

Locke Studies

Orthodoxy, Orthopraxy, and Locke's Arguments for Toleration

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Volume 22, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1097348ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5206/ls.2022.15111>

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Éditeur(s)

Western Libraries at The University of Western Ontario

ISSN

1476-0290 (imprimé)

2561-925X (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Ferg, E. & Hall, B. (2022). Orthodoxy, Orthopraxy, and Locke's Arguments for Toleration. *Locke Studies*, 22, 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.5206/ls.2022.15111>

Résumé de l'article

A Letter Concerning Toleration (1689) comprises John Locke's mature thoughts on religious toleration. In it, Locke offers three political arguments against state religious coercion. He argues that it is impossible, impermissible, and inadvisable for the civil magistrate to enforce 'true religion,' which Locke defines as the 'inward and full persuasion of the mind' (Works, 6:10). Notwithstanding the various internecine conflicts within Christianity, conflicts which motivated Locke's concern with toleration, all of the many-splendored sects of Christianity nonetheless share the notion that orthodoxy (correct belief) is required for salvation. Since the early days of Christianity, orthodoxy has represented the lowest-common-denominator obligation of adherents to Christianity. Locke's political arguments in the Letter, at least in their first instance, assume an orthodox definition of "true religion." This is likewise true of those who have either defended or criticized Locke's arguments in the secondary literature. In contrast to Locke and his commentators, we will argue that the dominant characterization of "true religion" globally and throughout history does not concern correct religious belief as much as it concerns correct religious practice, or orthopraxy. Even though it has not received as much attention in the literature, Locke does discuss orthopraxy—what he calls 'outward worship'—at length in the second half of the Letter (Works, 6:29–39). We will demonstrate how versions of all three political arguments for toleration can be redeployed to constrain the power of the magistrate within an orthoprax conception of true religion.

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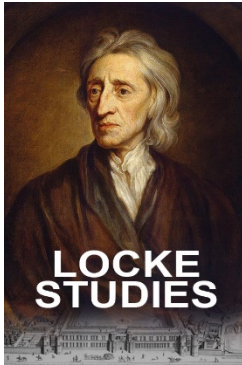
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LOCKE STUDIES

Vol. 22

<https://doi.org/10.5206/ls.2022.15111> | ISSN: 2561-925X

Submitted: 28 JULY 2022

Revised: 3 JANUARY 2023

Published online: 8 FEBRUARY 2023

For more information, [see this article's homepage](#).

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Orthodoxy, Orthopraxy, and Locke's Arguments for Toleration

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Abstract:

A Letter Concerning Toleration (1689) comprises John Locke's mature thoughts on religious toleration. In it, Locke offers three political arguments against state religious coercion. He argues that it is impossible, impermissible, and inadvisable for the civil magistrate to enforce 'true religion,' which Locke defines as the 'inward and full persuasion of the mind' (Works, 6:10). Notwithstanding the various internecine conflicts within Christianity, conflicts which motivated Locke's concern with toleration, all of the many-splendored sects of Christianity nonetheless share the notion that orthodoxy (correct belief) is required for salvation. Since the early days of Christianity, orthodoxy has represented the lowest-common-denominator obligation of adherents to Christianity. Locke's political arguments in the Letter, at least in their first instance, assume an orthodox definition of "true religion." This is likewise true of those who have either defended or criticized Locke's arguments in the secondary literature. In contrast to Locke and his commentators, we will argue that the dominant characterization of "true religion" globally and throughout history does not concern correct religious belief as much as it concerns correct religious practice, or orthopraxy. Even though it has not received as much attention in the literature, Locke does discuss orthopraxy—what he calls 'outward worship'—at length in the second half of the Letter (Works, 6:29-39). We will demonstrate how versions of all three political arguments for toleration can be redeployed to constrain the power of the magistrate within an orthoprax conception of true religion.

Keywords: John Locke, Toleration, Christianity, World Religions

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1. Introduction

A Letter concerning Toleration (1689) comprises John Locke's mature thoughts on religious toleration.¹ In it, Locke offers three political arguments against the state establishment of religion. He argues that it is impossible, impermissible, and inadvisable for the civil magistrate to enforce "true religion," which Locke defines as the "inward and full persuasion of the mind."² Whereas the impermissibility and inadvisability arguments are *normative* in their conclusions (the magistrate *ought not* to enforce religious dictates), the impossibility argument is *descriptive* (the magistrate *cannot* enforce religious dictates). Locke's impossibility argument hinges on the idea that a threat of punishment can only compel a person to obey civil law (external action) but cannot compel the religious beliefs (inner persuasion of the mind) that constitute true religion.

