A Letter
Concerning Toleration
and Other Writings
John Locke
John Locke:  
*A Letter*  
*Concerning Toleration*  
*and Other Writings*  

Edited and with an Introduction  
by Mark Goldie  

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Thomas Hollis (1720–74) was an eighteenth-century Englishman who devoted his energies, his fortune, and his life to the cause of liberty. Hollis was trained for a business career, but a series of inheritances allowed him to pursue instead a career of public service. He believed that citizenship demanded activity and that it was incumbent on citizens to put themselves in a position, by reflection and reading, in which they could hold their governments to account. To that end for many years he distributed books that he believed explained the nature of liberty and revealed how liberty might best be defended and promoted.

A particular beneficiary of Hollis’s generosity was Harvard College. In the years preceding the Declaration of Independence, Hollis was assiduous in sending to America boxes of books, many of which he had had specially printed and bound, to encourage the colonists in their struggle against Great Britain. At the same time he took pains to explain the colonists’ grievances and concerns to his fellow Englishmen.

The Thomas Hollis Library makes freshly available a selection of titles that, because of their intellectual power, or the influence they exerted on the public life of their own time, or the distinctiveness of their approach to the topic of liberty, comprise the cream of the books distributed by Hollis. Many of these works have been either out of print since the eigh-
teenth century or available only in very expensive and scarce editions. The highest standards of scholarship and production ensure that these classic texts can be as salutary and influential today as they were two hundred and fifty years ago.

David Womersley
INTRODUCTION

The Context of Intolerance

Protestant Europe inherited a fundamental belief from the medieval Catholic Church: that membership of the church was coextensive with membership of the commonwealth and that it was the duty of a “godly prince” to promote and support the true religion. Protestants agreed with Catholics that “schism” and “heresy” were intolerable, though what counted as orthodoxy now depended on which side of the Alps one stood. There was therefore no intrinsic connection between religious freedom and the advent of Protestantism. Luther was ferocious against the Anabaptists, calling down the wrath of the German princes upon them. At Geneva, Calvin burned Servetus for heresy. In England, the regime of Elizabeth and the early Stuarts drove religious nonconformists to flee to the Netherlands and America; in the Netherlands, Calvinists harassed those who deviated into Arminianism; and in Massachusetts, separatists were punished. During the English Civil Wars, Presbyterians, who had suffered under the episcopal Church of England, were vociferous in demanding suppression of the radical Puritan sects. The Reformation and Counter-Reformation witnessed extraordinary savagery in the name of religious orthodoxy, in events such as the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre in France and the Cromwellian annihilation of Irish “papists.” Nor
was there any cessation after the mid-seventeenth century. In 1685 Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes, under which Protestant Huguenots had achieved a measure of toleration, causing thousands to flee, and introducing a new word, *refugee*, into the English language; thousands who were left behind faced torture, enslavement, and death. In England, the later Stuart era saw the final attempt in that country’s history to coerce citizens to be of one church: the Anglican church restored after the Civil Wars. Hundreds of Quakers died in prison, the Baptist John Bunyan was incarcerated in Bedford jail, and William Penn resolved to create a safe haven, which he named Pennsylvania.

It is mistaken to suppose that the practice of intolerance betokened mere unthinking bigotry. On the contrary, a fully developed ideology of intolerance was articulated in countless treatises and sermons and was upheld by Protestants and Catholics alike. Religious minorities were castigated on three grounds. First, dissenters were seditious dangers to the state, and their claims of “conscience” were masks for rebellion and anarchy. Second, they were schismatic violators of the unity and catholicity of God’s church, since Christian creeds taught that the church is “one.” Third, they held erroneous beliefs that endangered their souls and polluted those of their neighbors, so that they should be obliged to harken to the truth. To these political, ecclesiastical, and theological objections could be added ethical suspicions that dissenters were closet libertines who concealed their depravity under outward piety. Scripturally, it was claimed that Christ himself had authorized religious coercion of the wayward, for, as St. Augustine had explained, Jesus’ injunction in St. Luke’s Gospel to “compel them to come in” must be understood in relation to the church (Luke 14:23). *Compelle intrare* became the cardinal text for Christian brutality and remained a pulpit staple. The Christian magistrate, guided by the Christian pastor, was duty bound to suppress error, for “he beareth not the sword in vain: he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil” (Romans 13:4).
Locke’s \textit{Letter} and Evangelical Tolerance

