

“The Chief Characteristical Mark of the True Church”: John Locke’s Theology of Toleration and His Case for Civil Religion

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Abstract: This essay argues that Locke’s *Reasonableness of Christianity* provides a morally robust argument for religious pluralism—one which avoids the pitfalls of relativism and official neutrality by elucidating the need for a civil religion of toleration. The work thus contains Locke’s friendly critique of his more radical Enlightenment contemporaries who had openly debunked the Bible. This critique is friendly, I argue, because Locke ultimately agrees with Spinoza and Hobbes about revelation, miracles, and religion’s psychological causes. While Locke joined these thinkers in a common project to make Christianity less sacrificial and friendlier to enlightened selfishness, his analysis also reveals the need to retain some of its self-abnegating spirit in liberalism’s service. But Locke has difficulty accounting for that spirit itself, and this problem in one of liberalism’s original theorists may help explain the dissatisfactions and anxieties troubling tolerant societies today.

Responding to criticisms leveled against his *Reasonableness of Christianity*, John Locke declared that the purpose of that work was to show that the New Testament’s moral teaching surpasses “all that philosophy and human reason had [previously] attained to, or could possibly make effectual to all degrees of mankind.”¹ *The Reasonableness* has therefore always seemed to occupy a puzzling place in Locke’s corpus. For, putting aside for the moment the question of the work’s paradoxical title,² its apparent deference to revelation seems to sit uneasily with, if not to repudiate, the political teaching of the *Two Treatises* and *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, both of which claim

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¹John Locke, *The Works of John Locke* (Darmstadt: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1823), 7:188.

²See Michael S. Rabie, “The Reasonableness of Locke, or the Questionableness of Christianity,” *Journal of Politics* 53, no. 4 (1991): 939.

to vindicate reason's moral authority.³ Moreover, since *The Reasonableness* concludes with a call to "enlighten the bulk of mankind" by shoring up their faith in miracles and revelation, it appears to cast doubt on Locke's status as an Enlightenment thinker: "The greatest part cannot *know*, and therefore they must *believe*" (243 [146], emphasis original).⁴

Locke scholars have therefore tended either to dismiss *The Reasonableness* or to see it as evidence that his works are disjointed. Among those who look to Locke as the father of liberal or libertarian freedom, it tends to be mentioned either not at all⁵ or as an embarrassment—a work in which the chief originator of modern secularism "disinherits himself."⁶ More commonly, however, scholars have taken Locke's apparent self-contradictions as a sign of his respectable piety. John Marshall, for example, has argued that Locke spent his entire career trying to provide a demonstration of the code of selfless behavior which he called the law of nature (what Marshall terms "the ethics of a gentleman").⁷ That ethic, to Locke, requires a rewarding and punishing God,⁸ but his proof of that God's existence is notoriously inadequate.⁹ Thus, in the most common view, Locke, having recognized this failure, concluded that reason can only recognize its "self-limitations"¹⁰ and took refuge at the end of his life in a study of scripture.¹¹

³John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 25; *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. Richard H. Cox (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1982), sec. 25.

⁴I cite *The Reasonableness* by paragraph number (provided in John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity, As Delivered in the Scriptures*, ed. George W. Ewing [Chicago: Regnery, 1965]) followed in brackets by the corresponding page in *Works*, vol. 7. For this criticism, see Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670–1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 135–63; "Spinoza, Locke and the Enlightenment Battle for Toleration," in *Toleration in Enlightenment Europe*, ed. Ole Peter Grell and Roy Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁵See, e.g., Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

⁶George Kateb, "Locke and the Political Origins of Secularism," *Social Research* 76, no. 4 (2009): 1033.

⁷John Marshall, *John Locke: Resistance, Religion, and Responsibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 157ff.

⁸John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), I.3.6.

⁹*Essay* IV.10.12. See Richard Ashcraft, "Faith and Knowledge in Locke's Philosophy," in *John Locke: Problems and Perspectives*, ed. John W. Yolton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 204–5; John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 94–95; *Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 84; Marshall, *John Locke*, 384.

¹⁰George W. Ewing, editor's introduction to *Reasonableness of Christianity*, xviii.

¹¹Ashcraft, "Faith and Knowledge," 218ff.; Dunn, *Political Thought*, 187, 193–94; *Locke*, 66–67, 85; John C. Higgins-Biddle, introduction to *The Reasonableness of*

While a few scholars look to this religious Locke as a guide for liberal politics today,¹² the mainstream view dismisses his thought as antiquated on account of its allegedly Christian underpinnings.¹³ By contrast, a sizable minority of scholars has followed Leo Strauss in assigning Locke paramount importance for the creation of our regime and way of life, and, insisting on the unity of his corpus, they have presented his interpretation of the Bible as a Trojan horse for criticism and reform.¹⁴ In the most prominent study of *The Reasonableness* expressing this view, Michael Rabieh uses Locke’s reading of the New Testament to substantiate Strauss’s thesis according to which Locke’s true teaching resembles that of Thomas Hobbes, whose atheistic morality—if one can use that term—is “nakedly based on considerations of self-interest.”¹⁵ According to Rabieh, not only are Locke’s professions of belief ironic,¹⁶ but the theology of *The Reasonableness* is intended to corrupt and undermine traditional Christianity by weakening its law of faith and by transforming its moral teaching into a mercenary ethic.¹⁷ Moreover, for Rabieh, Locke’s influence not only accounts for the remarkable marriage of self-interest and morality one sees in American churches, but it explains the

Christianity: As Delivered in the Scriptures, ed. John C. Higgins-Biddle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), xcix–ci; Marshall, *John Locke*, xii–xviii, 388, 449; Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations of John Locke’s Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 211; David Wootton, editor’s introduction to *Political Writings*, by John Locke (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), 111–12.

¹²See Greg Forster, *John Locke’s Politics of Moral Consensus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Joshua Mitchell, “John Locke and the Theological Foundation of Liberal Toleration: A Christian Dialectic of History,” *Review of Politics* 52, no. 1 (1990): 64–83; and (more tentatively) Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality*, 13–15, 235ff.

¹³Dunn, *Political Thought*, x–xi; Locke, 59. See also Micah Schwartzman, “The Relevance of Locke’s Religious Arguments for Toleration,” *Political Theory* 33, no. 5 (2005): 678–705.

¹⁴See, e.g., Ross J. Corbett, “Locke’s Biblical Critique,” *Review of Politics* 74, no. 1 (2012): 27–51; Robert Faulkner, “Preface to Liberalism: Locke’s First Treatise and the Bible,” *Review of Politics* 67, no. 3 (2005): 451–72; J. Judd Owen, “Locke’s Case for Religious Toleration: Its Neglected Foundation in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*,” *Journal of Politics* 69, no. 1 (2007): 156–68; Thomas L. Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism: The Moral Vision of the American Founders and the Philosophy of Locke* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Rabieh, “Reasonableness”; Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), chap. 5; Michael P. Zuckert, *Launching Liberalism: On Lockean Political Philosophy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), chap. 6.

¹⁵Rabieh, “Reasonableness,” 935, 953; cf. Pangle, *Modern Republicanism*, 203–4.

¹⁶See Rabieh’s discussion of miracles at “Reasonableness,” 949–51.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 939, 941, 947–48, 952–55.

decline of religion in liberal society more generally: “Locke has taken God off our minds.”¹⁸

In this essay, I would like to revisit Rabieh’s thesis with a view to articulating the political consequences of Locke’s religious reforms—for, as I will argue, while the conventional view is wrong to take Locke’s professions of faith at face value, there is also good reason to suspect that Locke would have been alarmed by the sociological effects Rabieh observes. As Michael Zuckert notes,¹⁹ *The Reasonableness* also makes a case for a liberal civil religion, although scholars have not yet explored its connections to Locke’s earlier works. That is what I propose to do here.²⁰ By articulating the link between the *Letter* and *The Reasonableness*, I will argue not only that these two works should be read together, but also that the latter’s civil religion can be found in the background of Locke’s political teaching. As I argue below, Locke wrote *The Reasonableness* to challenge traditional interpretations of the Bible that were hostile to toleration. Although he begins that work endorsing Christian revelation, he eventually lays the groundwork for a multireligious society that is nonetheless united by a broad-based theological agreement. In other words, Locke’s analysis of the New Testament contains his argument for the claim he powerfully asserts but neglects to prove in the *Letter*, namely, that both “the Gospel of Jesus Christ” and “the genuine Reason of Mankind” agree that toleration even of “those that are not Christians” is “the chief Characteristical Mark of the True Church.”²¹ When read together, these works outline a publically authoritative religious teaching—one which encourages a morally robust (because limited) attachment to toleration, and which therefore stands in stark contrast to the relativism and the commitment to neutrality, with its concomitant self-doubts, that characterizes much of liberal theory today.²²

But while Locke seeks to replace the older, illiberal orthodoxy with one that is friendly to toleration, his new orthodoxy is puzzling—for what could it mean for Christians to believe that a principled toleration, and not merely a prudential acceptance of heresy, is the chief mark of the true church? What Locke paradoxically suggests is that truly orthodox Christians are those

¹⁸Ibid., 933–34, 955.

