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“Reason Teaches All Mankind, Who Will  
But Consult It”

*John Locke and Moral Consensus*

Western liberalism has come full circle. It was born when members of western societies gradually learned, over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to tame their violent religious fanaticisms and co-exist as members of shared political communities. This accomplishment was so successful that fundamental moral disagreement and religious violence became steadily less threatening to society, and various other types of problems moved to the top of the theoretical agenda. Liberal political theory became less and less involved with what was, historically, its foundational concern: getting members of different religions to live together in peace. The subject gradually receded into the far corners of liberal consciousness, and as the study of liberalism's founders came to reflect this change, the portions of their works dealing with religion and religious violence were increasingly either ignored or skimmed over even by most scholarly specialists.

Now the circle has closed, and in a very real sense we are back where we started. Violent religious fanaticism and fundamental moral discord threaten the legitimacy and even the very existence of liberal societies. Liberal theorists are failing to cope with these challenges adequately because their longstanding neglect of moral and religious problems has left them unfamiliar with the basic philosophical concepts that once helped them better understand religious belief and moral law, and hence the intricate relationship between religion, morality, and politics. Liberalism will not remain the governing philosophy of western nations if it cannot give a moral account of itself that will satisfy the overwhelming majority of people who believe, through various religions, that the universe is divinely ordered. And there is no hope for providing such an account if

liberal theorists do not begin by learning from the wisdom of the great thinkers who designed liberalism in the first place.

Ironically, the liberal thinker who has suffered the most neglect is the one who can lay the most plausible claim to be the founder of liberalism as we know it: John Locke. He towers over the history of liberalism precisely because virtually everything he wrote was directed at coping with the problems that gave birth to liberalism – religious violence and moral discord. When these problems no longer seemed to pose a mortal threat to liberal societies, Locke came to be read and studied less, and respected and admired less, by scholars and laymen alike. To those living in societies where religious factions hadn't actually gone around killing one another for centuries, it just didn't seem like such a big accomplishment that Locke had provided the definitive, foundational guide for how liberal societies of that kind could be built in the first place. Now that religious factions are once again actively killing, and western societies are increasingly characterized by large and growing conflicts over moral and cultural differences, the study of Locke can no longer be safely neglected.

#### RELIGION AND POLITICS: RECOVERING LOCKE

We are living through a fascinating and in many ways frustrating period in Locke scholarship. In the past thirty years, scholars have made revolutionary advances in understanding Locke, both in uncovering more about his role as a political actor and in restoring a historically accurate reading of his philosophic works. In particular, the deep and pervasive influence of religion on Locke's beliefs has been a continual source of new discoveries, reshaping our understanding of how Locke used the concepts of property, authority, rights, natural law, toleration, and virtually everything else in his politics. More and more scholars have come to the conclusion that, as Eldon Eisenach writes, "Locke's political theory and epistemology cannot be understood apart from his writings on religion."<sup>1</sup>

But accounting for Locke's religion is no small adjustment because Locke's Christianity is an extraordinary accomplishment unto itself. Locke blends elements drawn from diverse theological traditions – ranging from theologically conservative Calvinism to what we might now call the "liberal" movement of Anglican Latitudinarianism – into an alloy that stands apart from standard theological classifications. This is why Locke scholars have never agreed on what religious label Locke should

wear.<sup>2</sup> Incorporating this unique theology into our understanding of Locke will require a complete reconstruction of that understanding.

Unfortunately, the opposite is occurring – by and large, Locke scholarship's recent advances in taking account of Locke's religion have either failed to penetrate the discourse of political theorists or have done so with unfortunate results. Too many political theorists in the profession at large, along with what seems to be a large majority of people in the general intellectual population, still understand Locke more or less the same way he was understood thirty years ago. This naturally encompasses a wide range of views. Locke is variously seen as a libertarian defender of absolute individual rights; a secularist who sought to remove religion from politics; an apologist for capitalism; a rationalist who sought to found natural law doctrine on pure reason, unassisted by revelation; a theorist of tolerance whose theory is marred by bigotry against atheists, Muslims, and Catholics; and so on. Some, following Leo Strauss, believe that Locke was a closet atheist and/or Hobbesian.

