

The Church and the State: A Critical Reading of John Locke's Theologico-Political Thought

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the clear cut separation and distinction of the role and business of the church and the state. Social disorder, wars and conflicts of diverse natures have always resulted from the inefficient link between the church and the state. My focus in this paper is to justify that, without the establishment of a real boundary between the church and the state, there can be no certain end to the controversies that will be always arising. This principle of separation is geared toward the secularization of politics, as a means of putting the different sectors of the society in their right positions, by emphasizing on the fact that, the affairs of heaven do not have any business with those of the earth and restricting the temptation of power abuse by either the church or the state or both. I emphatically portray that, the church must be separated from the state exactly and absolutely because it is considered as the first method to resolve the different problems related to the misuse of power that usually occur within the society. I further admit that, the church is mainly concerned about the interests of men's souls which involve exercising purity, God worship, living a holy and decent life, aimed at acquiring the salvation of individual souls. Finally, I conclude that, the aspiration of the state is outward, external or public and centered on the commonwealth, geared toward the procuring, preserving and advancing of civil interests which include: life, liberty, indolence of the body, and the possession of outward things, such as: money, land, houses, furniture.

KEYWORDS: Church, State, John Locke, Freedom, Commonwealth, Religion, Government

INTRODUCTION

The business of the church and the state occupies a central position in the philosophy of John Locke. This is evident because, the church and its divine authorization are closely connected to the idea of tolerance manifested within the state. There is no doubt that Locke an tolerance unfolds with the question of the church when he starts by stating that, toleration is the "chief Characteristical Mark of the true Church".² This opening paragraph of Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* echoes the important role to be played by the church and state as a means to embark on the search for tolerance. That is the reason why admittedly, in connection to the value of such a vital role it is clear that, "a good life" involves religion and piety, but it "concerns also the civil government".³ As a result of this assertion, the moral actions fall under the jurisdictions of both magistrate and conscience. This creates the danger of one depending on the other. Therefore, it is of vital importance to distinguish between these two realms. First of all, the idea that characterizes the realm of religion is as follows: Every man has an immortal soul, capable of eternal happiness or misery, whose happiness depending upon his believing and doing those things in life, which are necessary to the obtaining of God's favor and are prescribed by God to that end: it follows

² Locke, J., *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. In *Locke on Toleration*, Edited by Richard Vernon, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 8.
³*Ibid*, p. 241.

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from thence, first, that the observance of these things is the highest obligation that lies upon mankind.⁴

The realm of religion is that of the immortal souls of all human beings, who strive for salvation by worshipping God. It is equally considered as the other eternal world, whose obligations over ride everything else from this visible world of ours. At most, human beings can try to persuade each other concerning the truth of a particular doctrine or form of worship, but "all force and compulsion are to be forborne in this physical and public or outward realm".⁵ In line with the question of divine authorization, Locke condemns the reliance on the dictates of divine authorization under the realm of tolerance which was the order of the day involving church ministry. To further justify this necessity in challenging such a dependence on divine authorization when treating tolerance issues, in my opinion, "Locke's religious ideas concur with his finality that consist in making toleration a more attractive aspect of the state".⁶ The conception of the true church include the fact that, first, a true church, for him, refers to that which is more concerned about searching for the salvation of individual souls not through the means of arming oneself with the sword or any other instrument of force, but by equipping the public with a gospel characterized by peace, second, by involving the

⁴ Locke, J., *Op.Cit.*, p. 240.
⁵*Ibid*, p. 242.
⁶*Ibid*, p. 275.

exemplary and holy nature of what their conversation embodies.

I. The Character and goals of a True Church

It is important to underscore the fact that, for any true church to be regarded as such, it must therefore be able to accomplish its mission, being the salvation of the souls of the people and the tendency for that church to equally exercise a real sense of morality, by appealing to the policy of tolerance which constitutes the "chief Characteristical Mark of a True Church". This also means in simpler terms that, when talking about a true church in the real sense of the term, it is understood as the one which is geared towards the saving of individual souls as well as promoting morals of the church, as the method intended to attain toleration a result of the simple fact that every true church strives for the salvation of souls, Locke was convinced beyond every reasonable doubt that, at last, there is no difference existing between the "National Church and the other separated Congregations".⁷ At this level, even the sects are acknowledged as true churches, given that they also exercise a sense of morality in carrying out their duties. Moreover, the manifestations of immoral acts such as violence and persecution of other people are contrary to the expectations of true churches which are supposed to live by the dictates of the gospel, by basing their actions on the principle of charity, portraying the purity of the church for the glory of God.⁸

