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Writers of the Period

John Martin Creed and John Sandwith Boyssmith

Excerpt

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I

NATURAL RELIGION AND
REVELATION

1. THE CERTAINTY OF THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

John Locke

JOHN LOCKE (1632–1704), the philosopher of the English Revolution, and “on the whole the most important figure in English philosophy” (Sorley), was the son of a Somerset lawyer who had served for a period as Captain in a Parliamentary regiment of horse. He was educated at Westminster School, and Christ Church, Oxford, where he graduated B.A. in 1656. Like others of his generation who started from a Puritan background, Locke was repelled by the dogmatism of the ruling powers under the Commonwealth, and was ready to welcome the restoration of the Monarchy, to which he looked for a return to political and religious liberty. A generation was to pass before his hopes were realized. While at Oxford Locke devoted much time to the study of medicine, and in 1666 his advice and help as a physician were called upon by Lord Ashley. A close friendship sprang up between the two men, and Locke took up his abode in Ashley’s London house, concerning himself closely in his patron’s affairs, both public and private. When in 1672 Ashley, now Earl of Shaftesbury, became Lord Chancellor, Locke served as his secretary for Church patronage. In 1675 Locke visited Montpellier on grounds of health and continued to live in France till 1679 when he returned to England to give further help to Shaftesbury, now President of the Privy Council. Though he was not implicated in the violent intrigues which closed Shaftesbury’s career, Locke became an object of suspicion to the authorities, and in 1683 left the country, settling shortly after in Holland. Here he remained until the Revolution. While in Holland he became closely acquainted with Limborch, the Remonstrant Divine, and also with Le Clerc. He also became known to William of Orange and Mary, and returned with Mary to England in February 1689. From now onwards Locke became famous as a writer, and a number of works, many of which had been long in preparation, were given to the world in rapid succession. In 1691 he settled at Oates in Essex with an old friend Lady Masham, daughter of Cudworth, the Cambridge Platonist, and her husband Sir Francis Masham. Here he lived till his death (1704).

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The works which call for mention here are:

(1) The *Epistula de Tolerantia*. The letter on Toleration had been addressed to Limborch in 1685, being based upon an earlier unpublished work, written in 1667. It was published in Latin in Holland in 1689, and in the same year appeared in English, French and Dutch translations. This work, together with three subsequent Letters written in answer to criticism, remained the classical statement of the Whig doctrine of Toleration and of the voluntary principle in Church association. We quote from the first Letter in a later place (see pp. 237 ff.).

(2) *An Essay concerning Humane Understanding* (1690), Locke's greatest work. The *Essay* was the fruit of enquiries and reflections pursued during the preceding twenty years as to the capacities of the human mind, and as to what objects "our understandings were or were not fitted to deal with".

(3) *The Reasonableness of Christianity, as delivered in the Scriptures* (1695). Here Locke states his position as a Christian believer. The theme of the book is the great topic of post-Reformation theology—Justification by Faith. But Locke sweeps aside the niceties of scholastic Divinity, and interrogates the Bible direct, as in his philosophy he had interrogated the *data* of perception. With Chillingworth, Locke would say that "The Bible and the Bible only is the religion of Protestants". Faith is conceived almost exclusively as intellectual conviction: saving Faith is the conviction that Jesus is the Messiah, which conviction is to be accompanied by sincere obedience to the Messiah's precepts.

Through all the period with which we are here concerned these works of Locke maintained their position as standard authorities. As a thinker, Locke inaugurates the empirical philosophy which remained the most influential tendency in English thought, until Kantian influences gave a fresh orientation. Breaking with the Cartesian doctrine of innate ideas, he holds that all knowledge (except of the existence of the self) is based upon sensation, or reflection upon sensation. By this teaching Locke appeared to break down the last stronghold of inherited prejudice, and traditional authority, and to make an open way for the human mind to learn all that lay within its power. Thus he became the philosopher *par excellence* of the eighteenth century, not only in his own country, but also on the continent of Europe and particularly in France. Some of his disciples, both English and French, applied his principles in ways which the cautious Locke would have disapproved. But Locke's testimony remained. It was of moment for the religious history of England that though Locke made short work of traditional methods in theology, he believed himself to be justified in standing by the Christian revelation embodied in the Scriptures.

