Diego Lucci

Political Scepticism, Moral Scepticism, and the Scope and Limits of Toleration in John Locke

1 Introduction

In *A Letter concerning Toleration*, written in late 1685 and published in 1689, John Locke argued for the separation between the state and religious organizations.[1] He advocated toleration of all those subscribing to organized religion, be they Christians, Jews, Muslims, or pagans. Nevertheless, as Jonathan Israel has noted, in Locke's *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

This essay is one of the results of a study period I spent in Hamburg from February to July 2018, when I was a Senior Research Fellow of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies (MCAS) at the University of Hamburg. Before finalizing this essay, I presented its thesis at the 2018 Conference of the International Society for Intellectual History (ISIH), which took place at the University of St Andrews on June 10 to 13, 2018. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the Director of the MCAS, Prof. Giuseppe Veltri, for his support, friendship, and sincere interest in my research. I would also like to thank all the administrators, staff members, research associates, and research fellows of the MCAS for their assistance, encouragement, and attention to my scholarly activities. Concerning this article, I am very grateful to Dr. Bill Rebiger, Dr. Raffaele Russo, Dr. Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth, and an anonymous reviewer for their precious suggestions and assistance. I would finally like to thank Prof. Peter Anstey, Prof. Teresa Castelao-Lawless, Prof. Mark Goldie, Prof. Michael Hunter, and Dr. Adam Sutcliffe for the feedback and advice they gave me at the 2018 ISIH Conference.

1 [John Locke], *Epistola de Tolerantia* (Gouda: Justum ab Hoeve, 1689). The *Letter* was promptly translated into English: [John Locke], *A Letter concerning Toleration*, [trans. William Popple] (London: Churchill, 1689). After publishing the *Letter*, Locke engaged in a debate with the Oxford chaplain Jonas Proast. In responding to Proast in three more letters written in 1690, 1692, and 1704, Locke reaffirmed and further clarified his views on toleration. This article concentrates on Locke's first letter, while referring to the other letters when necessary. On the Locke–Proast controversy, see Mark Goldie, "John Locke, Jonas Proast, and Religious Toleration, 1688–1692," in *The Church of England, c.1689–c.1833: From Toleration to Tractarianism*, eds. John Walsh, Colin Haydon, and Stephen Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993): 143–171; Richard Vernon, *The Career of Toleration: John Locke, Jonas Proast, and after* (Montreal–Kingston: McGill–Queen's University Press, 1997); *Locke on Toleration*, ed. Richard Vernon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Adam Wolfson, "Toleration and Relativism: The Locke–Proast Exchange," *The Review of Politics* 59 (1997): 213–232; Adam Wolfson, *Persecution or Toleration: An Explication of the Locke–Proast Quarrel, 1689–1704* (Lanham: Lexington, 2010); John W. Tate, *Liberty, Toleration and Equality: John Locke, Jonas Proast and the Letters Concerning Toleration* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

https://doi.org/10.1515/978-3-11-057768-6-007

limbo without any clear status or guaranteed freedom.'[2] In the *Letter*, Locke's main goal was indeed to prevent churches from gaining power from the political rulers and oppressing other religious groups. Thus, far from advocating complete freedom of conscience, he simply delineated the criteria regulating the relationships between political authorities and religious societies, as well as between different religious groups. This focus on merely the separation between the state and religious organizations is a significant shortcoming in the theory of toleration expounded in Locke's *Letter*—a theory much less inclusive than other seventeenth-century views on the matter, such as Spinoza's philosophical advocacy of freedom of conscience and Bayle's sceptical justification of wide toleration. However, Locke's later writings on religion imply different conclusions regarding toleration. In *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), a theological book with significant irenic implications, Locke formulated a moralist soteriology based on what he took to be the fundamentals of Christianity—i.e. faith, repentance, and obedience, which he judged to be plainly revealed in Scripture, essential to morality and salvation, and hence placed at the core of the Christian Law of Faith.[3] As Locke argued that every Christian had the right and duty to study Scripture by themselves, he admitted that more specific, non-fundamental beliefs might arise from different interpretations of biblical texts not dealing with the fundamentals of Christianity. However, to Locke, non-fundamentals are irrelevant to morality and salvation and, thus, must not hinder peace among Christians. Briefly, Locke's doctrine of the fundamentals implies that all those who try to live by the Christian Law of Faith ought to tolerate each other, regardless of non-fundamentals and confessional affiliation. Therefore, this position also allows for toleration of denominationally uncommitted Christians; and this is certainly a step beyond Locke's advocacy, in the *Letter*, of merely a separation between the state and religious societies.

In this essay, I reconsider the impact of Locke's moral and soteriological concerns on his approach to religious toleration and, thus, on the scope and limits of Locke's views on toleration in their development from the *Letter* to the *Reasonableness*. In doing so, I call attention to the sceptical dimension of Locke's thought. Although Locke devoted a good deal of Book IV of *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690) to demonstrating that he was not a sceptic, several contemporaries considered his way of ideas as liable to lead to scepticism. Among Locke's critics who judged his epistemology to be essentially sceptic were the latitudinarian Bishop Edward Stillingfleet, the Catholic priest John Sergeant, the Church of England divine

2 Jonathan I. Israel, "Spinoza, Locke and the Enlightenment Battle for Toleration," in *Toleration in Enlightenment Europe*, eds. Ole P. Grell and Roy Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 103.

3 In this article, where not indicated otherwise, I refer to the Clarendon edition of the *Reasonableness:* John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity, as Delivered in the Scriptures*, ed. John C. Higgins-Biddle (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

Henry Lee, and such famous philosophers as Leibniz and Berkeley.[4] Sam Black, investigating the sources of Locke's 'mitigated skepticism' in an article of 1998, contended that 'Locke is indebted for his ideas to the revival of New Academy skepticism.'[5] In this respect, John Rogers has argued that, although Locke was definitely not a full-blown Pyrrhonian sceptic, the early modern revival of sceptical considerations informed his epistemology in a twofold sense.[6] First, according to Locke we cannot expect to get behind ideas to things themselves, namely to the substance of things, which he defined as an unknown substratum or support of the qualities we perceive.[7] Second, to Locke we cannot hope to attain certainty in most areas of inquiry, in which we can only aspire to rely on probabilities.[8]

While the sceptical aspects of Locke's epistemology are not the main subject of this article, it is important to stress that Locke's emphasis on the limits of knowledge significantly conditioned his approach to religious and moral matters. He believed that the amount of knowledge available to humankind in matters of religion and ethics was strictly limited, and he had serious doubts about the prospects for enlarging this stock of knowledge through the operation of natural reason alone.[9] This awareness of the narrow scope of knowledge in religious and moral matters influenced Locke's conception of political authority. In this regard, some students of Locke—including, among others, Susan Mendus, David Wootton, and Richard Vernon—have contended that a sort of political scepticism inspired his arguments to exclude 'the Care of Souls' from the magistrate's purview.[10] Locke's political scepticism involved

4 Edward Stillingfleet, *A Discourse in Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Mortlock, 1697); John Sergeant, *Solid Philosophy Asserted, against the Fancies of the Ideists* (London: Clavil, 1697); Henry Lee, *Anti-Scepticism: or, Notes upon each Chapter of Mr. Locke's Essay concerning Human Understanding* (London: Clavel, 1702); Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding* (1704), trans. and eds. Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (Dublin: Pepyat, 1710). Stillingfleet was one of the major representatives of the English theological current known as latitudinarianism. *Contra* Calvinist predestination, the so-called 'latitude-men' upheld a moralist soteriology stressing the importance of human reason, free will, and morality. Moreover, they aimed to relax the terms of conformity in such a manner as to 'comprehend' at least the least radical Dissenters within the Church of England. See Martin I. J. Griffin, Jr., *Latitudinarianism in the Seventeenth-Century Church of England* (Leiden: Brill, 1992); William M. Spellman, *The Latitudinarians and the Church of England, 1660–1700* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1993).

5 Sam Black, "Toleration and the Skeptical Inquirer in Locke," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 28 (1998): 475.

6 G. A. John Rogers, "John Locke and the Sceptics," in *The Return of Scepticism: From Hobbes and Descartes to Bayle*, ed. Gianni Paganini (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2003): 37–53.

7 John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), II.xxiii.1–6.

8 *Ibidem*, IV.xv.2, IV.xvi.6.

9 Black, "Toleration," 478.

10 Susan Mendus, "Locke: Toleration, Morality and Rationality," in *John Locke: "A Letter concerning Toleration" in Focus*, eds. John Horton and Susan Mendus (London: Routledge, 1991): 147–162; David Wootton, "Introduction," in John Locke, *Political Writings*, ed. David Wootton (London; Penguin,

not the existence of true religion, but the human ability to comprehend and, above all, communicate religious truth. In Locke, the limits of knowledge, especially in religious and moral matters, inform the scope of political power, as Black has explained:

> [T]here is a basic relationship between the *grounds* of state action and the limits of knowledge. This relationship is straightforward in Locke's case. The grounds of state action [...] conform to the boundaries of moral and religious knowledge. This implies, first, that the state is duty-bound to secure through coercive measures fundamental moral and religious truths. Second, the state is forbidden to pursue through force practical goals whose truth is inaccessible, at the expense of its citizens' basic interests. [...] [O]ne important reason why Locke advocates toleration is because Locke is a skeptic about *most* religious claims. It is a consequence of his mitigated skepticism that Locke advocates a duty of religious toleration.[11]

Although Locke called attention to the narrow scope of knowledge in religious and moral matters, his toleration did not extend beyond the boundaries of moral standards that he considered beneficial, or at least harmless, to the commonwealth and its members' civil interests. Surrendering to moral relativism, to Locke, would indeed be as dangerous as its opposite—namely, allowing religious fanaticism, enthusiasm, and dogmatism to influence civil life.[12] As Locke 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.'[13] For this reason, the *Letter* expressly denied toleration to atheists, whom Locke considered devoid of morality, and Roman Catholics, who, in his opinion, held some moral views harmful to society. However, *A Letter concerning Toleration* and *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* denote a sort of moral scepticism that Locke brought to its logical conclusions, and attempted to overcome, in his later writings on religion, especially in *The Reasonableness of Christianity.* Locke's moral scepticism was not about the existence, rationality, and demonstrability of morality in itself; but he questioned the *actual* ability of natural reason to demonstrate moral ideas and, thus, to establish a thorough, convincing, flawless system of ethics.[14] Therefore, in his search for solid foundations for morality, Locke eventually turned to Christian revelation, particular-

1993): 100–106; Vernon, *Career*, 35–51, 124–144; Richard Vernon, "Introduction," in *Locke on Toleration*, xxiv–xxix; Black, "Toleration;" Alex Tuckness, "Rethinking the Intolerant Locke," *American Journal of Political Science* 46 (2002): 288–298; Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 257–261.