Notwithstanding the various internecine conflicts within Christianity that motivated Locke's concern with toleration, all of the many-splendored sects of Christianity share the notion that orthodoxy (correct doctrine or belief) is required for salvation. Since 325 CE,³ *orthodoxy* (i.e., assent to "correct doctrine") has been the lowest-common-denominator obligation of adherents of Christianity; that is, Christianity consists, at a bare minimum, of the inward and full persuasion of the mind. Locke's political arguments in the *Letter*, at least in their first instance, assume an orthodox definition of "true religion." This is likewise true of those who have either defended or criticized Locke's arguments in the secondary literature.⁴ This is not surprising insofar as the Christian religion provides the

¹ The topic of religious toleration is one that Locke returned to throughout his career beginning with the *Two Tracts on Government* (1660) and ending with *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695). See John Locke, *First Tract on Government* in *Locke: Political Essays*, ed. Mark Goldie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3–53; John Locke, *Second Tract on Government* in *Locke: Political Essays*, ed. Mark Goldie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 54–78; John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity, as Delivered in the Scriptures*, in vol. 7 of *The Works of John Locke*, rev. ed. (London, 1823), 1–158. Over time, his view became more tolerant, and the *Letter* can be taken as his considered view on the degree to which non-Christian religions should be tolerated. Although *Reasonableness* comes later, it mainly focuses on Christianity itself rather than non-Christian religions. For these reasons, we will be focusing mainly (though not exclusively) on the *Letter*. For a short overview of the development of Locke's thought, see Petar Cholakov, "The Development of John Locke's Ideas on Toleration," *Balkan Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2015): 187–94. Another good resource is John W. Gough, "The Development of Locke's Belief in Toleration," in *John Locke: "A Letter concerning Toleration" in Focus*, ed. John P. Horton and Susan Mendus, 57–77 (New York: Routledge, 1991).

² John Locke, *A Letter concerning Toleration*, in vol. 6 of *The Works of John Locke*, rev. ed. (London, 1823), 10.

³ The First Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, followed by the First Council of Constantinople in 381, together comprise the First and Second Ecumenical Councils, respectively, during which time the Nicene Creed was composed and finalized. The Nicene Creed, and its influence on Christian history and identity, will be discussed in detail in section three.

⁴ An early critical example is Jonas Proast, *The Argument of the Letter concerning Toleration, Briefly Consider'd and Answer'd* (London, 1690). A recent defense is Felicity Green, "Freedom and Obligation in Locke's Account of Belief," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 28, no. 1 (2020): 69–89.

shared cultural context of early modern discussions of these issues and has colored their subsequent reception in the secondary literature.⁵ Orthodoxy is the context, in other words, within which the debate has taken place. It is unclear, however, how applicable these arguments are outside of this context.

In contrast to Locke and his commentators, we will argue that the dominant characterization of “true religion” globally and throughout history does not concern religious *belief* as much as it concerns religious *practice*. Since about 1850, and still today, these religious categories have been referred to as orthodoxies (i.e., religions fundamentally concerned with or defined by doctrine or belief) and orthopraxies (i.e., religions fundamentally concerned with or defined by written or unwritten codes of behavior around practices, actions, and rituals).⁶

Although Christian concerns might have motivated the *Letter*, Locke intends its conclusions to extend to other world religions and explicitly mentions Judaism, Islam (“Mahometan”), and paganism, all of which typically emphasize orthopraxy over orthodoxy.⁷ Such practices, furthermore, involve external action that could (in principle) be compelled just as much as obedience to any civil law can be compelled. Whereas orthodoxy (assent to a creed or doctrine) is the lowest common denominator of all variations of Christianity, orthopraxy (obligation to the performance of certain practices) comprises the lowest common denominator of almost every other world religion. If this is true, then Locke’s political arguments, at least in their first instance, are unsound, because there are many cases where *practice* rather than *belief* constitutes true religion.

Even though it has not received as much attention in the literature, Locke does discuss orthopraxy—what he calls “outward worship”—at length in the second half of the *Letter*.⁸ In a break with his earlier position of the 1660s, Locke there holds that the magistrate does not have a role to play in proscribing religious practice except insofar as those practices are not “lawful in the ordinary course of life,” i.e., they violate natural rights (life,

⁵ The ubiquity of this early modern perspective about religion impelled Moses Mendelssohn to provide a corrective to the received view regarding what he considered the original form of Judaism in *Jerusalem* (1783). While Mendelssohn holds that Judaism did consist, at least in part, of eternal and historical truths (propositions), he describes Mosaic law (the “life and power” of Judaism, to use Locke’s language) as directed not at right belief but, rather, exclusively at right practice. See Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush (Waltham, MA: Brandeis, 1983); see especially §18, “A Summary Account of Early Judaism.”

⁶ The adjective “orthodoxy” has long been used to refer to Christian theological concepts. During the mid-19th century, the term “orthopraxy” began to be used in theological studies (later in religious studies) as a contradistinctive term for religious traditions where practice is emphasized over belief.

⁷ An exception could perhaps be made in the case of Islam, which combines elements of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. (See the discussion below in section three.) However, in Islam, orthopraxy is at least as important as—and perhaps arguably more important than—its orthodoxic component.

⁸ *Letter*, 6:29–39.

liberty, property).⁹ In a second instance of his normative political arguments, Locke argues that, given our natural liberty, it is impermissible for the magistrate to prescribe any practices unless they are necessary for promoting the “public good,” i.e., the preservation of life, liberty, and property.¹⁰ Locke also provides a version of the inadvisability argument. If magistrates were to have the power to prescribe or proscribe religious practice beyond what the public good requires, princes would use orthopraxy as a “cloak to covetousness, rapine, and ambition.”¹¹ Conversion would become a pretext to conquest, and orthopraxy would become a function of political power.

