

# JOHN LOCKE ON ATHEISM, CATHOLICISM, ANTINOMIANISM, AND DEISM<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Locke's religious conception of morality played a primary role in shaping his views on toleration and salvation. In *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), Locke excluded from toleration atheists, whom he considered inherently immoral, and Roman Catholics, whose morals he judged harmful to society. In *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), he turned to Christian revelation in search of the foundations of morality. His moralist soteriology denied the possibility of salvation to those who, like antinomians and deists, rejected Christ's moral and salvific message. To Locke, antinomians denied any importance to good works, while deists relied on natural reason alone, thus neglecting the limits of unassisted reason and the weakness of human nature. Nevertheless, Locke's hostility to antinomianism and deism did not lead him to invoke the civil power against antinomians and deists, whom he judged still able to understand, albeit partially and imperfectly, the divine law and, thus, to behave morally.

## KEYWORDS

Antinomianism, atheism, Catholicism, deism, Locke

## 1. INTRODUCTION

John Locke is widely known as the founder of modern empiricism and the father of political liberalism. However, his works also denote a strong interest

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in a number of religious subjects, such as religious toleration, the fundamentals of Christianity, and the pursuit of eternal salvation in accordance with Christ's salvific message. He indeed had a markedly religious conception of life, which strongly influenced his reflections on morality and politics, regarding, especially, the issue of toleration and the moral foundations of civil society. He wrote several works on the subject of toleration, including the celebrated *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, composed in 1685 and published in 1689.<sup>2</sup> Although Locke's theory of toleration in the *Letter* was significantly less inclusive than Spinoza's philosophical advocacy of freedom of conscience and Bayle's skeptical justification of wide toleration, he provided convincing arguments to assert the separation between the state and religious societies. In the *Letter*, he developed a theoretical model to regulate the relations between the political authorities and religious organizations, as well as between different religious groups. To this purpose, he limited the civil magistrate's power to the preservation and promotion of the citizens' civil interests (i.e. life, property, and freedom) and he forbade religious societies to interfere in political affairs, violate other religious groups' rights, and hinder anyone's enjoyment of their inalienable civil rights.<sup>3</sup> Locke further developed his tolerationism in his major book of theology, *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), a work of Protestant irenicism advocating peace among Christians and stressing the importance of morality in the pursuit of salvation.<sup>4</sup>

2 *A Letter Concerning Toleration* was written and first published in Latin: [John Locke], *Epistola de Tolerantia* (Gouda, 1689). It was soon translated into English: [John Locke], *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, [trans. William Popple] (London, 1689). In this article, I refer to the following edition: John Locke, "A Letter Concerning Toleration", in John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration and Other Writings*, ed. Mark Goldie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010), pp. 1-67. After publishing the *Letter*, Locke engaged in a debate with the Oxford chaplain Jonas Proast, a supporter of religious uniformity. During this debate, Locke wrote three more "letters" on toleration in 1690, 1692, and 1704. A selection of the works that Locke and Proast wrote during this dispute is in Richard Vernon (ed.), *Locke on Toleration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). There are several essays on the Locke-Proast debate, including three book-length monographs. See Richard Vernon, *The Career of Toleration: John Locke, Jonas Proast, and after* (Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997); Adam Wolfson, *Persecution or Toleration: An Explication of the Locke-Proast Quarrel, 1689-1704* (Lanham: Lexington, 2010); John William Tate, *Liberty, Toleration and Equality: John Locke, Jonas Proast and the Letters Concerning Toleration* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

3 Locke, "Letter", pp. 12-24.

4 In this article, I refer to the Clarendon critical edition of the *Reasonableness*. John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity, as Delivered in the Scriptures*, ed. John C. Higgins-Biddle (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

It is well known that Locke made two significant exceptions to toleration in the *Letter*, as he denied this “privilege” to atheists and Roman Catholics. Moreover, in the *Reasonableness* and in the two vindications of this work, which he wrote during a dispute with the ultra-Calvinistic divine John Edwards, he harshly criticized antinomianism and deism.<sup>5</sup> I believe that it was mainly Locke’s religious conception of life and morality to motivate his intolerance of atheists and Catholics and his hostility to antinomianism and deism. Locke described belief in a divine creator and legislator, who expects humans to behave virtuously, as necessary to morality in several works, including the manuscript *Essays on the Law of Nature* (1664), *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, and *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), in which he called attention to the limits of unassisted reason in religious and moral matters. Finally, in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, he argued that only Christ, revealing the Law of Faith, had established a sound system of ethics, whereas natural reason alone had always failed to establish

5 Following the publication of the *Reasonableness*, John Edwards (a son of the famous or, to some, notorious heresiographer Thomas Edwards) and others accused Locke of anti-Trinitarianism. In four books published in the second half of the 1690s, Edwards depicted Locke as a Socinian – namely, as a follower of the ideas of the anti-Trinitarian and anti-Calvinist theologian Faustus Socinus and his disciples. Locke had actually abstained from talking of the Trinity in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* because, in this book, he had concentrated only on the fundamentals of Christianity, not on what he called “disputed doctrines”. Therefore, in his two vindications of the *Reasonableness*, Locke rejected Edwards’s charge. Nonetheless, he abstained from either asserting or denying belief in the Trinity, as he also did in his controversy with Bishop Edward Stillingfleet, who argued that Locke’s way of ideas could lead to the denial of the Trinitarian dogma, as we will see below. However, Locke’s manuscripts, especially *Adversaria Theologica*, composed shortly before the *Reasonableness*, show that he was familiar with the Socinians’ works, many of which he owned in his library, and with the Socinians’ denial of the Trinity, which, nevertheless, he never endorsed expressly. See John Locke, “Adversaria Theologica 94”, in John Locke, *Writings on Religion*, ed. Victor Nuovo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 19-33 (23-28). Moreover, Locke’s comments on Ephesians 1:10 in *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St Paul* (published posthumously in 1707) indicate that Locke, unlike the Socinians, believed in Christ’s pre-existence to his human birth, though not in Christ’s divinity. See John Locke, *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St Paul to the Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, Ephesians*, ed. Arthur W. Wainwright, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), Eph. 1:10. On Locke’s position on the Trinity and his attitude towards Socinianism, see Arthur W. Wainwright, “Introduction” to Locke, *Paraphrase*, vol. 1, pp. 1-88 (38); John Higgins-Biddle, “Introduction” to Locke, *Reasonableness*, pp. xv-cxv (xlii-lx); John Marshall, “Locke, Socinianism, ‘Socinianism’, and Unitarianism”, in M.A. Stewart (ed.), *English Philosophy in the Age of Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. 111-182; Stephen D. Snobelen, “Socinianism, Heresy and John Locke’s *Reasonableness of Christianity*”, *Enlightenment and Dissent*, 20 (2001): pp. 88-125; Victor Nuovo, *Christianity, Antiquity, and Enlightenment: Interpretations of Locke* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), pp. 21-51, 36-43, 75-101.

morality on solid grounds. One of the main reasons behind Locke's moral concerns is his conviction that civil coexistence necessitates acceptable moral standards. As J.B. Schneewind has noted in an excellent essay on Locke's moral philosophy:

[Locke] was concerned to combat both skeptical doubts about morality and enthusiastic claims to insight into it. Skepticism and enthusiasm both work against the possibility of constructing a decent and stable society. [...] And only an understanding of morality to which God was essential could win the assent of the vast majority of Europeans.<sup>6</sup>

Locke's stress on the necessity of decent standards of morality to build a secure, stable society was behind his denial of toleration, in the *Letter*, not only to atheists, but also to Roman Catholics. He considered atheists unable to appreciate any moral law because of their failure to acknowledge the existence of a divine creator and legislator. Concerning Catholics, he accused them of holding some moral ideas incompatible with ordinary moral rules. Locke's moral concerns also led him to attack antinomianism and deism in the *Reasonableness*. He argued that belief in predestination, which was at the basis of antinomianism, denied any importance to good works and, thus, hindered the achievement of salvation. Moreover, he blamed deists for falling into the opposite extreme, because deists relied on natural reason alone to direct their conduct. To Locke, the deists' neglect of the limits of unassisted reason, disregard of the weakness of human nature, and denial of the need for divine assistance made salvation impossible. Nevertheless, Locke's hostility to antinomianism and deism did not lead him to declare antinomians and deists intolerable in the civil commonwealth. In fact, whereas to Locke atheism and some moral ideas held by Catholics were intrinsically immoral, antinomians and deists believed in a divine creator and legislator. Therefore, they were able to appreciate and grasp, albeit partially and imperfectly, the divine law and to behave as at least minimally decent members of society.

In this article, I reconstruct the making of Locke's moral views from the 1660s to his later theological writings, exploring how his religious conception of life and morality shaped his approach to toleration and salvation, particularly in *A Letter Concerning Toleration* and *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. Then, I examine how Locke's preoccupation with morality and religion conditioned his considerations on atheism, Catholicism, antinomianism, and deism, besides clarifying what Locke meant when he

6 J.B. Schneewind, "Locke's Moral Philosophy", in Vere Chappell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 199-225 (219).

addressed these views on religion.<sup>7</sup> In this regard, I point out that, although Locke kept the issues of salvation and toleration separate since, at least, *An Essay Concerning Toleration* of 1667, his religious conception of morality always prevented him from endorsing complete freedom of conscience and, instead, enabled him to advocate only limited forms of religious toleration.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. THE QUESTION OF MORALITY FROM THE ESSAYS ON THE LAW OF NATURE TO AN ESSAY CONCERNING HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

Starting with the manuscript *Essays on the Law of Nature*, composed in 1664, Locke struggled to find rational grounds for morality. Locke did not question the existence, rationality, and demonstrability of morality in itself. Whereas he always dismissed innate ideas, including innate moral ideas, he did not deny the existence of innate faculties. In this regard, Nicholas Wolterstorff has observed that, in Locke's ethics, "what is innate in us is not the knowledge of moral obligations but the capacity for coming to know about moral obligations".<sup>9</sup> Locke indeed believed in the actuality and effectiveness of what Franziska Quabeck has defined "the innate judge evaluating man's actions",<sup>10</sup> namely conscience. In the *Essays on the Law of Nature*, he made

7 In this article, I concentrate on Locke's views on atheism and Roman Catholics, whom he expressly excluded from toleration in the *Letter*, and on antinomians and deists, whose views on morality and salvation he openly criticized in his later writings on religion. Concerning Locke's considerations on non-Christian believers, such as heathens, Jews, and Muslims, in his theological works, see another article of mine: Diego Lucci, "Political Scepticism, Moral Scepticism, and the Scope and Limits of Toleration in John Locke", *Yearbook of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies*, 3 (2018): pp. 109-143. On Locke and the Jews, see, also, Raffaele Russo, "Locke and the Jews: From Toleration to the Destruction of the Temple", *Locke Studies*, 2 (2002): pp. 199-223.

8 John Locke, "An Essay Concerning Toleration", in John Locke, *Political Writings*, ed. David Wootton (London, 1993), pp. 186-210. In his first work on toleration, the manuscript *Two Tracts* (1660-1662), written against Edward Bagshaw's tolerationist ideas, Locke supported religious uniformity, thus expressing a position different to Locke's views in his later writings on this subject. See John Locke, *Two Tracts on Government*, ed. Philip Abrams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); Edward Bagshaw, *The Great Question concerning Things Indifferent in Religious Worship* (London: s.n., 1660). Between the *Essay* of 1667 and the *Letter*, Locke wrote several other manuscripts in favor of religious toleration. Many of these manuscripts have been published in John Locke, *Political Essays*, ed. Mark Goldie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

9 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 140.

10 Franziska Quabeck, *John Locke's Concept of Natural Law from the Essays on the Law of Nature to the Second Treatise of Government* (Zurich-Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2013), p. 32.

reference to conscience in an attempt to prove the existence of the Law of Nature:

The second argument which proves the existence of a law of nature can be derived from men's consciences; from the fact, namely, that "no one who commits a wicked action is acquitted in his own judgement". Thus the sentence which everyone passes on himself testifies that there is a law of nature. For if there were no law of nature which reason declares we must show ourselves obedient to, how does it come to pass that the conscience of people who recognize the precepts of no other law whereby they are either guided or bound in duty, nevertheless passes judgement upon their life and conduct and either acquits or declares guilty, seeing that without some law no judgement can be pronounced? This law, then, is not written, but innate, i.e. natural.<sup>11</sup>

Locke's notion of conscience in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is essentially the same as in the *Essays on the Law of Nature*. In *Essay* I.iii.8, he defines conscience as "our own Opinion or Judgment of the Moral Rectitude or Pravity of our own Actions".<sup>12</sup> Moreover, *Essay* I.iii.8-9 shows that what Locke means by "Opinion or Judgment" is not mere awareness of the righteousness or wrongness of our actions: it is, in fact, consciousness accompanied by feelings of confidence and serenity, in the case of just actions, or by remorse, in the case of wrong deeds.<sup>13</sup> He also employed this notion of conscience in *Essay* II.xxvii.22, which is part of the chapter on "Identity and Diversity", added, in 1694, to the second edition of the *Essay*. In this chapter, Locke maintains that, on Judgment Day, everyone "shall receive his Doom, his Conscience accusing or excusing him".<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, Locke's recognition of this "innate judge", namely conscience, is not accompanied by a demonstration of the foundations of morality based on self-evident principles and hence consistent with his way of ideas, although he believed that morality was capable of rational demonstration, at least in theory. Both the *Essays on the Law of Nature* and *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* indeed hint at belief in God as necessary to moral conduct.

Whereas Locke recognized the limits of human understanding and rejected innatism, he argued that human beings could deduce God's existence from the observation of Creation. Thus, in the *Essays on the Law of Nature* and *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, he made use of the argument from

<sup>11</sup> John Locke, *Essays on the Law of Nature*, ed. Wolfgang von Leyden (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), p. 117.