Though GOD has given us no innate *Ideas* of himself; though he has stamped no original Characters on our Minds, wherein we may read his Being: yet having furnished us with those Faculties, our Minds are endowed with, he hath not left him-

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self without witness: since we have Sense, Perception, and Reason, and cannot want a clear proof of him, as long as we carry our selves about us. Nor can we justly complain of our Ignorance in this great Point, since he has so plentifully provided us with the means to discover, and know him, so far as is necessary to the end of our Being, and the great concernment of our Happiness. But though this be the most obvious Truth that Reason discovers; and though its Evidence be (if I mistake not) equal to mathematical Certainty: yet it requires Thought and Attention; and the Mind must apply it self to a regular deduction of it from some part of our intuitive Knowledge, or else we shall be as uncertain, and ignorant of this, as of other Propositions, which are in themselves capable of clear Demonstration. To shew therefore, that we are capable of *knowing*, i.e. *being certain that there is a GOD*, and how we may come by this certainty, I think we need go no farther than our selves, and that undoubted Knowledge we have of our own Existence.

I think it is beyond Question, that *Man has a clear Perception of his own Being*; he knows certainly, that he exists, and that he is something. He that can doubt, whether he be any thing, or no, I speak not to, no more than I would argue with pure nothing, or endeavour to convince Non-entity, that it were something. If any one pretends to be so sceptical, as to deny his own Existence, (for really to doubt of it, is manifestly impossible,) let him for me enjoy his beloved Happiness of being nothing, until Hunger, or some other Pain convince him of the contrary. This then, I think, I may take for a Truth, which every ones certain Knowledge assures him of, beyond the liberty of doubting, *viz.* that he is something that actually exists.

In the next place, Man knows by an intuitive Certainty, that bare *nothing can no more produce any real Being, than it can be equal to two right Angles*. If a Man knows not that Non-entity, or the Absence of all Being cannot be equal to two right Angles, it is impossible he should know any demonstration in *Euclid*.

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If therefore we know there is some real Being, and that Non-entity cannot produce any real Being, it is an evident demonstration, that from Eternity there has been something; Since what was not from Eternity, had a Beginning; and what had a Beginning, must be produced by something else.

Next, it is evident, that what had its Being and Beginning from another, must also have all that which is in, and belongs to its Being from another too. All the Powers it has, must be owing to, and received from the same Source. This eternal Source then of all being must also be the Source and Original of all Power; and so *this eternal Being must be also the most powerful.*

Again, a Man finds in himself *Perception*, and *Knowledge*. We have then got one step farther; and we are certain now, that there is not only some Being, but some knowing intelligent Being in the World.

There was a time then, when there was no knowing Being, and when Knowledge began to be; or else, there has been also *a knowing Being from Eternity*. If it be said, there was a time when no Being had any Knowledge, when that eternal Being was void of all Understanding. I reply, that then it was impossible there should ever have been any Knowledge. It being as impossible, that Things wholly void of Knowledge, and operating blindly, and without any Perception, should produce a knowing Being, as it is impossible, that a Triangle should make it self three Angles bigger than two right ones. For it is as repugnant to the *Idea* of senseless Matter, that it should put into it self Sense, Perception, and Knowledge, as it is repugnant to the *Idea* of a Triangle, that it should put into it self greater Angles than two right ones.

Thus from the Consideration of our selves, and what we infallibly find in our own Constitutions, our Reason leads us to the Knowledge of this certain and evident Truth, That *there is an eternal, most powerful, and most knowing Being*; which whether any one will please to call *God*, it matters not. The thing is evident, and from this *Idea* duly considered, will

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easily be deduced all those other Attributes, which we ought to ascribe to this eternal Being. If nevertheless any one should be found so senselessly arrogant, as to suppose Man alone knowing and wise, but yet the product of mere ignorance and chance; and that all the rest of the Universe acted only by that blind hap-hazard: I shall leave with him that very Rational and Emphatical rebuke of *Tully* l. 2. *de leg.* to be considered at his leisure. “What can be more sillily arrogant and misbecoming, than for a Man to think that he has a Mind and Understanding in him, but yet in all the Universe beside, there is no such thing? Or that those things, which with the utmost stretch of his Reason he can scarce comprehend, should be moved and managed without any Reason at all?”

From what has been said, it is plain to me, we have a more certain knowledge of the Existence of a GOD, than of any thing our Senses have not immediately discovered to us. Nay, I presume I may say, that we more certainly know that there is a GOD, than that there is any thing else without us. When I say we *know*, I mean there is such a Knowledge within our reach, which we cannot miss, if we will but apply our Minds to that, as we do to several other Enquiries.

