

Religious justification for political acts



**ASSIGN
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While Locke first appeals to his readers' passions to justify a separation between church and state, these arguments are weak; the true, more covert argument Locke makes for not allowing the magistrate to enforce religion is that having one uniform religion is not as good for the politics of society, nor is religion superior to the politics of ourselves, or our reasoning. Throughout Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, he (like Socrates) often says one thing but means the opposite. So for example while Locke claims to be a Christian and support the separation between church and state because of religious reasons (the idea that no religion can truly be imposed on anyone as religion is an internal commitment), he also criticizes Christianity and gives examples in which politics are held to be more important than religion. Although he is subtle in how he shows them, understanding Locke's priorities in which politics and one's own reasoning are more important than religion is essential to understanding why he truly believes the magistrate cannot impose a religion on its people. It's not a religious justification, it's a political one well-disguised by appeals to religious passion that on the surface appear valid, but when more closely examined give way to his real reasoning behind the idea of separation between church and state.

Locke starts off with a very simple idea. He says that "the care of souls cannot belong to the civil magistrate, because his power consists only in outward force; but true and saving religion consists in the inward persuasion of the mind, without which nothing can be acceptable to God" (7). This is Locke's appeal to people's passions, yet it is a weak one when this simple question is raised: can religion really not be influenced by external forces? It is easy to imagine that it can be. Personally, most of us got our religion from

our parents' beliefs. Historically, European settlers made almost the entire continent of central/south America adopt Christianity. Hypothetically, if a new ruler took over and imposed a religion on his people, sure maybe they might believe externally and not internally, but would their kids be the same way? What about their kids? Eventually, this magistrate would persuade people of their religion. Having proved that his first argument is invalid and a mere appeal to the simple reader's passions, what then is the real reason why Locke believes that the magistrate can not establish religion through his political power?

Practically, believing in many different religions is safer for society. In terms of the safety of the government and in the laws, Locke says that "[the churches] will watch one another, that nothing may be innovated or changed in the form of the government, because they can hope for nothing better than what they already enjoy—that is, an equal condition with their fellow-subjects under a just and moderate government" (38-39). In other words, having multiple churches provides a check on each so that they do not change the government wrongly or do anything unjust. If there were only one church then it would simply operate in its own self-interest, regardless of if what it is doing is just or not. In terms of conflicts outside of society, allowing the magistrate to choose the religion for his people creates a dangerous precedent. If each magistrate believes his religion is the correct one, then he will want to impose it on other kingdoms as well through war, both as part of his duty to his beliefs as well as to "save" others. Locke notes that "no peace and security, no, not so much as common friendship, can ever be established or preserved amongst men so long as this opinion

prevails, that dominion is founded in grace and that religion is to be propagated by force of arms" (15). If each magistrate thinks they have the true church, then trying to spread it to others will result in constant warfare (as history has shown). The only way to stop these conflicts can be the toleration of all religions. As such, the magistrate can not enforce a statewide church. In making these arguments, Locke's focus more on the practical effects of tolerating all churches (such as staying out of war and controlling government tyranny) rather than the spiritual benefits to doing so show that he does not want a statewide religion not because he has a dedication to any religion, but rather because of the more positive political implications that would follow.

Locke proposes another political justification when asked if a person should obey the "conscience of a private person" (33), in other words oneself, over the magistrate when the magistrate enacts a law that one's conscience disagrees with. He very specifically chooses his wording, first saying that "But if, perhaps, it do so fall out [of the public good], I say, that such a private person is to abstain from the action that he judges unlawful," (33). He continues on to justify this by saying that "the private judgement of any person concerning a law enacted in political matters, for the public good, does not take away the obligation of that law" (33). Locke has cleverly switched from saying one should obey one's conscience to the idea that one should obey one's private judgement. This is important because our conscience is not really us. We believe it to come from a higher sense of morality, we believe it to come from God. Therefore to ask whether one should follow conscience or the magistrate is to ask what is more important,

religion or state? It appears here that Locke holds religion to be more important because he answers with consciousness, yet he qualifies this answer by changing “consciousness” to “private judgement”, which is our own reasoning, not God’s. If our own reasoning is what really rules us (and not our consciousness, or religion, or the state), then Locke is saying that our own personal politics are more important than religion. Yet again, Locke has said one thing and meant the opposite. So how does this relate to the magistrate not being able to impose religion on a society? Having shown that Locke prioritizes man’s reasoning to be most important, it does not make sense that one religion should be thrust upon us. We can make our own judgements about what is right for us. If our own reasoning is the supreme judge, then we should have the power to choose our own religion.

An objection to this argument may be that this cannot be said, as I have previously claimed that Locke’s argument that religion can only be internal is invalid. This is a weak objection as his original argument is that external forces can’t influence our religious beliefs. I say that is false, but that is not to say however that external forces shouldn’t impose beliefs, because our own beliefs should be most important. There is room for both the idea that external forces can influence us, and the idea that our own judgement is still most important. Furthermore, one may reasonably ask if Locke can really believe in Christianity if he considers reasoning (or in other words himself) to be above God, and this is a reasonable argument, but there is not ample space in the remainder of this short paper to discuss all of Locke’s own beliefs (or lack thereof.) The important idea is simply that he may answer in a politically salient manner in which he suggests religious belief is supreme,

but Locke really holds our own judgements to be superior to the church, and as such we should be the ones allowed to choose our religion, not the other way around.

Locke lived in a time where even this letter in all its subtleties was considered radical. He could not blatantly state that politics and the public good were superior to the church and that that is why the magistrate could not enforce a religion. Rather, he had to shroud this argument in other, weaker ones that appealed to religious people's passions and made him appear as if he was supporting the church in his cause. This was not the case, as Locke argues first for the political benefits of a tolerant society that gets involved in less conflict and checks the power of both the church and the government. He then goes on to give the more personal answer that each person's reasoning and politics are more important and above that of religion (although he of course does not overtly say this), implying that we should be able to choose our church rather than having it chosen for us by a magistrate. For Locke, the separation between church and state is necessary because it is good politics and gives us the choice we deserve, not because he is dedicated to the religious inclinations of others.