International Journal of Education and Social Science; Vol. 6 No. 5; May 2019
ISSN 2410-5171 (Online), 2415-1246 (Print)
Published by Research Institute for Progression of Knowledge

John Locke, Muslims, Religious Freedom and the Role of the State

Clinton Bennett, PhD.
SUNY New Paltz
1 Hawk Dr, New Paltz, NY 12561, USA

Introduction: John Locke and his Contemporary Relevance

This paper discusses the development of John Locke's defence of religious freedom throughout his life focusing on references to Muslims. His four *Letters on Toleration* are his best known works on religious freedom. However, earlier writings provide insights into the way his thinking evolved, and merit discussion here. These are now part of the published record of Locke's contribution to debate about toleration, and they almost all contain references to Turks and to aspects of Islamic belief and practice. In the context of contemporary debate surrounding religious minorities and civil liberty in the West, as a major English philosopher, Locke's contribution on this topic is still relevant to discussion about the role of religion in society especially in the light of the use of anti-Muslim rhetoric by some politicians in the USA who oppose the rights of Muslims to serve in Congress as "a threat to the values and beliefs of the United States) (Thomas, *Scapegoating*, pp. 115-116).

Locke's four *Letters concerning Toleration*, edited by Thomas Hollis (d. 1774), with the assistance of Richard Baron (d. 1768), and published in 1765, gather all four of John Locke's letters together in one volume. It was widely distributed in Europe and North America. Locke wrote the first of these, *Epistola de tolerantia*, in the Netherlands in late 1685 and gave a manuscript to his friend Philipp van Limborch (d. 1712), who printed and published the 96-page text at Gouda in late April to early May 1689 (ed. Hollis, *Letters concerning toleration*, pp. 3-28). Limborch wrote to Locke on 6 May to inform him that the work was in print and he was sending him copies. Shortly after this, William Popple (d. 1708), a Unitarian who would become secretary of the Board of Trade in 1696 on which Locke served 1689 to 1700, began to translate it into English. This version, licensed on 3 October 1689, was published in November 1689 or early 1690.

In response to criticism mainly from Jonas Proust (d. 1710), chaplain at All Souls College, Oxford, in May 1690 Locke wrote a 69-page second letter, this time signed Philanthropes (ed. Hollis, *Letters concerning toleration*, pp. 69-116). Debate continued between Proust and Locke, resulting in the lengthy third letter of 1692 (pp. 119-379), and of the fourth in 1704. Left incomplete, this remained unpublished until it was included in *Posthumous works of Mr. John Locke*, 1706, pp. 233-77 (ed. Hollis, *Letters concerning toleration*, pp. 383-99). Pagination below refers to the Hollis edition. Before analyzing Locke's *Letters* this paper examines references to Muslims in his earlier writing.

Locke's Early View of Religious Freedom

In 1660-1, Locke wrote an English tract, followed by a Latin tract, in response to Edward Bagshaw's *The great question concerning things indifferent in religious worship* (1660). These contain his earliest reference to Islam. They remained in manuscript form until 1961, when Philip Abrams published them as *Two Tracts on Government*. The English tract, which has no title, begins, *Question: whether the Civil Magistrate may lawfully impose and determine the use of indifferent things in Religious Worship*, while the Latin tract is called *An Magistratus Civilis possit res adiaphoras in divini cultus rites asciscere, easque populo imponere? Afirmatur* ('Whether the Civil Magistrate may incorporate indifferent things into the ceremonies of divine worship and impose them on the people. Confirmed'). Between these tracts and the *First Letter* Locke's ideas about religious toleration changed from scepticism about its practicability, through almost complete opposition, to advocacy. His thinking developed in part due to different circumstances, various influences on his thought and his own experience in Cleves and in the Netherlands. His second discussion of toleration, in which he shifts from his earlier opposition, was the *Essay on Toleration* written in 1667 and revised several times.

His references to Islam throughout these works (and elsewhere) demonstrate that he had a working but sometimes inaccurate knowledge of the religion, and some appreciation for the Ottoman Empire's policy towards non-Muslims.

