



## **Pluralism and Toleration in Modern World: with a focus on John Locke's Argument of Religious Origins of Toleration**

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**Abstract:** Toleration is a contested concept as well as an unavoidable act of social life that is subject to disputes and challenges that changes and justifies over time. It closely involves socio-politico-philosophical but disputed concepts in modern society - including pluralism. Therefore, through the lenses of the practice of toleration, accept pluralism can be viewed a set of unescapable diversity challenges mainly in fields politics in contemporary more diversified society. Since toleration means to live and let live but it may also mean to look down upon and disapprove, there is a need to find ways to agree on those differences for which minority groups may require to find the appropriate forms of institutional accommodation. Using the influential work of John Locke as a starting point the paper further investigate the idea that the root of social conflict stems from competing beliefs systems, arguing that it is historically the ability of religion, particularly its distinct cult, to adjust their own comprehensive views to accord with a public conception of consensus. Although there exist considerable but more general debates in the literature in favor of religious toleration, John Locke views toleration from particular groups. So, in this paper, an attempt is made to see whether the limits that he sets to toleration are consistent with his case in favor of it. It is contended that there are two line of debate promoted in this question: the first being whether the argument is valid and consistent, to which here it is said that it is; the second line is that, whether Locke's emphasis on particular case for toleration is valid or adequate, which here it is rejected.

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**Keywords:** social order, pluralism, toleration, religion, socio-political coexistence.

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### **Introduction**

Toleration is a contested concept that is subject to disputes and challenges in human diversified world. It involves many socio-political concepts, particularly pluralism. In fact, toleration and pluralism are two inter-connected and complementary concepts and practices regarding the establishment of a stable social order. The contested area is mainly concerned to the fact that the forbearance of toleration, per se, is of normative and pragmatic value – as many minorities see it politically short-sighted solution for paving ways of social and political cohesion necessary for the formation of a macro social order. Hence, the limitations of tolerance need also to be acknowledged. Because, it involves power, the power of the majority to suppress the minority. And it also implies non-acceptance or non-respect. To tolerate implies living and letting live but it may also mean to look down upon and reject. In Rawls's term, in seeking a form of balance in a context of diversity, we need to discover ways or principles to agree on those cultural and religious differences for which minority groups may require these more advanced forms of acceptance and find the appropriate forms of institutional accommodation. Although, the objects and boundaries of toleration are historically changing, civil societies have come into conclusion that positions are not beyond contestation and solutions/consensuses are less costly.

Different scholars, from Protagoras (Plato 1992) to Michel de Montaigne (1973) to Max Weber (Gerth & Mills 1946), all have emphasized the existence of heterogeneity in practices, beliefs, and value systems, which may or may not turn into a philosophical position about the nature of values and our experience of them. Some thinkers admit to the existence of cultural pluralism and integrate it into a political arrangement and a philosophical theory about justice but abstain from asserting anything conclusive about the fundamentally pluralistic nature of cultural elements or their impact on social agency. The central debate in toleration is the existence of normality, not impartiality in heterogeneity. Rawls (1996) (see also Larmore 1996: 152–74 (Gerth & Mills 1946: 77–156, 323–62). So any attempt to explain definitions of pluralism and implicitly or explicitly entail an account of the roots of social

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conflict and a proper way of dealing with toleration in pluralism. This is partly owing to the fact that an overlapping consensus must go much deeper than this to achieve lasting social stability; parties must genuinely affirm the principle of political justice upon which social cooperation is founded, not out of coveting tolerance but out of sincere conviction derived from whatever beliefs and commitments each individual or group holds. Of course, it is unlikely that an overlapping consensus would emerge *sui generis* from a diverse society.