11 Black, "Toleration," 474.

12 Jerome B. Schneewind, "Locke's Moral Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, ed. Vere Chappell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994): 208; Wolfson, "Toleration," 230; Wolfson, *Persecution*, 88–99.

13 John Locke, "A Letter concerning Toleration," in John Locke, *A Letter concerning Toleration and Other Writings*, ed. Mark Goldie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010): 49–50.

14 Locke, *Essay*, IV.iii.18–20; Locke, *Reasonableness*, 148–150.

ly to Christ's assurance of otherworldly rewards and punishments—the only effective incentive to act morally.[15]

Locke's conviction that only the Christian Law of Faith can establish morality on solid grounds has controversial implications concerning the morality of believers who refuse this law—not only antinomians and deists, whom Locke openly criticized, but also post-biblical Jews and heathens. This urges some considerations regarding not only the salvation, but also the tolerability of non-Christian believers. However, whereas Locke's later religious writings describe eternal salvation as necessitating acceptance of the Christian Law of Faith, he never considered conversion to Christianity as a requirement for toleration, and he never proposed a Christian commonwealth as the proper way to do the business of morality. To the author of the *Reasonableness*, belief in a divine legislator and the consequent acceptance of and adherence to the divinely given Law of Nature were sufficient to make a person tolerable—even though unassisted reason in fact grasps the Law of Nature only partially and imperfectly, and even though rejecting the Law of Faith hinders the achievement of salvation. Yet, although the *Reasonableness* and Locke's other theological writings imply a tolerationism more inclusive than that of the *Letter*, Locke never went so far as to advocate complete freedom of conscience in matters of religion, since his views on toleration were always conditioned by a markedly religious conception of human life and morality.

2 Political Scepticism and the Struggle against Moral Scepticism in *A Letter concerning Toleration*

Whereas a detailed reconstruction of the development of Locke's approach to toleration from his early writings on the subject to *A Letter concerning Toleration* is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth pointing out that this issue attracted his attention since at least the early 1660s.[16] Locke's first work on toleration, the manuscript *Two Tracts on Government* (1660–1662), was occasioned by the publication of Edward Bagshaw's *The Great Question concerning Things Indifferent in Reli-*

15 John T. Moore, "Locke on the Moral Need for Christianity," *Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* 11 (1980): 61–68; Takashi Kato, "The *Reasonableness* in the Historical Light of the *Essay*," *Locke Newsletter* 12 (1981): 55–56; Schneewind, "Locke's Moral Philosophy," 217–219; Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Locke's Philosophy of Religion," in *Cambridge Companion*, 185; Raffaele Russo, *Ragione e ascolto. L'ermeneutica di John Locke* (Naples: Guida, 2001), 168–174; Greg Forster, *John Locke's Politics of Moral Consensus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 40–83; Victor Nuovo, *John Locke: The Philosopher as Christian Virtuoso* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 215–218.

16 John W. Gough, "The Development of Locke's Belief in Toleration," in *John Locke: "A Letter concerning Toleration" in Focus*, 57–77.

gious Worship (1660).[17] Bagshaw argued, mainly on scriptural grounds, that individuals should be allowed to observe or disregard religious ceremonies (which he considered 'indifferent' to salvation) according to their conscience. Refuting Bagshaw's theory point by point, *Two Tracts* endorsed religious uniformity, thus expressing a position different to Locke's views in his later writings on this subject—starting with the manuscript *An Essay concerning Toleration* (1667), which advanced many of the arguments later refined and further developed in the *Letter*.[18] Locke highlighted the dangers of state-imposed religious uniformity and, on the other hand, the benefits of toleration of different religious societies in other manuscripts written before the *Letter*—most prominently in his *Critical Notes* (c.1681) on Stillingfleet's *The Mischief of Separation* (1680) and *The Unreasonableness of Separation* (1681).[19] In this manuscript, Locke advocated a separation between the state and religious societies, employing some of the arguments he later used in the *Letter* and arguing that 'a national Church [that] tends to the support of a national Religion' was unable to promote true religion, preserve civil peace, and prevent dangerous errors.[20] Locke was eventually prompted to write *A Letter concerning Toleration* by Louis XIV's revocation of the Edict of Nantes in October 1685—an event that led many French Huguenots to flee to surrounding Protestant countries. Locke attributed the causes of this and other intolerant policies to competition among churches aiming to gain power from the state. To Locke, the main cause of state-supported intolerance toward some religious groups was the rivalry among power-seeking churches themselves. In this regard, Locke also disapproved of the imprudence of civil magistrates whose willingness to favour a sect over another reflected a grievous failure properly to comprehend the origins, purpose, and limits of political authority. This is why the *Letter* begins with a plea for 'mutual toleration of Christians'[21] and gives arguments against undesirable alliances between the civil magistrate and one or more religious societies.

The *Letter* presents three arguments delineating the purview and aims of the commonwealth, which Locke defines as 'a Society of Men constituted only for the

17 Edward Bagshaw, *The Great Question concerning Things Indifferent in Religious Worship* (London: s.n., 1660); John Locke, *Two Tracts on Government*, ed. Philip Abrams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

18 John Locke, "An Essay concerning Toleration," in Locke, *Political Writings*, 186–210.

19 Edward Stillingfleet, *The Mischief of Separation* (London: Mortlock, 1680); Edward Stillingfleet, *The Unreasonableness of Separation* (London: Mortlock, 1681); John Locke, "Critical Notes upon Edward Stillingfleet's *Mischief* and *Unreasonableness of Separation*—Extracts," in John Locke, *Writings on Religion*, ed. Victor Nuovo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 73–79. The 170-page manuscript *Critical Notes*, still unpublished in its entirety, is MS Locke c. 34 (Bodleian Library, University of Oxford). Several other manuscripts on toleration, written by Locke between the *Essay* of 1667 and the *Letter*, have been published in John Locke, *Political Essays*, ed. Mark Goldie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

20 Locke, "Critical Notes," 77–78.

21 Locke, "Letter," 7.

procuring, preserving, and advancing of their own *Civil Interests*.'[22] By civil interests, Locke means 'Life, Liberty, Health, and Indolency of Body; and the Possession of outward things, such as Money, Lands, Houses, Furniture, and the like.'[23] It follows that the civil ruler's power does not extend to 'the Care of Souls,' as Locke argues in the first of his arguments—the argument from the mandate of the state:

> [T]he 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 compell any one 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 it to the choice of any other, whether Prince or Subject, to prescribe to him what Faith or Worship he shall embrace.[24]

Consequently, to Locke 'there is absolutely no such thing, under the Gospel, as a Christian Commonwealth.'[25] Moreover, the political authorities cannot impose religious uniformity because of the nature of the power they exercise, as Locke explains in his second argument—the argument from belief:

> 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 perswasion of the Mind; without which nothing can be acceptable to God. And such is the nature of the Understanding, that it cannot be compell'd to the belief of any thing by outward Force.[26]

Finally, Locke's third argument—the argument from error—states that, even 'though the rigour of Laws and the force of Penalties were capable to convince and change Mens minds, yet would not that help at all to the Salvation of their Souls.'[27] To Locke, there is only one true religion and many false ones. Therefore, in most cases, imposing the 'Religion of the Court' on the subjects would put them 'under an Obligation of following their Princes in the ways that lead to Destruction.'[28]

These arguments are far from being *positive* arguments in support of religious toleration. In the *Letter*, Locke supplied only a *negative* justification of a limited toleration on the part of the state, as he criticized several arguments for the magistrate's *complete* control of religious affairs.[29] Locke's negative justification of toleration relied on a sort of 'political scepticism,' which, nevertheless, was not about 'true reli-

22 *Ibidem*, 12.
23 *Ibidem*.
24 *Ibidem*, 13.
25 *Ibidem*, 42.
26 *Ibidem*, 13.
27 *Ibidem*, 14.
28 *Ibidem*, 15. See, also, John Locke, "A Third Letter for Toleration," in *Locke on Toleration*, 123–124; Black, "Toleration," 488–490.
29 David J. Lorenzo, "Tradition and Prudence in Locke's Exceptions to Toleration," *American Journal of Political Science* 47 (2003): 254.

gion' in itself. Locke never questioned the existence of true religion, which he identified with 'the truth of the Gospel,' containing all things 'necessary to salvation.'[30] Therefore, according to Locke, 'all charitable Admonitions, and affectionate Endeavours to reduce Men from Errors [...] are indeed the greatest Duty of a Christian.'[31] However, he argued that 'all Force and Compulsion are to be forborn' 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.'[32] Locke's rejection of 'force and compulsion' in religious matters not affecting others' civil interests is rooted in his scepticism about the human ability to correctly comprehend and, above all, to effectively communicate religious truth. Locke recognized that, although there can be but one true religion, differences in human understanding and the difficulties of communication had produced a plethora of divergent dogmas and ceremonies. As a result, 'every one is Orthodox to himself'[33] and believes that all others are heretics. This happens because most religious doctrines are simply a matter of opinion—not a matter of knowledge; but divergences in religious opinions should not hinder civil coexistence, as Locke argued in *An Essay concerning Human Understanding:*

> Since, therefore, it is unavoidable to the greatest part of men, if not all, to have several opinions, without certain and indubitable proofs of their truth; and it carries too great an imputation of ignorance, lightness, or folly for men to quit and renounce their former tenets presently upon the offer of an argument which they cannot immediately answer, and show the insufficiency of: it would, methinks, become all men to maintain peace, and the common offices of humanity, and friendship, in the diversity of opinions; since we cannot reasonably expect that any one should readily and obsequiously quit his own opinion, and embrace ours, with a blind resignation to an authority which the understanding of man acknowledges not. For however it may often mistake, it can own no other guide but reason, nor blindly submit to the will and dictates of another. [...] We should do well to commiserate our mutual ignorance, and endeavour to remove it in all the gentle and fair ways of information; and not instantly treat others ill, as obstinate and perverse, because they will not renounce their own, and receive our opinions, or at least those we would force upon them, when it is more than probable that we are no less obstinate in not embracing some of theirs.[34]

To facilitate coexistence between people holding different religious views, in the *Letter* Locke adopted the distinction between things indifferent and things necessary to salvation, and he maintained that toleration ought to apply to the latter. Nevertheless, Locke was aware that making a case for toleration based on the concept of

30 Locke, "Letter," 66; John Locke, "A Second Letter concerning Toleration," in *Locke on Toleration*, 79.
31 Locke, "Letter," 46.
32 *Ibidem*, 45–46.
33 *Ibidem*, 7.
34 Locke, *Essay*, IV.xvi.4.