Insofar as Locke recognizes that “indifferent things”—practices neither right nor wrong in themselves—cease to be indifferent when connected to religious practice,¹² this seems to reflect a burgeoning awareness on Locke’s part that true religion might well go beyond belief to include practice as well. In this respect, Locke is presaging a new conceptualization of “true religion” that goes beyond the received (Christian) view, a conceptualization that has been insufficiently appreciated both by Locke’s philosophical predecessors and successors.

Over the course of the past 60 years, the field of religious studies has become more conscious of a Christian bias that has informed academic perspectives of understanding non-Christian religions. For example, the field has increasingly noticed how non-Christian religions often are inelegantly referred to as “faiths,” how scholars often look to a religious tradition’s texts or scriptures—rather than its practices—as the most official or correct means by which to understand a given religious tradition, and how adherents or practitioners of other religions are called “believers.” Consciousness of this Christian bias in studying religion gradually has informed scholarly work in the field, and that is the lens we will be applying in this paper as well. Accordingly, rather than assuming the meanings of religious terminology, we will instead examine Locke’s use of the terms “true religion” and (religious) “belief” and will argue that Locke’s explicit conception of both is specifically Christian, rather than universal, in character.

The second section of this paper will reconstruct Locke’s three central arguments for toleration, with a particular emphasis on the impossibility argument and how it assumes an orthodox notion of true religion. The third section will argue that orthodoxy is a feature nearly unique to the historical development of Christianity. It will examine orthopraxy in world religions and demonstrate how orthopraxy creates a clear counterexample to Locke’s political arguments that assume an orthodox notion of true religion. The final section will demonstrate how versions of all three political arguments for toleration can

⁹ *Letter*, 6:33. Locke argues in the *First Tract on Government* that the magistrate does possess the authority to enforce uniformity of religious practice. See Locke, *First Tract*, 10-13.

¹⁰ *Letter*, 6:30.

¹¹ *Letter*, 6:36.

¹² *Letter*, 6:32.

be redeployed to constrain the power of the magistrate within an orthoprax conception of true religion.

2. Three Arguments for Toleration

At the outset of the *Letter*, Locke makes clear that he will be offering both descriptive as well as normative arguments against the state establishment of religion. The civil power “neither can nor ought in any manner to be extended to the salvation of souls.”¹³ These are sometimes called Locke’s “political arguments” in contrast to other forms of argument he offers in the *Letter*.¹⁴ Regardless of what we call them, however, as Diego Lucci notes, they are only *negative* arguments for why the magistrate’s power is (or should be) constrained and do not themselves constitute *positive* arguments for toleration.¹⁵

Beginning with the descriptive claim, Locke offers an argument from belief which holds that it is *impossible* for the magistrate to compel someone to believe something they do not wish to believe.¹⁶ Here Locke draws a distinction between inward belief and external action. Although the magistrate can compel external actions (e.g., forcing people to baptize babies), the magistrate cannot compel inward belief (e.g., forcing people to believe that baptizing babies cleanses those babies of original sin). Even if a parent were to comply with a public order to baptize her baby, she need not believe that the baptism functions as a spiritual cleanse. As noted at the outset, Locke believes that “all the life and power of true religion consist in the inward and full persuasion of the mind: and faith is not faith without believing.”¹⁷ This makes clear that, for Locke, true religion consists more in what one thinks or believes (doxa) than in what one does (praxis). This view of “religion” is consistent throughout history with most versions of Christianity. Even though the magistrate *can* enforce conformity of practice (orthopraxy), the magistrate, for Locke, *cannot* enforce conformity of belief (orthodoxy).

This argument has been pilloried since its inception. In Locke’s own day, Jonas Proast argued that the magistrate can control the *evidence* made available to citizens for the formation of their beliefs and, so, can indirectly control the content of their beliefs.¹⁸ If

¹³ *Letter*, 6:10.

¹⁴ In addition to what he identifies as the “political arguments,” Cholakov explores other lines of argument for toleration within the *Letter*. See Cholakov, “Locke’s Ideas on Toleration,” 192

¹⁵ Diego Lucci, “Political Skepticism, Moral Skepticism, and the Scope and Limits of Toleration in John Locke,” *Yearbook of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies* (2018): 115.

¹⁶ See *Letter*, 6:11.

¹⁷ *Letter*, 6:10.

¹⁸ Jonas Proast, *The Argument of the Letter concerning Toleration*, 5. Jeremy Waldron reiterates Proast’s basic criticism while arguing that Locke fails to adequately respond to it. See Jeremy Waldron, “Locke, Toleration, and the Rationality of Persecution,” in *Justifying Toleration: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives*, ed. S. Mendus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 84.

the state, for example, exclusively promotes Catholic dogma, then it should not be at all surprising that cradle Catholics come to *believe* that baptism washed away their original sin.