<sup>12</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), I.iii.8, p. 70.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, I.iii.8-9, p. 70.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, II.xxvii.22, p. 344.

design and the anthropological argument to prove God's existence.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, he considered God as not only the creator, but also a wise and benevolent legislator, and he thought that belief in a divine creator and legislator was crucial to morality: as he wrote in *Essay* I.iv.8: "Without a Notion of a Law-maker, it is impossible to have a Notion of a Law, and an Obligation to observe it".<sup>16</sup> He expressed the same view in *Essay* IV.iii.18, where he declared morality capable of demonstration and compared it to mathematics:

The *Idea* of a supreme Being, infinite in Power, Goodness, and Wisdom, whose Workmanship we are, and on whom we depend; and the *Idea* of our selves, as understanding, rational Beings, being such as are clear in us, would, I suppose, if duly considered, and pursued, afford such Foundations of our Duty and Rules of Action, as might place *Morality amongst the Sciences capable of Demonstration* wherein I doubt not, but from self-evident Propositions, by necessary Consequences, as incontestable as those in Mathematicks, the measures of right and wrong might be made out, to any one that will apply himself with the same Indifferency and Attention to the one, as he does to the other of these Sciences.<sup>17</sup>

However, Locke doubted that natural reason alone could *actually* demonstrate moral ideas and, thus, find solid grounds for morality. He called attention to the difficulties that natural reason meets when trying to demonstrate moral ideas – difficulties like their unfitness for sensible representation and their complexity:

[W]e have no sensible marks that resemble [moral ideas], whereby we can set them down; we have nothing but Words to express them by: which though, when written, they remain the same, yet the *Ideas* they stand for, may change in the same Man; and 'tis very seldom, that they are not different in different Persons. *Secondly*, Another thing that makes the greater difficulty in *Ethicks*, is, That *moral Ideas* are commonly more complex than those of the Figures ordinarily considered in Mathematicks.<sup>18</sup>

Locke noted that these difficulties "may in a good measure be *remedied* by Definitions, setting down that Collection of simple *Ideas*, which every Term shall stand for; and then using the Terms steadily and constantly for that precise Collection".<sup>19</sup> However, he admitted that the limits of human

15 Locke, *Essays on the Law of Nature*, pp. 109, 147-159; Locke, *Essay*, I.iv.9 (p. 89), II.xxiii.12 (pp. 302-303), IV.x.1-6 (pp. 619-621). I give more details of Locke's use of these arguments below in this article, specifically in the section regarding Locke's stance against atheism.

16 *Ibidem*, I.iv.8, p. 87.

17 *Ibidem*, IV.iii.18, p. 549.

18 *Ibidem*, IV.iii.19, p. 550.

19 *Ibidem*, IV.iii.20, p. 552.

understanding and the frailty of human nature prevent us from demonstrating moral ideas in the same way as we demonstrate mathematical notions:

Confident I am, that if Men would in the same method, and with the same indifferency, search after moral, as they do mathematical Truths, they would find them have a stronger Connection one with another, and a more necessary Consequence from our clear and distinct *Ideas*, and to come nearer perfect Demonstration, than is commonly imagined. But much of this is not to be expected, whilst the desire of Esteem, Riches, or Power, makes Men espouse the well endowed Opinions in Fashion, and then seek Arguments, either to make good their Beauty, or varnish over, and cover their Deformity.<sup>20</sup>

Briefly, whereas Locke did not call into question the existence, rationality, and demonstrability of morality in itself, he doubted the *actual* capacity of unassisted reason to establish morality. Moreover, Locke himself, in the *Essay*, failed to explain the source of moral obligation in accordance with his way of ideas, for he did not clarify which simple ideas are combined to form the mixed-mode idea of moral obligation.<sup>21</sup> When working on the *Essay* in the 1680s, Locke actually attempted at a system of ethics consistent with his way of ideas in the manuscript *Of Ethick in General*, written around 1686 and originally intended as the final chapter of the *Essay*.<sup>22</sup> However, he eventually discarded this project and left the manuscript incomplete. In J.B. Schneewind's words:

Locke's view of how to demonstrate moral truths [...] suggests that there cannot be a demonstration of a moral principle that satisfies Locke's own standards. [...] Although Locke said we must start our moral demonstrations from self-evident principles, he also said that there are no self-evident moral principles with substantial content.<sup>23</sup>

Locke was indeed aware of the very narrow scope of human knowledge in religious and moral matters, as Sam Black has pointed out:

Religious and ethical propositions give him more trouble [than mathematical truths and *a posteriori* truths]. For Locke reckons that knowledge is available in both of these domains [i.e. religion and ethics], but subject to two important caveats. First, he maintains that the amount of knowledge that is currently

20 *Ibidem*.

21 *Ibidem*, II.xxii.1-12, pp. 288-295; Schneewind, "Locke's Moral Philosophy", p. 213.

22 John Locke, "Of Ethick in General", in Locke, *Writings on Religion*, pp. 9-14. On this manuscript, see Victor Nuovo, *John Locke: The Philosopher as Christian Virtuoso* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 193-197.

23 Schneewind, "Locke's Moral Philosophy", p. 207.



available in these areas is strictly limited. Second, he believes that the prospects for enlarging this stock of truths are thoroughly pessimistic.<sup>24</sup>

Locke's pessimism about the prospects for enlarging human knowledge of morality and religion through the operation of natural reason alone led him to turn to revelation, as John Higgins-Biddle has observed:

[Locke's] whole analysis of human understanding was designed to show how little proper knowledge man has and how ineffectual that knowledge is in most matters of morality and religion. [...] Thus, he sought in the *Essay* to establish traditional revelation as the primary guide in that proper science and business of mankind, morality and religion.<sup>25</sup>

By "traditional revelation", Locke essentially meant divine revelation as recorded in Scripture, which he distinguished from "original revelation":

I say, *Traditional Revelation*, in distinction to *Original Revelation*. By the one, I mean that first Impression, which is made immediately by God, on the Mind of any Man, to which we cannot set any Bounds; and by the other, those Impressions delivered over to others in Words, and the ordinary ways of conveying our Conceptions one to another.<sup>26</sup>

Calling attention to the limits of human understanding in the *Essay*, Locke argued that divine revelation – specifically *traditional* revelation – comes in where unassisted reason cannot reach, as he explained in a famous passage from *Essay* IV.xix.4:

*Reason* is natural *Revelation*, whereby the eternal Father of Light, and Fountain of all Knowledge communicates to Mankind that portion of Truth, which he has laid within the reach of their natural Faculties: *Revelation* is natural *Reason* enlarged by a new set of Discoveries communicated by God immediately, which *Reason* vouches the Truth of, by the Testimony and Proofs it gives, that they come from God.<sup>27</sup>

24 Sam Black, "Toleration and the Skeptical Inquirer in Locke", *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 28 (1998): pp. 473-504 (478).

25 John C. Biddle, "Locke's Critique of Innate Principles and Toland's Deism", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 37 (1976): pp. 411-422 (417).

26 Locke, *Essay*, IV.xviii.3, p. 690. Although Locke was confident that the authors of the biblical texts had received original revelations from God, and although he did not dismiss the possibility of original revelations in post-biblical and modern times, he was very suspicious of those claiming to have received a revelation directly from God, as the chapter "Of Enthusiasm" in the *Essay* demonstrates: see *ibidem*, IV.xix.5-16, pp. 698-706.

27 *Ibidem*, IV.xix.4, p. 698.

According to Locke, an unquestionable divine revelation must take priority over the uncertain conjectures of unassisted reason.<sup>28</sup> To Locke, revelation includes things “whose truth our mind, by its natural faculties and notions, cannot judge” – things that we have to accept as “above reason”.<sup>29</sup> He divided propositions into three categories – according to reason, above reason, and contrary to reason:

1. *According to Reason* are such Propositions, whose Truth we can discover, by examining and tracing those *Ideas* we have from *Sensation* and *Reflexion*; and by natural deduction, find to be true, or probable. 2. *Above Reason* are such Propositions, whose Truth or Probability we cannot by Reason derive from those Principles. 3. *Contrary to Reason* are such Propositions, as are inconsistent with, or irreconcilable to our clear and distinct *Ideas*.<sup>30</sup>

Concerning morality, Locke thought that human beings need a strong incentive to behave morally. As J.B. Schneewind has observed, Locke’s mature writings present a “constant insistence that only sanctions will bring about compliance with the laws of morality”.<sup>31</sup> To Locke, unassisted reason is able to conceive the existence of a divine creator and lawmaker, and hence to appreciate the existence of a divinely given moral law and to understand the duties that human beings have towards their creator. However, human beings cannot infer any incentive to act morally from merely acknowledging the existence of God and his law. According to Locke, only divine revelation gives such an incentive, in the form of an afterlife with reward and punishment. In *Essay* IV.xviii.7, the existence of an afterlife with reward and punishment is indeed an emblematic example of truth above reason, unambiguously revealed in Scripture and receiving assent from reason as assent to a probable matter of fact.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, *Essay* II.xxi.60 hints at belief in an afterlife with reward and punishment as the only effective incentive to resist evil urges and, hence, to act morally:

Change but a Man’s view of these things [i.e. earthly desires and enjoyments]; let him see, that Virtue and Religion are necessary to his Happiness; let him look into the future State of Bliss or Misery, and see there God the righteous Judge, ready to *render to every Man according to his Deeds; To them who by patient continuance in well-doing, seek for Glory, and Honour, and Immortality, Eternal*

28 Jonathan S. Marko, “The Promulgation of Right Morals: John Locke on the Church and the Christian as the Salvation of Society”, *Journal of Markets & Morality*, 19 (2016): pp. 41-59 (51).

29 Locke, *Essay*, IV.xviii.9, p. 695.

30 *Ibidem*, IV.xvii.23, p. 687.

31 Schneewind, “Locke’s Moral Philosophy”, p. 208.

32 Locke, *Essay*, IV.xviii.7, p. 694.

*Life; but unto every Soul that doth Evil, Indignation and Wrath, Tribulation and Anguish.* To him, I say, who hath a prospect of the different State of perfect Happiness or Misery, that attends all Men after this Life, depending on their Behaviour here, the measures of Good and Evil, that govern his choice, are mightily changed. For since nothing of Pleasure and Pain in this Life, can bear any proportion to the endless Happiness, or exquisite Misery of an immortal Soul hereafter, Actions in his Power will have their preference, not according to the transient Pleasure, or Pain that accompanies, or follows them here; but as they serve to secure that perfect durable Happiness hereafter.<sup>33</sup>

Locke also emphasized God's power to reward and punish in *Essay* II.xxviii.8:

The *Divine* Law, whereby I mean, that Law which God has set to the actions of Men, whether promulgated to them by the light of Nature, or the voice of Revelation. That God has given a Rule whereby Men should govern themselves, I think there is no body so brutish as to deny. He has a Right to do it, we are his Creatures: He has Goodness and Wisdom to direct our Actions to that which is best: and he has Power to enforce it by Rewards and Punishments, of infinite weight and duration, in another Life: for no body can take us out of his hands. This is the only true touchstone of *moral Rectitude*; and by comparing them to this Law, it is, that Men judge of the most considerable *Moral Good* or *Evil* of their Actions; that is, whether as *Duties*, or *Sins*, they are like to procure them happiness, or misery, from the hands of the Almighty.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, it is worth mentioning that God's power over humankind plays an important role in Locke's delineation of natural rights and duties in the *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, composed in the same period as the *Essay*:

[F]or men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent, and infinitely wise maker; all the servants of one sovereign master, sent into the world by his order, and about his business; they are his property, whose workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one another's pleasure. [...] Every one, as he is *bound to preserve himself*, and not to quit his station wilfully, so by the like reason, when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he can, *to preserve the rest of mankind*.<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless, it was in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* that Locke, turning to Scripture, found solid grounds for proposing the prospect of

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, II.xxi.60, pp. 273-274.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, II.xxviii.8, p. 352.

<sup>35</sup> John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 271. On Locke's hints at God's power and the prospect of an afterlife with reward and punishment in the *Essay* and the *Second Treatise*, see Nuovo, *John Locke*, pp. 182-213.

otherworldly rewards and sanctions as the only truly effective incentive for moral conduct.

### 3. MORALITY AND SALVATION IN LOCKE'S LATER WRITINGS ON RELIGION

In *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke attempted to overcome his own skepticism about the actual capabilities of unassisted reason in moral matters. As Takashi Kato has observed: "Locke, after his acknowledgment of the virtual impossibility of demonstrating morality by 'unassisted reason', evidently shifted his major concern to the study of Holy Scripture".<sup>36</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff has reaffirmed this view and has further clarified why Locke eventually turned to Christian revelation:

[Locke's] turn to close scriptural exegesis and exposition in his last decade was a consequence of his growing conviction that a true *scientia* of morality, though in principle possible, was in fact nowhere in view. To know God's full will for us we must, de facto, turn to the New Testament.<sup>37</sup>

In a recent, and excellent, book on Locke's religious thought, Victor Nuovo has accurately explained the reasons and implications of Locke's turn toward religion during his last decade, confirming that this turn was determined by Locke's intention to establish morality on solid foundations and that, thus, there is continuity between *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and *The Reasonableness of Christianity*:

Locke concluded the *Essay* by declaring that in the light of the human situation in the world and the capacities and limitations of human knowledge, morality is the proper business of mankind and that to be efficacious it must be joined to religion. The *Reasonableness* was intended to accomplish this. This turning toward religion, however, does not require the abandonment of natural reason, rather its enlargement through revelation, not by endowing it with transcendent

36 Takashi Kato, "The *Reasonableness* in the Historical Light of the *Essay*", *Locke Newsletter*, 12 (1981): pp. 45-59 (55-56).