Consequently, if any church is discovered professing the opposite, that is, manifesting immorality and indulging in the persecution of others, that church is automatically going to earn the title of an untrue church. The emphasis in determining the true church from the numerous churches that exists in the society is intended to attempt resolving whatever problems that could arise from the establishment of tolerance within the state. The emphasis by stressing on the features of a true church as determined by "the outward Form and the Rites of Worship", coupled with the "Doctrines such a church professes, as well as the Articles of Faith", are all considerations to booster the point concerning the essentiality of a true church. This insistence is a vital tool in the question of toleration.

II. The Expectations of Ecclesiastical Authorities

In order to clarify the doubts and suspicions that ecclesiastical authority could bring to the society, Locke openly and categorically writes that, "Ecclesiastical Authority, whether it be administered by the Hands of a Single Person, or many, is everywhere the same".⁹ He also states that, "Every Church is Orthodox to itself; to others, Erroneous or Heretical". This is what caused him to attack the Church of England by preaching the need for the institution of equal authority of all churches. He still adds that, the authority of the church was not initially determined by the government, coercive force, possessions, but they were visibly expressed through the presence of peace, morals, virtue, and other things instituted by the moral voice.¹⁰ Locke further enumerates that if any church proclaims its sole authority or orthodoxy, then, there will be conflicts as power holders are always corrupted by power

absolutely. Rather, all the churches are instead expected to declare their equality of authority or orthodoxy *vis-à-vis* the others.

To be more precise, Locke particularly tells the sects to affirm their orthodoxy. This reaction towards ecclesiastical laws as well, went a long way to serve as part and parcel of the underpinnings characterizing the notion of tolerance.¹¹ The degree of the negativity in face of ecclesiastical laws was the accusation of the leaders of the English church for immoral actions. According to the convictions of the Anglicans, church ministers were appointed by God and were thus referred to as "the servants of God". Hence, such ministers were not regarded as ordinary persons. To add to the above, they were considered as "the representatives of God" and also as the "mediators between God on the one hand and the people of God on the other hand", as explained by Cornwall.¹² In Locke an perspectives, the minister of the church is referred by him as "a minister of the Word of God, a Preacher of the Gospel of Peace" and equally termed as one who must do everything necessary in order to avoid practices of "Violence and Rapine, as well as all manner of Persecution".¹³ As a means to disprove the belief that ministers of God are actually God's representatives, Locke mentions that, instead for some of these ministers to preach a gospel of peace to the people, on the contrary, they preached and even practiced violence especially through the wrong method.

It was for the above reasons that Locke addressed the people of England with the message that it was actually unreasonable and needless to be insisting that there should be a uniformity of worship. This message was for the simple reason that the adoption of obligation is not the real manner of producing a true church, so, it is consequently invalid. The above renders Locke's arguments two folded, corresponding to two categories of people.¹⁴ On the one hand, it serves as a warning to the people of England. On the other hand, he addresses those belonging to the sects to give away their rights of worship and that they should begin practicing beliefs which are acceptable as a means to please God. Here, the reasonable stance for toleration stems from the activities of every true church. Although the church of England was not characterized by freedom of worship, Locke strongly held the view that the church remains "a free and voluntary society".¹⁵ By free and voluntary, Locke means that the people enter such a society and become members of the society through their own free individual wills, depending on the convictions of their personal judgments in relation to their knowledge about the form of faith and religious worship that is pleasing to God.¹⁶ Worthy of note is that, the Locke an proposal of attempting to render church membership free and open was not welcomed by the Anglicans of the seventeenth century. What impression then, did these Anglicans have in mind for denying this Locke an proposal? Again, what answer did Locke advance to clarify his assertion? These Anglicans denied such an idea because

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹²*Ibid.*, pp. 53, 30.

¹³ Cornwall, R., *Visible and Apostolic: The Constitution of the Church in High Anglican Church and Non-juror Thought*. In Newark, Delaware, University of Delaware Press, 1993, p.11.

¹⁴ Locke, J., *Op.Cit.*, pp. 33-34.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 28, 31, 39.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁹ Locke, J., *Op.cit.*, p. 24.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 53.

they regarded it as radical in the sense that, it did not only insist on the free participation of the individual in worship, but was equally viewed as an intention to break the collective links enjoyed by people of the same family as well as towards that of the local parish. The quick response to this Anglican complains is the fact that, the act of attempting or deciding to belong to a particular church is not a collective obligation but an individual decision to take.