¹⁹Zuckert, *Launching Liberalism*, 165–66.

²⁰For this, it will be necessary to retrace some ground covered by Rabieh, as well as by Zuckert and Pangle. While I have sought to acknowledge specific instances of this retracing in the notes, it should be understood throughout that my overall reading of *The Reasonableness* is deeply indebted to their work.

²¹*Letter*, 23, 25.

²²Here I have in mind the troubles encountered by the later John Rawls, who understands liberalism as openness to all viewpoints, including “nonliberal” ones, and who therefore expresses “regret” that liberal societies must require a minimal civic education (John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2005], xlv, 37, 143, 200).

who take their belief in their own orthodoxy least seriously, for such Christians would also agree that “every Church is Orthodox to it self.” Similarly, Locke’s civic theology, as it is more fully developed in *The Reasonableness*, seeks to undercut the devotional moral teaching, with its encouragement towards self-sacrifice, which characterizes much of the actual New Testament and which Locke associates with a wholehearted belief in religious truth. By making the Bible friendly to liberty and prosperity in this world, Locke implicitly suggests that traditional Christianity is unreasonable, and has been a political failure, because of its hostility to an ethic of enlightened selfishness.²³

At the same time, however, Locke also indicates that this weakening of the traditional Christian ethic should not extend too far. Liberal citizens will occasionally have to fight for their freedoms, and so some kind of religious spiritedness must remain for those who may need to make sacrifices to protect a regime of natural rights. In supplying this, and in articulating his reasons for doing so, Locke also criticizes more radical Enlightenment thinkers, such as Hobbes and Spinoza, who had offered direct and debunking challenges to revealed religion, and whose secularizing influence was on the rise during his lifetime.²⁴ So far as I am aware, no previous commentator has read *The Reasonableness* as a friendly critique of these thinkers, although doing so, I will contend, is necessary for appreciating the reasons for the limited character of Lockean Enlightenment. Indeed, as I will also show, *The Reasonableness* contains Locke’s account of the natural origins of Christianity, which he locates in poverty, oppression, and intellectual backwardness. Because Locke shares this common Enlightenment view, he belongs very much in the company of Hobbes and Spinoza—but, as we will see, he is far less optimistic than they are about removing religion’s natural causes.²⁵

Thus, on the basis of a modern philosophic view of religious psychology, Locke seeks to redirect fanaticism rather than overcome it. It follows, then, that he has been unfairly characterized by those who regard him as a religious thinker offering a compromised Enlightenment.²⁶ Rather, Locke’s writing is

²³This also constitutes a new piece of evidence against the conventional view of Locke, which takes his statements that the Gospel provides a sufficient teaching about morality at face value (see, e.g. Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality*, 101; cf. Kateb, “Locke,” 1032 [n. 94 below]). If Locke’s analysis of the New Testament’s moral teaching is actually a subtle criticism of it—and an attempt to change it—then he cannot simply have turned to the Bible in his old age hoping to find support for the ethic of his earlier works.

²⁴Israel, *Radical Enlightenment; Enlightenment Contested*.

²⁵Cf. Spinoza: “it is equally impossible to take away superstition from the vulgar as to take away dread”; and yet the aim of a liberal republic is “to free each from dread” (*Theologico-Political Treatise*, ed. and trans. Martin D. Yaffe [Newburyport, MA: Focus, 2004], pref., chap. 20 [xiii, 230]).

²⁶See n. 4 above.

animated by a prudent concern for religious statesmanship, one which is too little appreciated even if it is not, ultimately, wholly successful. Indeed, at the end of this paper I offer a critique of Locke focusing on the deficiencies in his case for civil religion—deficiencies which arise from the inability of his religious psychology to explain that self-sacrificial spiritedness which he seeks, in part, to preserve. As I conclude, reflection on this lacuna in Locke's thought may help explain the dissatisfactions and anxieties troubling liberalism today.

The Letter and The Reasonableness

That Lockean liberalism is not theologically neutral can be seen from a brief look at the *Letter*.²⁷ As previously noted, Locke begins that work by calling toleration “the chief Characteristical Mark of the True Church,” and he repeatedly quotes the Bible to prove it.²⁸ Not only does Locke outlaw atheism, but—against Rawls²⁹—he insists that religious arguments for toleration must take precedence over secular ones: taking away God, “tho but even in thought, dissolves all.”³⁰ Accordingly, throughout the *Letter* Locke continually makes theological claims, the most important of which is that the Gospel's chief teaching concerns “charity” or good works: it commands the humane treatment of non-Christians and considers persecution a sin punishable by “eternal perdition.”³¹ On the other hand, dogma and ceremony are much less important than those rules of common decency which protect what Locke in another place calls “Life, Liberty, Health, and Indolency of Body.”³²

But while the “the Substantial and truly Fundamental part of Religion”³³ is morality, it does not entail indifference to matters of dogma. After all, Locke's claim that toleration is the chief mark of the true church is a dogmatic one, and so even though his liberal state may not have an officially established church, it will nonetheless propagate an authoritative religious teaching which its citizens will be required to believe, or at least profess. Thus, in addition to atheism, Locke excludes from liberal society all those that “will not own and teach the Duty of tolerating All men in matters of meer Religion.”³⁴ Faiths that do not subscribe to Locke's tolerant theology

²⁷For a more comprehensive account, see Adam Wolfson, “Toleration and Relativism: The Locke-Proast Exchange,” *Review of Politics* 59, no. 2 (1997): 213–31.

²⁸*Letter*, 23.

²⁹For an articulation of this potential Lockean critique of Rawlsian public reason, see Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality*, 233, 237ff.

³⁰*Letter*, 51.

³¹*Ibid.*, 23–24.

³²*Ibid.*, 24, 26, 36; Peter C. Myers, *Our Only Star and Compass: Locke and the Struggle for Political Rationality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 184–85.

³³*Letter*, 36.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 50–51.

will have no home in his polity—if necessary, the government can and will repress them, although this is an authority it will seldom have to use, for Locke also suggests that a project of education and cultural transformation will make them disappear.³⁵ He looks forward to a future when such religions will be considered not only heretical but passé, when “pulpits every where” will resound with his own “Doctrine of Peace and Toleration,” and when the vast majority will agree that any minister of God who teaches differently “neglects the Business of his Calling” and will “one day give account thereof to the Prince of Peace.”³⁶ In other words, the religious diversity of Lockean society will be superficial compared to its underlying, governmentally sanctioned, uniformity. Since the notion that churches are private voluntary associations and separate from the state will be preached from every pulpit, this idea will be the centerpiece of a common theological outlook which will allow the state to shut down churches that teach otherwise on the grounds that they are not just dangerous, but also false and sinful.³⁷

Of course, that Locke envisions such a civil religion does not necessarily show why or even that he thinks it necessary, so one might wonder whether he proposes it only as the first stage towards a more complete Enlightenment. Could he even intend his prohibition of atheism as no more than a temporary necessity? Locke will provide his full case for civil religion only in *The Reasonableness*, but his preliminary suggestion here is that this view is incorrect. When Locke states that atheism undermines the “Promises, Covenants, and Oaths, which are the Bonds of Humane Society,” he strongly implies that a civil religion will always be necessary because human nature is fundamentally self-interested. Because there will always be times when the benefits of criminality are high and the odds of getting caught are low, someone who does not believe in ultimate reward and punishment can hardly be a good citizen, for he will merely calculate on each occasion whether it would be expedient to fulfill the social contract. And, as Locke states in *The Reasonableness*, the times when such calculations will come out on the side of virtue are rare indeed: the “portion of the

³⁵See Nathan Tarcov, “John Locke and the Foundations of Toleration,” in *Early Modern Skepticism and the Origins of Toleration*, ed. Alan Levine (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999), 179–80.

³⁶Letter, 34.

