

The principles of religious freedom in the letter concerning toleration by John Locke*.

“The end of a religious society (...) is the public worship of God and, by means thereof, the acquisition of eternal life. (...). Nothing ought nor can be **transacted** in this society relating to the possession of civil and worldly goods. (...). For force belongs wholly to the civil magistrate, and the possession of all **outward** goods is subject to his jurisdiction.”

This is one of the resolute statements we can find in Locke's Letter of Toleration (1689), which still nowadays can be considered as the column and the **blueprint** of any reflection about **tolerance**: this is based on division of powers between civil government and religion and on a balanced relationships among different religions. Here are the main tenets and principles Locke presented as a theoretical reflection which still today is worldwide considered to be as a sort of final word on the issue, **shedding** the light of reason on the **blindness** of human affairs.



1) Civil **unrest** in society is provoked more by refusal to prevent different religions from being practiced, rather than by **permitting tolerance and free worshipping**. So **Thomas Hobbes**, in his **Leviathan**, was wrong when arguing that uniformity of religion would be a key-means for a well-functioning civil society: only tolerance can assure freedom of thought, cooperation, negotiation among individuals, and finally social development. It is impossible to merge all religions in one single state religion.

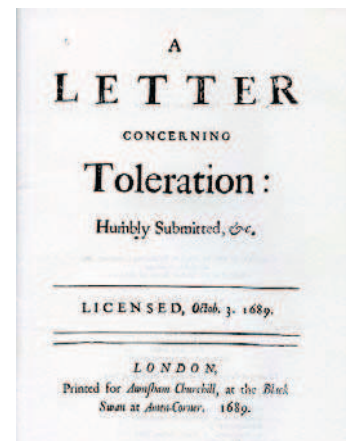
2) We have to sharply **distinguish between the role of state and of religion in society**: the business of civil government completely differs from that of religion. The former is "...a society of men constituted only for procuring, preserving and advancing their own civil interests" like "...life, liberty, health (...), possession of outwards things, such as money, land, houses (...). It is the duty of civil magistrate (...) to secure unto all the people in general and to every one of his subjects (...) the just possession of these things belonging to this life". On the contrary, a church, and a religion in general, is only committed to preserving individual salvation by means of inward persuasion of mind: it never can be assured by any intervention of the civil magistrate, nor by exertion of force upon the people, since "...though the rigour of laws and the force of penalties were capable to convince and change men's minds, yet would not that help at all to the salvation of their souls". So, souls belong to God, whereas bodies belong to the magistrate: for the very first time separation of power was stated.

3) If state and church are now **two different institutions, aiming at different goals on different realms**, then the government may not involve itself into the care of souls, exactly like the church may not make use of any means other than moral persuasion for promising salvation and the reign of God. Force cannot create any change necessary for salvation: it neither would persuade anyone from joining a certain church, nor a similar artificial conviction would truly be helping for personal salvation of the soul. Locke argues, contrary to our current acceptance, that yet **atheists would not be tolerated**, since they do not tolerate God, and also because "...promises, covenants, and oaths which are the bonds of human society can have no hold upon an atheist".

The "**Reasonableness of Christianity**" (1695) consists yet of being Christianity fully acceptable in terms of pure Reason: Locke does not reject it because as a religion it has simply to be considered as a trivial problem of faith. On the contrary, Christianity implies a real content of Reason: it provides simple but strong rationales to logic belief in the existence of a core of principles, free of superstition, which are a) Jesus Christ being the Messiah and b) the **true nature of God** being recognized as free from any theological **diatribe**. Christianity so, is particularly well acceptable as a religion (the position of **Deism**), although within the limits of its action with regard to the government, since it is useful for society, and it is even innerly rational like no others religions.

With his **Letter** Locke delivered to posterity the most important reflection in the history of Philosophy, regarding the justification and defence of the freedom of thought and consciousness for any modern "citizen" who would be born in the future, like we are in our post-modern world, still choked by **clashes of civilization**.

***John Locke (1632-1704)** Born in Wrington, Somerset, Great Britain. One of the major intellectuals of philosophical Empiricism together with David Hume and George Berkeley and heir of the tradition of Francis Bacon. Father of Liberalism, called "the Doctor" because of his early studies as a physician; well known for his theory of Knowledge based on Sensism, Empiricism, sensorial experience which records memory in a individual mind conceived as a *Tabula rasa* (*An Essay concerning human understanding*, 1690). He deeply grounded the theory of State and civil Government (*Two Treatises on the civil Government*, 1689), influencing American revolution, the whole Enlightenment, classical Republicanism, the Liberal Theory and the American Declaration of Independence. He was the first philosopher tackling the problem of Tolerance and the necessary separation needed by modern governments between civil government and religious power by establishing a clear division line (*A Letter concerning Toleration*, 1689).