The coercion of belief by either the government or certain categories of people exercising some degree of power is therefore totally wrong and unreasonable as it will yield no fruits. Hence, the ministry of the church as a prescription of divine authorization was equally deemed as a crucial issue of importance to the theory of toleration. This issue of church and divine authorization is evident from the evocation of aspects like public worship, persecution, and also the definition of the concept of orthodoxy. Furthermore, another evidence of the crucial nature of this church ministry is the fact that, Locke himself never abandoned the church of England and also admired the various levels or ranks that characterized the English church. In establishing the identity of the traditional church, Locke did not base his knowledge on the group knowledge of that time but was more focused on the features of a true church.

For these reasons seen, the coinage “ministry” as used in the English church during the seventeenth and eighteenth century England, was referred to as “divine authorization”. To further justify this usage of the above expression, Robert Cornwall writes: “Ministry was not only an earthly system it was also a reflection of the heavenly order”.¹⁷ In this sense, the idea of ministry was actually characterized by hierarchy, ordination and limitation to particular and special persons. Even the clerics were on their part deriving their authority from succession. On the contrary, Locke develops a different claim to the one advanced by Cornwall in that, for Locke, every church possess an equal authority just as the other existing churches. He remarks in relation to this equality in terms of authority by stating that, “a bishop, or Presbyter, with Ruling Authority” through a system of apostolic succession is not the required prerequisite for a true church.¹⁸

This means that, Christ did not issue any idea concerning apostolic succession as a commandment to be practiced by any true church. Again, Christ instead placed a true church in his presence and in his name following what is written in the *Holy Bible*, precisely in Matthew 18:20.¹⁹ From a clear implication of this biblical quotation, since Christ did not in any way prescribe the succession of apostles, Locke was therefore confident in concluding that a true church is determined by the scripture of Christ according to the Bible. For this reason, Locke propounds a system of “Ecclesiastical Liberty” which goes hand in glove with the saving of a person’s soul determined by the impression one has concerning the idea of a true church.²⁰

The church in this aforementioned context of using power or the sword or persuasive means to push individuals to error

is going out of the bounds meant for the mission of churches. In this light, what arms are the churches expected to bear? The answer Locke advances to this issue of what is actually expected from the church’s business are: “Exhortations, Admonitions and Advices”, which he regards as the “last and utmost Force of Ecclesiastical Authority of the church”.²¹ The authority of the church is however based in peace and enforcement of morality and not geared towards the realization or manifestation of political power. Again, according to Locke, even the law or the government never gave any church the right to the imposition of any type of religious worship on any individual who refused taking part in the God worship of a particular church.²² This is so because, no government as Locke believes, will grant to any church such a right to manifest that authority. Thus, the church’s right to use such powers is totally illegitimate and unacceptable no matter the given situation and reasons behind that.

Although the act of choosing a church is termed as ecclesiastical liberty, it contains liberal and radical aspects. But the added advantage brought by this conception is the fact that it is reserved for every human being and equally opposed to the idea of “ecclesiastical authority”. By insisting on the universalization of his idea of ecclesiastical liberty especially within the context of the government of England and the church of England, Locke was indirectly passing the message that, ecclesiastical liberty constitutes a necessary ingredient for the identification of a true church. This means that Locke’s own version of a true church is the one which relies in the freedom of the individual and not the one based on an authority or depended on tradition. So, even a person’s freedom as an individual contributes in rendering a true church the way it should be. If there exists ecclesiastical laws, then there should be precautions in their promulgation because, those laws may sometimes be geared towards the foundation and justifiability of persecution. For this reason, Locke advises that such authority or laws should rather be directed towards church affairs, precisely, towards the worshipping of God publicly.²³ This is why the ecclesiastical laws must be preoccupied by God worship solely, and not on properties or the society. Nonetheless, the only case whereby the adopted of any form of ecclesiastical laws can become acceptable as civil laws is the case of the commonwealth system of the Jews which is characterized by absolute theocracy.

Here, as civil laws are required for the government, so are the ecclesiastical laws directed to God worship. Furthermore, Locke equally frowns at the manner in which most of the church ministers manipulated or intended to modify the laws established by the monarchy. For instance, for the case of the clergy, he declared that they “easily and smoothly” intended to transform their “Decrees, their articles of faith, form of worship and even form of worship” as evident with the kings such as Edward VI, Henry VIII, including queens such as Queen Elizabeth and Mary.²⁴ The fact that some these aforementioned kings and queens interfere in the issues concerning worship, faith and even

²¹ In this chapter and verse of the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, it is written: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them”.