³⁷Thus, Beiner’s suggestion that the *Letter’s* teaching on separation constitutes a break from the tradition of civil religion (Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011], chaps. 12 and 13) overlooks the way in which Locke quietly continues this tradition in the absence of an officially established church. See Robert P. Kraynak, “John Locke: From Absolutism to Toleration,” *American Political Science Review* 74, no. 1 (1980): 53–69; Christopher Nadon, “Absolutism and the Separation of Church and State in Locke’s *Letter Concerning Toleration*,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 35, no. 2 (2006): 94–102.

righteous has been *in all ages* taken notice of to be pretty scanty in this world" (245 [148], emphasis added). Even in the most well-run society, justice cannot profit everyone; absent an afterlife, no reasonable person should be expected to choose it. Hence, "the true ground of Morality ... can only be the Will and Law of a God, who sees Men in the dark, has in his Hand Rewards and Punishments, and Power enough to call to account the Proudest Offender."³⁸

But Locke also indicates a second reason for the necessity of civic piety, one which is not as straightforwardly utilitarian and which may therefore complicate this psychological picture. At the *Letter's* close, he warns the magistrate of the consequences of abridging freedom of conscience: it will be difficult, he writes, for citizens to suffer being "stript of the Goods, which they have got by their honest Industry; and contrary to all the Laws of Equity, *both Humane and Divine*, to be delivered up for a Prey to other mens Violence and Rapine." In such cases, they will "think it lawful ... to resist Force with Force, and to defend their natural Rights ... with Arms."³⁹ In other words, here, as in the *Second Treatise*, Locke justifies rebellion in extreme cases by joining considerations of self-interest to an "appeal to Heaven"—that is, to a widespread belief in a God who protects our natural rights to private property and private religious freedom, but who exercises that protection by granting us the authority to enforce the law of nature in his name.⁴⁰

Putting this passage together with Locke's vision for a liberal clergy, it seems that that clergy's chief task will be to endow liberal principles with a moral meaning that, while allied with self-interest in one sense, can also call upon citizens to risk their lives and property to punish violations of their rights. Although, as *The Reasonableness* will show, Locke does believe we are naturally selfish, he suggests elsewhere that our pursuit of happiness can be bound up with a moral spiritedness that is linked to a belief in divine justice. In the *Second Treatise*, he gives indignation a large psychological role: one reason the state of nature proves unstable is that its inhabitants continually punish one another for perceived violations of the natural law.⁴¹ And in the *Essay*, Locke indicates that this moral spiritedness, when it accompanies the religious dogmatism of which it is often a product, can inspire acts that appear self-sacrificial. Human beings will "sooner part with their Lives, and whatever is dearest to them, than suffer themselves to doubt, or others to question, the truth" of their "*first and unquestionable Principles.*" When

³⁸*Letter*, 51; *Essay* I.3.6; Steven Forde, "Natural Law, Theology, and Morality in Locke," *American Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 2 (2001): 396–99. As Pangle notes, Locke's contrary assertion in the *Essay* (I.3.5) that a Hobbesian has as much reason for keeping his promises as a Christian "does not ... speak to the problem of secret crimes" (*Modern Republicanism*, 191).

³⁹*Letter*, 55, emphasis added.

⁴⁰*Second Treatise*, sec. 168, 176, 241–42; Sanford Kessler, "John Locke's Legacy of Religious Freedom," *Polity* 17, no. 3 (1985): 503.

⁴¹See esp. sec. 11.

stamped with “*the Characters of Divinity*,” these principles make men ready to “fight, and die in defence of their Opinions.”⁴²

Now, the question of how this spiritedness can be reconciled with Locke’s hedonistic psychology is too complex to receive full treatment here, but the beginnings of an answer can be found in his discussion of the “Law of Opinion or Reputation.”⁴³ As Ruth Grant and John Baltes have recently argued, the nuances of Locke’s psychology, and the methods of his educational and cultural project, cannot be appreciated without attention to the large role Locke gives to the power of praise and disgrace.⁴⁴ The “greatest part” of mankind governs itself “chiefly, if not solely,” by the desire to acquire the former and avoid the latter, and this helps explain why so many people make what might otherwise appear to be sacrifices. For most —perhaps for all—it would be better to die than live in disgrace: “no Body, that has the least Thought, or Sense of a Man about him, can live in Society, under the constant Dislike, and ill Opinion of his Familiars, and those he converses with. This is a Burthen too heavy for humane Sufferance.”⁴⁵

So while Locke’s psychology does hold that human beings are motivated solely by the desire to attain pleasure and avoid pain,⁴⁶ the “Law of Fashion” shapes our understanding of these things. Since what is praised or blamed varies almost infinitely across cultures, the definition of happiness is highly malleable.⁴⁷ This accounts for the tremendous variety of (often shocking) human customs,⁴⁸ but it also means that a project of education or cultural transformation has incredible potential to succeed (“for white Paper receives any Characters”).⁴⁹ Indeed, by articulating a new religion to be preached from pulpits, Locke seeks to manipulate, and steer in a politically healthy (if paradoxical) direction, the very law of fashion which has hitherto been so destabilizing. As Grant writes, Locke’s project in the *Essay* and *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* is to inculcate “a prejudice against prejudices” or a dogmatic opposition to dogmatism.⁵⁰ In a similar way, by promulgating a civil religion in the *Letter*, he seeks to use the power of fanaticism against itself

⁴²*Essay* I.3.21, 26, emphasis original.

⁴³*Essay* II.28.10–12. See also Pangle, *Modern Republicanism*, 176–97.

⁴⁴John Baltes, “Locke’s Inverted Quarantine: Discipline, Panopticism, and the Making of the Liberal Subject,” *Review of Politics* 75, no. 2 (2013): 173–92; Ruth W. Grant, “John Locke on Custom’s Power and Reason’s Authority,” *Review of Politics* 74, no. 4 (2012): 607–29.

⁴⁵*Essay* II.28.12; Grant, “Custom’s Power,” 610.

⁴⁶*Essay* II.21.41–42.

⁴⁷*Essay* II.21.55.

⁴⁸*Essay* I.3.9–10.

⁴⁹*Essay* I.3.22. As Baltes notes, the place of education is doubly important if the fear of hell is not always as persuasive as the *Letter* and *The Reasonableness* suggest (cf. *Essay* II.28.12 with Baltes, “Inverted Quarantine,” 188–89).

⁵⁰Grant, “Custom’s Power,” 625.

and in support of toleration. What results is a paradoxical orthodoxy which teaches that “every one is Orthodox to himself”⁵¹ and which may even require churches to speak even of their own religion as “meer religion.”⁵²

Now, how Locke can accomplish this is hard to see in the *Letter*, for while that work’s arguments go some way toward justifying its theological claims, the reader who demands a fuller demonstration is likely to come away unsatisfied. After all, the *Letter*’s statements about what God will reward or punish are presented dogmatically, with only a few scattered biblical references for support. This work therefore seems to require or presuppose a more direct and dialectical confrontation with scripture, and this is what Locke undertakes in *The Reasonableness*. As he states in the *Second Vindication* of that work, *The Reasonableness* “tends to peace and union among Christians” by providing “a stricter and more thorough inquiry into the question about justification.”⁵³ Its biblical exegesis is meant to show not only that Christianity can be a liberal civil religion, but also that this has always been its purpose.⁵⁴ But, as we will now see, Locke also intended this work for his free-thinking contemporaries, and he suggests it will explain why society needs a civil religion in the first place.

In the *Second Vindication*, Locke claims he wrote *The Reasonableness* in the “hope of doing some service to decaying piety.”⁵⁵ He presents himself as an apologist for Christianity attempting to stem a rising tide of irreligion, and to this end he primarily sought to reach not Christians—for whom this message would be redundant—but “those, who either wholly disbelieved, or doubted of the truth of the Christian religion.”⁵⁶ His book was therefore chiefly designed for Deists and other free-thinkers who had “mistaken and slandered” Christianity, but only because they “misunderstood” it.⁵⁷ But Locke also says the biblical interpretation he arrived at in this study was entirely novel—it “awed [him] with the apprehension of singularity”⁵⁸—and so it seems that,

⁵¹*Letter*, 23.

⁵²I say “may” because the “meer” of William Popple’s 1693 translation of the *Letter* is absent from the Latin (John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. Mario Montuori [The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1963], 90), though Montuori provides evidence that Locke supervised Popple’s work (xxx–xlvi). While “mere” did not mean “insignificant” in the seventeenth century, in addition to “pure, unmixed,” or “unalloyed,” it could signify the quality of having no greater power or importance than a designation implies (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “mere”). In context, this meaning of “mere religion” as “religion alone” makes the most sense, and, insofar as it implies that piety must be supplemented by other factors, it entails a denigration of its importance.

⁵³Locke, *Works*, 7:186, 189.

⁵⁴Zuckert, *Launching Liberalism*, 147ff.

⁵⁵*Works*, 7:165.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 7:164.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 7:166, 168.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 7:187.

his suggestion to the contrary aside, *The Reasonableness* will have much new to say to convinced Christians. These too may misunderstand the Bible’s teaching, and in addressing both traditionalists and Deists Locke will chart a middle course between the intolerant churches of his day and the adherents of the Radical Enlightenment who were contributing to a “decaying piety.”