37 Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Locke's Philosophy of Religion", in Chappell (ed.), *Cambridge Companion*, pp. 172-198 (185). See, also, J.T. Moore, "Locke on the Moral Need for Christianity", *Southwestern Journal of Philosophy*, 11 (1980): pp. 61-68; Schneewind, "Locke's Moral Philosophy"; Raffaele Russo, *Ragione e ascolto. L'ermeneutica di John Locke* (Naples: Guida, 2001), pp. 168-174; Greg Forster, *John Locke's Politics of Moral Consensus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 40-83; Nuovo, *John Locke*, pp. 215-218.

capacities, but by showing the reasonableness of extending belief to matters beyond the capacity of reason and experience to discover.<sup>38</sup>

In the *Reasonableness*, Locke admitted openly that unassisted reason had always failed to establish a sound system of ethics:

[‘T]is too hard a task for unassisted Reason to establish Morality in all its parts upon its true foundation; with a clear and convincing light. [...] Such trains of reasoning the greatest part of Mankind have neither leisure to weigh; nor, for want of Education and Use, skill to judge of. We see how unsuccessful in this, the attempts of Philosophers were before our Saviour’s time. How short their several Systems came of the perfection of a true and compleat *Morality*, is very visible. [...] Experience shews that the knowledge of Morality by mere natural light, (how agreeable soever it be to it) makes but slow progress, and little advance in the World. And the reason of it is not hard to be found in Men’s Necessities, Passions, Vices, and mistaken Interests; which turn their thoughts another way. And the designing Leaders, as well as following Herd, find it not to their purpose to imploy much of their Meditations this way. Or whatever else was the cause, ‘tis plain in fact, that humane reason unassisted, failed Men in its great and Proper business of *Morality*. It never from unquestionable Principles, by clear deductions, made out an entire body of the *Law of Nature*.<sup>39</sup>

Locke saw the Law of Nature as a law of convenience that promotes utility. Most human beings know some of its principles in the form of prescriptions of civil law or moral precepts deduced by philosophers.<sup>40</sup> However, according to Locke, the limits of human understanding and the frailty of human nature have always prevented unassisted reason from grasping the Law of Nature in its entirety. Furthermore, Locke thought that ecclesiastical tradition, priestcraft, and power politics negatively affected the human capacity to comprehend and respect the Law of Nature. He believed that the weakness and limitations of human nature make human beings susceptible to be misled by both their own mistakes and priestly frauds.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, he disapproved of Roman Catholic – in his words, “Romanist” – biblical hermeneutics, which he

38 *Ibidem*, p. 216.

39 Locke, *Reasonableness*, pp. 148-150.

40 *Ibidem*, pp. 151-154.

41 *Ibidem*, pp. 161-163. Concerning Locke’s anticlericalism and views on priestcraft, see John Marshall, *John Locke: Resistance, Religion and Responsibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 353-357, 405-410; Richard Ashcraft, “Anticlericalism and Authority in Lockean Political Thought”, in Roger D. Lund (ed.), *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response, 1660-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 73-96; Mark Goldie, “John Locke, the Early Lockean, and Priestcraft”, *Intellectual History Review*, 28 (2018): pp. 125-144; James A.T. Lancaster, “From Matters of Faith to Matters of Fact: The Problem of Priestcraft in Early Modern England”, *Intellectual History Review*, 28 (2018): pp. 145-165.

considered influenced by traditional, unscriptural doctrines, and, in his attack on Robert Filmer's patriarchalism, he argued against all authoritative tradition in interpreting Scripture.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, in *Essay* III.x.2, he maintained that "the several *Sects* of Philosophy and Religion" had augmented the natural difficulties of the use of language by coining "insignificant" words, "either affecting something singular, and out of the way of common apprehensions, or to support some strange Opinions, or cover some Weakness of their Hypothesis".<sup>43</sup> Finally, although the Law of Nature is a law of convenience promoting utility, natural reason cannot find in it incentives strong enough to act morally.

Given all these problems, God established the Law of Moses through the covenant of works. The Law of Moses consisted of two parts – ritual prescriptions and moral precepts. Locke called these moral precepts "the Law of Works", which he considered identical to the Law of Nature.<sup>44</sup> To Locke, the main advantage of the Law of Works over the Law of Nature was that the former was available in the Old Testament in terms comprehensible to everyone. However, the Law of Moses, while demanding strict obedience, did not offer strong incentives to act morally and was too rigorous for such weak and imperfect beings as humans. This is why God made a new covenant with humankind – the covenant of grace or covenant of faith.<sup>45</sup> With this new covenant, Christ revealed the divine law completely and perfectly, thus establishing the Law of Faith. Besides disclosing the Law of Nature in its entirety, Christ complemented and completed it with the prospect of reward and punishment in the afterlife, which gave human beings a powerful incentive to act morally:

Thus we see our Saviour not only confirmed the Moral Law; [...] But moreover, upon occasion, requires the Obedience of his Disciples to several of the Commands he afresh lays upon them; With the enforcement of unspeakable Rewards and Punishments in another World, according to their Obedience, or Disobedience.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Locke, *Two Treatises*, pp. 141-263. On Locke's contempt of Catholic hermeneutics, see Marshall, "Locke, Socinianism", p. 145.

<sup>43</sup> Locke, *Essay*, III.x.2, p. 491.

<sup>44</sup> Locke, *Reasonableness*, pp. 16-21.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 21-25, 110-112, 132.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 129. On the necessity of the prospect of reward and punishment to motivate moral action, see, also, a manuscript that Locke composed probably in 1694, shortly before writing the *Reasonableness*. John Locke, "Voluntas", in Locke, *Political Essays*, p. 321.

Locke thought that Christ had required human beings to repent for their sins and obey the divine law if they want to achieve salvation. Repentance and obedience go hand-in-hand in Locke's moralist soteriology:

[Repentance is] not only a sorrow for sins past, but (what is a natural consequence of such sorrow, if it be real) a turning from them, into a new and contrary Life. [...] Repentance is an hearty sorrow for our past misdeeds, and a sincere Resolution and Endeavour, to the utmost of our power, to conform all our Actions to the Law of God. So that Repentance does not consist in one single Act of sorrow, [...] But in *doing works meet for Repentance*, in a sincere Obedience to the Law of Christ, the remainder of our Lives.<sup>47</sup>

To Locke, the penalty for those who do not repent for their sins and do not commit themselves to respect the divine law is punishment in the afterlife, whereas those who repent and make a sincere effort to abide by Christ's precepts will enjoy eternal beatitude.<sup>48</sup> Following the example of the anti-Trinitarian and anti-Calvinist theologian Faustus Socinus and his disciples, Locke called special attention to this incentive, which he described as one of the advantages of Christ's Coming not only in the *Reasonableness*, but also throughout the posthumously published *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St Paul*.<sup>49</sup> As David Wootton has noted:

Locke's *A Paraphrase* shows that he accepted the essential core of Socinianism: that before Christ's coming mankind as a whole had no reason to believe that there was a law of right and wrong, enforced by other-worldly punishments, for they had no reason to expect a life after death.<sup>50</sup>

47 Locke, *Reasonableness*, pp. 111-112.

48 Locke was a mortalist. He did not believe in the soul's natural immortality. He approved of the version of mortalism named *thnetopsychism*, according to which the soul dies with the body and will then raise again by miracle for the Last Judgment. He thought that, upon Christ's Second Coming, a general resurrection of the dead will take place and will be followed by the Last Judgment. Whereas the righteous will be admitted to enjoy eternal bliss in heaven, the wicked will be resurrected for only a short time to suffer a brief but terrible torment and die a second, and final, death. Locke's position on this matter is remarkably similar to the mortalist views of Socinian writers like Johann Crell and Jonas Schlichting. Whereas Locke's mortalist ideas emerge from a number of manuscripts and from several passages in the *Reasonableness* and *A Paraphrase and Notes*, his most comprehensive account on the subject is in a manuscript, *Resurrectio et quae sequuntur*, which he composed, most probably, in 1699. See John Locke, "Resurrectio et quae sequuntur", in Locke, *Writings on Religion*, pp. 233-237.

49 Locke, *Reasonableness*, pp. 160-161; Locke, *Paraphrase*, *passim*.

50 David Wootton, "John Locke: Socinian or Natural Law Theorist?", in James E. Crimmins (ed.), *Religion, Secularization and Political Thought: Thomas Hobbes to J.S. Mill* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 39-67 (49).

Socinus and his followers believed that God's Revealed Word was superior to the Law of Nature.<sup>51</sup> This is a point of difference between the Socinians and the Magisterial Reformers, whose position on the subject was expressed in Philip Melanchthon's *Loci Communes* (1521). To Melanchthon, human beings have an innate knowledge – namely, a knowledge not dependent on revelation – of God and of the divine law in its entirety, which Melanchthon described as a perfect Law of Nature: divine revelation had simply reasserted and clarified this Law of Nature.<sup>52</sup> Conversely, the Socinians argued that religious belief did not originate in an instinct innate to all humans. Therefore, they deemed faith in God unattainable by natural reason alone. On this matter, Sarah Mortimer has observed:

[Socinus] divorced religious belief from human nature, for he believed this was necessary if his emphasis on the human will was to be preserved. In mankind's natural condition, without any revelation, human beings were assumed to be unaware of any supernatural being or an afterlife; religious worship only arose after God revealed himself to man.<sup>53</sup>

To the Socinians, religious belief results from the free choice to accept the assistance of God's grace, which one can know of through biblical revelation. The acceptance of God's assisting grace implies a sincere effort to abide by Christ's moral precepts. Before Christian revelation, morality was devoid of effective incentives to act morally. Only after Christ's Coming could humanity find good reasons to behave morally and, thus, to pursue salvation effectively. To the Socinians, the Law of Nature cannot lead to salvation because it inclines human beings merely to the preservation of their earthly interests. Conversely, Christ's moral precepts offer a better prospect than worldly

51 Socinus delineated his ethics and soteriology in *De Jesu Christo Servatore*, a work written in 1576, printed for the first time in 1594, and later included in the nine-volume *Bibliotheca Fratrum Polonorum* (1665-1692). See Faustus Socinus, "De Jesu Christo Servatore", in *Bibliotheca Fratrum Polonorum quos Unitarios vocant*, 9 vols. (Irenopoli [Amsterdam]: post annum Domini 1656 [1665-1692]), vol. 2, *Fausti Socini Senensis Opera Omnia in duos tomos distincta* (1668), pp. 115-246. See, also, Johann Crell, *Ad librum Hugonis Grotii quem de satisfactione Christi adversus Faustum Socinum Senensem scripsit* (Racoviae, 1623). In this book, Crell defended Socinus's views from Hugo Grotius's criticism: see Hugo Grotius, *Defensio fidei Catholicae de satisfactione Christi adversus Faustum Socinum* (Leiden, 1617).

52 Philipp Melanchthon, *On Christian Doctrine: Loci Communes 1555*, trans. and ed. Clyde L. Manschreck (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 51-53, 73-75.

53 Sarah Mortimer, "Human Liberty and Human Nature in the Works of Faustus Socinus and His Readers", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 70 (2009): pp. 191-211 (197). See, also, Sarah Mortimer, "Freedom, Virtue and Socinian Heterodoxy", in Quentin Skinner, Martin van Gelderen (eds.), *Freedom and the Construction of Europe*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), vol. 1, pp. 77-93.



benefits – the prospect of eternal salvation. For this reason, the Law of God revealed by Christ is superior to the Law of Nature. According to the Socinians, it is convenient to prefer the Law of God to the Law of Nature when these two laws clash with each another – for instance, on occasions in which the Law of Nature disposes human beings to self-defense. Concerning such cases, the Socinians referred to the New Testament to argue that doing violence to another human being, even for reasons of self-defense, would impede the attainment of the supreme good – eternal beatitude. This is why Socinus and his followers, especially Johann Crell and Jonas Schlichting, endorsed radical pacifism and even non-resistance to despotic political powers.

Locke concurred with the Socinians that Christ's message was superior to the Law of Nature, but he believed that Christian revelation had not invalidated any element of the Law of Nature, such as our right of self-defense. To Locke, we have a natural right and duty to preserve the life that God has given us, the properties acquired through our work, and the freedom to use our persons and possessions without harming others' life, health, property, and liberty.<sup>54</sup> This means that we still have a right and a duty to preserve our earthly goods, even when this leads us to resist a despotic power.<sup>55</sup> To Locke, the Law of Faith had simply completed and perfected the Law of Nature, which he considered God-given, and, hence, valid eternally and immutably.<sup>56</sup>

However, Locke did not claim that accepting the Law of Faith, and hence believing in an afterlife with reward and punishment, necessarily and unfailingly leads to act morally. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which Locke revised multiple times until his death in 1704, and in his theological works, he admitted that even those who believe in otherworldly sanctions are still liable to sin, given the limits of human understanding and the weakness of human nature.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, Locke agreed with the Socinians about another significant advantage of God's Revealed Word over the Law of Nature. Besides providing an effective incentive to act morally in the form of an afterlife with reward and punishment, Christian revelation offered humanity a concrete hope of salvation, despite the frailty and limitations of human nature. In *De Jesu Christo Servatore* (1594), Socinus noted that Christ had stressed God's mercy. To Socinus and his disciples, God does not have to punish the sinner. Whereas human judges have to apply the laws of the state, God is merciful and omnipotent: God is not bound to any law and,

<sup>54</sup> Locke, *Two Treatises*, pp. 269-272.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 406-428.

<sup>56</sup> Locke, *Reasonableness*, pp. 13-15.