Using the influential work of John Locke as a starting point this paper investigate the idea that the historical root of toleration can stem from a particular religious cult, allowing highly conflicting or competing belief/value systems to compromise over time – tolerated one another, even as a *modus vivendi*. So, the central question requiring to be addressed is that whether Locke's 'intolerance' of certain groups in society is justified in accordance with his definition of toleration. This needs more concentration on the definition of toleration. We start to choose Horton's definition of toleration. According to him, the concept refers to "the deliberate choice not to prohibit, hinder or interfere with conduct of which one disapproves, where one has both the requisite power and knowledge" (1987: 295). In broad philosophical terms, this 'intolerance' can be viewed as unacceptable, owing to the fact that toleration is assumed to be an absolute term, whilst, in conjunction with Locke's whole political theory (resting on natural law and the rights of obligations within this), it seems that his conclusion in 'A Letter Concerning Toleration' obviously denies some groups the privilege of universal toleration is permissible. In this paper, an emphasis is placed on the conditions in which Locke was writing (and which inspired him to write) and the groups and practices that he withheld toleration to. Likewise, his justification of intolerance is derived from the same ideas which invoke toleration. The remaining question would be 'how acceptable is this reasoning?' To clarify the above points, the discussion is organized in four sections. The first section is concerned with the case for toleration. The second section outlines the limits. The third section deals with the fact that whether his case for toleration is consistent with the limits that he sets for toleration. The section four deals with concluding remarks on Locke's case for religious toleration and its implications for liberal theory.

### **Conceptual scope: pluralism and toleration as unavoidable features of modern world**

Toleration can be viewed as a rationally necessary outcome of heterogeneity/plurality. Yet the exact definition is open to debate, pluralism, in the context of a liberal democracy, can be broadly defined as a system in which people of diverse religions and belief systems can coexist peacefully with, more or less, equal opportunity to share in political power and social advantages (Byene 2011; Quinn 201). In the same way, toleration can be outlined as recognition of differences which is more adequate than current liberal views in order to face issues arising from contemporary pluralism. The liberal conception of toleration as freedom from government's interference in certain areas is appropriate if pluralism is conceived of as a plurality of conflicting conceptions of the good. By contrast, if pluralism is understood as the plurality of groups and cultures, asymmetrically situated in democratic society, then the issues underlying toleration are seen as the challenged claim of minorities for asserting their different identity in the public space. Public toleration of differences is thus regarded as a symbolic public gesture of inclusion of the different identities and their bearers into democratic citizenship on an equal footing as members of minority groups. This bear in mid Rawls' notion that public toleration is so founded on reason of justice (Schlosberg, 2006).

Although toleration in pluralized society needs some unanimity, an overlapping consensus must go much deeper than this to achieve lasting social stability. John Locke make an attempt to a genealogy of tolerance in modern liberal societies. There is little point in exhausting the details of Locke's background other than to say that during his most prolific time of writing, Europe including England was experiencing religious strife on a large scale. In England Locke was concerned with the crisis of the Reformation, whereby James II-a Catholic was in a position to accede the throne, ending a period of Protestant monarchy by Charles II-who Locke was keen to see restored. On the continent there was persecution and oppression, for instance, the repression of the Huguenots in France under Louis XIV. Religious tension was an international issue which needed to be addressed – not least for the fact that religion was, without a doubt, a more integral part of everyone's lives in the 17th century than it is now.

As Waldron (1991: 109) explains, Religious toleration was one of Locke's abiding preoccupations and one of the most contested political issues of the age.

The gestation of the idea of toleration which Locke expressed was centuries old, and its foundations for him can be found in his ideas of the laws of nature which are discussed in detail in 'The Two Treatises of Government'. This analogy will be discussed later as it goes quite a way in explaining his intolerance of specified groups, who coincidentally, violate the laws of nature. However, we, here, are mainly concerned with Locke's case for religious toleration. This will be done by outlining the nature of religion itself. Locke argues that religious matters and beliefs are of an exclusively individual nature and that they should not be controlled by the civil magistrate. According to him, 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 (cited in Horton and Mendus 1991: 49).

Therefore, as well as being of an individual nature – which only implies independence – they are intrinsic and wider society can have no hold on them, further, on the point of being intrinsic they rest on an honest conviction. In fact, an outward acceptance of a religion which one does not intrinsically believe in defies the whole object of religion – being salvation which is an individual concept, dependent wholly on individual conviction. As Locke stresses in his popular work, the Letter, I may grow rich by an art that I take not delight in; I may be cured of some disease by remedies that I have no faith in; but I cannot be saved by a religion that I distrust, that by a worship that I abhor (ibid, 1991: 32).