- Sensism, Empiricism, empiricist, (1695) The Reasonableness of Christianity, as Delivered in the Scriptures: Hegel, Kant, several other attempts to show inner rationalism in christianity as the unique rational religion....Best modern justification of the history of philosophy, concerning the issue of freedom of thought and consciousness. Enlightenment – classical Republicanism, Liberal Theory, American Declaration of Independence, Fundamental Constitution of Carolina.

“...I esteem it above all things necessary to *distinguish exactly the business of civil government from that of religion* and to settle the just bounds that lie between the one and the other. If this be not done, there can be no end put to the controversies that will be always arising between those that have, or at least pretend to have, on the one side, a concernment for the interest of men's souls, and, on the other side, a care of the commonwealth...

The commonwealth seems to me to be a society of men constituted only for the procuring, preserving, and advancing their own civil interests.

Civil interests I call life, liberty, health, and indolency of body; and the possession of outward things, such as money, lands, houses, furniture, and the like.

It is the duty of the civil magistrate, by the impartial execution of equal laws, to secure unto all the people in general and to every one of his subjects in particular the just possession of these things belonging to this life. If anyone presume to violate the laws of public justice and equity, established for the preservation of those things, his presumption is to be checked by the fear of punishment, consisting of the deprivation or diminution of those civil interests, or goods, which otherwise he might and ought to enjoy. But seeing no man does willingly suffer himself to be punished by the deprivation of any part of his goods, and much less of his liberty or life, therefore, is the magistrate armed with the force and strength of all his subjects, in order to the punishment of those that violate any other man's rights.

Now that the whole jurisdiction of the magistrate reaches only to these civil concernments, and that all civil power, right and dominion, is bounded and confined to the only care of promoting these things; and that it neither can nor ought in any manner to be extended to the salvation of souls, these following considerations seem unto me abundantly to demonstrate. First, because the care of souls is not committed to the civil magistrate, any more than to other men. It is not committed unto him, I say, by God; because it appears not that God has ever given any such authority to one man over another as to compel anyone to his religion. Nor can any such power be vested in the magistrate by the consent of the people, because no man can so far abandon the care of his own salvation as blindly to leave to the choice of any other, whether prince or subject, to prescribe to him what faith or worship he shall embrace. For no man can, if he would, conform his faith to the dictates of another. All the life and power of true religion consist in the inward and full persuasion of the mind; and faith is not faith without believing. Whatever profession we make, to whatever outward worship we conform, if we are not fully satisfied in our own mind that the one is true and the other well pleasing unto God, such profession and such practice, far from being any furtherance, are indeed great obstacles to our salvation. For in this manner, instead of expiating other sins by the exercise of religion, I say, in offering thus unto God Almighty such a worship as we esteem to be displeasing unto Him, we add unto the number of our other sins those also of hypocrisy and contempt of His Divine Majesty. In the second place, the care of souls cannot belong to the civil magistrate, because his power consists only in outward force; but true and saving religion consists in the inward persuasion of the mind, without which nothing can be acceptable to God. And such is the nature of the understanding, that it cannot be compelled to the belief of anything by outward force. Confiscation of estate, imprisonment, torments, nothing of that nature can have any such efficacy as to make men change the inward judgement that they have framed of things. In the third place, the care of the salvation of men's souls cannot belong to the magistrate; because, though the rigour of laws and the force of penalties were capable to convince and change men's minds, yet would not that help at all to the salvation of their souls. For there being but one truth, one way to heaven, what hope is there that more men would be led into it if they had no rule but the religion of the court and were put under the necessity to quit the light of their own reason, and oppose the dictates of their own consciences, and blindly to resign themselves up to the will of their governors and to the religion which either ignorance, ambition, or superstition had chanced to establish in the countries where they were born? In the variety and contradiction of opinions in religion, wherein the princes of the world are as much divided as in their secular interests, the narrow way would be much straitened; one country alone would be in the right, and all the rest of the world put under an obligation of following their princes in the ways that lead to destruction; and that which heightens the absurdity, and very ill suits the notion of a Deity, men would owe their eternal happiness or misery to the places of their nativity.