<sup>57</sup> Locke, *Essay*, II.xxi.60-73 (pp. 273-287), II.xxviii.12 (pp. 356-357); Locke, *Reasonableness*, pp. 19, 120, 130.

consequently, He can waive His right to punishment. This means that God has the power to forgive the sins still committed by the repentant faithful who have sincerely endeavored to obey the divine law.<sup>58</sup> Like the Socinians, Locke attached great importance to God's forgiveness, as he argued that "by the *Law of Faith*, Faith is allowed to supply the defect of full Obedience; and so the Believers are admitted to Life and Immortality as if they were Righteous".<sup>59</sup> According to Locke, Christ "did not expect [...] a Perfect Obedience void of all slips and falls: He knew our Make, and the weakness of our Constitution too well, and was sent with a Supply for that Defect".<sup>60</sup> This supply was faith, which Locke considered as one of the three fundamentals of Christianity, along with repentance and obedience. Nevertheless, Locke did not believe in salvation by faith alone. As Dewey Wallace has observed:

By the law of faith Locke does not intend a new way of serving God but the same moral law, which may, however, under the new covenant be only partially fulfilled, the defect in its fulfillment being compensated for by the faith of the believer.<sup>61</sup>

In fact, according to Locke, repentance and obedience are essential elements of the Law of Faith, as the following passage from *The Reasonableness of Christianity* explains:

[Christ's followers] were required to believe him to be the *Messiah*; which Faith is of Grace promised to be reckoned to them for the completing of their Righteousness, wherein it was defective: But Righteousness, or Obedience to the Law of God, was their great business; which if they could have attained by their own Performances, there would have been no need of this Gracious Allowance, in Reward of their Faith. [...] But their past Transgressions were pardoned, to those who received *Jesus*, the promised *Messiah*, for their King; And their future slips covered, if renouncing their former Iniquities, they entered into his Kingdom, and continued his Subjects, with a steady Resolution and Endeavour to obey his Laws. This Righteousness therefore, a complete Obedience and freedom from Sin, are still sincerely to be endeavoured after. And 'tis no where promised, That those who persist in a wilful Disobedience to his Laws, shall be received into the eternal bliss of his Kingdom, how much soever they believe in him.<sup>62</sup>

58 Socinus, "De Jesu Christo", pp. 121-132; Crell, *Ad librum*, pp. 164-167.

59 Locke, *Reasonableness*, p. 19.

60 *Ibidem*, p. 120.

61 Dewey D. Wallace, "Socinianism, Justification by Faith, and the Sources of John Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity*", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 45 (1984): pp. 49-66 (53-54).

62 Locke, *Reasonableness*, p. 130.

This means that the repentant faithful who have consistently made an effort to obey the divine law will receive “the Pardon and Forgiveness of Sins and Salvation by [Jesus Christ]”.<sup>63</sup> It is in this sense that, according to Locke, faith “justifies”. The justifying faith includes good works. Like Socinians and Arminians (i.e. the anti-Calvinist followers of the Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius, also called Remonstrants), Locke believed that human beings are able to accept or reject God’s assisting grace and, thus, to have faith or not. However, he argued that accepting the gift of grace and, hence, having faith is the “reasonable”, convenient choice, given the above said advantages of the Law of Faith.

#### 4. IRENICISM AND TOLERATION IN LOCKE’S THEOLOGICAL WRITINGS

Although inspired mainly by Locke’s moral and soteriological concerns, *The Reasonableness of Christianity* has significant irenic implications. In fact, this book is widely considered as a work of Protestant irenicism, belonging to the tradition of the “way of fundamentals”. This tradition included, among others, Socinians, Arminians, and, in England, various Arminian-influenced Protestant thinkers, such as the Great Tew Circle members and several latitudinarian divines. To these theologians, the core of the Christian religion consists of few fundamental tenets concerning God’s existence, His assisting grace, the divine authority of Scripture, rewards and punishments in the afterlife, and the necessity of good works to achieve salvation. According to this tradition, different beliefs and practices may result from divergent interpretations of Scripture, which every Christian can read according to their understanding. However, differences in non-fundamental beliefs and practices must not hinder peace and toleration among Christians. Locke followed this tradition in distinguishing between the fundamentals of Christianity and secondary doctrines. He considered the acceptance of repentance, obedience, and faith as necessary to become Christian. However, to Locke, the fundamentals of Christianity were necessary but not sufficient to achieve salvation. He argued that every Christian not only had to live in accordance with these fundamentals, but also had a duty to study the Bible conscientiously throughout their life. Accordingly, he maintained that every Christian had a right to give their own interpretation of Scripture and to infer

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 133.

particular doctrines from their understanding of the biblical text. In this regard, John Higgins-Biddle has noted:

[Locke] distinguish[ed] consistently between beliefs necessary to make one a Christian and beliefs that a Christian might subsequently hold. He maintained that the former were so simple and readily discernible that all persons could discover and understand them, whatever their intellectual capacities. At the same time, by allowing Christians to pursue subsequent beliefs to the extent of their intellectual capacity and in the direction of their religious preference, he maintained the flexibility necessary for toleration.<sup>64</sup>

Locke's doctrine of the fundamentals in the *Reasonableness* implied the extension of the possibility of salvation, and of toleration as well, to all those who accepted the fundamental tenets of Christianity and diligently studied the Bible – in other words, to all Christians who agreed with a moralist soteriology like that which Locke himself explained, regardless of non-fundamentals and denominational affiliation. As John Marshall has noted, Locke's later writings on religion indeed show that he “was opposed to dividing and denominating Christians on the basis of non-fundamentals, stressing the express words of Scripture and his status as a Christian, not the member of any sect”.<sup>65</sup> This

64 Higgins-Biddle, “Introduction”, p. lxvi.

65 Marshall, “Locke, Socinianism”, p. 171. This does not mean, however, that Locke intended to dissolve churches as formal associations with their specific doctrines, structure, discipline, and ceremonies. As Mark Goldie has noted: “[Locke] seems to fall back on an elementary Aristotelian insight that any group of people which shares a common purpose will need a visible and outward expression of their communion. [...] A church has good reason to be uniformitarian, for in the shared conventions of ritual we act out our common purpose, our solidarity as children of God. There can be no forced church membership, but voluntary membership does entail submission to a common discipline” (Goldie, “John Locke”, p. 134). Locke himself “lived and died a conforming and practising member of the Church of England” (*ibidem*, p. 140). However, I disagree with Goldie's statement that Locke, in his theological works, “makes clear that religious assemblies and ‘public acts of worship’ are necessary” because human beings “are associative beings” (*ibidem*, p. 134). In fact, Locke addresses “public acts of worship” in the section of the *Reasonableness* where he explains Jesus' attempt to reform the public worship among the Jews of his time. To Locke, Jesus deprived the public worship of “Stately Buildings, costly Ornaments, peculiar and uncouth Habits, And a numerous huddle of pompous, phantastical, cumbersome Ceremonies”, which were mistakenly “thought the principal part, if not the whole of Religion” (Locke, *Reasonableness*, p. 159). Instead, Jesus revealed that “[t]o be Worshipped in Spirit and in Truth; with Application of Mind, and sincerity of Heart, was what God henceforth only required. [...] Decency, Order, Edification, were to regulate all their publick Acts of Worship. [...] Praises and Prayer, humbly offered up to the Deity, were the Worship he now demanded; And in these every one was to look after his own Heart, And know that it was that alone which God had regard to, and accepted” (*ibidem*, p. 160). To me, it seems that, while expressing approval of the renovation of public acts of worship advocated by Jesus in the name of “Decency, Order, Edification”, this

position also allowed for toleration of denominationally uncommitted Christians, regardless of whether they were simply in search of a church with doctrines and rites they could approve, or unaffiliated to any church throughout their lives.<sup>66</sup>

The implicit extension of toleration, in the *Reasonableness*, to unaffiliated Christians was a significant step beyond the mere distinction between the state and religious organizations in *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. In his most famous writing on religious toleration, written in the immediate aftermath of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 and published four years later, Locke indeed aimed, above all, to prevent churches from gaining power from the political rulers and, thus, from oppressing other religious groups. According to Locke, the main cause of state-supported religious intolerance was the rivalry among power-seeking churches themselves. Moreover, Locke condemned the imprudence of civil magistrates whose willingness to favor a sect over another reflected their failure to comprehend the origins, purpose, and limits of political authority. Therefore, in the *Letter*, Locke demarcated the different spheres of state authority and religious organizations. As David Lorenzo has noted:

Nowhere does [Locke] supply a generalized, positive justification of toleration on the part of the state. Instead, by criticizing a variety of traditional

section does not describe public worship, and hence affiliation to a church, as essential to morality and salvation. In this section, Locke actually stresses that God requires only “Application of Mind, and sincerity of Heart” from those who “humbly” offer up “Praises and Prayer [...] to the Deity”. This form of worship is demanded by God and practicable, publicly and collectively, by the members of a church, but is not necessarily connected to public worship. Thus, I believe that, in the *Reasonableness* and other theological works, Locke does not preclude the possibility to be a “mere Christian” not affiliated to any church – as was, for instance, his friend Benjamin Furly after renouncing Quakerism in the early 1690s.

66 It is true that Locke suggests nowhere in the *Reasonableness*, or in other later works on religion, that a Christian might remain denominationally uncommitted throughout their life. However, nowhere in the *Reasonableness*, or in Locke’s other works written between the mid-1690s and his death in 1704, denominational affiliation is described as necessary to moral conduct and the achievement of salvation. Not even Locke’s manuscript *Sacerdos* (1698) requires confessional affiliation as essential to salvation. In this manuscript, Locke stated that Christ, reuniting religion and morality, had reformed “outward ceremonie” to fit with what “decency & order requird in actions of publique assemblies”. Concerning ministers’ right to regulate and perform public worship and “to teach Men their dutys of Morality”, Locke was talking of a right limited to the boundaries of their churches, which he considered as voluntary societies. See John Locke, “Sacerdos”, in Locke, *Writings on Religion*, pp. 17-18.

justifications for the magistrate's *complete* control of religious affairs in the *Letter*, he provided a negative justification of a limited toleration.<sup>67</sup>

The form of toleration devised in the *Letter* was indeed limited to religious societies and their members, be they Christian, Jewish, Muslim, or “pagan”, on condition that their beliefs and practices were not harmful to the commonwealth and its members' civil interests.<sup>68</sup> As Adam Wolfson has observed, Locke attempted “to prevent the toleration principle from spreading beyond competing conceptions of salvation to competing conceptions of the good”.<sup>69</sup> As Locke himself wrote in the *Letter*: “No Opinions contrary to human Society, or to those moral Rules which are necessary to the preservation of Civil Society, are to be tolerated by the Magistrate”.<sup>70</sup> This is why he denied toleration to atheists, whom he considered inherently immoral, and Roman Catholics, who, in his opinion, held some moral ideas harmful to the civil interests and communal life, as we will see in detail below. However, the model of toleration proposed by the *Letter* does not allow for toleration of several other people. As Jonathan Israel has noted, in the *Letter* “those who subscribe to no organized religion, be they agnostics, Deists or *indifferenti*, in confessional matters while not explicitly excluded are left in a vague limbo without any clear status or guaranteed freedom”.<sup>71</sup> Even the status of unaffiliated Christians is vague in the *Letter*, because merely asserting a separation between the state and religious organizations does not imply the granting of toleration to believers who belong to no church. Conversely, as I have explained above, *The Reasonableness of Christianity* implicitly extends toleration to unaffiliated Christians who accept the Law of Faith and the ethics it entails. Locke's moralist soteriology indeed has significant political implications, not only because it promotes peace and toleration among Christians, but also because it provides a persuasive incentive to act morally, as Eldon Eisenach has noted:

Only when the truth of morality is seen as part of a system of divine rewards and punishments will it attain both psychological force and historical reality.

67 David J. Lorenzo, “Tradition and Prudence in Locke's Exceptions to Toleration”, *American Journal of Political Science*, 47 (2003): pp. 248-258 (254).

68 Locke, “Letter”, pp. 18-23, 45-46, 58-59.

69 Adam Wolfson, “Toleration and Relativism: The Locke-Proast Exchange”, *The Review of Politics*, 59 (1997): pp. 213-232 (230).

70 Locke, “Letter”, pp. 49-50.

71 Jonathan I. Israel, “Spinoza, Locke and the Enlightenment Battle for Toleration”, in Ole P. Grell, Roy Porter (eds.), *Toleration in Enlightenment Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 102-113 (103).

Only under these conditions will morality provide the basis for a civil law with teeth in it.<sup>72</sup>

On this point, Victor Nuovo has pointed out that “Locke’s theology is a political theology at least in this respect, that the sovereign legislator of the moral law is God, or his viceregent Christ”.<sup>73</sup> However, Nuovo has correctly observed that Locke did “not propose a Christian commonwealth as the proper way to do the business of morality”.<sup>74</sup> Locke actually made sure that the *Second Treatise*, with its advocacy of a *civil* commonwealth, would be part of his philosophical legacy. Furthermore, he opposed the institutionalization of Christianity as a national religion, which, in his opinion, had done as much to disturb as to reinforce civil society and moral conduct. Nuovo believes that Locke did not endorse a Christian commonwealth in his mature works for two reasons – his Christian view of history and the concept of the Law of Nature explained in the *Second Treatise*:

[A]ccording to the Scriptures, it was not God’s intention to establish his kingdom or the kingdom of Christ – they are the same thing – until the history of redemption had run its course, until the resurrection and the last judgment. In the meantime, whether in a state of nature or in a civil state, the law of nature is the only proper rule to govern human behavior and civil institutions to safeguard human life and property.<sup>75</sup>

The *Second Treatise* indeed argues that human beings are bound to the God-given Law of Nature because they are God’s workmanship and, hence, they belong to God.<sup>76</sup> However, in the *Reasonableness* Locke wrote that unassisted reason had never “made out an entire body of the *Law of Nature*”.<sup>77</sup> To Locke, only Christ had revealed the divine law perfectly and completely, and the divine law comprises the Law of Nature in its entirety, along with the assurance of otherworldly rewards and sanctions and an emphasis on God’s mercy. Therefore, in order properly to know the Law of Nature, which Nuovo describes as “the only proper rule to govern human behavior and civil institutions”, one needs to accept the Christian Law of Faith. Does this mean that Locke considered also antinomians and deists (who were his major polemical targets in his theological writings) to be intolerable in a civil

<sup>72</sup> Eldon J. Eisenach, *Two Worlds of Liberalism: Religion and Politics in Hobbes, Locke, and Mill* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 85.

<sup>73</sup> Nuovo, *John Locke*, p. 246.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>76</sup> Locke, *Two Treatises*, p. 271.

<sup>77</sup> Locke, *Reasonableness*, pp. 148-150.

commonwealth? No, given also that Locke never invoked the civil power against antinomians or deists because of their imperfect morality. In a few words, whereas Locke opposed antinomians and deism as injurious to salvation, he did not consider antinomians and deists comparable to atheists and Catholics when he took into account the issue of toleration. In the remaining sections of this article, I will explain Locke's conceptions of atheism, Catholicism, antinomianism, and deism, and I will clarify the reasons why Locke denied toleration to atheists and Roman Catholics while, on the other hand, he did not declare antinomians and deists to be intolerable.