If states were to enforce religious conformity, the true meaning of religion would be lost. Religion is an individual will which may be socially expressed in a voluntary association in the form of the church. Locke's idea that no authority can belong to the magistrate in religious matters is crucial to his argument. The importance of the magistrate is found in its requirement to practice absolute toleration. Given its power in society, it is with the magistrate that the utility of toleration can be practiced, and Locke's demand is that there is no abuse of this power. After all, the magistrate's own choice of religion is no more important or legitimate than that of the ordinary person. Hence. With religion the magistrate, princes, and every person in society is made equal and the master of his/her own destiny. Equally, as important to recognize is that Locke does award magisterial dominance in a particular case, this being of papists. Throughout the Letter he stresses that the magistrate possesses no higher knowledge and that they cannot take control of religious matters as I have outlined above, yet he changes his views when it comes to the papists. As I have already mentioned, salvation is the crux of religious matters and the belief in salvation is the result of the individual's responsibility to God, however, Locke changes his individualistic and liberal principles here. As will be discussed later in this paper, Locke mistrusted the papists and he felt that they needed some guidance – and force from magistrate if necessary – to shift them onto the accepted religious (and political) path. It can be uncertainties about Locke's selective interference with certain groups as this implies disparity in his whole liberal theory.

### **The limits of toleration**

Now that the principles of religion have been outlined, it would be inspirational to combine them with the principles of toleration and address the case of the exceptions to the rule, which Locke places in two categories of 'events' and 'groups'. Religious toleration rests primarily on an acceptance of the intrinsic and subsequently unchangeable nature of faith itself. The presumption by Locke is that members of the churches which he accepts are members of civil society who adhere to the rules of natural law. The reason for his misgivings and basis for rejection of certain groups and practices is that he sees these people as a threat to the political structure of civil society. The nature and practices of their religions do not conform to the non-threatening nature of the accepted groups. Dissenters are deviants in a social and political sense, and cannot be accepted in civil society simply because of the threat which they pose to it.

It is helpful that first of all and before addressing ostracism of certain groups - where questions for philosophical and more importantly liberal debate are more prominent - the practices, which Locke feels

are unacceptable, are explored. Rites and ceremonies as a consequence or expression of religious belief, are not to be permitted on a public grounding as they may offend those who do not adhere to that particular faith (which would account for the majority in Locke's society).

Referring to those who sacrifice infants, or, as the primitive Christians were falsely accuses, lustfully pollute themselves in promiscuous uncleanness, or practice any other such heinous enormities... (Cited in Horton and Medus 1991: 36). Locke rhetorically asks whether such practices should be tolerated. He claims that the above named acts should not be permitted on any count in that they are repugnant. However, he goes on to say that the sacrifice of a calf, whether at home, or in a public place of worship cannot be banned by the magistrate which is confusing as surely this could be seen as offensive by many, "whether the doing so be well-pleasing to God or not, it their part to consider that do it" (ibid: 36). Locke's justification for the permissibility of this act is that it does not pose any threat to the commonwealth but this cannot be a universal proposition and is open for debate and variation. Waldron cites the inconvenience which this example would put on the principle of toleration in that, certainly, it would be an untidy and unsatisfactory state of affairs if we had to construct a fresh line of argument for toleration to match each different orthodoxy that was under consideration (Waldron, in Horton and Mendus 1991: 99).

This change would be imperative. We can assume with this example of calf sacrifice that the universal principle of toleration advocated is actually ethnocentric and culturally specific as many would find acts which Locke accepted as repulsive. Locke now addresses the exemption of certain groups in society who he feels are not worthy of toleration. In his early writings he claims that everyone has "a right to toleration so far as they do not interfere with advantages of the public or serve any way to disturb the government" (Bourne 1969: 187). This first group which he cites as violating this principle are 'papists'. From the given information (in the Letter) we can deduce that he was referring to Roman Catholics but must be remembered that they never specified by name in the Letter. His major misgiving with papists is that they favour another 'prince' in the form of Pope – Locke saw this as a threat to civil order. The reasoning behind this rejection can be found within political theory of natural law. As Cranston points out Roman Catholics should not be allowed to congregate or to publish they constituted a threat to the peace, safety and security kingdom (Cransto 1991: 81).