Edward Bagshaw (d. 1671), a contemporary of Locke's at Oxford, who became Dean of Christ Church in 1660, championed absolute religious freedom, arguing that magistrates cannot interfere, and do not have the authority to interfere, in matters of conscience. Bagshaw states, on his second page, that all Protestants agree the magistrate 'cannot force his religion upon any, but is to leave even those Poor Creatures the Jews and Mahumetans to their unbelief … rather than by fines and imprisonment to torture them out of it.' His argument is that 'things indifferent' (*adiaphora*) that cannot be found in scripture are outside the scope of the law. He includes in this wearing surplices, kneeling at the sacrament, and using set forms of prayer. If Jews and Muslims cannot be forced to worship in a specific manner or be prevented from following their own customs, how less just would it be if Christians were denied their liberty in serving God as their consciences dictated (p. 3). Despite having expressed some sympathy for Stubbe's plea for religious freedom in *Essay in Defence of a Good Old Cause* (1659) (Locke' letter to Stubbe, Wootton pp. 137-139) Locke totally opposes Bagshaw's argument.

Locke's first reference to Islam occurs on p. 130 of the Abrams edition, in the context of his defence of the magistrate's authority to regulate religious worship. He argues that if the 'heathen … tyrant' Nero had ordered Christians to 'wear white or black' or to assemble 'in this or that place', it would have been lawful, just as if a Christian magistrate were to order Muslims to worship at a particular time or in particular dress 'if his Alcoran had left them undetermined'. In Locke's opinion, the magistrate must 'have an *absolute* and *arbitrary* power over all the indifferent actions of his people', even if that power derives from the people's consent (pp. 122-3). Locke's concern is for '*order* and *decency*' in worship, which he says God leaves to the 'discretion of those who are entrusted with the care of society' to regulate. His fear is that if magistrates were not able to regulate in religious matters, people would make all sorts of wild claims that bizarre acts were religious and exempt from civil regulation (see Marshall, *Resistance*, p. 15). Yet he appears to accept that different societies will have different conventions about what is civil or beautiful, for 'our deformity is others' beauty, our rudeness others' civility', and 'eastern and turbaned nations' would find it uncouth 'to be bare in the public worship of God' just as we would find it uncouth to be 'covered' (p. 146; repeated in the second tract, p. 218). At this state Locke was sceptical that religious freedom was practical because he doubted that everyone would be prepared to actually tolerate others' religious beliefs and practices without trying to impose their own.

According to Locke, then, the magistrate's authority includes the right to determine aspects of Muslim worship. However, addressing Bagshaw's specific point about 'Jews and Mahomedans', he says that, in the event of a public calamity, no Christian magistrate should go so far as to order Muslims to go to their mosques and intercede with Muḥammad 'for a blessing', while he should order Christians to 'send up their prayers to God' in their churches (pp. 168-9). The magistrate has the authority to regulate Muslim worship and to order such prayer, but he should refrain from exercising this because doing so implies that he acknowledges 'something good and right in it', whereas in fact Islam is 'false' (p. 168). Incidentally, here Locke appears to have some knowledge of an incident in Turkey in 1661, when Christians were asked to pray during a plague (see P. Rycaut, *The History of the Turkish Empire*, London, p. 82, although this is too late to be Locke's source).

The Evolution of Locke's Thinking on Religious Freedom

In the course of 1667 or early 1668 Locke wrote his *Essay on Toleration,* possibly as a briefing paper for King Charles II or for Lord Ashley, his patron,who supported a bill in favour of a policy of comprehension for the Church of England to replace the Act of Uniformity. Comprehension would relax many regulations about items of subsidiary significance, allowing for ritual flexibility so that dissenters could be included in the established church. By 1667, Locke's thinking on religious liberty had evolved so that now he argued against the magistrate possessing authority over subsidiary items, which he also extended beyond ritual to dogma. Dogmas based on speculation, such as the Trinity, rather than on the explicit mandate of scripture were matters of private conscience, and lay outside the magistrate's remit. Locke now limited the magistrate's power to preserving the peace, which included preventing violence and theft, but matters of morality as such were outside his remit, as was any attempt to somehow oversee people's spiritual condition and style of worship. Locke's visit to Cleves in 1665 partly influenced this rethinking, but he was by then also surrounded by people who supported toleration, including Ashley and Boyle.