Just as there have been many attacks on Locke's impossibility argument, there have been an equal number of defenders.¹⁹ There are those who argue that the kind of belief that Locke is talking about in connection with true religion is particularly resistant to external coercion.²⁰ Others argue that Locke's normative arguments can be redeployed to save the impossibility argument.²¹ In contrast, some commentators argue that the impossibility argument is dispensable and that one should rather focus on Locke's normative political arguments (as well as the other arguments he offers for toleration in the *Letter*).²² Of particular interest, for our purposes, is John Simmons, who maintains that Locke's most promising approach is to refocus his arguments not on religious belief but rather religious practice.²³ Since it would seem that the magistrate has, in fact, enforced religious practice (actuality being the surest guide to possibility), one should rather *reapply the normative arguments to religious practice*. In the final section of this paper, this is precisely what we shall aim to do, but this will lead us to reassess Locke's impossibility argument within the domain of religious practice. We hope to demonstrate that religious practice is surprisingly resistant to coercion and that practices often remain, even after the beliefs that undergird them have disappeared. Our goal is not to defend the soundness of Locke's political arguments but, rather, to show that all three forms of argument can be extended to practice. Consequently, in the remainder of this section, we will not consider objections to the normative arguments but instead will present the key features of these arguments that later will be reapplied within the domain of religious practice.

Locke initially directs these normative arguments toward religious belief. He first claims that it is *impermissible* for the magistrate to establish a religion since God has not

¹⁹ For nice overviews of the various responses to Proast and Waldron, see Richard Vernon, "Tempers and Toleration: Re-Reading Locke's 'Irrationality' Argument," *History of Political Thought* 42, no. 2 (2021): 252–68 and Felicity Green, "Freedom and Obligation in Locke's Account of Belief."

²⁰ See Nicholas Jolley, *Toleration and Understanding in Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), chap. 5.

²¹ For example, Eric Mack claims it is unclear whether the kind of belief required for salvation can be incentivized by the state since the incentive rather than the doctrine of the Church could be motivationally operative. Although it would be *possible* to for the state to coerce belief generally, it would be *impossible* for the state to coerce the kind of belief required for salvation. See Eric Mack, *John Locke* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 114–15.

²² For someone who enjoins the reader to focus on the normative political arguments (rather than the descriptive), see John Harris, *The Mind of John Locke: A Study of Political Theory in Its Intellectual Setting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 112–13.

²³ A.J. Simmons, *On the Edge of Anarchy: Locke, Consent, and the Limits of Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 132n.

given any such authority to one man over another nor can one transfer such authority through consent.²⁴ In a point familiar from the *Second Treatise on Civil Government*, published in the same year as the *Letter* (1689), God has created us free and equal.²⁵ If the magistrate possessed a natural authority in religious matters, this would undermine natural equality as well as natural freedom. It would undermine natural equality since it would mean that some individuals (magistrates) possess an ability, through reason or revelation, that the rest of us lack. It would undermine natural freedom since the freedom of religious conscience is presumably a subspecies of natural freedom.²⁶ In the *Letter*, Locke repeatedly encourages people to trust their own reason on religious matters.²⁷

The only caveat to be mentioned in connection with the impossibility argument is the limitation that the “public good” places on the magistrate’s toleration of religion.²⁸ Much as in the *Second Treatise*, Locke argues in the *Letter* that the authority of the magistrate is limited to promotion of the public good which can be understood in terms of enforcing the law of nature, or each citizen’s natural right to life, liberty, and property.²⁹ This line of argument connects directly to his separation of civil and ecclesiastical authority. Whereas the business of the civil authority is promotion of the public good, the business of the ecclesiastical authority is the saving of souls.³⁰ Whereas the magistrate may use external force to ensure the protection of life, liberty, and property within the commonwealth, ecclesiastical power is limited to casting the heterodox out of the “Church,” i.e., a voluntary association of people for the worship of God and the salvation of their souls.³¹ Although neither the magistrate nor the Church may use *force* to compel belief, either may use “exhortations and arguments”—just as anyone might—to convince a person of his religious position.³²

If certain religious beliefs (or the lack thereof) imperil the public good, however, then the magistrate ought to persecute such beliefs insofar as it is in the magistrate’s power to

²⁴ *Letter*, 6:10. Locke also notes that the New Testament does not contain any mandate for forcing others to convert to Christianity. See *Letter*, 6:15.

²⁵ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, in vol. 4 of *The Works of John Locke*, rev. ed (London, 1823), 341.

²⁶ Cholakov makes this suggestion. See Cholakov, “Locke’s Ideas on Toleration,” 191.

²⁷ For example, see *Letter*, 6:11–12.

²⁸ *Letter*, 6:30.

²⁹ *Two Treatises*, 5:389. For how “public good” and “law of nature” are interchangeable, see Alex Tuckness, “Rethinking the Intolerant Locke,” *American Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 2 (2002): 291.

³⁰ *Letter*, 6:9.

³¹ *Letter*, 6:13–16.