'things indifferent,' also called *adiaphora*, had two drawbacks. First, it was difficult to reach consensus about the boundary between things indifferent and things necessary to salvation. Second, the very notion of 'things indifferent' could lead to an argument for intolerance. Since some doctrines and rituals were indifferent to salvation, one might wish to impose them by authority, for the sake of decency and good order. This was the position of several latitudinarian divines who, as Mark Goldie has remarked,

> [...] were in fact intolerant, for their intention was to embrace moderate nonconformists, by softening the rigidities of the church's 'good order,' before penalizing the recalcitrant minority who refused to accept such revised terms.[35]

Moreover, Locke too, in his *Two Tracts* of the early 1660s, had used the distinction between *fundamenta* and *adiaphora* to show, *contra* Bagshaw, the necessity of the magistrate's complete authority over religion. However, by 1667—the year when Locke wrote *An Essay concerning Toleration*—he had already made a 180-degree turn on this issue. This change in perspective denotes Locke's shift to a greater optimism regarding human nature in the *Essay* of 1667 and in his later writings on political theory. Locke's political scepticism—originating in his recognition of the 'burden of incommunicability' and, hence, of the limits of civil communication and the limited scope of public reason—led him to conclude, in the *Letter*, that 'indifferent' beliefs and practices ought to be tolerated, even when the civil magistrate or other citizens consider these beliefs and practices erroneous.[36] In the *Letter* and in the second of the *Two Treatises of Government* (1690), the difficulties of communicative possibilities restrict the purview of political power to what can be publicly conveyed and largely agreed upon. To Locke, what can be largely agreed upon depends on practical reasoning, which leads human beings to take steps for preserving themselves and the rest of humankind while avoiding principles destructive of human interests and, hence, of society.[37] Adopting principles detrimental to life, property, and freedom would be inconsistent with the criteria of the divinely given faculty of reason—more specifically, with practical reasoning, which is at the basis of public reason. The proper use of practical reasoning leads to consensus about the necessity to procure, preserve, and advance the civil interests of the members of the commonwealth. Political power can thus be rightfully exercised for this purpose. Conversely, it is impossible to reach consensus on religious beliefs and practices that do not harm anyone's life, property, or freedom and that, therefore, are not relevant to worldly interests. Such beliefs and practices, which are indeed 'things indifferent,' are open to

35 Mark Goldie, "Introduction," in Locke, *Letter*, xvii–xviii.

36 Vernon, *Career*, 35–51, 124–144; Vernon, "Introduction," xxiv–xxix.

37 John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 285–302.

human choice.[38] Thus, Locke concludes that human beings cannot 'stipulate' about 'their spiritual and eternal Interest,' they cannot 'submit this Interest to the Power of the Society, or any Soveraign they should set over them,' and no one can undertake to provide salvation to another through authoritarian, paternalistic means.[39] In fact, truth does not need to be imposed, and true religion can only benefit from toleration. True religion

> [...] is not taught by Laws, nor has she any need of Force to procure her entrance into the minds of men. [...] [I]f Truth makes not her way into the Understanding by her own Light, she will be but the weaker for any borrowed force Violence can add to her.[40]

By 'truth,' Locke means the *Christian* truth, which, in his opinion, would better spread without 'force and compulsion' and, at the same time, without finding impediments:

> [T]he Christian religion [...] grew, and spread, and prevailed, without any aid from force or the assistance of the powers in being; and if it be a mark of the true religion that it will prevail by its own light and strength, but that false religions will not, but have need of force and foreign helps to support them, nothing certainly can be more for the advantage of true religion, than to take away compulsion everywhere.[41]

Briefly, the *Letter* suggests that every individual, left to their own devices and suitably encouraged (but not pressured) by friendly others, has the ability and the right (and the duty, under natural law) to seek religious truth for themselves. Therefore, neither the civil magistrate nor anyone else can impede the search for truth, which, if left free, might lead the searcher to find the true religion. Besides being useless and even detrimental to salvation, the imposition of religious conformity by the political authorities proves destructive to human society, in that it is likely to trigger widespread discontent and harm the civil peace. Consequently, practical reasoning disposes human beings to shun the imposition of religious uniformity as a principle destructive of their own interests, both spiritual and civil, and of the public good. Concerning Locke's notion of the public good, Alex Tuckness has correctly observed:

> [T]he public good and the fundamental law of nature which commands that as much as possible mankind is to be preserved are, for Locke, more or less interchangeable. When God issues such a commission, he takes into account the fact that fallible persons will have to interpret and carry out the commission. God, as a rational legislator, will not define the public good broadly if a narrower conception that would be misapplied less often would better promote the good.[42]

---

38 Wolfson, *Persecution*, 21–38; Tate, *Liberty*, 31–37.

39 Locke, "Letter," 75.

40 *Ibidem*, 45.

41 Locke, "Second Letter," 69. See, also, Adam Drozdek, "Locke and Toleration," *Studia Minora Facultatis Philosophicae Universitatis Brunensis* 44 (1997): 25–32.

42 Tuckness, "Rethinking," 291.

However, Tuckness's analysis of human fallibility in Locke's thought focusses not on the perspective of citizens disputing about true religion, but on 'the perspective of a legislator putting forward a principle that will guide' the disputants.[43] *Pace* Tuckness, I believe that Locke's concept of legislator or magistrate in the *Letter* ought to be considered in the wider context of his political thought. In Locke's *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, it is indeed up to the community to delegate the legislative function—'the supreme power of the common-wealth'—to magistrates representing the people and accountable to the people; thus, the magistrates' powers flow from the citizens' consent, natural law, and the tasks of government.[44] Moreover, when advocating toleration of different opinions in the above-cited passage from *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Locke considered relationships between individual citizens or persons in general, not between citizens and the magistrate.[45] Briefly, Locke stressed not simply the magistrate's fallibility, but something more basic—that is, human fallibility in general.

The tolerationist implications of Locke's political scepticism denote several similarities with the Socinians' discourse on religious freedom, especially with Johann Crell's *Vindiciae pro religionis libertate*, written in late 1632, first published in 1637, and translated into English in 1646.[46] According to the anti-Trinitarian and anti-Calvinist theologian Faustus Socinus and his followers, salvation depends on the individual's free will, which informs all human decisions and actions. Reaffirming Socinus's emphasis on free will, Crell argued that human beings voluntarily join in civil societies and establish political institutions for the sake of security and peace. To Crell, political authority does not extend to matters pertaining to eternal salvation. Therefore, the magistrate cannot forbid religious beliefs and practices that do not affect the civil interests or communal life. According to Crell, the magistrate has a duty to protect all citizens in their religious observances, which are an essential part of their liberty, exactly as he protects them in all other aspects of life. Moreover, the magistrate's duty to respect and protect the citizens' religious liberty must be ratified in civil agreements, covenants, and pacts, which both the magistrate and the subjects are bound to comply with. More than half a century before the publication of Locke's *Letter concerning Toleration*, Crell's *Vindiciae* envisaged a clear separation between the state and religious organizations.[47] There is, nevertheless, a significant point of

43 *Ibidem*.

44 Locke, *Two Treatises*, 355–363; Lorenzo, "Tradition," 254.

45 Locke, *Essay*, IV.xvi.4; Black, "Toleration," 500.

46 [Johann Crell], *Iuni Bruti Poloni Vindiciae pro religionis libertate* (Eleutheropolis [Amsterdam]: Typis Godfridi Philadelphi, 1637); [Johann Crell], *A Learned and Exceeding Well-Compiled Vindication of Liberty of Religion*, trans. N. Y. [John Dury] ([London]: s.n., 1646). The Polish-based Socinians' fear that King Wladislaw IV might disregard the terms of the Warsaw Confederation of 1573, a document granting religious freedom in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, urged Crell to write this book.

47 Sarah Mortimer, "Freedom, Virtue and Socinian Heterodoxy," in *Freedom and the Construction of Europe*, eds. Quentin Skinner and Martin van Gelderen, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), vol. 1, *Religious and Constitutional Liberties:* 84.

divergence between Socinian tolerationism and Locke's toleration in the *Letter*. Socinus, Crell, and their followers considered human beings primarily as individuals. To the Socinians, salvation depends on the individual's free choice to accept the assistance of divine grace and, thus, to have faith and behave accordingly. They claimed that every individual believer had the right to study Scripture and to choose their own way to salvation. Therefore, although the Socinians acknowledged the individual's right to create and join religious organizations, they did not consider affiliation to a religious society as necessary to salvation and to toleration as well. Socinus himself never officially joined the Minor Reformed Church of Poland, to which most of his disciples, the 'Polish Brethren,' belonged. Conversely, in the *Letter*, Locke talked of individual believers as members of religious societies. Concentrating exclusively on *organized* religion, he made a distinction between the civil commonwealth, which he envisioned as a *general* entity consisting of all citizens, and religious organizations, which he described as *particular* societies, each composed of people who had freely joined it for a precise purpose. 'The end of a Religious Society,' Locke wrote,

> [...] is the Publick 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.[48]

In this passage, Locke not only delineated the ends of religious societies as distinct from the state's aims: he also suggested that salvation could be pursued effectively only within the bosom of a religious society, by means of the public worship of God. However, to Locke, religious societies ought to be free and voluntary. For this reason, he maintained:

> [E]xcommunication 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.[49]

Moreover, he clarified in which relation religious organizations must stand to each other and to private persons:

> 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. [...] 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

48 Locke, "Letter," 18.
49 *Ibidem*, 19.

> when the Civil Magistrate (as it sometimes happens) comes to be of this or the other Communion.[50]

It is worth noting that, in this passage, by 'private persons' Locke means, in essence, *members of religious societies*. In fact, he argues that no one's civil rights can be limited 'because he is of another Church or Religion'—not because this person holds heterodox ideas, for instance, ideas that cannot be attributed to any church or religion. What counts, here, is only whether one belongs to one or another religious society —a factor that, to Locke, must have no impact on civil life. Accordingly, Locke limited the authority of ecclesiastical ministers to the boundaries of their churches and denied that such authority could 'be extended to Civil Affairs.'[51] To Locke, all these conditions applied to both Christian and non-Christian organizations, as he expressly advocated toleration of Jews, Muslims, and pagans.[52] However, in the *Letter*, those subscribing to no organized religion—be they deists, agnostics, *indifferenti*, denominationally uncommitted Christians, etc.—are left in a vague limbo. On the one hand, they are not expressly excluded from toleration; but, on the other, their status remains undefined and they are not explicitly guaranteed any rights or freedoms.[53] Moreover, Locke openly denied toleration to Roman Catholics and atheists, and he did so for moral reasons bearing significant political implications.