Let us now consider what a church is. A church, then, I take to be a voluntary society of men, joining themselves together of their own accord in order to the public worshipping of God in such manner as they judge acceptable to Him, and effectual to the salvation of their souls.

I say it is a free and voluntary society. Nobody is born a member of any church; otherwise the religion of parents would descend unto children by the same right of inheritance as their temporal estates, and everyone would hold his faith by

the same tenure he does his lands, than which nothing can be imagined more absurd. Thus, therefore, that matter stands. No man by nature is bound unto any particular church or sect, but everyone joins himself voluntarily to that society in which he believes he has found that profession and worship which is truly acceptable to God. The hope of salvation, as it was the only cause of his entrance into that communion, so it can be the only reason of his stay there. For if afterwards he discover anything either erroneous in the doctrine or incongruous in the worship of that society to which he has joined himself, why should it not be as free for him to go out as it was to enter? No member of a religious society can be tied with any other bonds but what proceed from the certain expectation of eternal life. A church, then, is a society of members voluntarily uniting to that end. It follows now that we consider what is the power of this church and unto what laws it is subject. The end of a religious society (as has already been said) is the public worship of God and, by means thereof, the acquisition of eternal life. All discipline ought, therefore, to tend to that end, and all ecclesiastical laws to be thereunto confined. Nothing ought nor can be transacted in this society relating to the possession of civil and worldly goods. No force is here to be made use of upon any occasion whatsoever. For force belongs wholly to the civil magistrate, and the possession of all outward goods is subject to his jurisdiction.

These things being thus determined, let us inquire, in the next place: How far the duty of toleration extends, and what is required from everyone by it?

And, first, I hold that no church is bound, by the duty of toleration, to retain any such person in her bosom as, after admonition, continues obstinately to offend against the laws of the society. For, these being the condition of communion and the bond of the society, if the breach of them were permitted without any animadversion the society would immediately be thereby dissolved. But, nevertheless, in all such cases care is to be taken that the sentence of excommunication, and the execution thereof, carry with it no rough usage of word or action whereby the ejected person may any wise be damnified in body or estate. For all force (as has often been said) belongs only to the magistrate, nor ought any private persons at any time to use force, unless it be in self-defence against unjust violence. Excommunication neither does, nor can, deprive the excommunicated person of any of those civil goods that he formerly possessed. All those things belong to the civil government and are under the magistrate's protection. The whole force of excommunication consists only in this: that, the resolution of the society in that respect being declared, the union that was between the body and some member comes thereby to be dissolved; and, that relation ceasing, the participation of some certain things which the society communicated to its members, and unto which no man has any civil right, comes also to cease. For there is no civil injury done unto the excommunicated person by the church minister's refusing him that bread and wine, in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, which was not bought with his but other men's money.

Secondly, no private person has any right in any manner to prejudice another person in his civil enjoyments because he is of another church or religion. All the rights and franchises that belong to him as a man, or as a denizen, are inviolably to be preserved to him. These are not the business of religion. No violence nor injury is to be offered him, whether he be Christian or Pagan. Nay, we must not content ourselves with the narrow measures of bare justice; charity, bounty, and liberality must be added to it. This the Gospel enjoins, this reason directs, and this that natural fellowship we are born into requires of us. If any man err from the right way, it is his own misfortune, no injury to thee; nor therefore art thou to punish him in the things of this life because thou supposest he will be miserable in that which is to come.

What I say concerning the mutual toleration of private persons differing from one another in religion, I understand also of particular churches which stand, as it were, in the same relation to each other as private persons among themselves: nor has any one of them any manner of jurisdiction over any other; no, not even when the civil magistrate (as it sometimes happens) comes to be of this or the other communion. For the civil government can give no new right to the church, nor the church to the civil government. So that, whether the magistrate join himself to any church, or separate from it, the church remains always as it was before — a free and voluntary society. It neither requires the power of the sword by the magistrate's coming to it, nor does it lose the right of instruction and excommunication by his going from it. This is the fundamental and immutable right of a spontaneous society — that it has power to remove any of its members who transgress the rules of its institution; but it cannot, by the accession of any new members, acquire any right of jurisdiction over those that are not joined with it. And therefore peace, equity, and friendship are always mutually to be observed by particular churches, in the same manner as by private persons, without any pretence of superiority or jurisdiction over one another”.....