In Cleves, he witnessed a variety of denomination co-existing without friction.By this time, he may also have read Roger Williams' *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution* (1644), which included Jews, Muslims and even 'anti-Christians' in its plea for religious toleration by a civil society (see *Bloudy Tenent*, London, 1848, pp. 64-5). It was no accident that Newport in Williams' Rhode Island attracted a large Jewish community who built North America's first synagogue.

Locke appears to have thought there was a strong case for retaining an established church by making it inclusive of diversity. He did not use the word 'comprehension' - favoured by Latitudinarians and not widely used until after 1668 - in his *Essay*, but the essay supports this option rather than toleration because he still appears to prefer the established church to include as many views and styles of worship as possible. Catholics, though, were to be denied toleration because they owed allegiance to a foreign power. At Oxford, Locke had thought of the state as a ship sailing under one commander, not as a flotilla of ships that might ply different courses. He had still not completely abandoned this model, which would include crew members worshipping together and not in separate conventicles. The few, though, who could not in conscience join the state church ought to be free to worship as they wished, provided they did not subvert law and order.

In the *Essay*, Locke repeats his earlier support for Muslims and Jews enjoying freedom of worship, asserting that he has a right to worship on Friday with Muslims or on Saturday with Jews or on Sunday with Christians ‘with or without form’ (p. 109). Later, he states that Muslims ‘deserve all civil freedoms’. A Christian magistrate had no authority to legislate for Muslim worship any more than for Christian worship, arguing that even if he had any such authority it could only be exercised ‘within that church’, which ‘must be understood to be only a voluntary society’ of which ‘he himself is a member’. That authority would have to be recognized by other members and exercised at ‘their pleasure’ (p. 135). In the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina (1689) (Goldie, *Toleration*, pp. 146–48), Locke defined a church as consisting of at least seven people who “agree” on doctrine and choose a name to distinguish their church from others. Persecuting people for their religious beliefs, compelling belief or uniformity, Locke wrote, does not work. Even those with a weak or uninformed faith become zealous and heroic under force; here, he cites Christian captives in Turkey who had little or no knowledge of Christianity yet ‘endured all manners of miseries rather than part with their religion’ (p. 126). An enforced uniformity would end up making ‘chains’ for ‘all those to whom they will allow no liberty’ (pp. 126-7). In a fragment from 1679 entitled ‘Comformitas’, Locke recounts a story about Protestants in Constantinople from various churches ‘who all received communion from the embassy chaplain some kneeling, some standing according to their own preference according to the several fashions of their churches or persuasions’ (‘Latitude’, in Goldie, *Toleration*, p. 173). Locke’s source was the Church of England chaplain in Constantinople, John Covel (1638–1722).

Locke had now shifted from his earlier patriarchal view of government authority towards social contract theory. This becomes more explicit in his *Treatises on Government*. In the *First Treatise* (written in the early 1680s) he uses the ship of state metaphor to explain when citizens could justifiably rebel against the government (*Two Treatises*, London, 1821, p. 369). Rebellion is justified when the government inclines towards tyranny or fails to protect the people, just as on a ship whose captain is recklessly heading towards Barbary pirates who would enslave the crew and passengers. The “church” as a “free and voluntary society” and every “church is orthodox to itself” (*Letters*, p.41). How Turks laughed when they saw ‘what inhuman cruelty Christians …. rage against Christians’ (*Letters*, p. 41).