Locke's best-known argument against tolerating Catholics is of a prudential nature. He thought that the magistrate could not tolerate subjects who owed their primary allegiance to a foreign prince, such as the pope, and who were, therefore, untrustworthy members of the commonwealth.[54] Nevertheless, the *Letter* gave more reasons to exclude Catholics from toleration, repeating and expanding some of the points that Locke had made in *An Essay concerning Toleration*.[55] To Locke, some moral ideas that Protestant polemicists commonly ascribed to Catholics and that he mentioned in the *Letter* (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')* were harmful to civil society.[56] Moreover, Locke certainly had the pope in mind when he stigmatized

50 *Ibidem*, 20.
51 *Ibidem*, 24.
52 *Ibidem*, 58 – 59.
53 Israel, "Spinoza," 103.
54 Locke, "Letter," 51 – 52.
55 Locke, "Essay concerning Toleration," 197, 202 – 203.
56 Locke, "Letter," 50 – 51. In *An Essay concerning Toleration*, Locke had also deplored Catholic intolerance: see Locke, "Essay concerning Toleration," 202. On representations of Catholics in England in Locke's time, see John Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 17 – 93.

> [...] 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.[57]

This passage confirms Mark Goldie's thesis that Locke intended to preclude not Catholicism as such, but the Catholics' 'antinomianism'—namely, the opinion that a sort of divinely given 'superiority' can take priority over ordinary moral rules and direct the faithful's conduct.[58] In the *Letter*, Locke indeed excluded Catholics from toleration *not* because of ceremonies and doctrines that Protestants deemed absurd, such as the doctrine of transubstantiation, and that, nevertheless, did not harm anyone.[59] The use of political coercion against some members of the commonwealth because of the (alleged) absurdity of their (indifferent) beliefs would indeed contradict Locke's political scepticism. Therefore, Locke did not exclude the theoretical possibility of tolerating Catholics, on condition that they discarded what rendered them undeserving of toleration—that is, morals destructive of society. It is finally worth noting that Locke's objections against the Catholics' 'antinomianism' can also apply to others who, like various Calvinistic factions in seventeenth-century England, claimed to be divinely inspired to rule or exempt from ordinary moral norms. On this point, I concur with Goldie's statement that '[t]here are hints that Locke had Puritan fanatics in mind as being also potentially intolerable.'[60]

Locke's moral concerns also led him to deny toleration to atheists. In *An Essay concerning Toleration*, he wrote:

> [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.[61]

In the first of the two arguments against atheists in the *Letter*, Locke gave more details of why atheists are so dangerous to society:

---

57 Locke, "Letter," 52.

58 Goldie, "Introduction," xix–xx.

59 Locke, "Letter," 44.

60 Goldie, "Introduction," xix.

61 Locke, "Essay concerning Toleration," 188. On belief in God as preferable to atheism, see, also, John Locke, "Atheism," in Locke, *Political Essays*, 245–246 (a journal note written in 1676). On the social harmfulness of atheism, see, also, John Locke, "A Vindication of the Reasonableness of Christianity" (1695), in John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity, as Delivered in the Scriptures*, ed. Victor Nuovo (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1997): 162: '[A]theism being a crime, which, for its madness as well as guilt, ought to shut a man out of all sober and civil 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 hold upon an Atheist. The taking away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all.[62]

Locke's definition of atheists as 'those […] who *deny the Being of a God*' was quite specific, in a time when the epithet 'atheist' was utilized to define various sorts of religious heterodoxy. Locke's empiricist philosophy entailed a consideration of different ways of being an atheist, whereas most seventeenth-century English theologians judged the idea of God innate to human nature, hence deeming it impossible to genuinely deny God's existence and, thus, to be a 'speculative atheist.'[63] In their opinion, there were only 'practical atheists,' whom the Cambridge scholar Richard Bentley defined as 'them that, believing [God's] Existence, do yet seclude him from directing the Affairs of the World, from observing and judging the Actions of Men.'[64] Locke's rejection of innate ideas created the space for what Kei Numao has termed 'the "ignorant atheist," an atheist who has simply not yet developed the notion of a God,'[65] and 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.'[66] Locke considered the latter as the 'true' atheist and the truly intolerable one, not only because of the inherent irrationality of speculative atheism, but also because of its practical implications. Thus, Locke's first argument against atheism ought to be considered in light of his effort to overcome his moral scepticism.

For most of his life, starting with the manuscript *Essays on the Law of Nature* (1664),[67] Locke struggled to find rational grounds for morality. He was not sceptical about the existence, rationality, and demonstrability of morality in itself. In *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, he deemed it correct to 'place morality amongst the sciences capable of demonstration.'[68] However, he doubted that natural reason alone could *actually* demonstrate moral ideas and, thus, find solid grounds for morality. This is why, in the *Essay*, he called attention to the difficulties that reason meets when trying to demonstrate moral ideas—difficulties like their unfitness for sensible

62 Locke, "Letter," 52–53.

63 Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration*, 256–263; David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2013), 1–47; J. Kei Numao, "Locke on Atheism," *History of Political Thought* 34 (2013): 252–272.

64 Richard Bentley, *Eight Sermons Preach'd at the Honourable Robert Boyle's Lecture* (Cambridge: Crownfield, 1724), 4–5.

65 Numao, "Locke," 260.

66 *Ibidem*, 267.

67 John Locke, *Essays on the Law of Nature*, trans. and ed. Wolfgang von Leyden (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958). These eight essays were originally written in Latin. Von Leyden's edition also includes Locke's valedictory speech as censor of moral philosophy and some philosophical shorthand writings by Locke.

68 Locke, *Essay*, IV.iii.18.

representation and their complexity.[69] He argued 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.'[70] Nevertheless, he observed that the limits of human understanding and the weakness of human nature actually prevent us from demonstrating moral ideas in such an effective way as we can demonstrate, for instance, mathematical concepts.[71] In fact, as Locke eventually noted in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, unassisted reason had always proven unable to provide adequate foundations for morality.[72] Briefly, 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.[73]

According to Locke, a revelation having the discernible marks of being from God must take priority over the uncertain conjectures of unassisted reason.[74] Locke believed that, despite the limits of knowledge in religious matters, human beings could demonstrate God's existence through the operation of natural reason. To Locke, although no idea, including the idea of God, is innate, natural reason is able to deduce the idea of God's existence from the observation of Creation:

> [T]he 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.[75]

This means that atheism is irrational, because atheists do not accept a 'discovery' that 'carries such a weight of thought and communication with it.'[76] Locke also believed that, since God is a lawmaker, belief in God is crucial to establish morality: '[W]ithout a notion of a law-maker, it is impossible to have a notion of a law, and

69 *Ibidem*, IV.iii.19.
70 *Ibidem*, IV.iii.20.
71 *Ibidem*.
72 Locke, *Reasonableness*, 148–150.
73 John C. Biddle, "Locke's Critique of Innate Principles and Toland's Deism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37 (1976): 417. Locke distinguished 'traditional revelation'—including biblical revelation—from 'original revelation' in *Essay* IV.xviii.3.
74 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): 51.
75 Locke, *Essay*, I.iv.9. See, also, Locke, *Essays on the Law of Nature*, 109, 147–159; Locke, *Essay*, II.xxiii.12, IV.x.1–6.
76 *Ibidem*, I.iv.9.

an obligation to observe it.'[77] However, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* neither provides a thorough description of this law, nor explains why human beings are obliged to observe it. In the *Essay*, Locke indeed fails to identify the source of moral obligation in a manner consistent with his way of ideas, as he does not clarify which simple ideas are combined to form the mixed-mode idea of moral obligation.[78] 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.*[79] However, he eventually discarded this project and left the manuscript incomplete. Thus, the *Essay* does not explain how natural reason, albeit able to prove God's existence, can find reasons to act morally based on self-evident principles. Instead, the *Essay* argues that human beings should avail themselves of both reason and revelation, when considering matters of morality and religion:

> 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.[80]

To Locke, revelation comes in where unassisted reason cannot reach:

> 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.[81]

In such cases, reason can only recognize the *probability* of a revealed thing. To Locke, faith is, in fact, not a mode of *knowledge:* faith is assent to merely *probable* matters of fact. Far from being grounded on the premises of some demonstration, such assent is given based on one's belief that God has revealed these matters of fact:[82]

> 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,

77 *Ibidem*, I.iv.8.
78 Schneewind, "Locke's Moral Philosophy," 207.
79 John Locke, "Of Ethick in General," in Locke, *Writings*, 9 – 14. On this manuscript, see Nuovo, *John Locke*, 193 – 197.
80 Locke, *Essay,* IV.xix.4.
81 *Ibidem*, IV.xviii.7. On Locke's distinction between things according to reason, above reason, and contrary to reason, see *ibidem*, IV.xvii.23.
82 Wolterstorff, "Locke's Philosophy," 190.

> 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.[83]

Revelation indeed includes several things 'whose truth our mind, by its natural faculties and notions, cannot judge'—things that we, therefore, ought to accept as 'above reason.'[84] In the *Essay*, Locke gave the existence of an afterlife with reward and punishment as an emblematic example of truth above reason, unambiguously revealed in Scripture, in whose divine authority he firmly believed.[85] He also hinted at an afterlife with rewards and sanctions as the only effective incentive to act morally:

> 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.[86]

Moreover, in the *Essay*, Locke stated that God 'has power to enforce [the divine law] by rewards and punishments of infinite weight and duration in another life [...]. This is the only true touchstone of moral rectitude.'[87] Later, in the *Reasonableness*, Locke maintained that belief in reward and punishment in the afterlife, which he described as an essential part of faith (particularly of the Christian Law of Faith), provides a strong motivation to behave morally. Briefly, in his mature works, Locke stressed the importance of otherworldly sanctions as effective incentives for moral conduct.[88] Atheists, however, do not believe in a divine creator and legislator. Thus, to Locke, they are inherently immoral, in that they can neither understand their duties towards their creator, nor accept any divinely given law, nor appreciate otherworldly sanctions.

In his other argument against toleration of atheists, Locke maintained 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.'[89] The *Letter* indeed provides a theory of toleration for the benefit of those who have religion—namely, those who pursue eternal salvation and have 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.'[90] However, atheists deny God's ex-

83 Locke, *Essay*, IV.xviii.8–9.
84 *Ibidem*, IV.xviii.9.
85 *Ibidem*, IV.xviii.7.
86 *Ibidem*, II.xxi.60.
87 *Ibidem*, II.xxviii.8.
88 Schneewind, "Locke's Moral Philosophy," 208.
89 Locke, "Letter," 53.
90 *Ibidem*, 15.

istence. Thus, they do not pursue salvation and do not belong to any church. In other words, they have no religion. Therefore, they cannot ask for toleration, which, in Locke's *Letter*, is a 'privilege' to be granted only to those who have religion.