²² Locke, J., p. 28.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

²⁴ Locke, J., *Op.Cit.*, p. 31.

¹⁷ Locke, J., *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁸ Cornwall, R., *Op.Cit.*, p. 105.

¹⁹ Locke, J., *Op.cit.*, pp. 97, 98.

²⁰ Locke, J., *Ibid.*, p. 29.

decrees is a clear indication that they do not follow what their conscience tells them to do and also their judgments.²⁵ However, since the behaviors of the clergies are usually questionable, especially in the category of their morality as individuals, it consequently presented more problems in relation to the church. This is the extent to which Locke, regarded as a “Liberal Latitudinarian” stands in support of the other Latitudinarians of the seventeenth century due to their concern and contributions towards the promotion of ethics, practical and moral behavior, as well as the facilitation of theology with emphasis on morality.

III. The Business of Civil Authorities

The main concern of the state governed by the civil magistrate as far as the issue at stake is concerned, is to concentrate on those who violate the laws in one way or the other, and also for punishment to be meted on those who violate others rights. For the afore mentioned purposes, therefore, any civil magistrate who does not comply and appeal to the duties cited above, does not merit such a position and is thereby considered as a violator. The various roles to be exercised equally include the prevention of the misuse of power by any of the authorities, be it the religious or the civil. First of all, which the magistrate is supposed to secure the people as well as their possessions by executing equal laws.²⁶ That means in essence that, their first role is to protect the peoples properties and also to protect them through the law. It is worth noting that, the exercise of power by the civil magistrate is only acceptable or considered legal if and only if it does not reach the domain of faith, souls, including other forms of religious worship. The next role is to administer punishment to those who violate the laws as well as the human rights of others. Even though punishment was to be meted on the violators of the above, Locke was careful enough in prescribing the form of punishment to be implemented by the authority in place, though, the degree of such a punishment is limited. In relation to this, the response is that, those who deserve to be punished include those who disturb public peace, those who violate other people’s rights, those who harm their neighbors and the commonwealth.²⁷ Although those who violate either the laws or the rights of others are always experiencing the fear of penalties and punishment to be levied upon them, moral evil, characterized by lying, stealing, greed, sins and even idol worshipping is inherent in human nature and therefore cannot be completely eradicated by the establishment of punishment.²⁸ In addition to the incapability of punishment to resolve the problem of those who violate any of the laws, punishment is equally powerless in producing various belief systems especially in determining the true religion, too, it is incapable of changing

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 30.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 44.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p.38.

²⁸The Latitudinarians such as John Tillotson, Benjamin Whichcote, John Wilkins, greatly influence Locke’s epistemology as well as his idea of the church due to Locke’s intimate relationship with them from the 1650s to the 1680s. In line with the Latitudinarians, Locke underscored the role reason plays and the prophetic office of Christ in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, including *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. For a fuller discussion on that, see John Marshall, “John Locke and Latitudinarianism”. In *Philosophy, Science, and Religion in England, 1640-1700*, R. Kroll ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 273-275; Maurice Cranston, *John Locke: A Biography*, New York, Macmillan Company, 1957, pp. 124-128.

the minds of individuals to engage in one religion or the other, or to abandon their religion to profess another simply because they were punished before to do it. Lastly, no matter the form of punishment adopted, it cannot ensure the salvation of individual souls.²⁹ In addition to the first two examined duties of the civil magistrate, he is also supposed to carry weapons as a means to protect the liberty, properties, life, not leaving out the reason that it is his duty to punish those who go against the laws and equally abuse the human rights of other people.³⁰

IV. The conception and form of Punishment as a Manifestation of Political Power

In relation to what form of punishment to be executed by the civil magistrate and for what category of people, Locke was very careful in determining that, since the use of power and the adoption of penalties are very necessary, he advised that such use of force, especially armed force must be strictly restricted by the law and under the dictates of the civil jurisdiction. After the examination of the role of the use of punishment by the civil magistrate and the domains concerned, it is therefore evident that, such a use of penalties especially on the issues related to the mind of the individual as well as in religious affairs, is not acceptable to be considered as part of the duty of the civil magistrate.³¹ As a means to enforce the relationship between the church and the state, the most effective means for this to be realized is by limiting the power existing within the church and that of the state. The efficiency of this method is seen when Locke differentiated between the authorities, including the forces of the state and church, as well as their various rights, as a strategy to regulate the use of power by both parties. Here, Locke insisted that all the outward power to be manifested should be done by the civil magistrate, in accordance with the laws.³²