An Essay concerning Humane Understanding, Book iv, ch. x,
“Of our Knowledge of the Existence of a God”.

2. THE REASONABLENESS OF CHRISTIANITY

John Locke

[See note on pp. 1 f.]

THE FAITH, AND THE OBEDIENCE WHICH GOD REQUIRES

This is the Law of that Kingdom, as well as of all Mankind; And that Law by which all Men shall be judged at the last day. Only those who have believed *Jesus* to be the *Messiah*, and have taken him to be their King, with a sincere Endeavour after Righteousness, in obeying his Law, shall have their past sins not imputed to them; And shall have that Faith taken

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instead of Obedience; Where Frailty and Weakness made them transgress, and sin prevailed after Conversion in those who hunger and thirst after Righteousness (or perfect Obedience) and do not allow themselves in Acts of Disobedience and Rebellion, against the Laws of that Kingdom they are entred into.

He did not expect, 'tis true, a Perfect Obedience void of all slips and falls: He knew our Make, and the weakness of our Constitutions too well, and was sent with a Supply for that Defect. Besides, perfect Obedience was the Righteousness of the Law of Works; and then the Reward would be of Debt, and not of Grace; And to such there was no need of Faith to be imputed to them for Righteousness. They stood upon their own legs, were Just already, and needed no allowance to be made them for believing Jesus to be the *Messiah*, taking him for their King, and becoming his Subjects. But whether Christ does not require Obedience, sincere Obedience is evident from the Laws he himself pronounces (unless he can be supposed to give and inculcate Laws only to have them disobeyed) and from the Sentence he will pass when he comes to Judge.

The Faith required was, to believe *Jesus* to be the *Messiah*, the Anointed; who had been promised by God to the World.

THE FUNDAMENTAL ARTICLES OF FAITH DISCOVERED IN THE GOSPELS AND THE ACTS BETTER THAN IN THE EPISTLES

The Epistles therefore being all written to those who were already Believers and Christians, the occasion and end of writing them, could not be to Instruct them in that which was necessary to make them Christians. This 'tis plain they knew and believed already; or else they could not have been Christians and Believers. And they were writ upon Particular Occasions; and without those Occasions had not been writ; and so cannot be thought necessary to Salvation: Though they resolving doubts, and reforming mistakes, are of great Advantage to our Knowledge and Practice. I do not deny,

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but the great Doctrines of the Christian Faith are dropt here and there, and scattered up and down in most of them. But 'tis not in the Epistles we are to learn what are the Fundamental Articles of Faith, where they are promiscuously, and without distinction mixed with other Truths in Discourses that were (though for Edification indeed, yet) only occasional. We shall find and discern those great and necessary Points best in the Preaching of our Saviour and the Apostles, to those who were yet strangers, and ignorant of the Faith, to bring them in, and convert them to it. And what that was, we have seen already out of the History of the Evangelists, and the *Acts*; where they are plainly laid down, so that no body can mistake them.

CHRISTIANITY SUITED TO PLAIN MEN

Though all divine Revelation requires the obedience of Faith; yet every truth of inspired Scriptures is not one of those, that by the Law of Faith is required to be explicitly believed to Justification. What those are, we have seen by what our Saviour and his Apostles proposed to, and required in those whom they Converted to the Faith. Those are fundamentals; which 'tis not enough not to disbelieve: Every one is required actually to assent to them. But any other Proposition contained in the Scripture, which God has not thus made a necessary part of the Law of Faith, (without an actual assent to which he will not allow any one to be a Believer) a Man may be ignorant of, without hazarding his Salvation by a defect in his Faith. He believes all that God has made necessary for him to believe, and assent to: And as for the rest of Divine Truths, there is nothing more required of him, but that he receive all the parts of Divine Revelation, with a docility and disposition prepared to imbrace, and assent to all Truths coming from God; And submit his mind to whatsoever shall appear to him to bear that Character. Where he, upon fair endeavours, understands it not; How can he avoid being ignorant? And where he cannot put several Texts, and