³² *Letter*, 6:11, 6:41.

do so (see the impossibility argument above). Rather infamously, Locke claims that neither Catholics nor atheists ought to be tolerated by the state. His worry with Catholics is their purported loyalty to a “another prince” (i.e., the Pope).³³ Presumably, if the Pope were to order Catholics to seize the property of non-Catholics (a violation of the public good), they would be obligated to do so. It would seem, by Locke’s lights, Catholics cannot resist such a power and no other religious leaders can exert similar power on adherents living in foreign lands.³⁴ Locke’s worry with atheists is predicated on his commitment to natural law theory, a view that faces its own significant challenges. If God is the moral lawgiver, then those who do not view themselves as subject to such laws (since they do not believe in the existence of the purported lawgiver) lack a reliable motivation to be moral even if they possess the same (ostensibly God-given) natural capacities as the believer. As Locke writes, “Promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist. The taking away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all.”³⁵

Even if establishing a state religion were possible or permissible, compelling belief through threat of punishment is *inadvisable* since the religious opinion of the prince (to use Locke’s locution) might be based on ignorance, ambition, or superstition. Often, for Locke, religion is simply the prince’s pretext to conquest.³⁶ Assuming that there is only one true religion (as these princes all think, each being orthodox unto themselves)³⁷ and given the disagreement among princes as to the true religion, only one (or perhaps none!) of them can be right. Everyone following their respective prince would not bring more people to salvation since any one of these princes is liable to have a false religion. If one were to simply follow the opinion of one’s prince, salvation and damnation would be arbitrary.³⁸ After all, no one has a choice as to what country they are born into, and, for most, it is difficult if not impossible to leave one’s country for another. To echo a point

³³ *Letter*, 6:46-47.

³⁴ For an eloquent repudiation of the former, see John F. Kennedy, Address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association,” 12 Sep 1960, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, transcript and motion picture, 46:33, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/IFP/1960/IFP-140/IFP-140>. For a counterexample to the latter, note Ayatollah Khomeini’s 1989 infamous *fatwa* to assassinate Salman Rushdie after the latter published the *Satanic Verses* (London: Viking, 1988). This led to a failed assassination attempt that same year in England and a more recent attempt in New York (2022). Curiously, Locke countenances a “Mahometan” who would “yield blind obedience to the mufti of Constantinople” (*Letters*, 6:47) but, nonetheless, claims that Islam should be tolerated while Catholicism should not.

³⁵ *Works*, 6:47. For a good discussion of why Locke believes that neither Catholics nor atheists ought to be tolerated, see Diego Lucci, “John Locke on Atheism, Catholicism, Antinomianism, and Deism,” *Ethics & Politics* 20, no. 3 (2018): 201–46.

³⁶ *Letter*, 6:6, 6:8, 6:15.

³⁷ *Letter*, 6:5.

³⁸ *Letter*, 6:12.

from earlier, it is much better to trust one's *own reason* in such matters. Locke's idea seems to be that even if we grant the metaphysical point that there is only one true path to salvation, there is still the epistemological worry that one may not actually *know* what path that is.³⁹ Although the prince could compensate for his error in terrestrial matters (e.g., by repaying you for a failed business venture he demanded you undertake), there is no way for the prince to repay you for the eternal damnation you suffer by blindly following his dictates.⁴⁰ Mirroring a point from the impossibility argument, even if the state were right about the one true path, personal conviction is required, and this cannot be compelled. Feigned belief (the likely outcome of forcing professed belief through threat of punishment) is a roadblock to salvation and sinful in its own right.⁴¹

Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that Locke's political arguments for toleration are sound. Collectively, they would establish that the magistrate neither can nor ought to establish religion, where true religion is understood as the full and inward persuasion of the mind (i.e., belief, or, as we more specifically will argue, orthodoxy). Although Locke spends much of his time talking about Christianity in the letter, he also clearly intends his political arguments for toleration to extend to other non-Christian religions. He explicitly mentions Islam, Judaism, and paganism in the *Letter*.⁴² In this connection, he also talks about the toleration of non-Christian *belief*. For example, Locke writes: "If a heathen doubt of both testaments, he is not therefore to be punished as a pernicious citizen."⁴³ As we will argue in the following section, however, most non-Christian religions (including those mentioned by Locke) are united not by *orthodoxy* but rather by *orthopraxy*. If Locke's political arguments for constraining state power are to apply to non-Christian religions in the way he intends, it is important to show that these arguments can be extended from *belief* to *practice*.

3. Christian Orthodoxy, Orthopraxy, and Locke's Impossibility Argument

Living, as Locke did, within the historical context of more than 150 years of intra-Christian warfare regarding interpretations of "true" religion, a primary motivation for Locke's *Letter* was that of toleration:

³⁹ Cholakov views this as a separate *epistemological* argument that complements the *political* arguments but is not identical with them. See Cholakov, "Locke's Ideas on Toleration," 192.

⁴⁰ *Letter*, 6:12.

⁴¹ *Letter*, 6:11. For a non-theoretical example of this, think about Spain post-1492 for Jewish communities or post-1611 for Muslim communities who were forced to convert to Christianity or else face expulsion. This led, over subsequent centuries, to the existence of communities of "Crypto Jews" and "Crypto Muslims," communities who dissimulated as Christians—which we discuss further in section four—as well as to a culture that still today lauds ostentatious public consumption of pork.

⁴² For example, see *Letter*, 6:52.

⁴³ *Letter*, 6:40.