Locke's denial of toleration to atheists is not an accidental deviation from the theoretical framework of the *Letter*. Locke's intolerance of atheists is the logical consequence of his notion of toleration in the *Letter* and shows the limitations of this notion, which is conditioned by a markedly religious conception of life and morality. Locke thought that only faith in a divine creator and legislator and, hence, in a divinely given moral law could enable human beings to behave in morally acceptable ways. Consequently, only faith in God could enable a person not only to pursue salvation, which the *Letter* nominated 'to be everyone's highest priority,'[91] but also to be a good member of society. This conclusion led Locke to expect from the members of the commonwealth the care of their own souls (which, in the *Letter*, entails not only compliance with a morality based on belief in God, but also membership to, and worship within, a religious society), if they wanted to enjoy the 'privilege' of toleration.

3 Christian Irenicism, the Pursuit of Salvation, and the Overcoming of Moral Scepticism in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*

Locke's major book of theology, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, is widely considered a work aiming to find a common ground for peace and toleration among Christians. In this book, Locke pursued the so-called way of fundamentals, thus adhering to an important tradition in Protestant irenicism. This tradition included, among others, the Socinians and the Arminians (i.e. the followers of the anti-Calvinist Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius, also known as Remonstrants) besides several English scholars, including the members of the Great Tew Circle and various latitudinarian divines.[92] Although Locke always maintained that his theological ideas resulted exclusively from his own reading of Scripture, his writings on religion present many points in common with Socinianism, Arminianism, and other currents and thinkers pursuing the way of fundamentals.[93] According to this tradition, Christianity consists

91 Marko, "Promulgation," 54.

92 On Locke and the 'way of fundamentals,' see John C. Higgins-Biddle, "Introduction," in Locke, *Reasonableness*, lxii–lxviii; Russo, *Ragione*, 160–165; Victor Nuovo, *Christianity, Antiquity, and Enlightenment: Interpretations of Locke* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 94–98.

93 Although Locke always denied any connections with Socinianism, he referred to Socinian works in various manuscripts, he owned many Socinian books, and he was friends with several anti-Trinitarians. See John R. Harrison and Peter Laslett, *The Library of John Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965); Richard Ashcraft, "John Locke's Library: Portrait of an Intellectual," *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society* 5 (1969): 47–60; Higgins-Biddle, "Introduction," lviii–lx; John Marshall, "Locke, Socinianism, 'Socinianism', and Unitarianism," in *English Philosophy in the Age of*

of few simple principles regarding God's existence and assisting grace, the divine authority of Scripture, the existence of an afterlife with reward and punishment, and the necessity of morality to achieve salvation. Disparate dogmas and practices may originate from different interpretations of Scripture, which every Christian is allowed to understand according to their intellectual capacities; but specific dogmas and practices are secondary in comparison with the fundamental tenets of Christianity. Therefore, divergences on secondary, non-fundamental doctrinal, ceremonial, and ecclesiological issues must not hinder peace among Christians. Peaceful coexistence among Christians should be attained through either mutual toleration between different churches (as the Socinians proposed) or comprehension of all denominations into one church admitting differences in secondary doctrines and practices (as most latitudinarians argued). Locke himself made a distinction between fundamental principles and secondary doctrines, as 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, which was the goal of the way of fundamentals.[94]

Whereas I agree with Higgins-Biddle that Locke's doctrine of the fundamentals had important irenic implications, I believe that it was mainly Locke's preoccupation with morality and salvation to shape his approach to the way of fundamentals. Like Socinians, Arminians, and other Protestant irenicists, Locke refused the main tenets of Calvinist theology and, instead, upheld a moralist soteriology. He rejected predestination, believed in the power of the human will to accept or resist saving grace, and highlighted the role of good works in the pursuit of salvation. Locke's approach to saving belief, however, differs from the views of other representatives of the way of fundamentals in a significant respect. Arminian authors like Arminius himself and Locke's friend, the Dutch theologian Philipp van Limborch, and Socinian writers like Socinus and Crell limited the essence of the Christian religion to a few fundamental principles, while they left it to each Christian to infer non-fundamentals from their own reading of the Bible. Nonetheless, Arminians and Socinians developed complex systems of doctrine and, according to Locke, showed 'zeal for their orthodoxy.'[95] Conversely, other Protestant irenicists, especially in England, avoided any

---

Locke, ed. M. A. Stewart (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000): 111–182; Stephen D. Snobelen, "Socinianism, Heresy and John Locke's *Reasonableness of Christianity*," *Enlightenment and Dissent* 20 (2001): 88–125.

94 Higgins-Biddle, "Introduction," lxvi.

95 John Locke, "A Second Vindication of the Reasonableness of Christianity" (1697), in Locke, *Reasonableness*, ed. Nuovo, 295.

attempt to detail even the fundamentals of Christianity. For instance, in *The Religion of Protestants* (1638), the Great Tew Circle member William Chillingworth wrote that Christians should 'syncerely endeavour to finde the true sense of [Scripture], and live according to it.'[96] However, Chillingworth considered it undesirable, and actually impossible, to create a unique list of fundamentals to be followed by all Christians. Unlike Chillingworth, Locke embarked on identifying the fundamental articles of Christianity, as we will see below; but, unlike Arminians and Socinians, he refrained from endorsing a specific system of doctrine. Locke did not wish to endorse a particular system of doctrine to others because, in his opinion, saving belief does not result from the acceptance of some theological system: saving belief is rooted in Scripture alone. Therefore, the faithful ought to study Scripture to the best of their abilities in order to live the Christian life and pursue salvation. Locke even admitted the possibility of mistakes in interpreting Scripture, given the limits of human understanding. As John Marshall has pointed out, in the *Reasonableness* and its two vindications (written against the attacks on Locke's theology by the Calvinistic divine John Edwards), Locke 'was also accenting that much was not plain in Christianity and that the search for religious truth was more important than its maintenance, arguing that error held after sincere search was saving.'[97] Locke indeed acknowledged that

> […] a great many of the Truths revealed in the Gospel, every one does, and must confess, a man may be ignorant of; nay, disbelieve, without danger to his Salvation: As is evident in those, who, allowing the Authority, differ in the Interpretation and meaning of several Texts of Scripture, not thought Fundamental.[98]

On the other hand, according to Locke, '[s]ome of the truths delivered in the holy writ are very plain: it is impossible, I think, to mistake their meaning; and those certainly are all necessary to be explicitly believed.'[99] These 'very plain' truths are what Locke identified as the three fundamentals of Christianity—namely, faith in Jesus as the Messiah, who had delivered a salvific message hitherto unknown to humankind, repentance for one's misdeeds, and obedience to the divine law, which only Christ had revealed completely and perfectly. Locke considered the acceptance of these fundamentals, which were clearly delivered in the Scriptures and had a prominently moral meaning, to be all that one needed to become a Christian. According to Locke, however, accepting and living by these fundamentals was necessary but not sufficient to salvation, given that the faithful also had to study the Bible conscientiously throughout their life. And Locke believed that disregarding the three fundamentals of Chris-

96 William Chillingworth, *The Religion of Protestants a Safe Way to Salvation* (Oxford: Lichfield, 1638), 180.

97 Marshall, "Locke, Socinianism," 172. See Locke, *Reasonableness*, 168–171; Locke, "Vindication," 164–165; Locke, "Second Vindication," 198, 234–235, 356–359, 376–377, 421–424.

98 Locke, *Reasonableness*, 168.

99 Locke, "Second Vindication," 356.

tianity, when reading the Bible, was likely to lead to either one of two equally extreme, albeit diametrically opposed, outcomes—antinomianism and deism.

In the *Second Vindication*, Locke declared that the antinomian controversy among Dissenters had prompted him to write the *Reasonableness*.[100] This controversy between Independent and Presbyterian ministers was occasioned by the republication, in 1690, of the Civil-War Independent divine Tobias Crisp's *Christ Alone Exalted* (1643) by his son Samuel.[101] To Locke, an incorrect, partial reading of Scripture was likely to lead to a radically predestinarian, antinomian soteriology, which he abhorred because all forms of antinomianism dismissed the importance of moral conduct for salvation. However, Locke's dislike of predestination denotes that he actually saw predestinarianism in itself—and not simply the extreme views endorsed by Crisp and his followers—as fundamentally antinomian and, hence, detrimental to the pursuit of salvation. According to Locke, the very concept of predestination—a concept essentially based on the doctrine of original sin, which he rejected[102]—was incompatible with God's justice and goodness. Moreover, the shortcomings of predestinarianism had led others to reach the opposite extreme in their reaction:

> For whilst some 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; this seemed to others so little consistent with the Justice or Goodness of the Great and Infinite God, that they thought there was no Redemption necessary, 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.[103]

To Locke, the opinion that Jesus was merely a moral philosopher, who had solely reasserted a perfect Law of Nature already known to natural reason, without adding anything to it, was typical of deism.[104] This opinion implied that natural reason

100 *Ibidem*, 186–187. Whereas Locke referred to this controversy, he never used the terms 'antinomian' and 'antinomianism' in the *Reasonableness* and its vindications.

101 Tobias Crisp, *Christ Alone Exalted*, 2nd edition (London: Marshal, 1690).

102 Locke, *Essay*, II.xxvii.22, II.xxvii.26; John Locke, "Peccatum originale," in Locke, *Writings*, 229–230; John Locke, "Homo ante et post Lapsum," in *ibidem*, 231. Locke wrote the manuscripts *Peccatum originale* and *Homo ante et post lapsum*, both of which deny original sin, in 1692 and 1693 respectively.