Political power is referred to as, “a Right of making Laws with Penalties of Death and consequently all less Penalties”.³³ This theory of punishment is thus central to the view of politics and part of what is considered innovative in Locke’s political philosophy. According to this idea, punishment ends up to be a “very strange doctrine” because, it ran against the assumption that, only political sovereigns could punish. Punishment requires that, there should be a law and since the state of nature has the law of nature to govern it, it is permissible to describe one individual as “punishing” another in that state. Locke’s rationale here is that, since the fundamental law of nature is that mankind is preserved and since that law would “be in vain” with no human power to enforce it, it must therefore be legitimate for individuals to punish each other even before government exists. It is in arguing this, that the negative form of punishment is evoked. The concept of punishment made no sense apart from an established positive legal structure. Again, the idea of retribution and of punishing only for reparation and restraint fall under such a category. A survey of other seventeenth century natural rights justification for punishment, however, indicates that, it was common to use

²⁹ Spellman, W.M., *The Latitudinarians and the Church of England, 1660-1700*. Athens and London, The University of Georgia Press, 1993, pp. 7-9.

³⁰ Locke, J., *Op.cit.*, p. 9.

³¹ Locke, J., *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³²*Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 27.

words like “retributive,” in theories that reject what we may call today retributive punishment.

Even though the civil magistrate has power, it is simply the type of power that can only be manifested under the dictates and prescriptions of the laws in place. The value of law is that it is an instrument used to get rid of “fraud and violence” that are manifested by some people in the society.³⁴ The law is therefore meant to get rid of such social ills that affect the community negatively. That notwithstanding, the law is not simply meant to dispose of those who commit the afore mentioned crimes, but it equally serves as a necessary government instrument which can better be implemented by the various magistrates as an effective strategy, to preserve the public good, liberty, life, property, as well as to maintain peace. That explains why political power is geared towards the outward world and charged with the responsibility to cater for such matters.

Given that the government does not need to handle issues connected to religion or beliefs of the people, for the reason that, such powers to intervene in affairs of faith are not prescribed by the laws under him, coupled with the impression that nobody imposes his power on the government or laws, it is therefore normal that coercion be regarded as an abuse of power and also as unlawful, given the circumstances stated. Similar to the “don’ts” in relation to the abuse of power in the government *vis-à-vis* the individual, Locke emphasized that even the church too, does not have the power of sword “to convince men’s minds of error” as a means of educating people about the truth in the meaning as determined by the state.³⁵ The reasons why the government cannot and should not in any way enforce the worship of God are that, first, the church is regarded as “a free society”, that is, the place where human freedom resides. Secondly, the value of worship is connected to the inward judgments and the conscience of the individual, which all make worship justifiable. Hence, the civil magistrate is incapable of coercing any type of religious practice in any given church.

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, the crux of the matter in this paper lies in critically examining the theological and political origins, role and aspirations of a true church, ecclesiastic authorities, including the nature, business, and finality of the state. The cares of a church involve the salvation of individual souls which is referred to as internal, inward or private, while insisting on public God worship as he deems necessary to please God. The state on her part, is charged with the responsibility of ensuring, protecting, and procuring the life, liberty, and property of the citizens within her jurisdiction. This means that, it manifests externally, outwardly and publicly, since her business is limited to the things of this earth. In order for these duties and goals of both organs to be realizable, some advices are prescribed through four different levels. At the first level, there are Locke’s theological foundations. Second, there is also the general principle prescribing that our political principles should all be ones that we would want others who are fallible and partial like ourselves to be able to interpret and also apply them accordingly every time need arises. Third, the specific

principle being that, the magistrate should not tolerate those beliefs that would be incompatible, with the possibility of establishing a civil society if widely held.³⁶ At the fourth level, Locke argued against the toleration of Catholicism and atheism.³⁷

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³⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 30,31, 35.

³⁷Tuckness, A., “Rethinking the Intolerant Locke”. *American Journal of Political Science*, no. 46, vol. 2, April, 2002, pp. 295-296.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 26.

³⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 34,35, 39, 41.