

Book Review

John Colman: *Everyone Orthodox to Themselves: John Locke and his American Students on Religion and Liberal Society*. (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2023. Pp.xiv, 230.)

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Liberalism, in one form or another, is contemporary Americans' dominant ideological commitment. In recent years, however, scholars like Patrick Deneen and Stephen Wolfe have challenged that reigning orthodoxy and gained a significant foothold for explicitly non-liberal views in American public discourse. These "postliberal" thinkers cast doubt on the desirability of America's present secularism and suggest that the nation should reintegrate religious faith and governance.

This is the context for John Colman's *Everyone Orthodox to Themselves*. After reviewing in the book's opening pages what he sees as a crisis of "renewed threats to religious liberty and free inquiry by a rising tide of illiberalism and incivility" (15), Colman sets out to demonstrate two complementary theses: First, orthodox faith—understood as "the idea that belief in a particular set of doctrines and dogmas [is] incontrovertibly necessary in order to be saved" (2)—is incompatible with liberal commitments to freedom of speech and religion. Second, a possible solution is to be found in the project of John Locke and several American founders to modify traditional religion by deemphasizing doctrine. For these thinkers, religion must become little more than "a shorthand education into the moral law that in principle [is] discoverable by way of unassisted reason" (3).

In his first chapter, Colman argues that the mainstream of historical Christianity, far from serving as liberalism's foundation, was directly opposed to its development. Puritan America, Colman notes, practiced something akin to Protestant integralism (18), and therefore needed to be replaced if liberal commitments were to dominate. The puritan belief that freedom means being "free only to 'do what God requires' is precisely what the individual right to religious liberty was meant to do away with" (19). Going back further, Colman reminds the reader that the Christian tradition historically has tended to side with Augustine's justification of coercion for the sake of people's spiritual good rather than with an individual right to sole responsibility for one's own religious beliefs (26).

The solution that Coleman puts forward as worthy of attention takes form in chapter 2, which focuses on Locke: Traditional faiths must be reformed to refocus them from doctrine to morality. Strictly speaking, it is not belief in

doctrine but intellectual hubris that is the real problem: "Locke does not take issue with faith as such but with the arrogation of infallibility each sect ascribes to their own confession" (40). Given disagreement between those supposedly infallible sects, all that can really be required of a person is that each submit to the truth as he or she understands it. One must accept "all morally serious men as worthy of the name Christian" (44–45). An emphasis on doctrine, by contrast, encourages persecution and the stifling of free inquiry that might divert people from accepted dogma. Given the intellectual variety consequent upon free inquiry, in fact, "orthodoxy by its very nature is contrary to the love of truth" (81). Religion is still necessary as a sort of elementary version of the natural law that philosophers might discover without its aid, according to Colman's Locke (71), but to serve this function, it must be reformed to teach that "God is primarily concerned with right action, not correct belief" (54).

The balance of the book restates and extends this argument by analyzing the thought of three American Founders. Chapter 3 documents on the part of Benjamin Franklin a nearly identical position to the one sketched in chapter 2: Recognizing one's own fallibility forbids judging others based on the truth of their beliefs (84), and so one should conclude that "faith is only a means of encouraging morality," not an end itself (100). Chapter 4 argues that the surface piety of James Madison's Memorial and Remonstrance conceals Madison's more fundamental position: People are self-owners, who have property rights in their opinions (126). In addition, revelation goes well beyond "what can be known and rationally proven about God" (132). For both reasons, public opinion must be cultivated to replace doctrinal certainty with an attitude of toleration. Finally, chapter 5 details Thomas Jefferson's well-known hope that free inquiry would demonstrate the irrationality of various Christian doctrines, and it identifies the ground of Jefferson's hope in metaphysical materialism. By purging Christianity of its supernatural elements, Jefferson would thus reduce it to the pure diamonds of Jesus' moral teaching, devoid of "the soul-rescuing spirit" that threatens to interfere with others' free thought (172).

Colman has produced a useful and valuable work on several levels. His articulation of his chosen thinkers' positions is erudite and extensively documented. In some cases, this results in a helpful overview of familiar territory, as with Franklin's desire to refocus colonial Americans from doctrinal disputes to practical morality. In others, as with Jefferson's thoroughgoing materialism, the book provides helpful background to its subject's more familiar beliefs. And on a more abstract level, Colman prods contemporary American public discourse in interesting ways. Chapter 1, for example, exposes a tension—often complacently neglected—between the Christian tradition and a political regime that disavows acting for the good of one's neighbor's soul.

The most salient difficulty with the book may be pinning down its precise significance vis-à-vis the postliberalism it targets. One might assume Colman

intends an appeal to the Founders' authority against the postliberal movement. He himself acknowledges, however, that the thinkers he analyzes are not representative (4). As scholars like Vincent Muñoz and James Hutson have established, the Founding was generally quite friendly to some integration of Christianity and politics. Alternatively, Colman seems to propose Locke's and his disciples' perspectives on their own philosophical merits (15). Yet this approach, too, involves serious difficulties the book does not acknowledge. The central argument it details from Locke to Jefferson rests on two assumptions to which time has decidedly not been kind. It consistently assumes that certainty is the only possible motive for allowing religious doctrine to guide politics. But certainty is never the question in rational decision-making—reasonable belief is. To remove the motive for doctrine to influence politics, one would have to foster widespread agnosticism, not mere intellectual humility. The argument also consistently assumes that free inquiry equals virtuous and rational inquiry. But if contemporary social science has established anything, it is the role of the subconscious and irrational in guiding much human reasoning. People typically rationalize believing what they wish, not what reason dictates (see, e.g., Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind* [New York: Vintage: 2012]). These unacknowledged truths seriously problematize the argument's philosophical force.

Indeed, one might have serious doubts about the argument's very coherence. As Colman correctly notes, the motive behind much liberal thinking is to remove "the inherently contentious, divisive question of the good" from public life in order to promote peaceful coexistence (177). Against the common charge that such "neutrality" is itself nonneutral, Colman defends "intolerance of the intolerant" as liberalism's "security for its own perpetuation" (39). But if one seeks to secure toleration via reforms that amount to the eradication of traditional religious beliefs, does this really achieve the goal of peaceful coexistence? Or has liberalism itself merely become one more domineering faith, demanding unquestioned sway in the public sphere?

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