Locke’s Four Letters

This shift towards the social contract concept continues in Locke's *Letters Concerning Toleration* (1689-1704) where he argues for limited general toleration – excluding Catholics and atheists (*Letters*, p. 59) although some question whether he did exclude the former - rather than for an inclusive, comprehensive Church of England. Locke’s experience of religiously tolerant Cleves (where he visited different Christian churches) was now supplemented by what he saw in Amsterdam and elsewhere during his exile there (1683-1689). The state’s authority is limited to matters of security, protecting life and property (*Letters*, p. 35). In Holland, Jews and Muslims were also visibly present, and Muslims were routinely depicted in Dutch art from this period as ‘generic figures’ representing ‘Amsterdam’s commercial ties to the Islamic world’, and played a part in the image of Dutch religious toleration that was actually ‘out of proportion to their presence’ (Kaplan, *Muslims in the Dutch Golden Age*, pp. 9-10, 26). Locke was also again surrounded by strong supporters of religious liberty, including Pierre Bayle, Limborch and William Penn. Penn asked Locke to comment on his *Frame* and *Laws* for Pennsylvania, in which Law 35 extended religious freedom to all who believed in one God.

Locke's response was uncomplimentary, but the two men corresponded regularly and influenced each other's ideas. These experiences and relationships only strengthened Locke's commitment to the cause of religious freedom.

The immediate catalyst behind the *First Letter on Toleration* was the revocation in France of the Edict of Nantes in October 1685, which led to many French Protestants having to seek refuge in Holland. The most important passage in the *First Letter* concerning Muslims reads, 'If solemn assemblies, observations of festivals, public worship be permitted to any sort of professors; all these things ought to be permitted to the Presbyterians, Independents, Anabaptists, Armenians, Quakers, and others, with the same liberty … neither *Pagan*, nor *Mahumetan*, nor *Jew* ought to be excluded from the civil rights of the commonwealth', (p. 63; see the *Third Letter*, p, 175). The first reference to Islam occurs earlier where Locke refers to the manner in which Muslims living in England would be obliged to blindly obey the commandment of the Mufti of Constantinople, who was himself 'obedient to the Ottoman emperor', raising questions about their loyalty to the English state. He implies that, provided they renounced loyalty to the sultan while in England, they were entitled to full civil rights (p. 60, see Matar, 'Turbanned nations', pp. 75-6; see also Ward, *John Locke and modern life*, 2010, p. 256).

Locke's knowledge of Islamic doctrine was derived from an 'unfinished treatise … in the form of a disputation between a Jewish Rabbi … and the Prophet'. This had been translated by his friend John Greaves (d. 1652), and was found among his papers (Matar, 'Turbanned nations', p. 70). In addition to owning a French translation of the Qur'an, Locke possessed copies of Paul Rycaut's *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire* (1677, in French) and Humphrey Prideaux's *The True Nature of Imposture* (1697). According to Russell, he had read *Philosophus Autodidactus* (1671), Edward Pococke the Younger's Latin translation of Ibn Ṭufayl's *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqẓān* or a summary of this work *(*See Russel, *Arabick interest*, pp. 225-226). Locke had tutored Pococke and was a student of Edward Pococke, Sr, Oxfrod's first Laudian Professor of Arabic. *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqẓān* is believed to have inspired Locke's concept of the *tabula rasa*.

Significance of Locke's Legacy on Religious Freedom

While the presence of Muslims in England, unlike that of Jews, was hardly discussed or seen as contentious in the late 17th century, Locke's outlook was such that he could not discuss religion without acknowledging Islam as a major religious tradition that should be included in discourse about religious rights. In acknowledging the toleration towards non-Muslims that existed in the Ottoman Empire, he contrasted this with the intolerance of his own society. He supported the right of Muslims to become citizens before it was even a topic of conversation, and even though he referred to Islam as 'false' and was fully aware of anti-Muslim bigotry in England at the time, he saw 'Muslims as sincere seekers of God' (Matar, 'Turbanned nations', p. 74). For that matter, while he was equally aware that many regarded the Ottoman Empire as a military threat and was concerned with Barbary piracy hindering trade and travel, he was also aware of increased commercial and diplomatic relations with the Barbary states, and may very well have wanted to encourage this as an alternative way of relating to the Islamic world. Jonathan Edwards saw so much affinity between Locke's philosophy and Islam that he accused him of copying his ideas from the 'Mahometan Bible', having 'the faith of a Turk' and 'confounding Turkey with Christendom' (*Socinianism Unmask'd*, 1696, p.54)