Moreover, those political theorists who do acknowledge the importance of Locke's religious beliefs have all too often followed this acknowledgement to the wrong conclusions. Some theorists have deliberately set aside Locke's religion and sought to apply his political doctrines without reference to their religious context. This ensures that the doctrines collapse into absurdity, unless they are rescued by intellectual contortions that alter them beyond recognition. Even in the best cases, this approach drains Locke's theory of its animating moral concerns. Locke's readers are left deaf and blind to the great confrontation that takes place in his works: one of the most brilliant minds that ever lived taking on the greatest and most troublesome of all political problems. Other scholars, understanding that extracting Locke's politics from his religion is impossible, cite Locke's religious beliefs as a reason for disregarding Locke altogether as irrelevant to modern political discourse, as if Christianity had gone out with the feudal system and Ptolemaic astronomy.<sup>3</sup>

Both of these responses occur primarily because the modern world looks with distrust, and sometimes open hostility, on any prospective role for religion in political life. Theorists today view the presence of religion in a political theory as something that must be either removed or delicately worked around if the theory is to speak to us. Our distrust of religion in politics takes many forms, such as the ongoing quest for a "public reason" that can solve our moral problems without reference to religion, but its root cause seems to be a fear that religion is inseparable

from passionate, primordial forces in the human psyche that are potentially dangerous, especially in politics.

It is understandable that we should have developed this fear of religion in politics. It is the outcome of historical trends, including the legacy of the religious wars of Locke's own time. We are naturally apprehensive at any prospect that such horrors, having finally been banished from our politics, might somehow be let back in. These apprehensions are particularly strengthened when we consider that we have before us, in some other parts of the world, cautionary examples of societies in which violent religious fanaticism has not yet been successfully tamed.

But however understandable our modern distrust of religion in politics might be in light of historical developments, it is one of the arguments of this book that the ideal of a separation between religion and politics simply cannot be sustained. Over the past half century, liberal theorists have experimented with various forms of "neutralism" to serve as replacements for political theories that are grounded in moral (and therefore, necessarily, religious) reasoning. But their attempt to remove morality from politics has never quite been able to overcome the contradiction upon which it is based. That government ought to be neutral with regard to morality is itself an "ought" statement – a moral proposition. All action, including political action, is guided by some scheme of normative commitments, and so politics is constantly brought back to moral problems.

Some have sought to build a more morally aware liberalism by appealing to the empirical fact of popular agreement on certain moral topics, such as support for a broad sphere of individual liberty. However, this does not alleviate the basic problem, because it does not provide a moral theory to justify the views on which it builds. If there is no moral theory to sustain public adherence to liberal principles, the popular consensus in favor of such principles will inevitably erode over time. People will generally do what they believe is morally right rather than what is approved by the political order, unless the political order is itself invested with moral legitimacy. Eventually, a political order unsupported by a moral theory will collapse under the weight of this problem.

What's more, a political community built upon merely coincidental overlap in the preferences of its members can never claim more than a mercenary sort of allegiance from those members. If I support the political community because it follows policies I prefer, but my reasons for preferring those policies are not admissible in public discourse, my solidarity with the political community will be tenuous at best. I will always

be on the lookout for political movements catering to my specific moral and religious beliefs, and those movements may or may not be liberal.<sup>4</sup>

To overcome this problem, the liberal political community must unite its members behind a common moral vision. This is not to say that government should impose proper beliefs coercively. One of greatest achievements in the history of western political theory is Locke's demonstration that any such project is both cruel and futile. But if liberal political institutions cannot shape people's beliefs using the tools of coercion, it is all the more urgent for liberal political theorists to shape those beliefs using the tools of persuasion. As Locke himself shows, toleration is not the last thing that needs to be said about religious belief in a liberal society. It is, in fact, barely the first thing.