## 5. ATHEISM

Locke lived in a time when the term "atheism" was utilized to define several sorts of religious heterodoxy, including, among others, Socinianism, Arianism, and deism.<sup>78</sup> However, Locke's works – not only the *Essay*, his works on toleration, and his theological writings, but also his tracts on education and the conduct of the understanding – take into account different forms of atheism.<sup>79</sup> Locke's approach to atheism was very original if we consider that, in seventeenth-century England, most theologians considered the idea of God innate to all human beings. They deemed it impossible to genuinely deny God's existence and, thus, to be a "speculative atheist".<sup>80</sup> For instance, in a Boyle Lecture entitled *The Folly of Atheism*, the Cambridge scholar Richard Bentley talked of "the commonly received notion of an Innate Idea of God, imprinted upon every Soul of Man at their Creation, in Characters that can never be defaced".<sup>81</sup> In a like manner, the latitudinarian theologian Edward Stillingfleet wrote that "God hath imprinted an universal character of himself on the minds of men" and that "the existence of a Deity [is] a thing so consonant to our natural reason, that as long as there are men in the world it

78 John Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 256-263.

79 [John Locke], *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (London, 1693); John Locke, "Of the Conduct of the Understanding", in John Locke, *Posthumous Works* (London, 1706), pp. 1-137; David C. Durst, "The Limits of Toleration in John Locke's Liberal Thought", *Res Publica*, 7 (2001): pp. 39-55; Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations in Locke's Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 217-243; J.K. Numao, "Locke on Atheism", *History of Political Thought*, 34 (2013): pp. 252-272.

80 David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 1-47; Gianluca Mori, *L'ateismo dei moderni. Filosofia e negazione di Dio da Spinoza a d'Holbach* (Rome: Carocci, 2016), pp. 11-34.

81 Richard Bentley, *Eight Sermons Preach'd at the Honourable Robert Boyle's Lecture* (Cambridge, 1724), p. 5.



will continue”.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, Robert Boyle and Ralph Cudworth judged speculative atheism self-contradictory, irrational, and conceptually impossible.<sup>83</sup> These religious thinkers only admitted the existence of “practical atheism”. According to Bentley, practical atheists are those who, although “believing [God’s] Existence, do yet seclude him from directing the Affairs of the World, from observing and judging the Actions of Men”.<sup>84</sup> Conversely, Locke’s rejection of innate ideas made it possible to conceive of what J.K. Numao has termed “the ‘ignorant atheist, an atheist who has simply not yet developed the notion of a God’”.<sup>85</sup> Accordingly, Locke’s empiricist, anti-innatist epistemology contributed to raise the conceptual problem of the “speculative atheist, [...] one who ‘rationally’ reached the wrong conclusion that God does not exist, and obstinately held fast to this view”.<sup>86</sup> To Locke, the speculative atheist was the “true” atheist and, hence, the truly intolerable one.

Like other seventeenth-century theist intellectuals, Locke considered speculative atheism irrational. However, unlike his predecessors, he denied that the idea of God is an innate idea, given that he denied any innate idea. Locke deemed unassisted reason able to demonstrate God’s existence based on the observation of Creation. This is why he made use of the argument from design and the anthropological argument to prove God’s existence in the *Essays on the Law of Nature* and *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Concerning the argument from design, Locke maintained, in *Essay* I.iv.9, that “the visible marks of extraordinary Wisdom and Power, appear so plainly in all the Works of the Creation, that a rational Creature, who will but seriously reflect on them, cannot miss the discovery of a *Deity*”.<sup>87</sup> This means that atheists deny a “discovery” that “carries such a weight of Thought and Communication with it”.<sup>88</sup> As to the anthropological argument, *Essay* IV.x.1-6 presents a line of reasoning consisting, in essence, of the following steps. Locke observes “that *Man has a clear Perception of his own Being*; he knows certainly, that he exists, and that he is something”.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, Locke argues:

82 Edward Stillingfleet, *Origines Sacrae* (London, 1662), pp. 384-385.

83 Robert Boyle, *Some Considerations Touching the Usefulness of Experimental Natural Philosophy* (Oxford, 1663), p. 101; Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London, 1678), pp. 183-208. For a detailed analysis of Cudworth’s consideration of atheism, see Mori, *L’ateismo dei moderni*, pp. 71-78.

84 Bentley, *Eight Sermons*, pp. 4-5.

85 Numao, “Locke on Atheism”, p. 260.

86 *Ibidem*, p. 267.

87 Locke, *Essay*, I.iv.9, p. 89.

88 *Ibidem*.

89 *Ibidem*, IV.x.2, p. 619.

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 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.<sup>90</sup>

From these premises, Locke concludes the following:

[F]rom 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.*<sup>91</sup>

Therefore, atheists are unable to appreciate the implications of their own being, since they fail to deduce God's existence from their own existence and constitution. Briefly, to Locke, atheism was irrational. According to Locke, however, the irrationality of atheism was dissimilar to the irrationality of some "indifferent" beliefs held by some religious groups – namely, beliefs that, although considered absurd by many, had no moral implications and consequently ought to be tolerated.<sup>92</sup> To Locke, the failure or refusal to acknowledge God's existence entailed the incapability to engage in at least minimally decent moral conduct. He clarified this point already in *An Essay Concerning Toleration* of 1667:

[T]he belief of a deity is not to be reckoned amongst purely speculative opinions, for it being the foundation of all morality, and that which influence the whole life and actions of men, without which a man is to be considered no other than one of the most dangerous sorts of wild beasts, and so incapable of all society.<sup>93</sup>

Around two decades later, in the first of his two arguments against atheists in *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, Locke focused on the main reason why atheists are so dangerous to society:

Those are not at all to be tolerated who *deny the Being of a God.* Promises, Covenants, and Oaths, which are the Bonds of Humane Society, can have no

90 *Ibidem*, IV.x.3, p. 620.

91 *Ibidem*, IV.x.6, p. 621.

92 This was, for instance, the case of the Catholic dogma of transubstantiation, which Locke considered in *A Letter concerning Toleration*, as I will explain below, in the section concerning Catholicism.

93 Locke, "Essay Concerning Toleration", p. 188. On belief in God as preferable to atheism, see, also, a journal note written in 1676: John Locke, "Atheism", in Locke, *Political Essays*, pp. 245-246.

hold upon an Atheist. The taking away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all.<sup>94</sup>

Locke's definition of atheists as "those [...] who *deny the Being of a God*" confirms that he, unlike most theologians of his time, recognized that some people actually failed to acknowledge God's existence. Therefore, when Locke talked of "atheists" in the *Letter*, he meant speculative atheists, namely people who did not use experience-based reason properly and who, hence, failed to infer God's existence from the observation of Creation and their own existence. To Locke, atheists, being unable to recognize God's existence, were also intrinsically devoid of morality and, thus, could not be trustworthy members of society. Atheists, in fact, failed to acknowledge the existence of a divine creator and legislator. Therefore, they were unable to understand their duties towards their creator and to admit the existence of a (divinely given) moral law to respect. Additionally, atheists did not believe in an afterlife with reward and punishment, which Locke, in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, described as the only effective incentive to behave morally – a conclusion already hinted at in some of his previous writings, as we have seen above. As Locke concluded in *A Vindication of the Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695): "Atheism [is] a Crime, which for its Madness as well as Guilt, ought to shut a Man out of all Sober and Civil Society".<sup>95</sup> Yet, already a decade before the publication of the *Reasonableness*, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* had described religious belief, with its moral implications, as an essential prerequisite to enjoy toleration in a civil society. In his other argument against tolerating atheists in the *Letter*, Locke indeed stated that "those that by their Atheism undermine and destroy all Religion, can have no pretence of Religion whereupon to challenge the Privilege of a Toleration".<sup>96</sup> Locke's *Letter* advocated toleration of those who had religion – namely, for those who pursued eternal salvation and had voluntarily joined a church "in order to the publick worshipping of God, in such a manner as they judge acceptable to him, and effectual to the Salvation of their Souls".<sup>97</sup> Atheists did not have religion, because they did not believe in God, did not pursue salvation, and did not belong to any religious society. Therefore, atheists could not claim a

94 Locke, "Letter", pp. 52-53.

95 John Locke, "A Vindication of the Reasonableness of Christianity", in John Locke, *Vindications of the Reasonableness of Christianity*, ed. Victor Nuovo (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012), pp. 3-26 (8).

96 Locke, "Letter", p. 53.

97 *Ibidem*, p. 15.

“privilege” reserved only for those who had religion – and who consequently, according to Locke, could be decent members of society.

## 6. CATHOLICISM

Despite Locke’s advocacy of toleration of organized religion, the *Letter* expressly denied toleration to Roman Catholics, and he did so for moral reasons. Locke’s best-known argument against Catholics is of a prudential nature. He argued that the magistrate could not trust, and therefore tolerate, subjects who owed their primary allegiance to a foreign prince, such as the pope; thus, Roman Catholics’ allegiance to a foreign power made them dangerous to the commonwealth, given that their religion bound them to obey the pope’s dictates.<sup>98</sup> What is worse, Catholic morals, according to Locke, promoted evil behaviors and, hence, were dangerous to human and civil society. Locke mentioned in the *Letter* several opinions that Protestant polemicists, especially in England, commonly ascribed to Catholics – i.e. “that Faith is not to be kept with Hereticks”, “that Kings excommunicated forfeit their Crowns and Kingdoms”, and “[t]hat Dominion is founded in Grace”.<sup>99</sup> Catholics were also widely blamed for their intolerance, which Locke attacked indirectly in the *Letter* after deploring it openly in *An Essay Concerning Toleration*.<sup>100</sup> In this manuscript, he argued that Catholics did not deserve toleration, because they denied toleration to others in the countries where they had power.<sup>101</sup> Finally, Locke obviously had the pope’s power in mind when he criticized, in the *Letter*, “the absolute Authority of the same Person; who has not only power to perswade the Members of his Church to whatsoever he lists, (either as purely Religious, or as in order thereunto) but can also enjoyn it them on pain of Eternal Fire”.<sup>102</sup>

Given Locke’s disapproval of Catholic immorality, I agree with Mark Goldie’s thesis about the main reason why Locke excluded Catholics from toleration. According to Goldie, Locke intended to preclude not Catholicism as such, but Catholic “antinomianism” – namely, the opinion that a sort of divinely given “superiority” takes priority over ordinary moral rules and can

98 *Ibidem*, pp. 51-52.

99 *Ibidem*, pp. 50-51.

100 Locke, “Essay Concerning Toleration”, pp. 197, 202-203. On Catholic intolerance and its representations in England from the 1670s to the 1690s, see Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration*, pp. 17-93.

101 Locke, “Essay Concerning Toleration”, p. 202.

102 Locke, “Letter”, p. 52.

thus inform the faithful's conduct.<sup>103</sup> In the *Letter*, Locke did not deny toleration to Catholics because of "indifferent" beliefs or practices that Protestants considered absurd, such as transubstantiation, and that nevertheless had no moral implications. On this matter, Locke wrote: "If a *Roman Catholick* believe that to be really the Body of Christ, which another man calls Bread, he does no injury thereby to his Neighbour".<sup>104</sup> In this regard, Goldie has concluded that, to Locke, "the absurdity of another's belief is not, in itself, a ground for coercion".<sup>105</sup> Locke believed in the existence of true religion, which he evidently identified with the version of Christianity that he expounded in the *Reasonableness*. In fact, he described Christianity as the only true religion already in his writings on toleration of the 1680s and early 1690s.<sup>106</sup> Consequently, he stated in the *Letter* that "all charitable Admonitions, and affectionate Endeavours to reduce Men from Errors [...] are indeed the greatest Duty of a Christian".<sup>107</sup> However, Locke was skeptical about the human capability to correctly comprehend and, above all, to effectively communicate religious truth, whereas he argued that human beings could reach consensus about the need to preserve and promote their civil interests.<sup>108</sup> Therefore, he argued that political power could be exercised "only for the procuring, preserving, and advancing of [...] *Civil Interests*",<sup>109</sup> and he expressly excluded "the Care of Souls" from the magistrate's tasks.<sup>110</sup> He maintained that "all Force and Compulsion are to be forboren" when "one Man does not violate the Right of another, by his Erroneous Opinions, and undue manner of Worship, nor is his Perdition any prejudice to another Mans Affairs", given that "the care of each Mans Salvation belongs only to himself".<sup>111</sup> For this reason, Locke did not dismiss the theoretical possibility of tolerating Catholics, on condition that they discarded morals harmful to human and civil society. If they did so, they would be cleared of the accusation of immorality.

103 Mark Goldie, "Introduction" to Locke, *Letter*, pp. ix-xxiii (xix-xx).

104 Locke, "Letter", p. 44.

105 Goldie, "Introduction", p. xix.

106 Locke, "Letter", p. 66; John Locke, "A Second Letter Concerning Toleration", in Vernon (ed.), *Locke on Toleration*, pp. 67-107 (69, 79).

107 Locke, "Letter", p. 46.

108 On Locke's "political skepticism" and its application to religious toleration, see Richard Vernon, "Introduction" to Vernon (ed.), *Locke on Toleration*, pp. viii-xxxii (xxiv-xxix); Black, "Toleration"; Lucci, "Political Scepticism".

109 Locke, "Letter", p. 12.

110 *Ibidem*, pp. 13-15.

111 *Ibidem*, pp. 45-46.