Locke mentions two differences between his scriptural interpretation and that of prior theologians. First, Locke claims to be the first to notice that Jesus displayed extreme caution in public and communicated his most important messages indirectly, through “parables and figurative ways of speaking.” Second, and of greater immediate importance, he discovered evidence in the Bible for “the necessity” that a lawgiver such as Jesus “should be sent from God, for the reforming the morality of the world.”⁵⁹ Now, those free-thinkers whom Locke was trying to reach would likely have been less receptive to arguments about biblical exegesis than to those appealing to secular concerns, and so by referring here to the “necessity” of Jesus’s coming he frames his argument in part as a critique of the Deist claim that there is no social need for revelation.⁶⁰ On the contrary, Christianity’s moral teaching, according to Locke’s new interpretation, “might be of some use in the world” because its teaching about divinely revealed law surpasses “all that philosophy and human reason” has “attained to, or could possibly make effectual to all degrees of mankind.”⁶¹

By making this assertion about the limited potential of reason and the social need for revelation, Locke implicitly criticizes (though on secular grounds) the attempts at widespread debunking undertaken by his near-contemporaries Hobbes and Spinoza,⁶² both of whom had claimed that miracles are impossible, that revelation is a product of the imagination, and that belief in such things can be explained psychologically, as the natural product of fear, ignorance, and desperation.⁶³ Spinoza, of course, also initiated the historical deconstruction of the Bible.⁶⁴ By contrast, Locke proceeds on the assumption that the Bible is internally coherent and divinely inspired, and he officially endorses Jesus’s miracles. And yet, this is consistent with, and even seemingly demanded by, the utilitarian concerns he voices in the *Second Vindication*. If philosophers have a responsibility not just to make religion tolerant, but to ensure that in becoming thus transformed it retains

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid., 7:188.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Although Hobbes and Spinoza have civil religion teachings of their own, both claim this could be a natural religion (Spinoza, *Treatise*, chap. 14; Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. xxx).

⁶³Spinoza, *Treatise*, preface, chaps. 1–2, 6; Hobbes *Leviathan*, chaps. xi–xii, xxxvii.

⁶⁴Spinoza, *Treatise*, chaps. 8–10. For Hobbes’s steps in this direction, see *Leviathan*, chap. xxxiii.

the strength to perform its social function, it would seem necessary for them to write books like *The Reasonableness* which correct the oversights of attempts to undermine revelation. But if these were Locke's motivations for writing, it may be that his theological opinions were in agreement with those of Hobbes and Spinoza, even if he thought differently about their political implications.

Sin, Redemption, and Merit

That Locke is charting a middle course between traditionalists and Deists is confirmed at *The Reasonableness's* opening, where he critiques two "extreme" opinions about Adam's Fall and Christ's Redemption. From his study of theologians, Locke reports that while some would doom all men "to eternal infinite punishment for the transgression of Adam, whom millions had never heard of, and no one had authorised to transact for him or be his representative; this seemed to others so little consistent with the justice or goodness of the great and infinite God, that they thought there was no redemption necessary" (1 [4–5]). Now, the first position is precisely that of original sin. It holds that Adam's sin engendered a corruption of human nature and "a state of guilt" condemning all his posterity to "endless torment, in hellfire" (3 [6]). According to this view, it was only God's grace in sending his son to mankind that permitted a select few to enter paradise, and then not through works but only through faith in Christ. According to Locke, however, this idea is so far from authentic Christianity that it actually shakes "the foundations of all religion" (1 [4]). Those who object to it because it undermines God's justice are correct. For God to condemn innocent men to an irreversible death is one thing (for naturally mortal men have "no right" to everlasting life), but for him to put them "in a state of misery, worse than not being" is quite another. This "would be hard to reconcile with the notion we have of justice" and would actually "confound good and evil, God and Satan" (5 [8]). Not only is the idea of original sin unjust, but, as Locke points out with relief, it is nowhere mentioned in the New Testament: "as I remember, every-one's sin is charged upon himself only" (4 [7]).

While Locke thus grants the objections Deists pose to traditional Christianity, he also suggests that those objections do not apply to the authentic version of it which can be uncovered through an uncorrupted reading of the Bible. But his message to the Deists is also that they have not thought adequately about those moral concerns which cause them to reject original sin. Their dissatisfaction with God's justice leads them to "make Jesus Christ nothing but the restorer and preacher of pure natural religion; thereby doing violence to the whole tenour of the New Testament" (1 [5]). Indeed, to read natural religion into the Bible would hinder that work's primary task, which is to provide "for the instruction of the illiterate bulk of mankind, in the way to salvation" (1 [4–5]). For this moral education,

natural religion is insufficient, and the “illiterate bulk” must regard the Gospel as a divinely revealed and therefore coherent work.

Now, Locke does not here say what the way to salvation is, nor does he indicate what opinion the literate minority ought to hold about it. But since the traditional teaching about justification rests upon the presupposition of original sin, it is hard to see how Locke can avoid heterodoxy. The theology he now articulates holds that before the Fall Adam enjoyed “a state of immortality” (2 [5]) which, however, was given to him not by right but by God’s grace (6 [7–8]). Since we can live forever only through divine gift, we cannot work for immortality; so when God decreed that Adam and his posterity would eventually die, he committed no injustice (5–6 [7]). And yet, immediately after saying this, Locke reverses himself and insists that those who live in “exact obedience to the law ... have a claim of right to eternal life” (9 [9]).

The effect of this sudden reversal is to re-present the Bible’s moral teaching not just as one of works rather than faith but, more fundamentally, as one of self-regarding rights rather than other-regarding duties. Indeed, Locke draws attention to these contrasts first by relying on Paul’s statement at Romans 4:4 — “to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt” — and then by glossing Jesus’s words at Luke 10:25: “‘Do this,’ i.e. what is required by the law, ‘and thou shalt live’” (9 [10]). In the first of these statements, however, Paul actually attacks the very position for which Locke argues: he declares that faith alone justifies and that Abraham’s works were insufficient in God’s sight (Rom. 4:3; cf. also 4:13). And in the second passage, Jesus claims that what is “required by the law” is not simply obedience, but to love God “with all thy heart ... and thy neighbour as thyself” (Luke 10:27). What the New Testament considers necessary for salvation, in other words, is not simply good works, but an internal disposition consisting of faith and a loving devotion to God and others—a devotion which, because it is carried out with *all* one’s heart, is contaminated with no admixture of concern for one’s own well-being or worldly prosperity. By providing such an unorthodox and distorting reading of these biblical passages so early in the work, Locke signals that his strategy in what follows will be to impose upon scripture a new teaching which will downplay the New Testament’s emphasis on selfless devotion, thereby indicating its unreasonableness.

Indeed, Locke begins to reveal what is wrong with traditional biblical morality when he provides more details about the law whose fulfillment allegedly guarantees us a right to live forever. This law is “the law of reason” or “of nature” (14 [11]); it is the unchangeable “eternal law of right” (20 [13]) and identical to what Locke elsewhere calls the “law of works,” as distinguished from the “law of faith” (16 [12]). It was revealed to the Jews in the moral part of the law of Moses (18, 20, 22 [12–14]) as well as to the Gentiles through natural reason (19, 22 [13–14]), and it holds that those who follow it to the letter will enjoy “eternal life and bliss” (12 [11]) while those who commit even the smallest transgression face certain mortality (11 [10]). The only

alternative to the existence of this law is “disorder, confusion, and wickedness,” for, as Locke states—and this is as far as he goes as yet in showing the grounds for the law of works in reason—if disobedience is permitted in any detail “government and order are at an end; and there can be no bounds set to the lawless exorbitancy of unconfined man” (14 [11]).

Now, since we are imperfect creatures who inevitably sin, this law makes it practically impossible for us to attain immortality, although this is where the Christian “law of faith” comes in (23 [15]). For, after the death and resurrection of his son, God permitted faith in Christ “to supply the defect of full obedience,” thus allowing believers to attain “immortality, as if they were righteous” (22 [14]). In Locke’s theology, in other words, reward and punishment are doled out “to every one according to his works” (6 [8]), but faith is a kind of currency that can be exchanged to make up for our inevitable failings. And yet, as before, Locke’s attempt to demonstrate this doctrine by appealing to Paul is highly distorting. For, to choose just one of the passages he refers to, when Paul claims that “we establish the law” through faith (20 [13]; Rom. 3:31), he is referring not (as Locke insists) to the moral law or the law of nature, but to a new law, the law of faith, which justifies “only him which believeth in Jesus”—i.e., not one who merely performs “the deeds of the law” (Rom. 3:26–28). Whereas in Locke’s theology the law of faith is subordinate to the law of works, in Paul’s account the situation is the opposite.⁶⁵ To Paul, not only is true belief required for salvation (and therefore subject to command), but actions by that very fact are inferior to and exist in the service of faith. Locke’s chief criticism of Paul, and thus also of most traditional interpretations of the Bible, then, centers around Christianity’s unreasonable insistence that there is something more important than adhering to a law which reason vouches for because without it “there can be no bounds set to the lawless exorbitancy of unconfined man.” Because it holds that the goods which the law of nature protects—one’s “life, health, liberty, [and] possessions”⁶⁶—may need to be sacrificed to attain salvation, the actual New Testament would seem apt to give rise to precisely that kind of fanaticism which Locke wrote *The Reasonableness* to counteract.