John Locke’s \textit{Letter Concerning Toleration} was one of the seventeenth century’s most eloquent pleas to Christians to renounce religious persecution. It was also timely. It was written in Latin in Holland in 1685, just after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and published in Latin and English in 1689, just after the English parliament conceded a statutory toleration for Protestant dissenters. Locke was certainly not the first writer to argue for toleration. The case can be traced to authors such as Sebastian Castellio and Jacopo Acontius in the late sixteenth century, to the radical Puritans of Civil War England, such as William Walwyn and Roger Williams, and to Locke’s contemporaries, such as Penn and, in Holland, the Jew Baruch Spinoza, the Arminian Philip van Limborch, and the Huguenot Pierre Bayle, whose \textit{Philosophical Commentary on the Words of Our Lord, “Compel Them to Come In”} (1686) is exactly contemporary with Locke’s \textit{Letter}.

Today Locke is regarded as the canonical philosopher of liberalism. Theorists continue to invoke Locke in addressing religious questions: the relationship between religion and civil society, and the boundaries of public tolerance of cultural pluralism, particularly in a West suddenly less convinced that secularism is an ineluctable characteristic of modernity. Locke’s liberalism is not, however, the same as modern secular liberalism. His \textit{Letter} can surprise and disconcert by the apparently limited basis and extent of its tolerance. It is not just that Locke excludes Roman Catholics and atheists from tolerance, but also that his very premises are rooted in Christian evangelism. His arguments are not as radical as those of Spinoza or Bayle, who were more inclusive and more skeptical. Crudely, Locke is not John Stuart Mill, for it is to \textit{On Liberty} (1859) that we turn to find a celebration of pluralism and arguments for moral diversity. “Tol-erance,” after all, denotes forbearance, not approval, and Locke defends rather than applauds religious diversity. Moreover, he does not offer toleration in the ethical sphere; quite the contrary, he upholds godly living as a better aspiration for civil societies than the disciplining of doctrine and worship. The first thing to emphasize, therefore, about Locke’s \textit{Letter} is that it is limited to a case for toleration of religious conscience in matters of worship and speculative theology. Furthermore, its argument is grounded in the question: What are the legitimate means at the dis-
posal of Christians to bring the wayward to the truth? While Locke is absolutely emphatic that coercion is not a legitimate means, the Letter remains an essay in evangelical tolerance, penned by a devout Christian, albeit one whom contemporaries suspected of theological heterodoxy and who thereby himself needed—or, in his enemies’ eyes, did not deserve—the blessings of toleration.

Separating Church from State

Locke’s Letter offers three principal arguments for toleration. He begins by asserting that peaceable means are of the essence of Christianity, and that Scripture does not authorize harshness. This point, however, is scarcely developed, and he does not explicitly discuss Jesus’ exhortation to “compel.” Rather, Locke’s overriding case is for the separation of the church from the state. Religion is not the business of the magistrate, and the state is not a proper instrument for the saving of souls. Church and state are “perfectly distinct and infinitely different” (p. 24). A church is a voluntary association within civil society; it is not a department of government. In this respect, churches are no different from other associations, such as “merchants for commerce” (p. 16). Broadly, this is a teleological argument: each gathering of people has its own ends or purposes and is delimited in its remit and governance by those ends. The state is no exception, for it cannot make totalizing claims: it, too, is limited by its temporal and secular purposes: the protection of life, liberty, and property. Locke was scarcely the first to offer such an assertion, but it is not too much to claim that he had broken with the concept of the “confessional state” that had governed medieval and Reformation Europe. Shockingly to his contemporaries, he avers that “there is absolutely no such thing, under the Gospel, as a Christian commonwealth” (p. 42). Temporal governors may and should be Christians, but Locke’s point is that their religious profession pertains to their private selves and not their public office.