Uniting the liberal community behind a common moral vision also doesn't mean that there must be social agreement on all religious questions, or even on the greatest question of all: which religion is the true one? Locke's political theory, contrary to what some have written about it, does not seek to justify a distinctively Christian political community. It envisions a multireligious political community, justified by arguments that are not particular to any one religion, with fully equal citizenship for members of all religions. But, as Locke frequently insists, this multireligious society can only hold together if it has the moral courage of its liberal convictions. That is, it must be willing to put forward the liberal ideal as a moral ideal, and require all members to abide by the moral rules of peaceful coexistence and mutual toleration derived from that ideal. An unabashedly moral theory is needed to justify the coercive rules that are the only hope of keeping a multireligious society from falling apart at the seams.

The aim of this book is to reintroduce the historically accurate Locke into the discourse of political theory, with his religious views intact, in a way that shows his continuing relevance to politics in our own time. Locke is uniquely qualified to allay our distrust of religion in politics because he shares our fear of the primordial forces religion can unleash, and bends over backwards in every part of his philosophic system to tame and suppress those forces. He argues that a proper faith does not burst forth from "enthusiastic" feelings (as they were called in his time); it must grow naturally from a rational weighing of evidence and argument. In fact, he goes so far as to say that enthusiastic religious feelings are not only dangerous to politics and other secular concerns; they are dangerous even – and perhaps primarily – to religion itself, because enthusiasm encourages false religious beliefs. Thus, religion and politics have a mutual interest

in taming religious enthusiasm. Locke utterly rejects the primordial and the passionate as a basis for politics.

There is no denying, of course, that our time and place is significantly different from Locke's. Seventeenth-century arguments cannot just be picked up out of old books and set down unchanged in the present. Our situation is different both in terms of social facts, including the rise of multiracial and multireligious societies such as have not been seen since the ancient empires, and in terms of knowledge, including the advance of science and technology. It would be foolish to think that the *Two Treatises of Government* could be published today as a political tract and hope to gain much support.

But in every great book there is a stock of wisdom that can be drawn on in any era and applied even to radically different situations. Otherwise, there would be little point in reading old books. Applying this wisdom to our time is a process of adjustment, of figuring out which of its aspects would change when applied to our environment, and how. The basic problems of human life change remarkably little over time. These problems are manifested in a variety of different ways, as different societies situated in different circumstances each come to grips with these problems in their own ways. However, one lesson we learn from reading the great works of philosophy in history is that the underlying problems – such as the problematic relationship between reason and revelation, or between the community and the individual – are woven into the fabric of human nature.

This book argues that Locke's main political project was to unite members of different religious groups into a single political community, and that his political, religious, and philosophical works construct a moral theory that can accomplish this goal. Locke never explicitly acknowledged any single intellectual project uniting his major works, but each of them is primarily addressed to one or another aspect of this same overall goal. As we will see, when the arguments of Locke's works are taken together they form a unified philosophic system. Locke himself did not describe his works as forming such a system, and as he was writing them he may not even have intended that they would ultimately fit together in this way. Nonetheless, they are all addressed to coping with the same problem – the political works to the political aspect of the problem, the religious works to the religious aspect of the problem, and the philosophical works to the philosophical aspect of the problem – and there are no significant conflicts between the positions taken in the various works. Thus, there is a natural intellectual confluence among Locke's works. This book argues

that a unified system of thought arises from this confluence; we will refer to this system of thought as Locke's theory of "moral consensus."