Locke’s Psychology of Religion

Locke’s task in the remainder of the work will therefore be to articulate a more “reasonable” version of Christianity which is no longer prone to such tendencies. Accordingly, he devotes the next and longest section to showing just what we must believe to be counted as having faith, and the answer he comes up with is, to say the least, undemanding. Through an excruciatingly detailed and repetitious examination of the Gospels and the Acts of the

⁶⁵Cf. Pangle, *Modern Republicanism*, 155–56.

⁶⁶*Second Treatise*, sec. 6.

Apostles, Locke concludes there is only one article of belief necessary for salvation, namely that “Jesus is the Messiah.”⁶⁷ Not only, then, does the Bible not require the acceptance of specific creeds and doctrines, but it enjoins only the most minimal set of beliefs that could be considered Christian.

Locke’s analysis in this long section consists of two elements: a surface theological teaching that repeats over and over again that only this single article is needed for salvation, and a more subtle and scattered historical account of who Jesus was, what kind of followers he attracted, and how Christianity was born. With regard to the first, Locke’s primary achievement in arguing for the single article is to recast the entire Christian theological tradition as a series of false glosses and human impositions upon a single idea which is as simple as it is divine. As Rabieh notes, Locke implies that the religious wars of his time are “not only barbarous but pointless,” and he also reduces the core meaning of Christianity to something rather vacuous.⁶⁸ The simple mantra that “Jesus is the Messiah,” after all, can be interpreted any number of ways, and Locke’s teaching is that all these ways are equally correct. Or rather, there is little need to interpret it, for, as we will soon see, even the Apostles did not understand it. The upshot of this is to reduce drastically the importance of belief. Locke thus claims several times that Jesus also taught lessons “that concerned practice, and not belief” (94 [51]; cf., e.g., 50 [28]), and—in a statement recalling his mention of “meer religion” in the *Letter*—he says the single article could only make people members of the church “as far as mere believing” could do so (165 [102]).

Now, although Locke suggests that there are no other beliefs that Christians must accept, there is one major exception: Locke is careful to catalogue Jesus’s miracles, and he insists on the continuing need to believe in them—especially the resurrection—because they are our sole evidence of his divinity (32 [20]). To see how Locke wants us to weigh that evidence, it will be helpful to examine the account of Jesus’s life which is also present in this section. According to Locke, at the time of Jesus’s appearance the Jews were in a state of political agitation tinged with extraordinary religious hopes: they expected the imminent establishment of the “Kingdom of the Messiah,” or the rule of “a mighty temporal prince” who would liberate them from the Romans and “raise their nation into a higher degree of power, dominion, and prosperity than ever it had enjoyed” (38 [22]; 53 [29]; 54 [30]; 59 [33]; 140 [82]; Dan. 9). They thought their Messiah would miraculously transform them from a people continually subjugated by foreign powers into one with “everlasting dominion” over the entire world (59 [33]; Dan. 7:13–14). Most importantly, this was to be the beginning of an era of bodily immortality for the righteous (148 [88]).

Locke traces this “general expectation” of messianic deliverance to a political source, for the Jews were living not only “under a foreign dominion”

⁶⁷Cf. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. xliii.

⁶⁸Rabieh, “Reasonableness,” 941.

(53 [29–30]; 54 [30]; 58 [32]), but also under a particularly oppressive tyranny—one where the whims of a “jealous and cruel prince, who encouraged informations, and filled his reign with executions for treason,” made life and property perpetually insecure (138 [81]). In such an atmosphere, where freedom was absent, where hunger and poverty were widespread, and where people lived in constant fear, the hopes of finding “an extraordinary man,” full of “divine power,” and capable of performing miracles grew to exceeding heights (58 [32]). Bowed by oppression and reduced to helplessness, the Jewish masses began to think that only a miracle could save them from their misery, and this is what Jesus was happy to deliver. Indeed, as Locke catalogues them, Jesus’s miracles consist, almost without exception, of the sudden alleviation of bodily pain and misfortune. He heals the sick, he raises the dead, he cures the blind, the dumb, and the lame, and, most importantly, he feeds the hungry (see, e.g., 87, 90–91, 96, 100–101, 116–17 [47–49, 51–53, 64–65]). Locke twice notes that, because Jesus distributed bread, he attracted “multitudes that followed him for the loaves” (103 [54], 144 [85]). When he spoke to them of eternal life, he often used “a mixture of allegorical terms of eating, and of bread” (103 [54]). The multitudes that followed Jesus, in other words, were driven not primarily by otherworldly hopes but by temporal hunger, although this hunger may have led them to long for a state where such needs would no longer have to be satisfied. Upon being miraculously fed, they were ready to force him to start a revolution (144 [85]; cf. 103 [55]), and it was only to confuse this mob so he could avoid this—which would have led to his death—that Jesus had recourse to rhetoric about another world and eating his flesh instead of bread (103 [55]).

According to Locke, it seems, the Gospel was preached to the poor because Jesus had a natural audience in the most destitute and least educated segments of Jewish society, as is evident from the Apostles themselves. They were “a company of poor, ignorant, illiterate men” who, with respect to prudence and intelligence, were “mere children.” But it was precisely these child-like men who were “convinced by the miracles” they saw Jesus do, and although they too “expected a temporal kingdom on earth,” they were “not too inquisitive” as to how a poor man from Bethlehem could overthrow the Roman yoke and lead the Jews to conquer the world. Whereas smarter, more urbane men would have asked questions, this hungry and unintelligent group was content to expect a miracle, and indeed, Locke informs us that it was precisely because of their simplicity that Jesus selected them (141 [82–83]).

But what of Jesus himself? As Locke describes him, he was everything the Apostles were not. Where they were simpleminded and naively trusting, he was shrewdly calculating and politically savvy. As previously mentioned, Locke claims to be the first to attribute to Jesus a mastery of rhetoric. As he narrates the history of Christ’s life he points out that Jesus always knew what to say on each occasion, when to retreat from public view, and, most importantly, when to let his miracles do his talking for him (see, e.g., 61–66

[34–38]). He employed this caution with “an eye to” the “straitness” produced by two opposing pressures. On one hand, he had to create “new converts” (121 [70]) from the masses and fan the flame of revolution just to the point where it was on the brink of burning out of control (cf. 74 [42]; 144 [85]). On the other hand, he had to demonstrate his innocence to the Romans, but not simply to protect himself. Rather, he never claimed to be King of the Jews within the hearing of the Romans or the Romanizing Pharisees (137 [80]). He spoke to them only of a kingdom in another world (71 [39–40]) so he would “not die as a criminal and a traitor” (138 [81]) but instead “be offered up [as] a lamb blameless and void of offense.” He wanted to be a martyr, to die, but to die innocent, satisfied not only in his own conscience but also in those of his murderers that he was free of fault (74 [42]; cf. also 62 [35], 120 [70], 136–38 [79–81]).

But why would Jesus seek to become a martyr? Locke provides a clear answer in his *Second Vindication*: “It is evident from Scripture, that our savior despised the shame and endured the cross for the joy set before him; which joy, it is also plain, was a kingdom.”⁶⁹ God had promised Jesus “an everlasting kingdom in heaven” (178 [109]), and “it is evident” that “he had regard to” this promise “in his sufferings” (177 [109]). Jesus, in other words, was a man of great political ambitions, but he was also astute enough to realize that in the atmosphere in which he found himself there was no worldly avenue for their fulfillment. Had he actually started a rebellion, he would have died a criminal (74 [42]). On the other hand, if he had tried to do his best within Judean society, as a poor man from Bethlehem he would have had no access to the community of the Pharisees. Thus deprived of an ordinary outlet, Jesus’s ambitions took a fanatical and otherworldly turn: he sought to give up his life to see his desires fulfilled in another world, and the religion that began after his death encouraged believers to do the same.