As Mabbot identifies of the Roman Catholic faith, it teaches that faith is not to be kept with heretics, which is equivalent to giving its followers a monopoly in promise making. It asserts that princes who are excommunicated forfeit their Kingdoms, which is equivalent to giving its own authorities the power to dispose Kings (Mabbot 1973: 179). Locke could not accept someone on earth being awarded a higher regard on an illegitimate truth or principle. Civil society, as stated earlier in the paper, consists of the powers of its members being centralized and represented by the civil magistrate. There cannot be more than one dominant body, as this is seen as a direct threat to the stability of social order.

I suggest that it might be worth looking at an alternative reasoning which Locke may have had for excluding the papists (and atheists for that matter). This approach involves looking beyond the text and recognizing Locke's motives for writing. We cannot have any certainty of the extent of religious persuasion which Locke adhered to, but we can be sure that he did not have his own concrete conceptions of religion. We also know that on a more political level he was keen to see the restoration of non-Catholic King to replace, for example James II. Despite the fact that he does give a convincing theoretical argument on why papists are not to be tolerated in his theory of toleration, we cannot be sure that his conclusions were arrived at in unbiased manner. More to the point, it is possible that he was airing his political views behind the veil of a case for toleration. This view provides cynicism of the theory based on Lockes political aims but it relates to contextual analysis. As such I will leave here as this paper is concerned more with a textual examination. The importance of coercing faith is an issue worth addressing here. In the latter part of the Letter, it seems that Locke implies that a unity of religion could be seen as a threat to the Commonwealth. Here he is expressing the later liberal theme as expressed by John Stuart Mill of the value of variation in a broad sense. As Gough states,

Though not a separatist himself, he championed the right of separatists to form their own independent churches, and this was the root in his belief in toleration (cited in Horton and Mendus 1991: 72).

Perhaps if there was just one church (expressing the supposed unity of the intrinsically held religious beliefs) then this could be interpreted as a revolutionary force, a potential threat to the established law of government. I have already outlined the essentially intrinsic nature of religion but once formed into amalgamated group, a universal sub-culture, the problems could be serious. A prime example of this is the Roman Catholic Church which, if accepted and adopted on a universal scale, could cause such a threat with the Pope instructing his humble and obedient followers to act in such a way a decided at his discretion. Bourne cites Lock's early writings where he claims that the papists' fidelity cannot be secured. According to him, while they owe a blind obedience to an infallible pop, who has the keys of their consciences tied to his griddle, and can, upon occasion, dispense with all their oaths, promises and the obligations they have to their prince, especially being a heretic, and arm them to the disturbance of the government ... (cited in Bourne 1969: 188).

These actions could easily deviate from the accepted norm as defined by law, and this is where Locke sees a problem, not least that religion is what men turn to when they feel oppressed. The final group who Locke rejects are those who deny the being of God on the ground that Promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist (cited in Horton and Medus 1991: 47). If they cannot adhere to the demands of religious conviction then their role in social and political life is dubious and a threat. As with papists, atheists are rebuked on the basis of the principles of natural law. As Gough states, even his intolerance was a consequence of the same belief in the right of free individuals to form voluntary societies by consent: for the atheist, in disbelieving in God, disbelievers in the author of the law of nature (Gough in Horton and Mendus 1991: 72).

Thus, atheists in the same way as papists challenges the law of nature and the stability of civil society. If atheists cannot show a responsibility to inner faith and obey their several decrees, how can they be expected to show a commitment to the demands of civil organization? Atheism is seem by Locke a potential anarchy. It must be recommended that Locke believes us all to be owned by God, and it is from this relationship that we derive natural and human rights. A denial of the existence of God therefore jeopardizes ideas of rights and obligations, reason, the idea of self-preservation, and respect and protection of the natural rights of others. Locke's political theory is based on a tripartite relationship between human beings, nature and God and as such. He would not be sympathetic to anyone who denied the importance – or even the existence – of any of these dependents. The same reasoning explains his mistrust of the papists as they see one more category in the form of the Pope who is either strictly a human being or God so disrupts Locke's theory. Indeed, the analogy with natural law and the ideas propagated in 'The Two Treaties of Government' are very relevant to this discussion. There is a definite link of ideas in the two texts with much of the Letter possible of being reduced to the principles of natural law. As mentioned earlier, the development of the idea of religious toleration were long standing. Apart from the examples given at the beginning of this paper, there are unlimited instances of religious strife which were present during the time of Locke's writing. Thus the ideas which are expressed in the Letter reflect feelings which have been impressed with Locke's strictly more political writings. The Two Treaties discusses civil society under the domination of magisterial command where individuals in a hypothetical state of nature transferred their powers to a central body, and as such they trusted this body as well as other individuals. Atheism invokes a strictly individual defiance, and Locke believes people in civil society should be, literally 'social' and not fragmented and self-contained like the creatures in the state of nature (and atheists).