Since you are pleased to inquire what are my thoughts about the mutual toleration of Christians in their different professions of religion . . . the toleration of those that differ from others in matters of religion is so agreeable to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to the genuine reason of mankind, that it seems monstrous for men to be so blind, as not to perceive the necessity and advantage of it, in so clear a light.⁴⁴

Accordingly, Locke offers two theologically inflected arguments that run parallel to, but are strictly independent from, the political arguments discussed in the previous section. First, toleration is “the chief characteristical mark of the true church.”⁴⁵ Second, true religion consists of the inward and full persuasion of the mind, a mental position that requires a form of voluntary assent on the part of the thinker and that is necessary for God’s acceptance.⁴⁶ Locke’s argument, then, involves both cognitive justification (concerning what human reason requires for assent to mental propositions) and theological justification (what God requires for salvation).⁴⁷ Moreover, it is based upon the “Gospel of Jesus Christ” as well as the Christian scriptures. Indeed, because Locke’s primary motivation in the *Letter* was that of toleration, Locke’s clear internalization of Christian theology underscores the second part of this paper: Locke’s work assumes that a specifically Christian principle—belief—signifies true religion. Belief, however, does not exclusively connote true religion, although an examination of the unique history of Christianity can help to explain the prominence of belief within Christian theology.

Despite the claims of the Gospels, and (often) that of general Christian self-understanding, neither upon the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, in approximately 4 BCE, nor upon his crucifixion, in approximately 29 CE, did one *single* form of Christianity arise or emerge. Instead, over the course of the next 300 years around the Mediterranean, many different forms of Christianity (defined herein as religious groups inspired by the life, death, and afterlife of Jesus Christ)⁴⁸ came into being and into competition, not only with

⁴⁴ *Letter*, 6:5–9.

⁴⁵ *Letter*, 6:5. This is the opening sentence of the *Letter*.

⁴⁶ *Letter*, 6:11.

⁴⁷ Salvation is typically defined as deliverance from sin and its consequences (damnation) and is believed by Christians to be brought about by faith in Christ. Salvation is a notion vital to Locke’s thinking and is repeatedly referenced throughout the *Letter*. Lucci defines Locke’s conception of salvation, as evidenced in Locke’s 1695 essay *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, as dependent not only on “ . . . [one’s] repentance for their sins and on the consequent resolution to obey the divine moral law, but also on one’s faith in Jesus the Messiah and one’s commitment to understanding God’s Revealed Word.” Diego Lucci, *John Locke’s Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 132. See also, Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*.

⁴⁸ “Christ,” χριστός (chrīstós) being a Greek translation of the Hebrew word (and title) “messiah,” מָשִׁיחַ (mašīaḥ): one “anointed” with oil, as was an historical custom for Jewish leaders. Early Christians taught that Jesus had been the “messiah” from Hebrew prophecies, but most contemporaneous Jews rejected this claim on the grounds that, in Jewish understanding, the “messiah” was promised to be a political or military

one another (e.g., Adoptionism, Arianism, Docetism, Donatism, Ebionism, Gnosticism, Montanism, Marcionism, proto-orthodoxies, etc.), but also with the various first-century CE Jewish groups out of which those forms of Christianity had emerged.⁴⁹ These variations among Christian groups ranged from the mundane (foods acceptable for consumption) to the extreme (the nature of the Trinity) and dealt with theology, Christology, authoritative texts read within particular communities, “proper” rituals practiced within them, and requirements for community membership.

This variety of theology and practice eventually led the Roman Emperor Constantine I (r. 306–37) to call, in 325, for a sort of standardization of Christianity at the First Council of Nicaea, during which Arianism (a “heretical” belief that denied the full divinity of Jesus) was repudiated, the Trinitarian relationship of “God the Son” to “God the Father” was clarified, the date of the observance of Easter was made uniform, and some elements of early church law were pronounced. Over the course of the next few hundred years, six more ecumenical church councils were called to redress (and ostensibly to eliminate) various theological disputes or discrepancies, and the earliest official divisions in Christianity (Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, the Assyrian Church) can be traced to these ecumenical councils.⁵⁰ The theological pronouncements that were produced at these councils regularly necessitated clarification, compelling subsequent councils.

For instance, after the First Council of Constantinople (381), where the Nicene Creed (and the human-divine nature of Christ) had been articulated and affirmed, questions over the *relationship* between the human and divine natures of Jesus persisted. Nestorius, who was a contemporaneous Patriarch of Constantinople, had begun to teach that the Virgin Mary *may* be called the *Χριστοτόκος*, *Christotokos*, the “Christ-bearer,” but *NOT* the *Θεοτόκος*, *Theotokos*, “God-bearer.” These titles for Mary (and the disputation over them) had arisen as a result of theological ambiguities that had remained following the First Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople. This disputation necessitated the Council of Ephesus (where Nestorius’s teachings were condemned and deemed heretical) in 431, led to the de jure separation of Nestorius and his followers from the “legitimate” Imperial theological positions of Constantinople (the polity), and resulted in the de facto establishment of the “Nestorian” church, known today as the Church of the East.

deliverer of the Jews, and Jesus of Nazareth achieved no political or military deliverance before his death. Early Christians began to argue instead that Jesus had accomplished deliverance *through* his death.