Locke’s account of Jesus’s life thus raises two questions. Since it links the belief in miracles among his followers to poverty, oppression, and backwardness, is it meant to raise doubts about them (and thus about the only evidence we have for Jesus’s divinity)? If Jesus was so shrewd, might he not have known how to play on the fears and superstitions of the multitude to convince them that he could produce bread from air, or even that he had risen from the dead? Moreover, if, as Jesus’s own example shows, the growth of otherworldly hopes among those of greater intelligence can be traced to thwarted ambition, what will be the fate of such hopes in a Lockean society where a poor carpenter will have more opportunity to rise in the world? Locke’s account provides reason to suspect that if the most astute and ambitious are given safer outlets for their desires, the kind of extreme religious spiritedness Jesus exhibited

⁶⁹*Works*, 7:235; Rabieh, “Reasonableness,” 953–35.

will become a thing of the past. Indeed, the remainder of *The Reasonableness* seeks to bring this change about.

Locke's Civic Theology

To draw the blueprints for a more reasonable, liberalized Christianity, Locke now provides a new beginning to the work—complete with a new account of the Fall—which recasts Jesus's achievement in unmistakably civic terms. For the “illiterate bulk of mankind” (1 [4–5]) not privy to the debunking account of Christianity's origins which he just provided, Locke now articulates a morally instructive theology according to which eternal life is a reward for “doing works meet for repentance” (171 [105]). Whereas Locke had earlier claimed that under the rational law of the Old Testament there was no forgiveness, he now reverses himself and says reason shows God to be “merciful” (231 [133]). Because reason teaches “that a man should forgive” even “his enemies, upon their repentance,” it can be presumed God will do so as well (232 [133]). Thus, the punitive God of the Hebrew Bible now seems quite unreasonable: since we all make mistakes, a law condemning us for “every tittle” (16–17 [12]) would create a society of condemned men whose “lawless exorbitancy” would be unconfined indeed. Locke can thus speak of the “reasonableness, or rather necessity” (172 [105]) of the New Covenant because, as this section of the work will show, the dominant role played by self-interest in our psychology ought to lead human beings to look upon law as something that exists because it is necessary, and a necessary law is therefore synonymous with a reasonable one.

Indeed, as Locke revisits the Fall he now presents a revised theology which centers around self-interest. Locke now states—as he had not earlier—that Adam was “the Son of God” (173 [106]) and that the reason he was originally immortal was because he shared in that aspect of “the likeness and image of his Father.” Eternal life, in other words, was something he inherited, but he lost that inheritance—and could not transmit it to his descendants (173 [106])—when he “forfeited [his] sonship” through his transgression (175 [106]). Eventually, however, God, “out of his infinite mercy,” became “willing” once again “to bestow eternal life on mortal men,” and to make this possible he sent his other son Jesus into the world (174 [106]). Since Jesus was conceived “in the womb of a virgin ... by the immediate power of God,” he “was properly” his son (174 [106]), and he thus enjoyed the same immortality as all those “who were the immediate sons of God” and who had not “forfeited that sonship by any transgression” (175 [106]). Jesus “was the heir of eternal life, as Adam should have been, had he continued in his filial duty” (175 [107]), and his chief accomplishment was to bring us quite literally back into God's family. For, according to Locke, Jesus enabled men to become “his brethren” and fellow sons of God “by adoption” (175 [107]). As God's children, Christians are also “joint-heirs with Christ”

(175 [107]; Rom. 8:15–17), and they are thus entitled “to share in that inheritance, which was his natural right” (175 [107]).

With this rather blasphemous account, Locke casts God’s gift of immortality to Jesus and mankind as an issue of inheritance in accordance with his own teaching about filial duty and paternal responsibility. According to that teaching, as it is outlined in the *Second Treatise*, the best way for parents to ensure their children’s loyalty is through their power to dispose of their property, and the strongest motive for children to remain obedient is their hope of attaining that reward.⁷⁰ Locke suggests that self-regarding and even mercenary motives guided God and Jesus in their relationships with one another, just as they ought to guide us in our attitudes towards both of them. As Locke tells the story, God wanted to grant Jesus a “kingdom in heaven” (178 [109]), though not simply out of parental duty. We know this because when he was on the cross, Jesus called to God demanding this kingdom: “I have glorified thee on earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do” (177 [109]; John 17:1–4). God and Jesus, in other words, had a deal: Jesus was to spread God’s glory on Earth in return for a kingdom in heaven, and now, having fulfilled his end of the bargain, Jesus does not shy from claiming what he is owed. Neither party to this contract was concerned chiefly with the well-being of the other, nor with any third party, although we stand to benefit a great deal incidentally. This is because, as Rabieh notes, if God had allowed the old, unforgiving law of works to stand, Jesus’s kingdom would be empty and there would be no one “to sing praises unto his name” (178 [110]). It was therefore “out of his mercy to mankind, and for the erecting of the kingdom of his Son, and furnishing it with subjects” (178 [110], emphasis added) that God, “for his Son’s sake,” decreed that all who were to “enrol themselves” in Jesus’s kingdom and live by its laws could be forgiven and join Jesus in eternal life (178 [110–11]).⁷¹

Now, this picture of a wholly rational divine cosmos appears tongue-in-cheek, but it also allegorically conveys Locke’s serious view of what, according to his rationalism, the driving forces behind human psychology are. Stated most succinctly, human beings “cannot be hindered” from pursuing their happiness (245 [149]). True self-sacrifice is impossible, and the task of any thoughtful legislator must be not to repress this overriding selfishness but to control it by appealing to it. According to Locke’s new presentation, this was Jesus’s great achievement: by teaching that eternal life is “the reward of justice or righteousness” (180 [111]) he made virtue “the most enriching purchase” and “the best bargain” (245 [150]). He reformed “the corrupt state of degenerate man” (180 [112]) by giving virtue encouragements appealing to “reason and interest and the care of ourselves,” for upon “this

⁷⁰Sec. 72; Pangle, *Modern Republicanism*, 238; Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 218–19.

⁷¹Rabieh, “Reasonableness,” 954.

foundation, *and upon this only, morality stands firm*" (245 [150], emphasis added). But Locke's analysis also implies that the traditional Christian teaching of charity was irrational because it suffered from a delusion characteristic of traditional morality more generally. Because he commanded selfless devotion, the New Testament's Jesus failed precisely where Locke says he succeeded.

Of course, there are many New Testament passages that stress the prospect of "treasure in heaven,"⁷² and these undoubtedly make it easier for Locke to suggest that Jesus approached morality in the spirit of economic calculation. But the Sermon on the Mount makes clear that salvation will only be given to the "perfect" or the "pure in heart" — those who give up everything they have without thought of reward.⁷³ By placing reward over sacrifice in our moral calculations, Locke's Christian ethic inverts that of the biblical Jesus. And yet, when Locke summarizes the Sermon, he only moderates its calls for radical humility, and he preserves those aspects of its self-abnegating teaching which can be redirected to support his new ethic. In Locke's synopsis, Jesus

not only forbids actual uncleanness, but all irregular desires, upon pain of hell-fire; causeless divorces; swearing in conversation, as well as forswearing in judgment; revenge; retaliation; ostentation of charity, of devotion, and of fasting; repetitions in prayer, covetousness, worldly care, censoriousness: and on the other side commands loving our enemies, doing good to those that hate us, blessing those that curse us, praying for those that spitefully use us; patience and meekness under injuries, forgiveness, liberality, [and] compassion. (188 [115])

Like that of the Gospels, Locke's Jesus condemns "worldly care" and calls for humility, but it is a humility far less radical than that demanded by his biblical counterpart. For example, although Locke's Jesus condemns worldly care, he stops short of telling us to give no thought to where our food or clothing will come from.⁷⁴ Whereas Locke's Jesus commands forgiveness (which we have seen to be part of a rational ethic), he does not call for turning the other cheek or counsel one who has been robbed of his cloak to give up his coat also, nor does he command his audience to pluck out their eyes for even looking at a woman in lust.⁷⁵ The Bible's Jesus forbids all divorces "saving for the cause of fornication"; Locke's forbids "causeless divorces" without specifying what those causes are, and he therefore leaves much room for such causes to proliferate.⁷⁶ The Lockean Jesus commands fidelity to promises, not getting angry easily, forgiving one's competitors and neighbors, and, in general, being polite (not "swearing in conversation" or being "censorious").

⁷²Cf., e.g., Matt. 6:20, 13:44ff.; Heb. 12:2.

⁷³Matt. 5:8, 48; cf. Matt. 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22.

⁷⁴Matt. 6:25–28.

⁷⁵Matt. 5:29, 39; Luke 6:29.

⁷⁶Matt. 5:29, 32. Cf. *Second Treatise*, sec. 77–82; Pangle, *Modern Republicanism*, 155.