Locke underpins the case for separation by showing that it is we who designate the purposes of our several communities. The state has its source in the “consent of the people.” It is for the protection of “civil rights and worldly goods” that the people originally authorized the state.
People therefore have worldly purposes when they form states and spiritual purposes when they form churches. “The care of each man's soul” (p. 48) cannot be part of the “mutual compacts” (p. 47) that create the polity. Fundamentally this is because it would be irrational to consent to a government that claimed a right to enforce a particular path to heaven, since that path might prove abhorrent to our conscience. This aspect of Locke’s argument firmly connects the *Letter* with his *Two Treatises of Government*, also published in 1689, and represents a crucial extrapolation of the latter’s premises. While it may appear puzzling that Locke does not supply this deduction in the *Treatises* themselves, which are conspicuously silent on the problem of religious persecution, their relentless insistence on the state’s purely secular purposes is so eloquent in its silence that Locke’s strategy is surely deliberate. The *Treatises* are not about religion because the state is not about religion.

A momentous corollary of Locke’s position is that toleration must be extended to non-Christian. Since the commonwealth is not, in its nature, Christian, then its ambit is extensive. Locke is quite clear that purely religious opinions of any sort cannot provide a ground for civil discrimination. “Neither pagan, nor Mahumetan, nor Jew, ought to be excluded from the civil rights of the commonwealth, because of his religion” (pp. 58–59). Furthermore, “not even [Native] Americans . . . are to be punished . . . for not embracing our faith and worship” (p. 39).

Locke’s separation of church and state is problematic in relation to the circumstances of England after the passage of the Toleration Act in 1689. Though toleration of Protestant dissenters was now legal, the Anglican creed in the Thirty-Nine Articles, the rituals of the Book of Common Prayer, and episcopacy continued to constitute the “Established” Church of England, which in turn retained a panoply of legal jurisdictions over people’s lives and a great body of landed and financial wealth. Citizens remained obliged to pay church taxes known as tithes; it was difficult to conduct marriage and burial outside the official church; and bishops were crown appointees who sat in the House of Lords. Furthermore, the Test Acts remained in place, by which citizens were disabled from holding public office unless they were communicant members of the Anglican Church. Although the Tests were often evaded in practice, they were
not formally repealed until 1828. The separation of religion from public institutions proved a long, slow, and incomplete process, and in national schooling, for example, it has never fully occurred. Today, while religious schooling has been pluralized beyond Anglicanism, Britons remain wedded to tax-funded “faith schools,” apparently believing that the saving of souls is one purpose of the state.

It is unclear if Locke was a categorical separationist. The logic of his position is abolition of the state church. Yet he does not categorically say so in the Letter, nor did he show any personal inclination to worship outside the established church. Some of his remarks point toward “comprehension,” which would have entailed liberalizing the terms of membership of the national church so as to admit moderate dissenters. On the other hand, even if Locke favored comprehension, he clearly also upheld the rights of separatists. Moreover, he exhibited a strong streak of anticlericalism, criticizing the tendency of established religions to serve as engines of clerical “avarice and insatiable desire of dominion” (p. 60). In the Constructions of Carolina (1669), which he helped to draft, the attitude toward churches is radically congregationalist: any group can register themselves as a church. If we assume that Locke was a categorical separationist, then it is not to Britain that one would look for a modern Lockean state, but to the United States, where the argument of Locke’s Letter found fulfillment in Thomas Jefferson’s Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom (1779), or to France, with its secular republican tradition of laïcité.