The goal of Locke's theory of moral consensus was not simply to make society into a merely political coalition, by showing groups that they had a mutual interest in peaceful relations. Such a society would fall apart into civil war every time some religious prophet came along to lead the faithful of his group in a struggle against the heathens and blasphemers of the other groups. The goal was to forge a unified political community among the faithful of different religions. In support of this goal, Locke's works provide a moral theory proving, in arguments that would be acceptable to all groups, that peaceful relations and a shared political community are divine moral imperatives. The essential foundation of a shared, multireligious political community is not the belief that such a community serves everyone's interests; it is the belief that such a community is the command of a supreme divine power, whose word is the ultimate standard of moral authority. In a community built on moral consensus, social and political solidarity has a moral rather than merely mercenary foundation.

Building this vision of moral consensus, and in particular finding moral arguments that members of different religions will all accept, is obviously a complex task. It requires us to confront difficult questions dealing with such issues as the nature of faith, the limits of certainty in human knowledge, and the visibility of a moral design in our universe. However, the relevance of such a body of thought to the political and social situation of our own time ought to be just as obvious. We, like Locke, are confronted with the challenge of building a common political community for an increasingly fragmented culture. It will be well worth the effort if we can recover the body of wisdom Locke has left for us on this topic. As this book will show, Locke created an integrated philosophic system, consisting of epistemology, theology, and political theory. This system, taken as a whole, provides a road map for building moral consensus.

#### METHOD AND STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

The best method for reintroducing Locke into liberal discourse is a step-by-step reconstruction of Locke's politics from the ground up, starting where Locke thought a philosopher should start, with epistemology, and following his logic from there until we have a view of his comprehensive system of theology and politics.<sup>5</sup> Such a reconstruction of Locke is necessary because there are so many different understandings of his

philosophy to be addressed – held variously by libertarians, communists, Marxists, Straussians, and others – that only a complete review of Locke's system can efficiently answer them all. The alternative would entail a separate critique of each alternative reading of Locke, which would make this book much longer, much more redundant with other Locke scholarship, and of much less interest to readers who are not Locke scholars. In a few places, where the point is important enough, this book digresses to briefly discuss alternative readings of Locke, particularly the Straussian reading. For the most part, however, its specific responses to other interpretations have been placed in the notes.

Another purpose for adopting this method is to show that Locke did in fact have a "system," that is, a set of mutually consistent arguments that fit together to form a unified philosophic structure. Locke's works have often been portrayed as sloppy, inconsistent, and conflicting, and one of the major purposes of this book is to refute that portrayal. We will argue that the perception of deep conflicts in and among Locke's works disappears when we properly understand his views, especially regarding his distinction between knowledge and belief and his account of reason and faith. This book will show the coherent architecture of Locke's philosophy. With some oversimplification we can say that his political principles are based on his natural law doctrine, his natural law doctrine presumes a particular kind of theology, and his theology arises from his epistemology. Of course, the lines from one book to the next are not actually that clearly drawn, but in broad outline the books do follow each other in this way. As Raymond Polin observes, Locke's "metaphysics, morals, and politics are tightly interwoven . . . the meaning of his political liberalism, a truly moral doctrine, can be understood only in the light of his philosophy considered as a really coherent totality."<sup>6</sup>

In order to carry out this method it has been necessary to select a few key works from the enormous number of writings Locke produced. To begin with, it seems sensible to stick with Locke's published works rather than including any of his unpublished papers, so that we can be sure we are dealing with the arguments he wanted us to consider. His private letters and notes may contain arguments he was unsure of, or did not consider at length, or even arguments that he did not personally agree with but wanted to record for some other reason. A separate but related concern is the consideration of works written early in Locke's career, which have recently received enormous scholarly attention.<sup>7</sup> Some of these are complete, well-crafted essays that clearly do reflect Locke's well-considered opinions at the time he wrote them, but there is good reason



not to include them here. With all the attention recently given to Locke's intellectual development, scholars risk losing sight of the gap of over twenty years between the writing of Locke's early works in 1662–7 and the publication of his more famous works in 1689. Locke changed his mind on many issues during that time, and tracing the development of Locke's thought is a separate scholarly concern from analyzing the final form of that thought.