He does not call charity a virtue, but he does consider “ostentation of charity” a vice. Most notably, he nowhere praises piety, but he condemns ostentation of devotion and fasting, as well as “repetitions in prayer.”⁷⁷ The effect of all this is to lay the groundwork for a liberalized Christian ethic, one which will encourage believers to be peaceable and accommodating towards others, to interpret Christ’s condemnations of wealth as encouraging habits of frugality and delayed gratification, and, in general, to take their piety a little less seriously. Most importantly, however, this new ethic will moderate significantly Christ’s teaching of humility. Indeed, by watering down Jesus’s emphasis on self-transcending love, Locke indicates the dangerous potential for such humility to turn into fanaticism.⁷⁸

The Necessity of Christianity

But while Locke thus seeks to weaken Christian spiritedness considerably to allow it to permit toleration, he has already indicated that some part of this tendency toward zealotry will need to be retained for the sake of civil religion. In the final section of the work, Locke will indicate the considerations that make this civic piety necessary, and he will also make clear how it can encompass the various faiths of a diverse society. To address the latter problem, Locke starts by acknowledging an issue that has been developing since the work’s new beginning: if Christ punishes people not “for unbelief, but only for their misdeeds” (222 [126]), would it not be unreasonable of him to deny immortality to virtuous people who lived before him or have no access to the Gospel? In response, Locke declares this to be a question whose answer “is so obvious and natural” that it is not even worth asking. Since nobody “was, or can be required to believe, what was never proposed to him to believe” (228 [128]), Christians are not the only ones with access to eternal life. Moreover, because “the light of reason” (231 [133]) indicates God’s mercy—and hence the possibility of immortality—all that is required is a belief that God is “a rewarder” of those who obey him (228 [130]; Heb.

⁷⁷The New Testament’s Jesus prohibits “vain repetitions” in prayer, but he does so in the name of sincere, inward piety (Matt. 6:5–8). Locke’s draws no such contrast.

⁷⁸Perhaps to highlight this connection, after his discussion of the Sermon Locke devotes several pages to quoting without comment some of the biblical Jesus’s most emphatic statements in praise of fanatical self-abnegation—for example, “be not fearful, or apprehensive of want” (196 [118]; Luke 12:15, 22, 32–48); “whosoever ... is not ready to forego all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple” (199 [119]; Luke 14:33). Locke’s attempt to moderate such sentiments, however, seems evident from the one time he offers an interpretation: according to Locke, Christ’s injunction to “sell all that thou hast, and give it to the poor” (203 [119]) was only a test of faith for his interlocutor (Luke 18:22; Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 216n73). For us, such selflessness is hardly necessary for salvation, and simple obedience to the moral law is sufficient.

11:6; cf. 24–5 [16], 228 [129–30]).⁷⁹ Indeed, this is why Paul (in Locke’s summary) taught that the faith of pre-Christian believers “was *nothing but* a steadfast reliance on the goodness and faithfulness of God, for those good things, which either *the light of nature*, or particular promises, had given them grounds to hope for” (229 [131], emphasis added).

At this point, then, Locke seems to have embraced a version of the natural religion which he had earlier rejected. When he acknowledges the objection that Acts 4:12 declares Jesus “the only true Messiah” and the sole way to salvation (233 [133–34]), he fails to answer it. Indeed, the most he can now claim for this view is that “the revelation of the Gospel” can be accepted because it fails to contradict reason’s teaching that we can attain immortality (232 [133]). But does reason actually teach this? Locke, of course, repeatedly says so, and, as previously mentioned, *The Reasonableness* has often been taken as his attempt to correct the *Essay*’s failure to prove God’s existence. But at this point in his argument, precisely when the reader is expecting such a proof, Locke instead asks a different question: Why do we need a savior? “What advantage have we by Jesus Christ?” (234 [134]). Had this been asked at the opening, it would have come across as shocking. But having since reduced faith in Christ first to a mere precondition for eternal life and then to something practically redundant, Locke has guided us to a place where we can ask why we should continue to read the New Testament. Do we really need to believe in a savior who performed miracles, or might natural religion do just as well?

This question of what advantage we have by Christian revelation will guide Locke through the remainder of the work, and it is inextricably linked to the more fundamental question of how reason can demonstrate God’s otherworldly providence. Indeed, it might be supposed that we need revelation because we have no natural knowledge of the biblical God’s existence. This is a possibility Locke seems to endorse when he first responds to his hypothetical questioner by saying it should be “reply enough” simply to say that our “short views” and weak understandings cannot account for Jesus’s coming (235–36 [134]). But since reason by definition cannot accept such a proposition dogmatically, this “explanation” is hardly satisfying. It seems to pull the rug out from under Locke’s promise to provide a proof of Christian revelation, and it may be a quiet indication that he actually cannot give a rational demonstration of God’s providence. The religion of reason may not be so reasonable after all, and those who accept it may not recognize the degree to which their outlooks rest on unproven dogmas. But what of those few who come to see this and refuse to ground their opinions on “borrowed or begg’d foundations”?⁸⁰ What of

⁷⁹This condition also makes salvation available to non-Christians with access to the Gospel. Later Locke will subsume Islam (and by implication, Judaism) under the heading of Christianity (239 [137]).

⁸⁰*Essay* I.4.25.

those partisans of the Radical Enlightenment for whom Locke claims to have written this work? Might there be a compelling reason for them to follow him in claiming that reason endorses Christianity? For those who cannot be satisfied simply with his assurances, Locke offers a second explanation which he says has the “wherewithal to satisfy the curious and inquisitive,” one that concerns the “great and many advantages we receive” by Jesus’s coming as well as the “need” for it (236 [134–35]). Recalling his earlier promise to show the “reasonableness, or rather necessity” of Christianity (172 [105]), we are prompted to ask whether there is a need for those who take their bearings by reason to propagate a belief in such things as our understandings cannot account for. Might Christianity be “reasonable” insofar as it can deliver something which reason requires but cannot itself provide?

Locke, at any rate, lends credence to such suspicions when he suddenly and dogmatically declares that there is undeniable “evidence of our Saviour’s mission from heaven, in the multitude of miracles he did before all sorts of people,” so much so that Jesus’s words “cannot but be received as the oracles of God” (237 [135]). Rather strangely, Locke even claims that Christ’s miracles were so self-evidently divine that “they never were, or could be denied by any of the enemies or opposers of Christianity” (237 [135]). But since “where the miracle is admitted, the doctrine cannot be rejected,”⁸¹ it is hard to see how it is even logically possible for Christianity’s opponents to have accepted Jesus’s miracles. Thus, as numerous commentators have noted, Locke’s statement that even “Julian himself” accepted these miracles is plainly ironic.⁸² Julian would not “have failed to have proclaimed and exposed it, if he could have detected any falsehood in the history of the Gospel” (240 [138]), but he did precisely this: he published an anti-Christian critique.⁸³ His example thus quietly indicates that those who lack neither “skill nor power to inquire into the truth” should actually be led by their unassisted reason *away* from a belief in miracles and the Christian God.⁸⁴

But if Locke’s more subtle teaching is meant to sow religious doubt, it also indicates the need to keep that doubt confined to a few. His rather transparent comments about Julian are soon overshadowed by repeated assertions that what the Christian “philosophers” have received from revelation is rational

⁸¹John Locke, “A Discourse of Miracles,” in *Works*, 9:259; but cf. Rabieh, “Reasonableness,” 950–51, on Locke’s treatment of the problem of false prophecy.

⁸²Forde, “Natural Law,” 406; Rabieh, “Reasonableness,” 950; Owen, “Locke’s Case,” 163–65; Pangle, *Modern Republicanism*, 201; Zuckert, *Launching Liberalism*, 161.

⁸³Zuckert, *Launching Liberalism*, 161.

⁸⁴As Windstrup notes, the *Third Letter* explicitly states that the veracity of Christ’s resurrection cannot be known by reason. The effect of this is baldly to “deny the reasonableness of Christianity” (George Windstrup, “Freedom and Authority: The Ancient Faith of Locke’s *Letter on Toleration*,” *Review of Politics* 44, no. 2 [1982]: 248). See Locke, *Works*, 6:144.

(241 [140]) and that “the works of nature ... sufficiently evidence a Deity” (238 [135]).⁸⁵ The model for his rationalism, and his advice to his future followers, can thus be seen in his revised version of Julian, a vigorous seeker after truth who nonetheless made sure to endorse Christ’s miracles when speaking in public. As Locke states elsewhere, even unbelievers have a powerful incentive to “magnifie those Rules [of morality] to *others*, from whose observance of them, he is sure to reap Advantage to himself.” And because our psychology is such that appeals to virtue’s inherent nobility cannot be relied upon, considerations “of Interest, as well as Conviction” indicate everyone’s need to “cry up that for Sacred; which if once trampled on, and prophaned, he himself cannot be safe nor secure.”⁸⁶ In this respect, the behavior of philosophers should be no different, and they even have a special role in giving men “a clear knowledge of their duty” (241 [138]).