Finally, it is worth noting that Locke's objections to Catholic "antinomianism" can apply to others who claimed to be divinely inspired to rule or exempt from ordinary moral norms. This was the case, for instance, of several Calvinistic factions in seventeenth-century England. Therefore, I agree with Goldie that "[t]here are hints that Locke had Puritan fanatics in mind as being also potentially intolerable".<sup>112</sup> Goldie's thesis is indeed confirmed by Locke's attack on the antinomian attitude of enthusiasts in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*:

Immediate *Revelation* being a much easier way for Men to establish their Opinions, and regulate their Conduct, than the tedious and not always successful Labour of strict Reasoning, it is no wonder, that some have been very apt to pretend to Revelation, and to perswade themselves, that they are under the peculiar guidance of Heaven in their Actions and Opinions, especially in those of them, which they cannot account for by the ordinary Methods of Knowledge, and Principles of Reason.<sup>113</sup>

## 7. ANTINOMIANISM

Locke openly manifested his hostility to "antinomianism" in the *Reasonableness* and its two vindications. In the *Second Vindication*, he declared that he had been prompted to write the *Reasonableness* by a controversy that had "made so much noise and heat amongst some of the Dissenters".<sup>114</sup> Although Locke never used the terms "antinomian" and "antinomianism" in the *Reasonableness* and its vindications, this passage clearly refers to the antinomian controversy that involved several Nonconformist theologians in the 1690s. This controversy started in 1690, with the republication of the Civil-War Independent divine Tobias Crisp's *Christ Alone Exalted* (1643) by his son Samuel.<sup>115</sup> As an antinomian, Tobias Crisp argued that the elect were justified solely by God's eternal decree, the effects of which their good works and faith could not alter. The Presbyterian minister Daniel Williams refuted Crisp's views in *Gospel Truth, Stated and Vindicated* (1692),<sup>116</sup> a work that soon received the endorsement of sixteen other Presbyterian theologians. However, Samuel Crisp gained the support of several Independent divines, who accused Williams and his fellow-

112 Goldie, "Introduction", p. xix.

113 Locke, *Essay*, IV.xix.5, pp. 698-699.

114 John Locke, "A Second Vindication of the Reasonableness of Christianity", in Locke, *Vindications*, pp. 27-233 (34).

115 Tobias Crisp, *Christ Alone Exalted*, 2nd edition (London, 1690).

116 Daniel Williams, *Gospel Truth, Stated and Vindicated* (London, 1692).

Presbyterians of holding a moralist and essentially Arminian soteriology. The controversy became so bitter that, in 1694, Williams was removed from the Pinner's Hall lectureship. Along with the other Presbyterian divines who had left in protest, Williams established the Salter's Hall lectureship. Following these events, the "Happy Union" between Presbyterians and Independents, established in 1691, was dissolved in 1695.<sup>117</sup>

Locke abhorred Tobias Crisp's antinomian, radically predestinarian views. However, while he avoided using the term "predestination" in the *Reasonableness* and its vindications, his criticism involved much more than Crisp's extreme position. In his theological works, Locke indeed described predestinarian ideas in general as unscriptural, illogical, potentially immoral (in that belief in predestination denied the necessity of good works for salvation), and hence unreasonable and ineffective to salvation. Locke's stance against predestination entailed the rejection of original sin – a doctrine that Locke judged crucial to predestinarian views of life and salvation. On this matter, he wrote in the *Reasonableness*:

[S]ome Men would have all *Adam's* Posterity doomed to Eternal Infinite Punishment, for the Transgression of *Adam*, whom Millions had never heard of, and no one had authorized to transact for him, or be his Representative.<sup>118</sup>

Locke expressly denied original sin not only in the *Reasonableness*, but also in *Essay* II.xxvii.22, where he stated that, on Judgment Day, "no one shall be made to answer for what he knows nothing of".<sup>119</sup> Moreover, he focused on Adam's sin and its impact on human nature in two short manuscripts written in the first half of the 1690s, *Peccatum originale* (1692) and *Homo ante et post lapsum* (1693).<sup>120</sup> In *Peccatum originale*, Locke described the doctrine of original sin as illogical and incompatible with God's goodness and justice. Among other things, he provocatively asked: "[H]ow it consists with Gods truth or Veracity to repute to the Posterity of Adam to have committed that Sin in him who did not concur to it by any Act of theirs, nor were in being when it was committed?"<sup>121</sup> Nevertheless, Locke acknowledged that Adam's sin still had an effect on human life. In *Homo ante et post lapsum*, he stated

117 On these events, see Francis J. Bremer, *Congregational Communion: Clerical Friendship in the Anglo-American Puritan Community, 1610-1692* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994), pp. 250-252.

118 Locke, *Reasonableness*, p. 5.

119 Locke, *Essay*, II.xxvii.22, p. 344. See, also, *ibidem*, II.xxvii.26, pp. 346-347.

120 John Locke, "Peccatum originale", in Locke, *Writings on Religion*, pp. 229-230; John Locke, "Homo ante et post Lapsum", in Locke, *Writings on Religion*, p. 231.

121 Locke, "Peccatum originale", pp. 229-230.

that Adam and Eve's sin had "infected their children". However, he argued that it was fashion and example to have "spread the corruption" – a corruption coming from a world of covetousness, pride, and ambition.<sup>122</sup> Thus, Locke did not believe that humanity suffered from an inherited guilt or propensity to evil due merely to Adam's sin. Original sin is indeed irreconcilable not only with Locke's emphasis on individual responsibility in the pursuit of salvation, but also with his empiricism. As John Marshall has noted, it is unlikely that the philosopher who described the human mind at birth as a *tabula rasa* "meant to be supporting an infection of 'impressions' to be taken in an inherited as opposed to an environmental, or contagious sense, the latter being also the more usual way of talking of both infection and impression".<sup>123</sup>

Locke's denial of original sin echoes, in many respects, the Socinians' position on the matter, which also led Socinus and several of his followers to deny atonement. In *De Jesu Christo Servatore*, Socinus maintained that human nature had not become worse following Adam's sin. Thus, there was no need of reconciliation with God through the sacrifice of Christ, whose death was not intended to atone for the sins of humanity, whereas his resurrection aimed at strengthening hope in eternal salvation. Belief in atonement was indeed incompatible with Socinus's emphasis on the role of free will and reason in the pursuit of salvation.<sup>124</sup> Locke concurred with the Socinians that salvation is the result of freely chosen faith and good works, but he did not deny atonement. He simply abstained from including the satisfaction theory of atonement, which was upheld by Catholics and most Protestants, among the fundamentals of Christianity in the *Reasonableness*. According to the satisfaction theory, Christ suffered death on the cross as a substitute for human sin, thus satisfying God due to his infinite merit. This theory, first formulated by Anselm of Canterbury, was refined by Thomas Aquinas and was later accepted by the Magisterial Reformers. However, Calvin adapted the satisfaction theory to his predestinarian ideas, in that he limited Christ's atonement in its effect to only those whom God had elected to save despite the depravity of human nature following Adam's sin. Locke knew that writers belonging to different theological traditions held divergent views of satisfaction. As he declared in *A Second Vindication of the Reasonableness of Christianity*, he did not touch upon the subject of satisfaction in the *Reasonableness* because the doctrine of the satisfaction of Christ was one of

122 Locke, "Homo ante et post lapsum", p. 231.

123 Marshall, "Locke, Socinianism", p. 162.

124 Socinus, "De Jesu Christo", pp. 241-244.



the “disputed doctrines of Christianity”.<sup>125</sup> He observed that “satisfaction” was “a term not used by the Holy Ghost in the Scripture, and very variously explained by those that do use it”.<sup>126</sup> However, Locke addressed the subject of satisfaction, and more generally of atonement, in two manuscripts – *Adversaria Theologica*, composed shortly before the *Reasonableness*, and *Redemption, Death*, written, probably, in 1697.<sup>127</sup> In these manuscripts, he expressed views conflicting with the satisfaction theory, but compatible with the governmental theory of atonement, first formulated by Hugo Grotius and accepted by most Remonstrant theologians, including Locke’s friend, Philipp van Limborch. In *Defensio fidei Catholicae de satisfactione Christi adversus Faustum Socinum* (1617), Grotius maintained that Christ’s suffering and death on the cross were necessary to display God’s hate of evil, love of justice, and wrath. Christ’s death aimed at showing how seriously God takes sin and, thus, at discouraging human beings from committing evil deeds.<sup>128</sup> In *Theologia Christiana* (1686), Limborch offered a refined version of this theory, as John Mark Hicks has noted:

According to Limborch’s theory of the atonement, Christ paid a real, but not a full, price to the justice of God. The price was his physical death which demonstrated that God hated evil and loved justice. The price had no relation to the eternal penalty of sin except that it opens the way of reconciliation by the suspension of the Father’s wrath. Since this wrath was publicly displayed through Jesus, the Father is appeased and the way is now open for reconciliation with man. The Father has opened the way of salvation by the establishment, through his Son, of a new covenant in which the forgiveness of sins is proffered upon the condition of faith and repentance.<sup>129</sup>

125 Locke, “Second Vindication”, p. 227.

126 *Ibidem*.

127 Locke, “Adversaria Theologica”, pp. 32-33; John Locke, “Redemption, Death”, in Locke, *Reasonableness*, pp. 205-208. In the entry “Satisfactio Christi Aff.” (i.e. “the satisfaction of Christ affirmed”) in *Adversaria Theologica*, Locke recorded no argument and left the page blank. In the entry “Satisfactio Christi Neg.” (i.e. “the satisfaction of Christ denied”), he referred to a tract by the English Unitarian theologian Stephen Nye, *Considerations on the Explications of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (London, 1693), when relating the Socinians’ denial of the satisfaction theory.

128 Grotius, *Defensio fidei*; Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2006), p. 229.

129 John Mark Hicks, *The Theology of Grace in the Thought of Jacobus Arminius and Philip van Limborch*, Ph.D. dissertation (Westminster Theological Seminary, 1985), p. 206. See Philipp van Limborch, *Theologia Christiana* (Amsterdam, 1686). Locke read the drafts of some sections of *Theologia Christiana* when Limborch was still working on this book. Limborch then sent a copy of this book to Locke in late 1694, when the latter was working on *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. However, Locke did not rush to examine Limborch’s essay

The governmental theory of atonement, especially as elaborated by Limborch, is compatible with a moralist soteriology. This theory entails that salvation depends on the free acceptance of God's assisting grace manifested in the new covenant and, thus, on free will, which, according to both Limborch and Locke, leads the believer to repent for their sins, obey the divine law, and have faith. This approach to salvation avoids the shortcomings of predestinarianism – above all, its potentially immoral implications – while still making sense of Christ's suffering and death on the cross. Conversely, Socinus's and some of his followers' outright denial of atonement led them to emphasize not so much Christ's death as his resurrection.

Does Locke's rejection of antinomianism (and, in fact, of the very concept of predestination) as detrimental to salvation make this position also intolerable in a civil commonwealth? After all, in *A Letter Concerning Toleration* Locke excluded Roman Catholics from toleration because of their "antinomian" moral ideas, as we have seen above. However, things are different when it comes to Protestant antinomians. Whereas Locke criticized Calvinistic antinomianism as injurious to salvation, he did not declare Protestant antinomians "intolerable" in any of his writings. I believe that Locke considered Protestant antinomianism to be not as socially dangerous as some of the moral ideas held by Roman Catholics. In the *Letter*, he indeed condemned some specific antisocial ideas, which Protestant polemicists attributed to Roman Catholics, and he connected these ideas with the obedience that Catholics owed to their indisputable religious leader, who was also a foreign prince. As regards Calvinistic antinomians, Locke was probably aware of their *potential* intolerability, as Mark Goldie has argued, in that their claims of divine inspiration could possibly lead them to act regardless of ordinary moral norms and, consequently, to the detriment of the civil commonwealth.<sup>130</sup> Nonetheless, this theoretical possibility, unlike Roman Catholics' immoral principles informing their conduct, was not enough to make Protestant antinomians *actually* intolerable – as long as they did not really engage in illegal actions.

"diligently". As he wrote in a letter to Limborch dated 10 May 1695, he had delayed reading *Theologia Christiana* and other relatively recent books of theology until after completing his own inquiry, which he wanted to base exclusively on his reading of Scripture. However, his words of appreciation for Limborch's book in this letter show that his familiarity with at least some sections of *Theologia Christiana* contributed to his decision to make public his own religious ideas. See John Locke to Philipp van Limborch, 10 May 1695, in E.S. de Beer (ed.), *The Correspondence of John Locke*, 8 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979-1989), vol. 5, no. 1901.

<sup>130</sup> Goldie, "Introduction", p. xix.

## 8. DEISM

One of the reasons why Locke disliked predestinarianism was that, in his opinion, belief in original sin and predestination had an unfortunate side effect. At the start of the *Reasonableness*, Locke argued that belief in original sin and predestination had caused the reaction of others who, overestimating the capabilities of natural reason in moral and religious matters, had fallen into the opposite extreme:

[T]his 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, and consequently that there was none, rather than admit of it upon a Supposition so derogatory to the Honour and Attributes of that Infinite Being; and so made Jesus Christ nothing but the Restorer and Preacher of pure Natural Religion; thereby doing violence to the whole tenor of the New Testament.<sup>131</sup>

To Locke, the opinion that Jesus was “nothing but the restorer and preacher of pure natural religion” was typical of deism. Whereas Locke did not use terms like “deism” or “deist” in the *Reasonableness*, he wrote the words “deist” or “deists” once in the first vindication and eight times in the second. He employed these terms especially to refer to those who considered Jesus as merely a moral philosopher, who had simply reasserted a Law of Nature perfectly known to natural reason, without adding anything to it. However, it is not easy to understand whom exactly Locke meant to reproach in the above passage from the *Reasonableness*, which he wrote in 1695, at a time when the so-called “deist controversy” was still in its formative stage. This controversy raged especially between the publication of John Toland’s *Christianity Not Mysterious* in 1696 and the 1740s. This period saw the heyday of English deism, with the publication of the major works of the monistic pantheist Toland, the freethinker and determinist Anthony Collins (who was a friend of Locke during the latter’s last years), and Matthew Tindal, Thomas Chubb, Thomas Morgan, and Peter Annet, who described Christ’s message as merely a reaffirmation of the religion of nature.<sup>132</sup> While sharing a strong confidence in the powers of human reason, a view of history as a process of corruption,

<sup>131</sup> Locke, *Reasonableness*, p. 5.