103 Locke, *Reasonableness*, 5.

104 Locke did not use terms like 'deism' or 'deist' in the *Reasonableness*, but he wrote the words 'deist' or 'deists' once in the first vindication and eight times in the second. Higgins-Biddle has persuasively argued that Locke's deist targets in these works were the heterodox Jewish intellectual Uriel Acosta and the Irish freethinker John Toland. See Higgins-Biddle, "Introduction," xxvii–xxxvii. Acosta had committed suicide in 1640, thus ending his conflictual relationship with the Jewish community of Amsterdam. Locke's friend, Limborch, published Acosta's biography in 1687: see Philipp van Limborch, *De Veritate Religionis Christianae, amica collatio cum erudito Judaeo; acced. Urielis Acosta Exemplar Humanae Vitae, cum Refutatione per Limborch* (Gouda: Justum ab Hoeve, 1687), 341–364. In a

alone was a sufficient guide to salvation. However, according to Locke, unassisted reason was actually unable to comprehend the ultimate truths in matters of religion and morality and, thus, to serve as a guide to salvation. Locke even argued that many ancient philosophers, relying on natural reason alone and showing an elitist attitude, had eventually fostered the spread of priestcraft:

> The Rational and thinking part of Mankind, 'tis true, when they sought after him, they found the One, Supream, 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.[105]

This is why 'the Priests' ruled 'every where, to secure their Empire, having excluded *Reason* from having any thing to do in Religion.'[106] This was an indirect attack on deism, as Mark Goldie has pointed out: 'Contemporary deist claims for the great capacity of reason, Locke asserts, cannot be sustained in the face of history's evidence to the contrary.'[107] To Locke, only Jesus, revealing the divine law in its entirety, had reconciled religion and morality, thus avoiding the defects of '[t]he lives of pure idolatry and pure reason [which] were both failed projects.'[108]

Locke's sceptical attitude towards the actual capabilities of unassisted reason in matters of morality was another point of similarity with the Socinian tradition.[109] One of the main tenets of Socinianism is that God's Revealed Word is superior to the Law of Nature. This is a significant difference between the Socinians and the Magisterial Reformers, whose position on this subject is detailed in Philip Melanchthon's *Loci Communes* (1521). According to Melanchthon, human beings have an innate knowledge of God and of the divine law in its entirety—a knowledge not de-

---

manuscript note of 1695, Locke called Acosta 'the father and patriarch of the Deists;' see MS Locke d. 10, "Lemmata Ethica" (Bodleian Library, University of Oxford), 33. As to Toland, Locke first met him in 1693. In 1695, Toland sent some papers to Locke through the lawyer John Freke. These papers, which are lost, were probably the drafts of some sections of Toland's *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696). See the letter by John Freke to John Locke, 28 March 1695, in *The Correspondence of John Locke*, ed. E. S. de Beer, 8 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979 – 1989), vol. 5, no. 1868; letter by John Freke and Edward Clarke to John Locke, 9 April 1695, in *ibidem*, no. 1874.

105 Locke, *Reasonableness*, 144.

106 *Ibidem*, 143.

107 Mark Goldie, "John Locke, the Early Lockeans, and Priestcraft," *Intellectual History Review* 28 (2018): 132.

108 *Ibidem*.

109 On Socinian ethics and soteriology, see Faustus Socinus, "De Jesu Christo Servatore," in *Bibliotheca Fratrum Polonorum quos Unitarios vocant*, 9 vols. (Irenopoli [Amsterdam]: Sumptibus Irenici Philalethii, post annum Domini 1656 [1665 – 1692]), vol. 2, *Fausti Socini Senensis Opera Omnia in duos tomos distincta* [1668], 115 – 246; Johann Crell, *Ad librum Hugonis Grotii quem de satisfactione Christi adversus Faustum Socinum Senensem scripsit* (Racoviae: Tipis Sternacianis, 1623). *De Jesu Christo Servatore* was written in 1576 and first published in 1594.

pendent on revelation. Melanchthon and the other Magisterial Reformers identified the divine law with a perfect Law of Nature, which Christian revelation had simply reaffirmed and clarified.[110] Socinus and his followers rejected this view. They maintained that religious belief proper does not depend on a natural instinct innate to all human beings and, thus, is unattainable by natural reason alone. According to the Socinians, faith results from one's 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 entails a commitment to respect Christ's precepts, which the Socinians considered more coherent, convincing, and rewarding than the Law of Nature. To the Socinians, whereas the Law of Nature inclines human beings to the preservation of earthly goods, Christ's moral teachings offer a better prospect than merely worldly benefits —the prospect of eternal salvation. This means that, prior to Christian revelation, human morality was still imperfect, devoid of effective incentives to act morally, and flawed, in that it focussed on worldly interests alone. It was only after Christ's ministry on earth that humanity could comply with moral standards facilitating the pursuit of salvation and even clashing, in some cases, with the dictates of the Law of Nature.[111] This position was at the origin of the Socinians' radical pacifism and advocacy of non-resistance, which conflicted with the natural right to self-defence. While admitting that the Law of Nature disposes human beings to defend their lives when harmed by others, the Socinians inferred from the New Testament that doing violence to another human being, even for reasons of self-defence, would prevent one from attaining the supreme good—eternal beatitude.

Locke shared the Socinians' opinion that Christ's revelation was superior to the Law of Nature as discoverable, at least in theory, by unassisted reason. However, Locke disagreed with the Socinian idea that God's Revealed Word contradicted and invalidated some elements of the Law of Nature, such as our right of self-preservation and self-defence. To Locke, the Law of Nature gives us the right and duty to preserve the life that God has given us, the goods produced and acquired through our work, and the freedom to make use of our persons and possessions while respecting others' like rights.[112] According to Locke, Christ's precepts had neither nullified nor replaced any element of the Law of Nature. He thought that Christian revelation had fully disclosed, complemented, and completed the Law of Nature. It follows that, according to Locke, we still have a natural right and duty to preserve our life, property, and freedom, even when this means to resist a despotic political power.[113] To Locke, the Law of Nature is indeed a divinely established and, hence, eternally valid system

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

111 Sarah Mortimer, "Human Liberty and Human Nature in the Works of Faustus Socinus and His Readers," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70 (2009): 197.

112 Locke, *Two Treatises*, 269–272.

113 *Ibidem*, 406–428.

of morality.[114] The Law of Nature is a law of convenience promoting utility, and most human beings know some of its elements in the form of prescriptions of civil law or moral principles formulated by philosophers.[115] However, Locke argued that, before Christ's revelation, unassisted reason had always failed to grasp the Law of Nature in its entirety:

> ['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. […] [H]umane 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*.[116]

Locke also thought that ecclesiastical tradition, priestcraft, and power politics had negatively affected the human capacity to grasp and respect the Law of Nature, because the defects of human nature make human beings prone to being misled by both their own mistakes and priestly frauds.[117] Due to these problems, God reaffirmed the Law of Nature through the covenant of works, establishing the Law of Moses, which consisted of a ceremonial part and a moral part—the Law of Works, identical to the Law of Nature.[118] 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. Nevertheless, the Law of Moses was excessively rigorous and still did not offer effective incentives to act morally. This is why a new covenant, the covenant of grace or covenant of faith, was necessary. With this new covenant, Christ made the divine law known completely and perfectly, thus establishing the Law of Faith. To Locke, Christ revealed the Law of Nature in its entirety and complemented it with the assurance of rewards and punishments in the afterlife, thus providing a powerful incentive to act morally.[119] Locke emphasized this incentive, which was one of the main tenets of Socinian soteriology, not only in the *Reasonableness*, but also throughout the posthumously published *A Paraphrase and*

114 Locke, *Reasonableness*, 13–15.
115 *Ibidem*, 151–154.
116 *Ibidem*, 148–150.
117 *Ibidem*, 161–163. See, also, Locke, *Essay*, III.x.2, on the distortions of language deliberately made by 'the several sects of philosophy and religion.' Concerning Locke's anticlericalism and views on priestcraft, see John Marshall, *John Locke: Resistance, Religion and Responsibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 353–357, 405–410; Richard Ashcraft, "Anticlericalism and Authority in Lockean Political Thought," in *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response, 1660–1750*, ed. Roger D. Lund (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 73–96; Goldie, "John Locke, the Early Lockeans;" 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): 145–165.
118 Locke, *Reasonableness*, 16–21.
119 *Ibidem*, 21–25, 110–112, 132. See, also, John Locke, "Voluntas," in Locke, *Political Essays*, 321 (a manuscript note written in 1693–1694).

Notes on the Epistles of St Paul.[120] However, Locke did not claim that accepting the Law of Faith and, thus, believing in an afterlife with reward and punishment leads, necessarily and unfailingly, 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 acknowledged that even those who believe in otherworldly sanctions are still liable to commit evil deeds, given the limits of human understanding and the weakness of human nature.[121] Therefore, he shared another important tenet of Socinian soteriology—that is, belief in God's mercy. The Socinians thought that Christ had offered humanity a concrete hope of salvation, despite the limits and imperfections of human nature. In *De Jesu Christo Servatore* (1594), Socinus maintained that Christ had emphasized God's forgiveness. Socinus and his disciples rejected the opinion that God necessarily ought to punish sinners. They argued that God is merciful and omnipotent and, thus, not bound by any law—unlike human judges, who have to apply the laws of the state. To the Socinians, God could waive his right to punishment and, thus, forgive the sins of the repentant faithful who, during their life, had sincerely endeavoured to obey the divine law.[122] The importance that Locke attached to faith as one of the fundamentals of Christianity was in line with the Socinians' stress on God's forgiveness, as he wrote 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.'[123] 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.'[124] This supply was faith. Nevertheless, Locke did not believe in salvation by faith alone. To Locke, human beings still ought to respect the eternally valid principles of the divinely given Law of Nature, which Christ, establishing the Law of Faith, had fully disclosed and had complemented and completed with two significant 'advantages'—a powerful incentive to act morally, in the form of an afterlife with reward and punishment, and an emphasis on God's forgiveness. According to the Law of Faith, the believer's faith compensates for their failure to perfectly comply with the divine law—a failure that, given the weakness of human nature, is inevitable, even when one is sincerely committed to obedience.[125] Thus, the faithful will receive 'the Pardon and Forgiveness of Sins and Salvation'[126] thanks to their faith,

120 David Wootton, "John Locke: Socinian or Natural Law Theorist?," in *Religion, Secularization and Political Thought: Thomas Hobbes to J. S. Mill*, ed. James E. Crimmins (London: Routledge, 1989): 49.
121 Locke, *Essay*, II.xxi.60–73, II.xxviii.12; Locke, *Reasonableness*, 19, 120, 130.
122 Socinus, "De Jesu," 121–132; Crell, *Ad librum*, 164–167; Sarah Mortimer, "Human and Divine Justice in the Works of Grotius and the Socinians," in *The Intellectual Consequences of Religious Heterodoxy 1600–1750*, eds. John Robertson and Sarah Mortimer (Leiden: Brill, 2012): 75–94.
123 Locke, *Reasonableness*, 19.
124 *Ibidem*, 120.
125 *Ibidem*, 130; 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): 53–54.
126 Locke, *Reasonableness*, 133.

but only on condition that, in their life, they repent for their misdeeds and wholeheartedly attempt to obey the divine law. It is in this sense that, in Locke's soteriology, faith 'justifies.' The justifying faith includes good works. Locke's views on justification distinguish him, on the one hand, from predestinarians and antinomians of different stripes and, on the other, from deists. Locke's position is actually in line with the Socinian and Arminian idea that human beings are able to accept or reject assisting grace. However, Locke thought that accepting divine assistance and, hence, adhering to the Law of Faith was the 'reasonable,' convenient option, given the above said advantages of Christ's Coming.