The Ineffectiveness of Intolerance

The second principal argument of the Letter in seeking to preclude coercion is Locke’s insistence that persecution is radically ineffective. Coercion cannot, in principle, he argues, achieve its purported aim of bringing people to a conviction that a particular belief is true. This claim takes Locke into philosophical territory, for the argument depends upon an epistemological view about the etiology of human belief and the interiority of the mind. Belief is a matter of inward conviction, stemming from faith and persuasion, so that conscience cannot be forced. To punish somebody for believing an “error” is a non sequitur, since physical pressure, whether fines, imprisonment, torture, or death, cannot bring about genuine belief,
any more than the rod can persuade a schoolchild of the truth of a mathematical equation. Admittedly, coercion can modify behavior, for people can be forced to make declarations, sign documents, or attend church; but they do so as compliant hypocrites rather than recovered souls. Moreover, some will resist pressure and opt for martyrdom, and these, too, have not changed their minds. Religious compulsion is therefore based on a misapprehension about the efficacy of coercion for its ostensible evangelical purpose. Locke consequently wonders whether churchmen and “godly” magistrates do not have some other motive in persecuting, and he returns to his critique of clerical domination.

This aspect of Locke’s argument loomed large in his Second, Third, and unfinished Fourth Letters on toleration (1690, 1692, and, posthumously, 1706), which are many times the length of the original Letter. They were composed after Locke had been strenuously critical of an Oxford high churchman, Jonas Proast, who resented the Toleration Act of 1689, and who echoed the Augustinian injunctions to “compel” that had been strongly voiced in Restoration England. Proast’s case was subtle and there are modern interpreters who hold that Locke was unable to sustain his position convincingly. Proast conceded that coercion cannot directly convince the mind, but that, indirectly, it can encourage people to reconsider. Since Proast held that our beliefs are largely inherited and habitual, rather than rational, he claimed that we can be jolted into serious thought by discipline. Proast thought of dissenting sects rather as we might think of cults: people who have been brainwashed can be decontaminated, but they need to be physically removed from the cult. More generally, religious believers do often refer to some physical trauma as occasioning their conversion: St. Paul was shocked into Christianity on the road to Damascus. The disconnection between inner belief and the outer material self is, hence, not unbridgeable. As a good Augustinian, Proast insisted that the machinery of coercion must be accompanied by pastoral activity, the magistrate with a preacher at hand. Locke’s Second and Third Letters offered laborious refutations of Proast and are not much read today, yet they offer valuable elaborations of ideas outlined in the original Letter.

Locke’s argument from the disutility of intolerance had another and different aspect. This might be termed the “reciprocity” or “Alpine argument.” Truth, Locke observed, is apt to be different on each side of the
Channel, the Alps, and the Bosphorus. “Every prince is orthodox to himself” (p. 38). Protestantism is the state religion in England, Catholicism in France, and Islam in Turkey. He contrasts the fates of religions under different regimes: the dominant religion is apt to persecute the minority. The pattern of persecution is thus an indicator of the distribution of power rather than of the provenance of religious truth. Persecution has no utility for advancing the cause of the real truth if the case for coercion can so easily be mobilized by any regime that believes it has the truth. Hence, it is foolish to license the state to enforce “truth,” because the same argument will be used elsewhere against our co-religionists. In a world of divided religions and confessional states, those who suffer are not the erroneous but the weak. Protestants will suffer in France and Christians in Turkey. Locke offers the enforcer a calculus of prudence: if you wish to promote true belief, do not arm magistrates the world over with the sword of righteousness.

Skepticism

In keeping with Locke’s evangelical premise in the Letter, there is a limited role for skepticism. A nonbeliever would elevate doubt about religious belief into a principal ground for tolerance: how can we be so sure of our “truth” as to inflict it violently on others? Locke’s case for toleration is not that the claims of Christianity are doubtful, still less false. Arguably, however, his avoidance of a skeptical position is in part tactical. If he seeks to persuade the devout persecutor that force is improper, it makes more sense to dwell on reasons why force is inappropriate than on reasons why devoutness is ill-grounded. We may wish to bring people to Gospel truth, but compulsion is not Christlike, politic, or efficacious.