<sup>132</sup> For relatively recent histories of English deism, see Diego Lucci, *Scripture and Deism: The Biblical Criticism of the Eighteenth-Century British Deists* (Bern: Lang, 2008); Wayne Hudson, *The English Deists: Studies in Early Enlightenment* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009); Wayne Hudson, *Enlightenment and Modernity: The English Deists and Reform* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009); Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth, *Deism in Enlightenment England: Theology, Politics, and Newtonian Public Science* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

and a consideration of institutional religion as the product of socio-cultural, political, merely human dynamics, these authors employed different concepts of “reason” and held different worldviews. In late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, the term “deism” indeed denoted various forms of heterodoxy, such as pantheistic ideas, different versions of determinism, and belief in a transcendent, wise, and benevolent creator, who had made the laws of nature comprehensible to natural reason and who, therefore, abstained from interfering in worldly affairs. In this period, several theologians – including, among others, the Newtonian scholar and Boyle Lecturer Samuel Clarke, the mystic William Law, and Bishop Joseph Butler – reacted to the spread of deistic ideas by reasserting the primacy of revealed religion in different ways. For instance, Clarke maintained the compatibility of natural and revealed religion, but he argued that Christian revelation was a necessary complement to natural reason.<sup>133</sup> Conversely, fideists like Law and Butler claimed that revelation was essential to salvation in that it was different, unrelated, and superior to natural reason, which they judged inadequate to resolve matters of ultimate concern.<sup>134</sup> However, several years before the publication of Toland’s *Christianity Not Mysterious*, various English theologians, including Richard Baxter and Edward Stillingfleet, had already tried to define and refute deism.<sup>135</sup> In fact, deistic views had emerged in England much before the 1690s.

Starting with *A View of the Principal Deistical Writers* (1757) by the Presbyterian minister John Leland,<sup>136</sup> traditional histories of English deism trace its origins to *De veritate* (1624) by Lord Edward Herbert of Cherbury.<sup>137</sup> This late Renaissance intellectual maintained that human beings could grasp the basic notions of natural religion, which, in his philosophy, have to do with

133 Samuel Clarke, *A Discourse Concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion, and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation* (London, 1706).

134 William Law, *The Case of Reason* (London, 1731); Joseph Butler, *Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and the Course of Nature* (London, 1736).

135 Richard Baxter, *More Reasons for the Christian Religion, and No Reason against It* (London, 1672); Edward Stillingfleet, *A Letter to a Deist, in Answer to Several Objections against the Truth and Authority of the Scriptures* (London, 1677).

136 John Leland, *A View of the Principal Deistical Writers*, 2 vols. (London, 1757).

137 Edward Herbert de Cherbury, *De veritate, prout distinguitur a revelatione, a verosimili, a possibili et a falso* (Paris, 1624). This work was written in 1622. After reading its manuscript, Grotius encouraged Herbert to publish it. On this author, see Ronald D. Bedford, *The Defence of Truth: Herbert of Cherbury and the Seventeenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979); John A. Butler, *Lord Herbert of Chirbury (1582-1648): An Intellectual Biography* (Lewiston: Mellen, 1990); Richard Serjeantson, “Herbert of Cherbury before Deism: The Early Reception of the *De Veritate*”, *The Seventeenth Century*, 16 (2001): pp. 217-238.

the existence of a Supreme Being, the necessity to “worship” this Supreme Being through moral conduct, and rewards and punishments in the afterlife. The other seventeenth-century English thinker whose philosophy presents deistic ideas is Charles Blount, who published his works between the early 1680s and his premature death by suicide in 1693.<sup>138</sup> Blount, like Herbert of Cherbury, considered the religion of nature universal, necessary, and sufficient. However, whereas Herbert conceded that some revelations (e.g. the Decalogue and Christ’s teachings) were compatible with natural religion, Blount’s attacks on ancient paganism portrayed institutional religion in general as not only superfluous, but also absurd, irrational, and inhumane, in that it hindered the free development of rationality. Blount became notorious in his time not only because of his deistic ideas, but also because he plagiarized the works of authors like Herbert, Hobbes, and Spinoza. Various histories of English deism have actually pointed out some deist authors’ debt to Hobbes and, above all, to Spinoza. Toland’s “pantheism” was indeed inspired, mainly, by Spinoza’s monistic philosophy, although Toland’s metaphysics was even more radical than Spinoza’s system. In fact, Toland, whose book *Letters to Serena* (1704) insists on the intrinsic activity of matter and the eternity of the universe, blamed Spinoza for distinguishing thought from matter and for denying that motion was inherent to matter.<sup>139</sup> Moreover, Spinoza’s demystifying biblical hermeneutics significantly influenced Toland and other deists’ approach to the Scriptures and the history of organized religion.<sup>140</sup> However, when Locke, in the above-cited passage from the *Reasonableness*, criticized those who “thought there was no redemption necessary [...] and so made Jesus Christ nothing but the restorer and preacher of pure natural religion”, he was probably not thinking of Herbert of Cherbury and Blount, let alone Hobbes or Spinoza. Locke knew Herbert’s philosophy, which he criticized as a form of innatism in Book I of the *Essay*.<sup>141</sup>

138 Charles Blount, *Great is Diana of the Ephesians* (London, 1680); Charles Blount, *Miracles, no Violations of the Law of Nature* (London, 1683); Charles Blount, *Religio Laici* (London, 1683); Charles Blount, *The Oracles of Reason* (London, 1693). On this author, see Ugo Bonanate, *Charles Blount. Libertinismo e deismo nel Seicento inglese* (Florence: Nuova Italia, 1972); Dario Pfanner, *Tra scetticismo e libertinismo. Charles Blount (1654-1693) e la cultura del libero pensiero nell’Inghilterra degli ultimi Stuart* (Naples: Vivarium, 2004).

139 John Toland, *Letters to Serena* (London, 1704), pp. 131-239.

140 On Spinoza’s impact on Toland and other deists and freethinkers in Britain, mainly but not exclusively in matters of biblical criticism, see Rosalie L. Colie, “Spinoza and the Early English Deists”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 20 (1959): pp. 23-46; Rosalie L. Colie, “Spinoza in England, 1665-1730”, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 107 (1963): pp. 183-219; Lucci, *Scripture and Deism*, pp. 38-44.

141 Locke, *Essay*, I.iii.15-27, pp. 77-84.

Nevertheless, nothing in Locke's works shows that he had Herbert in mind when attacking deism in the *Reasonableness* and its vindications. Concerning Charles Blount, Locke received his works only a week before the publication of the *Reasonableness*. Therefore, it is unlikely that Locke was thinking of Blount when he wrote, in the *Reasonableness*, about the deists' views on redemption and Jesus. Finally, in the second half of the 1690s, Locke stated that he was "not so well read in Hobbes or Spinoza, as to be able to say what were their opinions".<sup>142</sup> So, who were Locke's "deists"? Who were those whom Locke blamed in the *Reasonableness* for denying the need for redemption and reducing Jesus to merely a moral philosopher? I concur with John Higgins-Biddle's thesis that, when Locke criticized, in the *Reasonableness*, those who believed only in natural religion, he was probably thinking of Uriel Acosta and John Toland.<sup>143</sup>

Uriel Acosta (also called Uriel da Costa) was born in Porto, around 1585, to a family of "New Christians". He fled Portugal and converted openly to Judaism in the mid-1610s, when he moved to Hamburg whereas part of his family settled in Amsterdam. His opposition to Jewish traditions caused a scandal and led to his excommunication by the communities of Venice and Hamburg. He decided to move to Amsterdam in 1623. In the same year, he published *Examination of Pharisaic Traditions*, a tract depicting Rabbinic Judaism as corrupted by unscriptural beliefs and ceremonies and devoid of spiritual and philosophical concepts.<sup>144</sup> Acosta believed that the Law of Nature was universal, necessary, and sufficient, while he judged the rituals and rules of institutional religion inconsistent with both reason and Scripture. When the *Examination* was burned publicly, Acosta relocated to Utrecht. He was readmitted to the Jewish community of Amsterdam in 1633, but was soon excommunicated because he did not stop expressing heterodox ideas. Seven years later, in 1640, he was readmitted again to the Amsterdam community, but only after suffering a harsh public punishment. In the end, shortly after his final readmission to the Jewish community of Amsterdam, he committed suicide by shooting himself. But, before killing himself, he completed an autobiography, *Exemplar Humanae Vitae*, which remained in manuscript form until Limborch published it, and attempted to refute Acosta's views, in

142 John Locke, "Reply to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Worcester's Answer to His Second Letter", in John Locke, *Works*, 9 vols., 12th edition (London, 1824), vol. 3, pp. 192-499 (477).

143 Higgins-Biddle, "Introduction", pp. xxvii-xxxvii.

144 Uriel da Costa, *Examination of Pharisaic Traditions*, trans. and ed. H.P. Salomon and I.S.D. Sassoon (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

1687.<sup>145</sup> Locke knew this work through Limborch and, in a note that he wrote in the notebook “Lemmata Ethica” in 1695 (the same year when he published the *Reasonableness*), he called Acosta “the father and patriarch of the Deists”.<sup>146</sup>

Whereas Locke did not receive a good impression from Acosta’s views, he found Toland’s ideas even less appealing. Locke had first met Toland in August 1693, when the Irish scholar was almost twenty-three years old and had recently returned to England from Holland. Several good friends of Locke had recommended Toland to him. Among Toland’s references were Limborch, the merchant Benjamin Furly, the lawyer John Freke, the natural philosopher and political writer William Molyneux, and the famous scholar and Arminian theologian Jean Le Clerc. Later, Toland sent some papers to Locke through Freke in early 1695, when he was working on *Christianity Not Mysterious*. Freke mentioned Toland’s papers in two letters to Locke, but, unfortunately, these papers are lost.<sup>147</sup> It is likely that these papers were the drafts of some sections of Toland’s then upcoming book. If so, the use that Toland made of Locke’s way of ideas must have shocked Locke, given that, in *Christianity Not Mysterious*, Toland declared acceptable only those revelations consistent with our “natural” or “common Notions”.<sup>148</sup> This approach made divine revelation secondary in comparison to natural reason. Toland indeed talked of revelation as a mere “means of information”, the contents of which ought to be consistent with the criteria of natural reason.<sup>149</sup> Toland concurred with Locke’s claim that “it still belongs to *Reason*, to judge of the Truth of [a proposition’s] being a revelation, and of the signification of the Words, wherein it is delivered”.<sup>150</sup> In *Essay* IV.xviii.5, Locke had indeed declared:

[W]e can never receive for a Truth any thing, that is directly contrary to our clear and distinct Knowledge. [...] And therefore, *no Proposition can be received for Divine Revelation*, or obtain the Assent due to all such, *if it be contradictory*

145 Philipp van Limborch, *De Veritate Religionis Christianae, amica collatio cum erudito Judaeo; acced. Urielis Acosta Exemplar Humanae Vitae, cum Refutatione per Limborch* (Gouda, 1687), pp. 341-364. A biography of Acosta in English appeared in 1740: John Whiston, *The Remarkable Life of Uriel Acosta: An Eminent Freethinker* (London, 1740).

146 MS Locke d. 10, “Lemmata Ethica” (Bodleian Library, University of Oxford), p. 33.

147 John Freke to John Locke, 28 March 1695, in de Beer (ed.), *Correspondence*, vol. 5, no. 1868; John Freke and Edward Clarke to John Locke, 9 April 1695, in de Beer (ed.), *Correspondence*, vol. 5, no. 1874.

148 John Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious* (London, 1696), pp. 31, 79, 128.

149 *Ibidem*, pp. 40-41.

150 Locke, *Essay*, IV.xviii.8, p. 694.

*to our clear intuitive Knowledge*. Because this would be to subvert the principles, and Foundations of all Knowledge, Evidence, and Assent whatsoever.<sup>151</sup>

However, Locke argued that unassisted reason is not always able to achieve certain knowledge. In fact, “most of the Propositions we think, reason, discourse, nay act upon, are such, as we cannot have undoubted Knowledge of their Truth”.<sup>152</sup> Therefore, in the many instances when we are unable to attain *certainty*, we need to rely on *probability*.<sup>153</sup> This is true especially in religious matters:

There being many Things, wherein we have very imperfect Notions, or none at all; and other Things, of whose past, present, or future Existence, by the natural Use of our Faculties, we can have no Knowledge at all; these, as being beyond the Discovery of our natural Faculties, and above *Reason*, are, when revealed, *the proper Matter of Faith*.<sup>154</sup>

In cases like those described by Locke in this passage of the *Essay*, reason can only recognize that a thing, being not “contrary to our clear and distinct knowledge”, is probable. Therefore, as Nicholas Wolterstorff has noted, to Locke “[f]aith is not a mode of knowledge. It consists in believing things on the basis of one’s belief that they have been revealed by God rather than on the basis of the premises of some demonstration”.<sup>155</sup> To Locke, faith is, indeed, assent to merely *probable* matters of fact, as he explained in the *Essay*:

Because the Mind, not being certain of the Truth of that it does not evidently know, but only yielding to the Probability that appears in it, is bound to give up its Assent to such a Testimony, which, it is satisfied, comes from one, who cannot err, and will not deceive. [...] For where the Principles of Reason have not evidenced a Proposition to be certainly true or false, there clear *Revelation*, as another Principle of Truth, and Ground of Assent, may determine; and so it may be Matter of *Faith*, and be also above *Reason*. Because *Reason*, in that particular Matter, being able to reach no higher than Probability, *Faith* gave the Determination, where *Reason* came short; and *Revelation* discovered on which side the Truth lay.<sup>156</sup>

Toland too acknowledged that “in Matters of common Practice [we] must of necessity sometimes admit *Probability* to supply the Defect of *Demonstration*”.<sup>157</sup> However, as James Lancaster has noted in a recent article,

151 *Ibidem*, IV.xviii.5, p. 692.

152 *Ibidem*, IV.xv.2, p. 655.

153 *Ibidem*, IV.xvi.6, pp. 661-662.

154 *Ibidem*, IV.xviii.7, p. 694.