⁴⁹ See, for instance, Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

⁵⁰ The first seven ecumenical councils were the First Council of Nicaea (325), the First Council of Constantinople (381), the Council of Ephesus (431), the Council of Chalcedon (451), the Second Council of Constantinople (553), the Third Council of Constantinople (680–81), and the Second Council of Nicaea (787). The Eastern (Greek, Russian, etc.), Western (Roman Catholic and most Protestant Churches), and Oriental Orthodox churches accept all seven of these councils (and the theological positions produced therefrom) as legitimate.

The document produced by the Councils at Nicaea in 325 and at Constantinople in 381 is known today as the Nicene Creed. This “statement of belief” or “statement of faith” is called in English a “creed” because, in Latin translation, the Nicene statement begins with the word “*Credo*,” that is, “I believe.”⁵¹ The Nicene Creed enumerated (and still enumerates) the Imperial (and thus the *enforceable*) beliefs held by “mainstream” Christians as to the substance and nature of Jesus with respect to the Trinity (*ὁμοούσιος* or *homoousios*: same substance, meaning Jesus is the same in being/essence/substance as “God the Father” and, thus, simultaneously human and divine). This statement of faith is still recited or sung aloud by Christians during church services and, in general, forms the doctrinal statement of correct belief that today constitutes the official theological position of the Eastern (Greek, Russian, etc.), Western (Roman Catholic and most Protestant Churches), and Oriental Orthodox churches.

Theological disputation among Christian communities continued (and grew) beyond the early Church Councils. The 1054 “Great Schism” over the *filioque* procession clause (*filioque* being Latin for “and the son,” as in: “The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the son*”), added during the sixth century by the Romans to their recitation of the Nicene Creed, ostensibly was the act that minted official severance between Western and Eastern Christianity. In 1517, Martin Luther’s 95 Theses comprised his own protestations to the theological positions and practices of the Roman church as it had to that point developed. The many Protestant sects of Christianity that developed after Luther were themselves reacting to—and creating—various positions and claims within Christian theology. Every new position or community created became susceptible to consequent theological objection and division.

This disputatious history of Christianity—and, in particular, of Locke’s understanding of Protestant Christianity—are evident in the *Letter*. Locke argues that a “Church” is a:

Free and voluntary society . . . no man by nature is bound unto any particular church or sect, but every one joins himself voluntarily to that society in which he believes he has found that profession and worship which is truly acceptable to God. The hopes of salvation, as it was the only cause of his entrance into that communion, so it can be the only reason of his stay there.⁵²

Indeed, Locke notes soon after,

pray observe how great have always been the divisions amongst even those who lay so much stress upon the divine institution, and continued succession of a certain order of rulers in the church. Now *their very dissension unavoidably puts us upon*

⁵¹ The Greek terminology in the Councils’ texts reads: “*Πιστεύομεν*,” “we believe.” The Greek liturgy has adherents recite “*Πιστεύω*,” I believe, as does the Latin translation, “*credo*.”

⁵² *Works*, 6:13.

*a necessity of deliberating, and consequently allows a liberty of choosing that, which upon consideration we prefer.*⁵³

In other words, for Locke, church variety *entails* choice. This voluntarism of choosing a “profession,” comprising assent to a creed or doctrine, constitutes the very definition of orthodoxy. The unique history of Christianity thus lends itself to a situation in which not just the religious history but the very *religion* of Christianity itself can be characterized as a matter of *belief*: “Credo:” “I believe” or, in other words: “I assent to the following theological position.” Such a reality is unique to the specific history of Christianity, and this has led to Christianity being rather unusual within world history and amongst religions as a religion that is characterized primarily as a matter of faith or as a matter of specific mental propositions—creeds, doctrines, or a specific theological framework—to which one assents. For Locke, true religion consists of the inward and full persuasion of the mind, a conception that is specifically Christian rather than universal in character.

The crucial observation proposed in this section is that these are elements not only of Locke’s uncritical assumptions about Christianity but also of Locke’s assumptions about religion, *per se*. Thus, Locke explicitly imputes a central aspect of Christianity—that at its heart is the matter of belief or of theological positions to which one does or does not assent—to all of religion. However, this is demonstrably not the case. There are other religious traditions—most, in fact: Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.—for which “belief” or “faith” or theological positions to which one does or does not assent are matters of far less importance than are the actions, practices, and rituals that one performs. A religious tradition can be said to be constituted more by practice than by belief when codes of behavior (written or unwritten) for worship, ritual, and daily life constitute the fundamental obligations of an adherent.

By way of example, we could focus on the religious tradition of Islam. This example is illustrative because among the major world religious traditions, Islam is considered to be the orthopractic religious tradition that is most similar to Christianity in terms of the importance it places on belief. Like any major religious tradition, there is of course variety within the ways in which Islam has been expressed among cultural traditions and across time. Nevertheless, Islamic communities are linked by a reverence and respect for both the Qur’ān and the Prophet Muḥammad, as well as by the “[Five] Pillars of Islam” or the أركان الدين or *arkān al-dīn*, the fundamental obligatory practices of Muslims.⁵⁴

⁵³ *Letter*, 6:14 (emphasis ours).