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make them consist together; What Remedy? He must either interpret one by the other, or suspend his Opinion. He that thinks that more is, or can be required, of poor frail Man in matters of Faith, will do well to consider what absurdities he will run into. God out of the infiniteness of his Mercy, has dealt with Man as a compassionate and tender Father. He gave him Reason, and with it a Law: That could not be otherwise than what Reason should dictate; Unless we should think, that a reasonable Creature, should have an unreasonable Law. But considering the frailty of Man, apt to run into corruption and misery, he promised a Deliverer, whom in his good time he sent; And then declared to all Mankind, that whoever believe him to be the Saviour promised, and take him now raised from the dead, and constituted the Lord and Judge of all Men, to be their King and Ruler, should be saved. This is a plain intelligible Proposition; And the all-merciful God seems herein to have consulted the poor of this World and the bulk of Mankind. These are Articles that the labouring and illiterate Man may comprehend. This is a Religion suited to vulgar Capacities; And the state of Mankind in this World, destined to labour and travel. The Writers and Wranglers in Religion fill it with niceties, and dress it up with notions; which they make necessary and fundamental parts of it; As if there were no way into the Church, but through the Academy or Lyceum. The bulk of Mankind have not leisure for Learning and Logick, and superfine distinctions of the Schools. Where the hand is used to the Plough, and the Spade, the head is seldom elevated to sublime Notions, or exercised in mysterious reasonings. 'Tis well if Men of that rank (to say nothing of the other Sex) can comprehend plain propositions, and a short reasoning about things familiar to their Minds, and nearly allied to their daily experience. Go beyond this, and you amaze the greatest part of Mankind: And may as well talk *Arabick* to a poor day Labourer, as the Notions and Language that the Books and Disputes of Religion are filled with; and as soon you will be

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understood. The Dissenting Congregations are supposed by their Teachers to be more accurately instructed in matters of Faith, and better to understand the Christian Religion, than the vulgar Conformists, who are charged with great ignorance; How truly I will not here determine. But I ask them to tell me seriously, whether half their People have leisure to study? Nay, Whether one in ten of those who come to their Meetings in the Country, if they had time to study them, do or can understand, the Controversies at this time so warmly managed amongst them, about Justification, the subject of this present Treatise. I have talked with some of their Teachers, who confess themselves not to understand the difference in debate between them. And yet the points they stand on, are reckoned of so great weight, so material, so fundamental in Religion, that they divide Communion and separate upon them. Had God intended that none but the Learned Scribe, the disputer or wise of this World, should be Christians, or be Saved, thus Religion should have been prepared for them; filled with speculations and niceties, obscure terms, and abstract notions. But Men of that expectation, Men furnished with such acquisitions, the Apostle tells us, I *Cor.* 1, are rather shut out from the simplicity of the Gospel; to make way for those poor, ignorant, illiterate, Who heard and believed promises of a Deliverer; and believed Jesus to be him; Who could conceive a Man dead and made alive again, and believe that he should at the end of the World, come again, and pass Sentence on all Men, according to their deeds. That the poor had the Gospel Preached to them; Christ makes a mark as well as business of his Mission. *Mat.* xi. 5. And if the poor had the Gospel Preached to them, it was, without doubt, such a Gospel, as the poor could understand, plain and intelligible: And so it was, as we have seen, in the Preachings of Christ and his Apostles.

The Reasonableness of Christianity, as delivered in the Scriptures.

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3. OF ENTHUSIASM

John Locke

[See note on pp. 1 f.]

The following chapter, *Of Enthusiasm*, was first added to the *Essay concerning Humane Understanding* in the fourth edition (1700).

He that would seriously set upon the search of Truth, ought in the first Place to prepare his Mind with a Love of it. For he that Loves it not, will not take much Pains to get it; nor be much concerned when he misses it. There is no Body in the Commonwealth of Learning, who does not profess himself a lover of Truth: and there is not a rational Creature that would not take it amiss to be thought otherwise of. And yet for all this one may truly say, there are very few lovers of Truth for Truths sake, even amongst those, who perswade themselves that they are so. How a Man may know whether he be so in earnest is worth enquiry: And I think there is this one unerring mark of it, *viz.* The not entertaining any Proposition with greater assurance than the Proofs it is built upon will warrant. Whoever goes beyond this measure of Assent, 'tis plain receives not Truth in the Love of it; loves not Truth for Truths sake, but for some other bye end. For the evidence that any Proposition is true (except such as are self-evident) lying only in the Proofs a Man has of it, whatsoever degrees of Assent he affords it beyond the degrees of that Evidence, 'tis plain all that surplusage of assurance is owing to some other Affection, and not to the Love of Truth: It being as impossible, that the Love of Truth should carry my Assent above the Evidence, that there is to me, that it is true, As that the Love of Truth should make me assent to any Proposition, for the sake of that Evidence, which it has not, that it is true: which is in effect to Love it as a Truth, because it is possible or probable that it may not be true. In any Truth that gets not