There is, nevertheless, a clear strand of skepticism in the Letter, in regard to the sphere of what theologians termed “things indifferent,” as distinct from “things necessary,” to salvation. Locke was among those latitudinarians who envisaged a wide ambit of “things indifferent”: matters that were not prescribed by Scripture and hence were open to human choice and local convention. God requires that he be worshipped, but he is not unduly prescriptive about the manner of worship. Accordingly, to
insist that worshippers stand or kneel, or that ministers wear particular garments, is to impose human preferences rather than divine precepts. Locke is likewise emphatic that the creedal content of Christianity is limited, and in his *Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695) he would be minimalist in asserting that the sole necessary truth was faith that Christ is the Messiah. He holds that much that has historically preoccupied theologians, and led to inquisitions and heresy-hunting, is merely speculation; Christian simplicity has been bemired in spiritual vanity and metaphysical pedantry. A constant theme of the *Letter* is Locke's insistence on freedom of “speculation,” an emphasis alloyed with anxiety about his own position. Charges of Socinianism, denoting a denial of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ, would be leveled against both his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) and the *Reasonableness*.

Locke was, however, aware that the argument for toleration drawn from the concept of “things indifferent” was problematic and had two drawbacks. The first was that consensus could not be reached regarding the boundary between “things necessary” and “things indifferent.” For example, quarrels over the “popish” white surplice and the black “Geneva gown” had bedeviled Protestant debate since the Reformation: the sartorial became soteriological. A Puritan might agree that “things indifferent” should be tolerated but deny that a popish surplice was a thing indifferent, which thereby rendered it utterly intolerable. The second drawback was that the notion of “things indifferent” can just as easily lead to an argument for intolerance. If something is a “thing indifferent,” then nobody has good reason to object to it on conscientious grounds. It was commonly held that “things indifferent” could be imposed by authority, not because God requires it, but rather for the sake of decency and good order. Shared practices should prevail for aesthetic and communal reasons. God requires “beauty in holiness” even if its specifics remain open to human ordinance. Hence it is not the rulers in church and state who are zealots but, on the contrary, nonconformists who pointlessly plead “conscience” and “indulgence” in matters indifferent. For this reason many latitudinarians, whose position is at first glance liberal, 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. At this point Locke departs from his fellow latitudinarians. For him, the comeliness and fellowship of conformity cannot trump the right of religious self-expression for those who have an unassuageable conviction, however misguided, that the terms of conformity are ungodly.

Here Locke stresses an elementary principle of respect. Conscientiously held beliefs are to be respected; or, rather, believers are to be respected, even if we regard their beliefs as ill-founded. We may agree that a sect is blighted by errant conscience, but freedom of conscience must take priority over (our own conception of) truth. Locke does not doubt his own version of Christian truth, but his argument is at its most apparently skeptical when he insists that we must tolerate error. What matters most is the sincere pursuit of truth, however tangled and tortuous the paths people take. In according a central place to sincerity, Locke bears the stamp of modern liberalism. To search sincerely after truth, even if failing to arrive, is held to be more valuable than to possess truth merely through happenstance or outward conformity. Locke is conscious that most people are full of mental clutter derived from upbringing, education, circumstance, culture. They are scarcely to be blamed for erroneous beliefs, though they are culpable if lacking in strenuous effort in sorting out their thoughts. Earnest endeavor must command our respect. A crucial caveat, however, remains. The duty of tolerance must not abridge our equal right to argue against error. “Every man has commission to admonish, exhort, convince another of error, and, by reasoning, to draw him into truth” (p. 14). Locke would thus have been dismayed by a society such as ours in which the onus on “respect” frequently produces a timid unwillingness to challenge the beliefs of others.

