will find what I need for the salvation of my soul. And thus ecclesiastical freedom (which you demand) is preserved for both of us, and neither has a legislator which he did not choose for himself.

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But since you are so anxious about the true church, permit me, in passing, to ask this question: is it not more fitting for Christ's church to establish conditions for communion¹¹ which contain those things that the Holy Spirit has taught in clear and explicit words in Holy Scripture and those things alone, rather than to impose its own inventions or interpretations as divine law, and give them authority as absolutely essential to the profession of Christianity, though they are matters on which the divine oracles¹² have not pronounced, or at any rate not as a matter of law? Anyone who requires for communion in the church what Christ does not require for eternal life is perhaps cleverly contriving an association that suits his own views and his own interest, but how are we to call a church Christ's church if it is founded upon laws not his and excludes persons whom he will one day receive into the kingdom of heaven?

However, this is not the place to explore the marks of the true church. I would just like to give a word of warning to those who fight so fiercely for the doctrines of their own association and are always holding forth about the church and nothing else, making as much of a din as the silversmiths made long ago in Ephesus about their goddess Diana (Acts 19: 23–41) and perhaps from the same motive. I would remind them that the Gospel everywhere testifies that the true disciples of Christ must expect persecution and bear it, but I do not remember reading anywhere in the New Testament that the true church of Christ should persecute others or harass them, or compel them to adopt their own doctrines with violence, fire, and sword.

The purpose of a religious association, as I have said, is public worship of God and the attainment of eternal life by means of it. This is what the whole of the church's teaching should aim at; these are the only ends to which all of its laws should be directed. There is and can be no concern in this association with the possession of civil or earthly goods. No force is to be used here for any reason. All force belongs to the civil ruler; and the possession and use of external goods are subject to his power.

You will say: what sanctions will maintain the laws of a church in the absence of all coercion? I reply: the kind of sanction that is appropriate where outward profession and outward observance bring no benefit if they do not sink deep into the soul and there receive the full assent

¹¹ *communio* also has the sense of 'participation'.

¹² A periphrasis for the Holy Scriptures.