Put differently, civil religion is necessary because considerations of advantage will lead people to recommend morality only to “others.” As previously mentioned, “the portion of the righteous” is “pretty scanty in this world” (245 [148]). It may be, as Locke claims, that the virtue of all would be conducive to the happiness of all (243 [147]), but such long-term reasoning is hardly persuasive from the point of view of the individual, who may learn a valuable lesson from the fate of the just, or who may think his own good would be maximized if virtue were to be practiced by everyone but himself.⁸⁷ This, it seems, is as far as a purely rational ethic can take us, and that is why, prior to Jesus, “human reason unassisted failed men in its great and proper business of morality” (241 [140]). Because the ancient philosophers were not lawgivers, even if they had disseminated a teaching about another life, men could have accepted or rejected it as they pleased without considering the consequences (242 [141]). Locke thus presents the time before Christ as one of moral chaos, when morality was not yet placed upon its “true foundations” (243 [144])⁸⁸ because its advocates fruitlessly appealed only to virtue’s intrinsic “excellency” (245 [149]). Most importantly, however, “Plato, and the soberest of the [ancient] philosophers” failed because they lacked the courage to challenge the dominant superstitions of their age: fearing the fate of Socrates, they “were fain, in their outward professions and worship, to go with the herd, and keep to the religion established by law” (238 [136]).

Now, this assertion that society was a shambles prior to Christianity seems exaggerated, but it has a serious core. For although Locke says that Christ’s revelation put an end to this chaos, he also acknowledges that Christianity

⁸⁵Cf. Pangle, *Modern Republicanism*, 215.

⁸⁶*Essay* I.3.6, emphasis added.

⁸⁷Pangle, *Modern Republicanism*, 190–91.

⁸⁸Reading with Locke, *Reasonableness*, ed. Higgins-Biddle, 154; Rabieh, “Reasonableness,” 943n9.

historically has produced “schisms, separations, contentions, animosities, quarrels, blood and butchery.”⁸⁹ Locke’s picture of life before Jesus, in other words, is more accurately a picture of life before himself. It is Locke, after all, who is attempting to make Christianity more humane and tolerant and who, by reinterpreting the Bible in a way that links salvation to works rather than faith, is propagating a new religion that makes virtue “the best bargain” (245 [150]). Prior to this, in the Middle Ages as in antiquity, there were certainly fleeting moments of stability and civilization—a Charlemagne here, an Augustus there—but society lacked the religious and cultural foundation necessary to keep it more than a step removed from barbarism (to say nothing of tyranny). By engaging in an ambitious project challenging the dominant superstition of his age, Locke not only provides this, but he suggests he is doing what is most conducive to his own well-being as a philosopher. For by remaining hidden on the margins of society, by refusing to “cry up” the belief in miracles and an afterlife, the ancient philosophers left themselves dependent on their cities’ good graces. On the other hand, when such beliefs are made to support toleration, the benefits for the quest for truth will be considerable⁹⁰ and far outweigh the costs incurred in the need to keep one’s deepest opinions to oneself.

Conclusion

At the core of Locke’s analysis of the Bible, then, there rests a delicate, prudentially minded project of religious statesmanship—one which seeks to preserve some of the self-sacrificial spiritedness of the Sermon on the Mount, but which also attempts to moderate it, to subordinate it to a concern for individual well-being, and thereby to rechannel it toward a defense of the liberal republic and the new doctrine of natural rights. The result of this, as Locke envisions it, will be a civil religion capacious enough to include all faiths (both Christian and non-Christian) that consider toleration the chief mark of the true church. Because these churches will respect one another as fellow adherents of religious truth, they will also regard toleration not as an openness to all ways of life but as the one true way—something worth defending with all the religious zeal such a belief can muster.

Now, since Locke’s project gives the state power to marshal religious fanaticism, it might contain inherent risks. But if it is true, as Locke believes, that fanaticism is rooted not only in the belief in orthodoxy,⁹¹ but also in many of the same causes that give rise to petty criminality—poverty, oppression, and ignorance—then a liberal state which ensures security and prosperity will

⁸⁹*Works*, 7:358.

⁹⁰*Letter*, 46.

⁹¹Cf., in addition to the sections of the *Letter* discussed above, Locke’s discussion of “enthusiasm” in *Essay* IV.19.

considerably weaken religious spiritedness. And for the portion of it that must remain—for no society can ever be entirely good for everyone in it—Locke is confident that zealotry can be turned to the service of his own doctrine of natural rights. Of course, since this doctrine is in one sense a teaching about the good of the individual, this project might seem beset with theoretical difficulties as well as practical ones—for how, after all, can one place self-sacrifice in the service of self-interest? But Locke might respond that this objection misses the complex character of his moral teaching, and this can be seen in the tremendous success it has had in shaping liberal democracy. For not only do virtually all religious groups in liberal society today accept Locke's theology of toleration, but that theology has proved to be the robust source of admirable moral dedication: one need only read the Gettysburg Address to see the power Lockean ideals of liberty and equality have to inspire sacrifice. From the perspective of the most sober rationalism, this may mean that life in a Lockean republic is not strictly good for those called on to make such sacrifices, but that is precisely why Locke thinks even a society of "possessive individualists"⁹² will need a religious basis. To this we could add that such sacrifices will be less necessary under a liberal regime than under all others.

And yet, these considerations do not put away every misgiving. For although almost all religions in liberal society adhere to Locke's theology, their influence is waning, and it seems reasonable to assign the kind of thinking Locke promoted some responsibility for this. Since Locke defends the reasonableness of religion in terms of its necessity—as an instrumental means for inculcating morality—it should not be shocking that the members of his philosophic audience eventually concluded that there was no longer a need to endorse it, especially when there seemed to be evidence that morality could stand on its own. After all, if the main thing one receives in church is an invocation to be a good person, one might question why that cannot be attained elsewhere. Locke, to be sure, would deny this and insist that most people have a special need to hear accounts of miracles, but the utilitarian logic he employs to support that claim may leave him open to the charge that he has overlooked or even undermined what is truly distinct and attractive about religion.

With these considerations in mind, I think we are in a better position to understand the dissatisfactions and anxieties which are troubling liberal society today, and which may even have been present since its inception. As early as 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that there is something about political life in modern democracies conducive to self-doubt: the same democratic man who often appears so proud "nonetheless despises himself to the point that he believes himself made only to taste vulgar

⁹²C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962).

pleasures.”⁹³ If this is so, then it may be a sign that, the previous considerations notwithstanding, liberalism has not provided us with sufficient opportunities for self-transcending dedication. Or rather, it might be better to say that, to the extent it has done so, it has drawn upon psychological bases which are alien to the political science informing it. Although Locke’s call for the adherents of his new piety to take risks and “defend their natural Rights ... with Arms” reminds us of our admiration for our liberal martyrs, it still seems necessary to ask how he can account for that sentiment. Given the psychology of religion he conveys in *The Reasonableness*, how can we make sense of that feeling of being moved that may occur when we do read the Gettysburg Address or stand on the beach at Normandy? If men really “cannot be hindered” from pursuing their happiness, how can we account for our admiration of those who have seemingly taken another path?

Here one must be cautious, as a full analysis of Locke’s psychology would require a substantive engagement with the *Essay*. Nevertheless, Locke’s comments in *The Reasonableness* on the primacy of self-interest, together with his account of the origins of Christianity, have given us sufficient ground to raise these questions. After all, one reason why Locke’s picture of Jesus’s crucifixion is so potentially offensive is that many people admire his sacrifice; they consider it praiseworthy because of its selflessness, and so Locke’s allegation that Jesus merely accepted death as a price worth paying for a greater good is insulting not just to Christians, but to all those who would take pride in voluntarily renouncing their happiness.⁹⁴ Although Locke’s account of Jesus’s life is clearly crafted with a great deal of attention to the potential reactions of his pious contemporaries, it nevertheless seems unclear whether he can adequately account for those feelings of pride and offense. And if Locke’s liberal theory has difficulty explaining this, it may help show why we, the heirs of his political philosophy, often find we cannot account for our feeling that a way of life devoted simply to the pursuit of our own good may not quite be enough.

⁹³Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. and trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 604.

⁹⁴“Locke bleaches out the distinctiveness of Jesus’s teachings about the conduct of life, even while he makes the Sermon on the Mount ... his main moral text. It is incredible that he replaces *agape* by divine law and clear-cut duties. This move should offend religious and nonreligious people equally. ... The sermon teaches magnanimity, forgiveness, and self-giving; it teaches self-denial to the point of self-loss. Locke foregoes almost all moral and supramoral radiance” (Kateb, “Locke,” 1032).