Briefly, to Locke, faith in Christ's Messiahship, repentance for one's misdeeds, and commitment to obey the divine law, along with a sincere and constant effort to study Scripture, are all that is required to achieve salvation. All those committed to pursuing salvation by these means should tolerate each other, instead of showing hostility to one another because of divergences about non-fundamentals. Therefore, the views on morality and salvation expressed in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* have important irenic implications. Locke's moralist soteriology even implies toleration of denominationally uncommitted Christians, although Locke lived and died a conforming member of the Church of England and although he never aimed at dissolving churches as formal associations with their specific doctrines, structures, norms, and ceremonies. In fact, Locke always granted churches the right to be uniformitarian. To Locke, there can be no forced church membership, but voluntary membership entails submission to the discipline of the religious society to which one has chosen to belong in order to perform the public worship of God. In the *Reasonableness*, Locke addressed public acts of worship, performed within religious societies, in the section concerning Jesus' attempt to reform the public worship among the Jews of his time. According to Locke, Christ had aimed at depriving '[t]he outward forms of *Worshipping the Deity*' of 'Stately Buildings, costly Ornaments, peculiar and uncouth Habits, And a numerous huddle of pompous, phantastical, cumbersome Ceremonies,' formerly, and mistakenly, 'thought the principal part, if not the whole of Religion.'[127] Locke maintained that Jesus had revealed the following:

> To 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.[128]

To me, it seems that, while endorsing the renovation of public acts of worship advocated by Jesus in the name of 'Decency, Order, Edification,' this section does not describe public worship, and hence affiliation to a church, as essential to morality and

127 *Ibidem*, 159.
128 *Ibidem*, 160.

salvation. Here, Locke indeed stresses that God requires only 'Application of Mind, and sincerity of Heart' from those who 'humbly' offer up 'Praises and Prayer [...] to the Deity'—a form of worship demanded by God and practicable, publicly and collectively, by the members of a church, but not necessarily connected to public worship. Thus, in my opinion, the *Reasonableness* does not preclude the possibility of salvation to those who accept the Law of Faith but consider themselves as 'mere Christians'—as was, for instance, Locke's friend Benjamin Furly after renouncing Quakerism in the early 1690s. Whether Locke, in his theological works, conceived of unaffiliated Christians as simply 'traveling' in search of a church with doctrines and rites they could approve, or as believers who could remain denominationally uncommitted throughout their lives, is not crucial to my argument.[129] It is true that Locke suggests nowhere in the *Reasonableness*, or in his other later writings on religion, that an individual Christian might remain unaffiliated 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 proposed as indispensable to moral conduct and the achievement of salvation.[130] As John Marshall has noted, Locke's later writings on religion actually 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.'[131] The *Reasonableness* and Locke's other later works on religion indeed extend the possibility of salvation to all those accepting the Law of Faith, regardless of non-fundamentals and confessional affiliation. Consequently, this position also allows for toleration of denominationally uncommitted Christians who adhere to the Law of Faith and the ethics it entails.

4 Non-Christian Believers in Locke's Later Writings on Religion

Locke's later theological works express the conviction that only the Christian Law of Faith can establish a coherent system of ethics and lead to salvation. As Locke put it in *A Paraphrase and Notes*, specifically in commenting on Ephesians 2:15:

129 Locke's use, in the *Reasonableness*, of the metaphor of the 'travel' is aimed at stressing the necessity of divine revelation (as facilitating our journey) in moral and religious matters and, on the other hand, at stigmatizing the unfortunate doctrinal conflicts among Christians: see *ibidem*, 156–159, 169–171.

130 I believe that Locke's manuscript *Sacerdos* (1698) does not require 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 assemblys.' Concerning ministers' right to regulate and perform public worship and 'to teach Men their dutys of Morality,' Locke was obviously talking of a right limited to the boundaries of their churches, which he always considered as voluntary societies. See John Locke, "Sacerdos," in Locke, *Writings*, 17–18.

131 Marshall, "Locke, Socinianism," 171.

> [T]he Subjects of [God's] Kingdom whereof this is now the Law, can be at no doubt or less about their Duty, if they will but read and consider the Rules of Morality, which our Saviour and his Apostles have deliver'd in very plain words in the holy Scriptures of the New Testament.[132]

In this regard, Victor Nuovo has observed that Locke's views on morality and salvation in his theological works imply that, 'if morality is the chief business of mankind, then the best way of pursuing it is to become a Christian'[133]—namely, to accept and live by the Law of Faith. Locke's moralist soteriology indeed implies a denial of the possibility of salvation for those refusing the Law of Faith and the ethics it entails—not only antinomians and deists, but also heathens, Muslims, and Jews unwilling to convert to Christianity.

Concerning pagans, the *Reasonableness* extended the possibility of salvation to those who had 'never heard of the Promise or News of a Saviour.'[134] Locke could not accept that God, in His goodness and mercy, would damn those people for not accepting a revelation they had never heard of. Therefore, he argued that God, 'by the Light of Reason,' had enabled them to grasp and respect the basic tenets of the Law of Nature and 'to find also the way to Reconciliation and Forgiveness' when they transgressed this law.[135] In Locke's words:

> [T]he Author of this Law, and God of Patience and Consolation, who is rich in Mercy, would forgive his frail Off-spring; if they acknowledged their Faults, disapproved the Iniquity of their Transgressions, beg'd his Pardon, and resolved in earnest for the future to conform their Actions to this Rule, which they owned to be Just and Right.[136]

Nevertheless, Locke abstained from extending the possibility of salvation to people who, having heard of Christian revelation, still preferred to profess other religions. Moreover, in *A Paraphrase and Notes*, Locke refrained from making any concession to the heathen world, including those who had 'never heard of the Promise or News of a Saviour.'[137]

As regards Muslims, Locke mentioned 'the *Mahometan* Religion' only once in the *Reasonableness*, when he observed that this religion had 'derived and borrowed' its monotheism from Christianity.[138] In the *Second Vindication*, he referred to the Islamic religion only in responding to John Edwards's charge of holding a non-Trinitarian,

---

132 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), vol. 2, 365.
133 Nuovo, *John Locke*, 245.
134 Locke, *Reasonableness*, 139.
135 *Ibidem*, 139–140.
136 *Ibidem*, 140.
137 Arthur W. Wainwright, "Introduction," in Locke, *Paraphrase*, vol. 1, 41–43; Marshall, *John Locke: Resistance*, 447–451.
138 Locke, *Reasonableness*, 145.

'Socinian,' 'Mahometan' view of Jesus as merely a prophet.[139] However, in his theological writings, Locke did not say anything about the possibility of salvation for Muslims.

Concerning Jews who lived before Jesus, Locke stated in the *Reasonableness:*

> [T]he *Faith* of those before *Christ*; (believing that God would send the *Messiah*, to be a Prince, and a Saviour to his People, as he had promised) [...] shall be accounted to them for Righteousness.[140]

However, in rejecting antinomian ideas and salvaging the importance of good works for salvation in the *Reasonableness*, Locke expressed views typical of supersessionism—that is, the Christian doctrine, also called 'replacement theology,' according to which the Christian Church has succeeded the Jewish people as the definitive people of God. Moreover, in *A Paraphrase and Notes*, he openly disparaged the Jewish religion. In order to counter antinomian readings of the New Testament, especially of Paul's epistles, Locke distinguished between the Christian concept of 'works' and the Mosaic notion of 'works of the law.' In the *Reasonableness*, Locke argued that Paul had not opposed good works. According to Locke, when Paul spoke against 'works,' he meant the 'works of the law,' namely the ceremonial part of the Law of Moses, which had only temporary validity, whereas its moral part, being identical to the Law of Nature, was eternally valid:

> [S]ome of God's Positive Commands being for peculiar Ends, and suited to particular Circumstances of Times, Places, and Persons, have a limited and only temporary Obligation by vertue of God's positive Injunction; such as was that part of *Moses's* Law, which concerned the outward Worship, or Political Constitution of the Jews, and is called the Ceremonial and Judaical law, in contradistinction to the Moral part of it; Which being conformable to the Eternal Law of Right, is of Eternal Obligation, and therefore remains in force still under the Gospel; nor is abrogated by the *Law of Faith*.[141]

Locke's view of the Mosaic Law is emblematic of the 'theory of condescension,' according to which, as Eldon Eisenach has put it, 'the Old Testament law is consigned to the dustbin of history.'[142] Several seventeenth-century latitudinarian theologians, including John Tillotson and Edward Stillingfleet, upheld this theory. In the early eighteenth century, the Newtonian scholar Samuel Clarke unambiguously formulated the basic tenet of this theory in a sermon entitled *The End and Design of the Jewish Law:* 'The Jewish Law was an Institution of Religion adapted by God in great conde-

139 Locke, "Second Vindication," 185, 283, 360, 362.
140 Locke, *Reasonableness*, 139.
141 *Ibidem*, 19.
142 Eldon J. Eisenach, "Religion and Locke's Two Treatises of Government," in *John Locke's Two Treatises of Government: New Interpretations*, ed. Edward J. Harpham (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992): 73. See, also, Raffaele Russo, "Locke and the Jews: From Toleration to the Destruction of the Temple," *Locke Studies* 2 (2002): 199–223.

scension to the weak apprehension of that people.'[143] Locke's remarks on Judaism in *A Paraphrase and Notes* are even more demeaning than Clarke's words and demonstrate why Locke's theological works do not contemplate the possibility of salvation for post-biblical Jews. In his paraphrase of Galatians 1:4, in which Paul states that Christ came to 'deliver us from this present evil world,' Locke maintained that by 'evil world' Paul means 'the Jewish nation under the Mosaical constitution.'[144] Accordingly, in commenting on Galatians 3:19 – 25, Locke argued that Christ's ministry on earth had marked the end of the Mosaic Law, which he considered superseded by the Law of Faith.[145] To Locke, 2 Corinthians 3:6 ('the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life') indicates that 'the New Testament or covenant was also, though obscurely, held forth in the law [of Moses].'[146] However, the bulk of the Jewish people were unable to discard their literalist, legalistic reading of the Scriptures, and to accept Jesus as the Messiah, because a sort of hermeneutic 'veil' conditioned their biblical exegesis. Locke expressed this opinion in his paraphrase of 2 Corinthians 3:15 ('But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the vail is upon their heart'): in Locke's words, 'even until now when the writings of Moses are read, the veil remains upon their hearts, they see not the spiritual and evangelical truths contained in them.'[147] Even the Jews who converted to Christianity shortly after Christ's Coming were unwilling to abandon the 'works of the law,' thus causing tensions and divisions among the early Christians.[148] When talking of these Jewish converts to Christianity, Locke wrote in a note to 1 Corinthians 2:6 ('Howbeit we speak wisdom amongst them that are perfect: yet not the wisdom of this world, nor of the princes of this world, that come to nought'):