Locke was more than a theoretical thinker, being involved in policy-making at the Board of Trade, and holding the view that trade between nations was likely to prevent war, because for him humans in the state if nature were instinctively peaceful. Referring to Muslims rather than Islam, he discussed them in the context of civil rights not theology. He saw no reason why Muslims in England would not be as 'politically submissive' and 'law-abiding' as Christians were in the Ottoman Empire where they enjoyed religious toleration (Matar, 'Turbanned nations', p. 71). He realised that he could not argue in favour of religious belief as outside the magistrate's remit without including Muslims, Jews and others in his argument. When he did speak about limits to religious freedom, this was due to concern about anti-social behaviour and issues about national loyalty unrelated to the specifics of religious belief. While Matar says that Locke did not warm theologically to Islam, he did concede to it some 'moral legitimacy' ('Turbanned nations', p. 75). Locke's statement that one group's civility and beauty are rude and ugly to others suggests that truth is culturally relative, which is generally taken to be his position. This for him removes any grounds for judging Islam to be false and Christianity true, especially given the dissatisfaction he felt with most of the forms of Christianity he encountered in England at the time.

Conclusion

Locke's references to Muslims as part of his argument for tolerance is evidence of increasing awareness in British society of the Islamic world, and of Muslims within Europe. They may follow a faith that was inferior or deficient, but they could not for the most part be dismissed as the demonic rivals to Christian society that they had generally been in former times. Rather, they had to be acknowledged as social beings with morals and customs of their own, and as such could not be ignored in the kind of general theories about society that Locke was developing. Locke's contribution to religious freedom as a civil right was more than theoretical. His writing was one of the inspirations behind the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. Locke's Secretary-ship of the Board of the Proprietors of Carolina (1668-1675) involved him directly in shaping the political structure of an English colony. In the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina (1689) (Goldie, *Toleration*, pp. 146–48) he made provision for limited religious freedom as a civil right. The Church of England was the official religion but "Jews, heathers and other dissenters" were granted the right to practice their faith. However, freemen had to believe in God. As an advisor to senior politicians in England, too, Locke's advice may have contributed to the passing of the 1689 Act of Toleration, which gave none Anglicans but not Catholics and Unitarians freedom of worship and abandoned the concept of a "comprehensive" Church of England.

Publications

For a comprehensive list of publications of this work, see the John Locke Bibliography project based at Penn State University: https://openpublishing.psu.edu/locke/bib/ch0.html#wtoc.

Locke, John. *Epistola de tolerantia*, Gouda: apud Justum ab Hoeve, 1689

Locke ,John. *A Letter Concerning Toleration, Humbly Submitted, & c*, trans. W. Popple, London: Awnsham & Churchill, 1689

Locke, John. *A Second Letter Concerning Toleration*, London: Awnsham & Churchill 1690

Locke, John. *A third letter concerning toleration in defense of The argument of the letter concerning toleration, briefly consider'd and answer'd*, London: George West and Henry Clements, 1691

Locke, John. 'Part of a Fourth Letter Concerning Toleration', *Posthumous works of Mr. John Locke*, London: A & J Churchill, 1706, 233-77

Locke, John. *The Works of John Locke*, London; John Churchill & Sam Manship, 1714, vol. 2 (first letter, pp. 232-56; second letter, pp. 259-92; third letter, pp. 295-470) (for later editions see https://openpublishing.psu.edu/locke/bib/ch0m.html#Complete)

Locke, John. *The works of John Locke, Esq In three volumes. The sixth edition. To which is added, the life of the author; and a collection of several of his pieces published by Mr. Desmaizeaux*, London: D. Browne, C. Hitch and L. Hawes, J. Shuckburgh, A. Millar, J. Beecroft, John Rivington, James Rivington and J. Fletcher, J. Ward, R. Baldwin, J. Richardson, S. Crowder, P. Davey and B. Law, T. Longman, E. Dilly, R. Withy, T. Payne, and M. Cooper, 1759