Antinomians

Given the powerful nature of Locke’s case for religious tolerance, it comes as a shock that, near the close of the Letter, he excludes atheists and Catholics from toleration. There is no gainsaying that he rejects the possibility of tolerating atheists, whom he claims have no motive for keeping rules, since they lack fear of divine punishment. “Promises, covenants, and
oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist” (pp. 52–53). Spinoza and Bayle disagreed. Locke’s position on Catholicism, however, needs finessing, since he did not, in fact, exclude the theoretical possibility of tolerating Catholics. Although Catholics held absurd beliefs, such as transubstantiation, the absurdity of another’s belief is not, in itself, a ground for coercion. What rendered Catholics unable to be tolerated was that they held political and moral positions that fundamentally threatened civil society. These were twofold: that the pope can depose heretic princes and authorize his followers to overthrow such princes; and that “faith need not be kept with heretics”: in other words, that rules of honesty and promise-keeping need not apply when Catholics deal with heretics. The implication of Locke’s position was that if Catholics could discard their uncivil beliefs, they could then be tolerated. Eighteenth-century Catholics took succor from this argument and strove to demonstrate that Catholicism was not committed to papal political dominion nor to breach of faith with heretics.

What Locke was precluding was not Catholicism as such, but antinomianism. An antinomian is one who holds that ordinary moral laws are trumped by the superiority of religious “truth.” This is to put religion in collision with reason and natural law, which are also the works of God and not in conflict with revelation. Antinomians hold either that they are divinely inspired to rule (the ultimate form of a godly commonwealth) or, on the contrary, that they are exempt from rule (the ultimate form of godly anarchy). Catholic claims that the pope had Christ’s commission to dictate to all nations and Calvinist claims that the “elect” should rule (“the rule of the saints”) were equally antinomian. There are hints that Locke had Puritan fanatics in mind as being also potentially intolerable. There are plenty of other varieties of antinomianism, then and now, such as the proposition that a particular territory belongs to a particular group because “God gave it to them,” or that one state should fight a war against another because it deems it to be the “antichrist.”

Locke was explicit that governments should concern themselves with religious behavior only insofar as it was dangerous to society’s temporal interests. Eccentric behavior in places of worship is no more harmful to civil society than eccentric behavior in marketplaces. Conversely, terror-
ist behavior in a church was as legitimately subject to surveillance as in a marketplace. Locke readily accepted that the state might need to exercise vigilance with regard to some religious groups, though the state should be explicit about the grounds for its suspicion. Conversely, citizens had a parallel duty to be vigilant in ensuring that those in charge of the state were not framing policy in accordance with “godly” agendas. Antinomianism can manifest itself from above as well as from below.

Locke’s Transition

Although this account has, thus far, dwelt on the Letter, Locke reflected and wrote about toleration across four decades. Conspicuously, he did not hold the same views in 1690 that he held in 1660. When monarchy and the Church of England were restored after the Civil Wars and republic, Locke had written in defense of the civil magistrate’s authority to impose a uniform public worship. Locke composed these essays, now known as the Two Tracts on Government (1660–62), while a young scholar and teacher at Oxford University, although they remained unpublished until 1967. They reveal a Locke deeply fearful of civil anarchy driven by religious fanaticism. Like most of his compatriots, he thought the Civil Wars had opened a Pandora’s box of wild “enthusiasm” and antinomian zealotry masquerading under the banner of conscience. He argued within the theological tradition of “things indifferent” and concluded that because most matters of worship and religious discipline are indifferent, the non-conformists had no conscientious ground for objecting to the imposition of order.

A striking feature of the Tracts is that they epitomize the argumentation that Locke would later come to oppose. For reasons that still remain unclear, by 1667 he had decisively changed his mind. Probably most important was his new association with Lord Ashley, the future Whig leader and Earl of Shaftesbury, and his consequent move from Oxford, the ideological home of Anglican churchmanship. Locke settled in the more cosmopolitan London, close to the court of Charles II, which had its own reasons for seeking toleration, as the king was either religiously