> St. Paul here tells the Corinthians that the wisdom and learning of the Jewish nation led them not into the knowledge of the wisdom of God, i.e. the Gospel revealed in the Old Testament, evident in this, that it was their rulers and rabbies, who, stiffly adhering to the notions and prejudices of their nation, had crucified Jesus, the Lord of glory, and were now themselves, with their state and religion, upon the point to be swept away and abolished.[149]

In this passage, Locke claimed that Paul had foreseen the imminent destruction of the Jewish nation, state, and religion as a deserved punishment for having crucified Jesus. Locke even justified this 'destruction' in a note to Romans 3:8, in which Paul maintained that the 'damnation' of 'some' who had slandered him was 'just.' Locke thought that, by 'some,' Paul meant the Jews:

---

143 Samuel Clarke, "The End and Design of the Jewish Law," in Samuel Clarke, *Works*, 4 vols. (London: Knapton, 1738), vol. 2, 313.
144 Locke, *Paraphrase*, vol. 1, 121.
145 *Ibidem*, vol. 1, 138.
146 *Ibidem*, vol. 1, 278.
147 *Ibidem*, vol. 1, 280.
148 *Ibidem*, vol. 2, 483.
149 *Ibidem*, vol. 1, 174.

> 'Some.' It is past doubt that these were the Jews. But St. Paul, always tender towards his own nation, forbears to name them, when he pronounces this sentence, that their casting-off and destruction now at hand, for this scandal and their opposition to the Christian religion, was just.[150]

Briefly, Locke's later writings on religion depict the Jews as bound to their superseded law and hence incapable of pursuing salvation, like all those refusing the Christian Law of Faith. When focussing his attention on heathens and Jews in his theological works, Locke obviously had the issue of salvation in mind. On the other hand, explicit political considerations, concerning whether the religious and moral ideas of heathens and Jews make them tolerable or intolerable in a civil commonwealth, are absent from Locke's theological writings, although his moralist soteriology has powerful political implications, as 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. Only under these conditions will morality provide the basis for a civil law with teeth in it.[151]

In this regard, Victor Nuovo has observed 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.'[152] However, Nuovo has correctly pointed out that Locke did 'not propose a Christian commonwealth as the proper way to do the business of morality.'[153] Locke actually laboured to ensure that the *Second Treatise*, with its advocacy of a *civil* commonwealth, would become part of his philosophical legacy. Moreover, he always opposed the institutionalization of Christianity as a national religion, which in practice, according to Locke, had done as much to disturb as to reinforce civil society and moral conduct. According to Nuovo, Locke never endorsed a Christian commonwealth for two main reasons—namely, his Christian view of history and the concept of the Law of Nature he had expressed 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.[154]

In the *Second Treatise*, Locke indeed described human beings as bound to the God-given Law of Nature, in that they are God's workmanship and, thus, they belong to

150 *Ibidem*, vol. 2, 506.
151 Eldon J. Eisenach, *Two Worlds of Liberalism: Religion and Politics in Hobbes, Locke, and Mill* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 85.
152 Nuovo, *John Locke*, 246.
153 *Ibidem*.
154 *Ibidem*.

God.[155] Nevertheless, Locke's position on the Law of Nature in the *Reasonableness* makes things quite problematic, given that, in this book, Locke maintained that unassisted reason had never 'made out an entire body of the *Law of Nature*.'[156] Moreover, according to Locke, even when the Law of Nature became easily accessible through the Old Testament, given that the moral part of the Law of Moses (i.e. the Law of Works) was identical to the Law of Nature, the Law of Moses was still ineffective to establish morality on solid grounds. Locke eventually concluded that only Christ had revealed, perfectly and completely, the divine law, which comprises the Law of Nature in its entirety, besides the assurance of otherworldly rewards and punishments and an emphasis on God's forgiveness. Therefore, in order to achieve flawless, thorough, certain knowledge of the Law of Nature—'the only proper rule to govern human behavior and civil institutions,' in Nuovo's words—one needs to accept the Law of Faith revealed by Christ.

However, in the *Reasonableness* and his other theological writings, Locke did not invoke the civil power against pagans, Muslims, and Jews because of their weak, defective, imperfect morality. He actually ruled out any such use of the civil power in the *Two Treatises of Government*, in all his letters on toleration, and throughout his mature manuscripts, including those written between the mid-1690s and his death. Conversely, in *A Letter concerning Toleration*, he expressly excluded atheists and Roman Catholics from toleration, and he did so mainly for moral reasons, as I have explained above. So, why did he not deny toleration to heathens, Jews, and Muslims too for moral reasons? We can answer this question if we consider Locke's views on the different moralities of atheists, Roman Catholics, and non-Christian believers. Locke judged atheists intrinsically immoral, and hence socially dangerous, because of their failure to acknowledge the existence of a divine creator and legislator and their consequent failure to appreciate any (divinely given) moral law. Concerning Roman Catholics, Locke considered them intolerable only because of some of their moral ideas, which he judged harmful to society. Therefore, he did not exclude the theoretical possibility of tolerating Catholics, on condition that the latter renounce their antisocial ideas. When it comes to pagans, Jews, and Muslims, things are different, because they do believe in a divine creator and legislator. Thus, they are able to appreciate and grasp, albeit partially and imperfectly, the divine law and their duties towards their creator. For this reason, they are not intrinsically immoral and, thus, they are not comparable to atheists. Heathens of different stripes can indeed comprehend, by the light of reason, at least some basic elements of the Law of Nature. Jews can also know the Law of Nature in the form of the Law of Works accessible through their Scriptures. Briefly, the religious and moral views of non-Christian believers, although defective and imperfect, still enable them to meet at least minimally decent moral standards. Their failure to accept the Christian Law of Faith, with

155 Locke, *Two Treatises*, 271.

156 Locke, *Reasonableness*, 148–150.

the ethics it entails, certainly prevents them from achieving the salvation of their souls. However, as Locke argues in *A Letter concerning Toleration*, 'the Care of Souls' falls outside of the purview of political authority, as long as a religious opinion or practice is not destructive of the civil interests or communal life. Therefore, Locke's more or less explicit denial of the possibility of salvation to non-Christian believers in his theological works does not invalidate what the *Letter* states in this regard, namely that 'neither *Pagan*, nor *Mahumetan*, nor *Jew*, ought to be excluded from the Civil Rights of the Commonwealth, because of his Religion.'[157]

Finally, we need to consider the case of deists and antinomians—Locke's main polemical targets in his later works on religion. Although Locke questions the actual ability of unassisted reason to comprehend the Law of Nature entirely and perfectly, the deists' commitment to live by the Law of Nature, or at least by its basic tenets, should be enough to make them tolerable in a civil commonwealth. However, it might be argued that deists do not belong to any 'deistic church' and thus, given Locke's exclusive focus on *organized* religion in the *Letter*, they do not meet an essential requirement for being considered, and tolerated, as people who have 'religion.' In the *Letter*, deists are indeed left in a 'vague limbo,' as their status remains undefined. Nevertheless, Locke's irenicism in the *Reasonableness* does not require confessional affiliation as a necessary condition for salvation, and for toleration as well, when it comes to Christian believers. I believe that the scarce importance that Locke attaches to church membership in the *Reasonableness*, combined with his stress, in his political writings, on the Law of Nature as the only proper rule to govern human behavior in a state of nature or in a civil commonwealth, allows for toleration of deists too, although Locke criticized their reliance on natural reason alone as ineffective to salvation. As regards antinomians, Locke's exclusion of Roman Catholics from toleration because of their 'antinomian' moral ideas implies that other, if not all, forms of antinomianism are intolerable, at least in principle. Yet, whereas Locke opposed Calvinistic antinomianism as detrimental to salvation, he abstained from explicitly declaring Protestant antinomians 'intolerable' in any of his writings. I believe that Locke judged Protestant antinomianism to be not as socially dangerous as Roman Catholics' 'antinomian' moral ideas. In the *Letter*, he indeed attacked some specific antisocial ideas, commonly attributed to Roman Catholics, and he connected Catholic morals with the obedience that Catholics owed to their indisputable religious leader, the pope, who was also a foreign prince. Concerning Calvinistic antinomians, Locke was probably aware of their *potential* intolerability, as Mark Goldie has argued, given that their claims of divine inspiration could possibly lead them to act against ordinary moral rules and even against the civil commonwealth.[158] Nevertheless, this theoretical possibility, unlike the Catholics' antisocial convictions, was not

157 Locke, "Letter," 58–59.
158 Goldie, "Introduction," xix.

enough to make Protestant antinomians *actually* intolerable—as long as they did not engage in immoral, antisocial, illegal conduct.

5 Conclusion

Locke always argued for toleration within the boundaries of a morality that only religious belief could ground. His arguments in the *Letter* revolve around the separation between the state and religious societies. While Locke's political scepticism enabled him to effectively delineate the civil magistrate's purview, his preoccupation with the need for morality to construct a decent, stable society led him to expressly advocate toleration for only those who believed in God and pursued salvation within the bosom of a church (except Roman Catholics, as long as they held antisocial morals). In *The Reasonableness of Christianity* and other theological writings, Locke turned to Scripture with the purpose of overcoming his own moral scepticism and finding strong foundations for morality. He formulated an original doctrine of the fundamentals, extending the possibility of salvation and toleration to all those accepting the Law of Faith revealed by Christ, regardless of non-fundamentals and confessional affiliation. His conviction that the Law of Faith alone could establish a sound system of ethics and make salvation possible did not lead him to endorse a Christian commonwealth, or to recant his advocacy of toleration of pagans, Jews, and Muslims. In fact, although non-Christian believers refuse the Law of Faith and are hence unable to achieve salvation, they do believe in a divine creator and legislator. Therefore, they are able to appreciate and grasp, even if only partially and imperfectly, at least the divinely given Law of Nature and to behave accordingly. In conclusion, Locke's developing approach to toleration, from the *Letter* to his later theological writings, was always conditioned by his religious conception of life and morality. This enabled him to advance persuasive arguments against the civil magistrate's complete control of religious affairs and to play a significant role in the irenic Protestant tradition of the way of fundamentals. On the other hand, his religious conception of life and morality always prevented him from advocating proper freedom of conscience and, instead, led him to argue for only limited forms of religious toleration.