Locke, John. *Letters Concerning Toleration*, ed. T. Hollis, London, 1765 (Latin and English text of the first letter, texts of the second, third and fourth letters)

Locke, John. 'An Essay on Toleration', in H.R.F. Bourne, *The life of John Locke*, 2 vols, London: King, 1876

Locke, Lock. *A letter concerning toleration*: Latin and English Texts, ed. M. Montuori, The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1963

Locke, John. *A letter concerning toleration and other writings*, ed. M. Goldie, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1997 (includes the *Essay on Toleration* and many of Locke's other toleration texts and fragments of texts)

Locke, John. *An essay concerning toleration, and other writings on law and politics, 1667-1683*, ed. J.R. Milton and P. Milton, Oxford,: Oxford University Press, 2006

Wootton, David. *John Locke, political writings*, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2003

Works Cited

For a comprehensive bibliography of studies of Locke on toleration, see *Toleration* at Penn State University https://openpublishing.psu.edu/locke/bib/ch6d.html.

Bird, Karen. M. 'The concession of toleration, Muslims and the British Enlightenment', *LIMINA: A Journal of Historical and Cultural Studies*22 (2017) 15-30.

Edwards, John. *Socinianism Unmask'd. A discourse shewing the unreasonableness of a late writer's opinion concerning the necessity of only one article of Christian faith; And of his other assertions in his late book, entituled, the Reasonableness of Christianity as Deliver'd in the Scriptures, and in his vindication of it. With a brief reply to another (professed) Socinian writer*. London: J. Robinson, 1696.

Kaplan, Benjamin J. *Muslims in the Dutch Golden Age: representations and realities of religious toleration*. Amsterdam: Amsterdams Centrum voor de studie van de Gouden Eeuw, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2007.

Marshall, John. *John Locke. Resistance, religion and responsibility*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994

Matar, Nabil.'John Locke and the "turbanned Nations"', *Journal of Islamic Studies* 2 (1991) 67-77

McLachlan, Herbert. *The Religious opinions of Milton, Locke, and Newton*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1941

Miller, Nicholas P. *The religious roots of the First Amendment. Dissenting Protestants and the separation of church and state*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012 (see ch. 2, 'The philosopher and the enthusiast. The collaboration of John Locke and William Penn', pp. 49-90).

Prideaux, Humphrey. *The true nature of imposture fully display'd in the life of Mahomet: with a discourse annex'd for the vindicating of Christianity from this charge, offered to the consideration of the deists of the present age*. London: Printed for William Rogers, 1698.

Russell, G.A. 'The impact of the Philosophus Autodidactus: Pocockes, John Locke, and the Society of Friends', in G.A. Russell (ed.), *The Arabick interest of the natural philosophers in seventeenth-century England*. Leiden: Brill, 1994, 224-65

Rycaut, Paul. *The history of the present state of the Ottoman Empire: Containing the maxims of the Turkish polity, the most material points of the Mahometan religion, their sects and heresies, their convents and religious votaries. Their military discipline, with an exact computation of their forces both by sea and land. Illustrated with divers pieces of sculpture representing the variety of habits amongst the Turks. In three books. By Sir Paul Ricaut, late consul of Smyrna and fellow of the Royal Society*. London: John Starkey, 1677.

Rycaut, Paul. *The History of the Turkish Empire from the year 1640, to the year 1677*. London: John Starkey, 1679.

Stubbe, Henry. *An essay in defence of the good old cause: Or A discourse concerning the rise and extent of the power of the Civil Magistrate in reference to spiritual affairs*. London: no publisher, 1659.

Thomas, Jeffrey. *Scapegoating Islam*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2015.

Waldron, Jeremy. *God, Locke, and equality. Christian foundations of John Locke's political thought*, Cambridge,: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Ward, Lee. *John Locke and modern life*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Williams, Roger, and John Cotton. 1644. *Bloudy tenent, of persecution, for cause of conscience, discussed, in a conference betweene truth and peace: VVho, in all tender affection, present to the high court of Parliament, (as the result of their discourse) these, (amongst other passages) of highest consideration*. No place, no publisher,1644.