### **The limits of toleration**

The main debate in Locke notion is that whether his case for toleration is consistent with the limits that he sets for toleration. With the analogy with natural law being explained above, we can see that Locke's reasoning for intolerance of certain groups was based on his same methodology for toleration. Religious toleration then, appears to be the consequence of a compliance to certain guidelines outside of religion itself. As such, religion for Locke must not be permitted to violate the laws of nature upon which society

is based. In fact, the term toleration in Lockean sense could be replaced by less absolute word as there is actually little toleration if the groups themselves which are 'tolerated' are of a homogeneous nature. One cannot be sure whether Locke can really be seen as advocating toleration as he desires the unity or sameness of religion which have the same foundation and pose no threat to society. However, for the sake of this paper it is unfair to dwell on lexical quirks. From the above discussion we may conclude that Locke's case for toleration is delivered through a rational process. His case rests on three strands, these being one; theological is two; Rights base is three. Based on these premises the limits which he sets to toleration are consistent with his argument. Locke strives to achieve a 'meeting place' between the individual and the state in that magistrates are not allowed to be intolerant, and individuals have a right to be tolerated. The intolerance occurs with the imbalance of these factors and this equation seems to be the center of his argument.

### **Concluding remarks**

It was argued that toleration and pluralism are two inter-connected and complementary concepts and the former is the unwanted outcome of the latter. Indeed, accept pluralism was viewed a set of inevitable diversity challenges rooted mainly in fields of politics in contemporary culturally differentiated society. So, toleration was regarded the subsequent state of heterogeneity, as it gave meaning that to live and let with different others. Likewise, the establishment of social order needs to find ways of approving on those differences for which minority groups may require to find the appropriate forms of institutional accommodation. Because they see it politically short-sighted solution for providing social and political cohesion necessary for the avoidance of socio-political disintegration. So to clarify such concepts as toleration and pluralism require an account of the roots of social conflict and a proper way of dealing with toleration in pluralism.

In this paper an attempt was made to explore the content of Locke's case for toleration and its implications for liberal theory. It was concluded that the limits of toleration specified by Locke are the logical result of his argument for toleration. Those religion which are tolerated fulfill certain criteria for Locke – these reasons which were specified above. The limits to toleration are expresses as the groups which have not fulfilled these criterion. The process is logical in theory but its implications for liberal are dubious and more invalid. The reason for this is that toleration as a liberal term implies a non-prejudicial attitude to life, religion and all things. Locke is prejudiced and judgmental and seems to adopt more an authoritarian approach than liberal one in his theory of toleration.

Toleration is criticized by non-liberal thinkers as in some cases seemingly condoning behavior which one disagrees with. Locke cannot be accused of doing this as he actively denies the rights of toleration to those who he feels violate political stability. Locke does not express neutrality and respect towards all persons, and these features from the appeal of toleration. Locke's theory of toleration is plausible within his own reasoning, but can only be viewed uniquely as his resting on his personal experiences and beliefs. Locke is acclaimed for being one of the founding fathers of liberalism but this must be kept in context. Put into a twenty one century context, the liberal foundation can be criticized (for the reasons which I have expressed above) but on the whole I think that it should be recommended that 'A Letter Concerning Toleration was the outcome of a religiously unstable episode and was first and foremost a piece of personal correspondence amidst a political milieu. Toleration and its limits are a double edged sword in a Loakean sense, based exclusively on his broader political theory.

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