155 Wolterstorff, “Locke’s Philosophy of Religion”, p. 190.

156 Locke, *Essay*, IV.xviii.8-9, pp. 694-695.

157 Toland, *Christianity*, p. 21.



Toland “was unwilling to admit probability in matters of fact wherein faith was the intended consequence”.<sup>158</sup> Toland’s insistence on demonstrable certainty, not merely probability, as the ground of assent when it comes to revelations contained in the Bible was a significant point of divergence from Locke, as Lancaster has remarked:

Toland differed from Locke in one fundamental respect, and this was his belief that the matters of faith revealed in the Bible could be known as matters of fact with demonstrable certainty. Where Locke argued that assent could properly be called “faith” because it was assent to probable matters of fact, Toland argued that assent should only be given to matters of fact that attained the level of the intuitive, not those which were merely probable.<sup>159</sup>

As Toland explained in *Christianity Not Mysterious*:

When all these Rules concur in any Matter of Fact, I take it then for *Demonstration*, which is nothing else but *Irresistible Evidence from proper Proofs*. But where any of these Conditions are wanting, the thing is *uncertain*, or, at best, but *probable*, which, with me, are not very different.<sup>160</sup>

Therefore, while Locke classified propositions into three categories – according to reason, above reason, and contrary to reason<sup>161</sup> – Toland stated that “there is nothing in the Gospel Contrary to Reason, Nor Above it”,<sup>162</sup> and that “an implicate Assent to any thing above Reason [...] contradicts the Ends of Religion, the Nature of Man, and the Goodness and Wisdom of God”.<sup>163</sup>

Toland’s use of Locke’s way of ideas led the latitudinarian theologian and Bishop of Worcester, Edward Stillingfleet, to blame Locke for having provided the author of *Christianity Not Mysterious* with the means to deny belief in the Trinity.<sup>164</sup> In the tenth and last chapter of *A Discourse in Vindication of the*

158 Lancaster, “From Matters of Faith”, p. 158.

159 *Ibidem*.

160 Toland, *Christianity*, pp. 17-18.

161 Locke, *Essay*, IV.xvii.23, p. 687. For more details of this distinction made by Locke, see above in this article.

162 Toland, *Christianity*, p. 77.

163 *Ibidem*, p. 139.

164 On the Stillingfleet-Locke dispute, see G.A.J. Rogers, “Stillingfleet, Locke, and the Trinity”, in Allison P. Coudert, Sarah Hutton, Richard H. Popkin, Gordon M. Weiner (eds.), *Judaeo-Christian Culture in the Seventeenth Century: A Celebration of the Library of Narcissus Marsh (1638-1713)* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1999), pp. 207-224; M.A. Stewart, “Stillingfleet and the Way of Ideas” in Stewart (ed.), *English Philosophy*, pp. 245-280; Philip Dixon, *Nice and Hot Disputes: The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventeenth Century* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), pp. 143-162; E.D. Kort, “Stillingfleet and Locke on Substance, Essence, and Articles of Faith”, *Locke Studies*, 5 (2005): pp. 149-178; Jonathan S. Marko,

*Doctrine of the Trinity* (1697), Stillingfleet criticized Locke's view that certainty ought to be based on "clear and distinct ideas".<sup>165</sup> In Stillingfleet's opinion, this view had enabled Toland to reduce faith to rational assent to what is intelligible. Toland indeed argued that the "Subject of Faith" must be intelligible to all and must be built upon "very strict Reasoning from Experience".<sup>166</sup> According to Stillingfleet, Toland's dismissal of mysteries from religion entailed a rejection of the Trinitarian dogma, because this dogma was not based on a "clear and distinct idea".<sup>167</sup> Moreover, the doctrine of the Trinity relied on a traditional, Scholastic understanding of substance, which Stillingfleet reaffirmed against Locke's agnostic rethinking of substance as an unknown substratum or support of qualities.<sup>168</sup> Stillingfleet's *Vindication* started a bitter controversy with Locke. During this harsh controversy, Locke published three long "letters" to Stillingfleet, who replied to Locke's first and second letter before dying in 1699, when the controversy finally came to an end. Replying to Stillingfleet's attacks, Locke claimed that the bishop had misinterpreted the *Essay* and was trying to push him to talk of a subject, namely the doctrine of the Trinity, which he had not intended to cover in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and his other works.<sup>169</sup> Moreover, Locke disassociated himself from Toland. As Locke noted frequently in his letters to Stillingfleet, he, unlike the author of *Christianity Not Mysterious*, actually admitted mysteries in religion, since his faith was based on Scripture.<sup>170</sup> Thus, Locke observed that, if others had made ill use of his theories, Stillingfleet should blame them, instead of making a case against him that rested merely on guilt by association.<sup>171</sup> In Locke's words:

[The author of *Christianity Not Mysterious*] says something which has a conformity with some of the notions in my book. But it is to be observed he

*Measuring the Distance between Locke and Toland: Reason, Revelation, and Rejection during the Locke-Stillingfleet Debate* (Eugene OR: Pickwick, 2017), pp. 13-59.

165 Edward Stillingfleet, *A Discourse in Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (London, 1697), pp. 230-292.

166 Toland, *Christianity*, p. 137.

167 Stillingfleet, *Discourse*, p. 252.

168 *Ibidem*, pp. 236-238, 261-262. See Locke, *Essay*, II.xxiii.1-6, pp. 295-299.

169 John Locke, "A Letter to the Right Reverend Edward, Lord Bishop of Worcester", in Locke, *Works*, vol. 3, pp. 1-96 (30, 68-69); Locke, "Reply to the ... Answer to His Second Letter", pp. 407-408. During the controversy with Stillingfleet, Locke refrained from asserting or denying belief in the Trinitarian dogma, as he also did during his dispute with John Edwards.

170 Locke, "Letter to the Right Reverend Edward", pp. 30, 95-96; John Locke, "Reply to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Worcester's Answer to His Letter", in Locke, *Works*, vol. 3, pp. 97-185 (110, 119, 127-130); Locke, "Reply to the ... Answer to His Second Letter", pp. 201-209, 259-270.

171 Locke, "Reply to the ... Answer to His Letter", p. 126.

speaks them as his own thoughts, and not upon my authority, nor with taking any notice of me.<sup>172</sup>

Locke's frequent claims about the necessity to refer to Scripture, and thus to divine revelation, when addressing religious and moral matters denote his distance from what he considered the core tenets of deism – namely, that unassisted reason had actually grasped the Law of Nature in its entirety, that the Law of Nature was sufficient to establish morality on solid grounds and lead to salvation, and that Jesus had merely reaffirmed the Law of Nature without adding anything to it. As I have explained above in this essay, Locke thought that unassisted reason had always failed to build a thorough, convincing, flawless system of ethics. He even considered many ancient philosophers' reliance on natural reason alone as one of the main factors behind the rise of priestcraft before Christ's Coming. Locke believed that some philosophers, in ancient times, had inferred the existence of "the One only True God", but they could not persuade the bulk of humankind, who were thus subjugated by the priests' "wrong Notions, and invented Rites".<sup>173</sup> This was also due to the philosophers' circumspection and elitism, as Locke explained in the *Reasonableness*:

The Rational and thinking part of Mankind, 'tis true, when they sought after him, they found the One, Supreme, Invisible God: But if they acknowledged and worshipped him, it was only in their own minds. They kept this Truth locked up in their own breasts as a Secret, nor ever durst venture it amongst the People; much less amongst the Priests, those wary Guardians of their own Creeds and Profitable Inventions. Hence we see that *Reason*, speaking ever so clearly to the Wise and Virtuous, had never Authority enough to prevail on the Multitude.<sup>174</sup>

As a result, it was not the philosophers to rule, but "the Priests every where, to secure their Empire, having excluded *Reason* from having any thing to do in Religion".<sup>175</sup> Locke's stigmatization of the ineffectiveness of unassisted reason to direct human conduct in ancient times contained an indirect attack on deism, as Mark Goldie has pointed out:

Locke succeeds in turning anti-clericalism against the deists by showing that it was the flimsy hubris of ancient philosophy – of the advocates of reason – that bred clerical monstrosities by way of a reaction against the vanity and vacuity of secular philosophy. For Locke, undue faith in reason was a type of "enthusiasm". Contemporary deist claims for the great capacity of reason, Locke asserts,

172 Locke, "Reply to the ... Answer to His Second Letter", p. 205.

173 Locke, *Reasonableness*, pp. 143-144.

174 *Ibidem*, p. 144.

175 *Ibidem*, p. 143.

cannot be sustained in the face of history's evidence to the contrary, for the darkness of error and superstition, and its priestly manipulators, had, through time, overwhelmed the dim light of reason and its partisans.<sup>176</sup>

Locke argued that Jesus Christ had reconciled religion and morality, thus avoiding the shortcomings of what Goldie has aptly defined “[t]he lives of pure idolatry and pure reason [which] were both failed projects”.<sup>177</sup> To Locke, Christian revelation was necessary to establish morality on solid grounds and, thus, to pursue salvation effectively, because Christ, far from merely reaffirming the Law of Nature, had revealed the divine law perfectly and completely. Locke remarked his distance from deism in his explanation of the five advantages of Christ's Coming in the *Reasonableness*.<sup>178</sup> First, Christ revealed the existence of “the one invisible true God”, thus putting an end to polytheism, idolatry, and superstition, all caused mainly by priestcraft. Second, Christ revealed to humankind “a true and compleat Morality”, clarifying all the elements and implications of the divine law that unassisted reason had always failed to comprehend. Third, Christ reformed the worship of God, depriving it of its ritualistic elements. Fourth, Christ's teaching and resurrection offered humankind a “clear revelation” and “unquestionable assurance” of an afterlife with reward and punishment. Thus, Christ gave humanity a strong incentive to act morally – an incentive that no philosopher before him had provided. Fifth and last, Christ promised assistance by “the Spirit of God” in the form of the gift of grace, which, according to Locke, human beings were able to freely accept or reject. However, Locke thought that accepting God's assisting grace and, hence, having faith was the “reasonable”, convenient option, given the five advantages of Christ's Coming. These advantages further distinguish Locke's religious thought from what he called “deism”, which he considered incapable to lead to salvation in that deists relied on natural reason alone and, thus, were unable to construct and follow a perfect system of ethics. Does this mean that, to Locke, deists are also intolerable in a civil commonwealth because of their defective morality? I do not think so, given that deists differ significantly from atheists.

Locke considered atheists inherently immoral, and therefore socially dangerous, because of their grievous failure to acknowledge the existence of a divine creator and legislator – which produced the even more grievous failure

<sup>176</sup> Goldie, “John Locke”, p. 132.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibidem*. This theme is present not only in the *Reasonableness*, but also in the 1698 manuscript *Sacerdos*, in which Locke described Christ as reuniting “again Religion and Morality as the inseparable parts of the worship of god, which ought never to have been separated”. See Locke, “Sacerdos”, p. 17.

<sup>178</sup> Locke, *Reasonableness*, pp. 139-164.

to recognize and respect any (divinely given) moral law. Conversely, deists believed in a divine creator and legislator and, thus, they were able to appreciate and grasp, although partially and imperfectly, the divine law and their duties towards God. By the light of reason, deists could comprehend and respect at least the basic principles of the Law of Nature. In other words, their religious and moral views, albeit imperfect, still enabled them to meet at least minimally decent moral standards. Consequently, they were not comparable to atheists, in that they were not inherently immoral. Whereas Locke questioned the actual ability of unassisted reason to understand the Law of Nature entirely and perfectly, the deists' commitment to live by the Law of Nature (or at least by its principles that they could grasp) could be sufficient to make them tolerable in a civil commonwealth.

It is true that, according to Locke, reliance on natural reason alone was ineffective to eternal salvation. Therefore, Locke thought that the deists' rejection of the Law of Faith prevented them from achieving the salvation of their souls. Nevertheless, as Locke argued in *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, "the Care of Souls" falls outside of the purview of political authority. A possible objection might be that deists did not belong to any "deistic church" and thus, given Locke's focus on merely *organized* religion in the *Letter*, they could not be tolerated as people having "religion". Nevertheless, in the *Reasonableness* Locke did not require church membership as an indispensable condition for toleration of Christian believers. Therefore, I believe that the scarce importance that Locke gave to confessional affiliation in the *Reasonableness*, along with his emphasis, in his political works, on the Law of Nature as the only proper rule to govern human behavior in a state of nature or in a civil commonwealth, allowed for toleration of deists too.

## 9. CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that Locke's moral concerns played a significant role in shaping his intolerance of atheists and Roman Catholics and his hostility to antinomianism and deism, which he considered detrimental to salvation. Locke's moral views were always informed by a markedly religious conception of life, since he considered belief in a divine creator and legislator indispensable to have acceptable moral standards. In *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, he denied toleration not only to atheists, but also to Catholics, and he did so mainly for moral reasons. However, since the *Letter* advocated toleration of merely those subscribing to organized religion, it left those who did not belong to a religious society, such as deists, agnostics, and even

unaffiliated Christians, in a vague limbo, abstaining from defining their status and from expressly granting them any rights. Later, the moralist soteriology of *The Reasonableness of Christianity* implicitly extended the possibility of salvation, and toleration as well, to all those adhering to the Christian Law of Faith and the ethics it entailed. On the other hand, in the *Reasonableness* and other later writings on religion, Locke harshly criticized antinomianism, which entailed a poor consideration of good works and thus, according to Locke, hindered the achievement of salvation. Moreover, he attacked what he took to be the opposite of antinomianism, namely deism, which he considered founded on the mistaken assumption that unassisted reason perfectly comprehended the Law of Nature. Having recognized the failure of unassisted reason to establish a sound system of morality, and having turned to Christian revelation in his search for moral guidance, Locke rejected deist ethic as defective and unable to lead to salvation. However, Locke kept the issues of salvation and toleration separate in his later theological works. In fact, he did not invoke the political power against those unwilling to accept the Law of Faith, and he did not propose a Christian commonwealth as the proper way to do the business of morality. He stuck to the idea that mere belief in God made one able to appreciate and grasp, even though partially and imperfectly, the divine law – at least the Law of Nature in its basic tenets. Therefore, belief in a deity that expects humans to act virtuously made one tolerable in a civil commonwealth, even though this person did not accept the Christian Law of Faith. Yet, Locke's markedly religious conception of life and morality always prevented him from arguing in favor of complete freedom of conscience and, instead, led him to propose only limited forms of toleration.