This book concerns Locke's mature thought, defined as his thought after 1689, the year that saw the publication of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, the *Two Treatises*, and the *Letter Concerning Toleration*. The philosophic merit and historical influence of these works demand their inclusion. We also have room for one other major work, and here the choice is dictated equally by the work's inherent merit and by the need to fill a particular gap in the 1689 works. Those works do not provide a theology, and (as this book will argue) their arguments rely so heavily on religion that they cannot be understood apart from theology. *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, published in 1695, provides the necessary theology and is a distinguished enough intellectual achievement in its own right to stand unabashedly next to the 1689 works. Unfortunately, there is no space to give the many other works Locke published after 1689 the treatment they deserve, but we will sometimes refer to them when they illuminate the four works we have chosen.

Chapter 2 will begin where Locke thought we ought to begin, with epistemology, looking at Books One through Three of the *Essay*. Locke's emphasis on separating reliable beliefs from unreliable beliefs through rational inquiry is his most distinctly and uncompromisingly modern quality. Before Locke can build his case for moral consensus around a set of beliefs that are very certain, he must show the uncertainty of other beliefs, with particular emphasis on the beliefs that were causing social conflict in his time. He constructs an epistemology of limits, in that he emphasizes understanding the limits of the human mind, and therefore the topics on which our beliefs are unavoidably tainted with a degree of uncertainty. Moral consensus cannot be maintained unless members of the community acknowledge that they do not know everything – that due to the limits of the human mind, they cannot possibly know everything – and so cannot legitimately write all their beliefs into law, to be coercively enforced upon others.

Chapter 3 completes the account of Locke's epistemology by showing how Locke thought reliable beliefs could be formed. This covers Book Four of the *Essay*. Locke's epistemology begins with the supreme

importance of God in human life. Religious knowledge is understood to be every person's most important concern. Locke wants reason to regulate beliefs about God because that is the best way to ensure that our beliefs about God are true ones, and because it ensures we will distinguish between more and less reliable beliefs. Locke's rational epistemology, which is sometimes accused of encouraging deism and the compartmentalization of religion and politics, actually encourages theistic religious belief because its general premises for rational belief strongly point toward that conclusion. Locke's account of the unity of reason and faith is a necessary prerequisite for a politics of moral consensus, because it shows that reason need not be set aside – indeed, must not be set aside – in religious matters. This makes it possible for reason to build the common ground both within and among religions upon which moral consensus will rest.

Chapter 4 presents Locke's arguments on the basic content of Christianity. This covers approximately the first two-thirds of the *Reasonableness* and most of the *Letter*. It also looks to parts of the *Essay* and *Two Treatises* to illustrate Locke's method for reading scripture. Following the epistemological rules of the *Essay*, Locke constructs a biblical exegesis that places religious faith on rationally solid ground, and shows that while there is much in the Bible that is above human reason, the fundamental content of Christianity (human beings are sinners who need salvation; salvation is available through repentance and faith in Christ) is simple, clearly conveyed in scripture, and rationally certain. In the *Reasonableness*, Locke shows that Jesus teaches that the rational evidence of miracles, rather than enthusiastic religious feelings, is the legitimate basis of belief. Locke also shows that only faith in Jesus' Messiahship and repentance for sin is necessary to salvation in Christ, from which he concludes that Christians can disagree on all other doctrinal matters and still accept one another as Christians. This makes it both possible and desirable that Christians should stop killing each other over doctrinal disputes.

Chapter 5 shows Locke's account of how moral law works, and why Locke thinks it is necessary to incorporate religious beliefs into the moral basis of politics. This includes sections of the *Essay* and *Letter*, but is mostly drawn from the last section of the *Reasonableness*. Locke argues that because God is all-powerful, beliefs about God will – and should – trump other beliefs, in the political sphere and everywhere else. He writes in an analysis of the ancient world that where religion and philosophy have gone to war with each other, religion has always won because people are rightly afraid of the supernatural. But for Locke such a conflict between religion and philosophy is a sign of intellectual degeneracy. Locke