⁵⁴ In this example, we will focus on the Sunni sect of Islam. The two largest sects of Islam are Sunnis (approximately 85% of the world’s Muslims) and Shi’is (among other small Islamic sects, Shi’is constitute approximately 15% of the world’s Muslims; the largest of these Shi’i communities are the Twelver Shi’is). There are authentic Sunni and Shi’i expressions of each of the “Five Pillars.” For considerations of space, however, only the Sunni expressions of each of the “Five Pillars” will be described and only the contemporary manifestations of these Sunni expressions. The “Five Pillars” were derived both from the content of the Qur’ān and from the Ḥadīth literature.

The first (and arguably most important) of the Five Pillars is the شهادة or *shahādah*, “statement of witness/faith”: لا إله إلا الله ومحمد رسول الله or “I bear witness that there is no god but God and [that] Muḥammad is his messenger.” This is the creedal statement of Islam, a mental proposition to which one assents and the repetition of which is required for matters of conversion. This is the most orthodox element of Islam and is entirely consistent with an orthodoxy like Christianity (especially considering that that this could be and often is considered the most fundamental element of the “Pillars”). We would argue, however, that this creedal statement constitutes the first (and most important) Pillar of Islam due to the need to distinguish Islam from the contemporaneous Trinitarian Christian theological positions of the sixth and seventh centuries, from which it had in part emerged and to which it was a response. In short, because of the legacy and impact of the forms of Christianity to which the religious movement of Islam was partly responding, there could be nothing but a credal statement of differentiation as the first Pillar of Muslim belief and practice. The remaining four Pillars are, more in keeping with the Jewish practices (Judaism also being a religion out of which Islam had in part emerged and to which it was a response), focused on practice and on ritual action. These Pillars are described below with special reference to those practices that are similar to or emulations of religious practices from earlier religious traditions, in part because we will refer to the practices again in section four.

The Second Pillar of Islam is صلاة or *ṣalāt*, “prayers.” Specifically, this refers to prayer five times per day and before which ablutions are required. The prayer times are set by and dependent upon the position in the sky of the sun at certain times (dawn, noon, midafternoon, sunset, and evening/night). This prayer practice was adapted from the five-times-per-day-based-on-the-location-of-the-sun prayer ritual practiced in the earlier religion of Zoroastrianism. Prayer in Islam is performed following a series of set positions, including standing, bowing, kneeling, and prostrating oneself with one’s head upon the floor. (This last position is similar to earliest Christian prayer practices, and one can still see it undertaken by candidates who lie prostrate before the altar during the Roman Catholic rite of Ordination.) Prayers are performed facing the direction of Mecca (before 624 CE, the Muslim قبله or *qiblah*, the direction of prayer, faced toward Jerusalem, following the practice of contemporaneous Jewish communities in the city of Medina).

The Third Pillar of Islam is زكاة or *zakāt*, “charity” or “almsgiving.” Influenced by Christian charitable giving practices, *zakāt* comes from the Arabic root meaning “purification” and “growth,” etymologically indicating that one purifies and grows both one’s wealth and one’s community in this manner. Set at about 2.5% of an individual’s wealth (net worth after expenses and other obligations), *zakāt* is given to the poor and needy. The poor or less wealthy can themselves give food or acts of kindness rather than money to others.

The Fourth Pillar of Islam is صوم or *ṣawm*, “fasting” during the thirty-day holiday of Ramaḍān. This monthlong fast takes place from just before dawn until just after sunset and rotates throughout the solar-calendar year (because the calendar of Islam is tied to the lunar calendar, which is 354 days long). This means that the annual cycle of holidays throughout the year shifts eleven days sooner each year with respect to the solar calendar, which results in the fast of Ramadan taking place during all seasons, some of which,

accordingly, can be far more difficult for adherents when making the fast during daylight hours. Muslims are enjoined to forego water, food, sexual intercourse, smoking, and negative actions while fasting. Given that this fast takes place for an entire month, it is substantially more challenging than either the fasts of Christianity (Lent is an example) or the numerous shorter daylong fasts of Judaism, both of which served as sources for the Muslim fast.

The Fifth Pillar of Islam is the *ḥajj* or *Hajj*, pilgrimage to Mecca. All Muslims who can afford (in all senses of the word) to make the annual pilgrimage to Mecca are bidden to do so at least once during their lifetimes. The *Hajj* takes place during days eight to twelve—of the final month of the Islamic lunar calendar *Dhū al-Hijja*, which, again, shifts eleven days earlier each solar year. The *Hajj* consists of several rituals, concentrated around the Ka'bah in Mecca, the cube-shaped shrine structure at the heart of Mecca toward which Muslims direct prayer. The many rituals of the *Hajj* (circumambulation of the Ka'bah, walking or running processions, prayer, standing, tossing pebbles at a pillar meant to represent Satan) are undertaken by pilgrims in remembrance of the life of Abraham, Patriarch from the Hebrew Bible and a founding figure in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (though one ritual consists in remembrance of the final sermon given by Muḥammad on Mt. Arafat). Marking the end of the *Hajj* pilgrimage is the *ʿĪd al-ʿAdha*, the “Feast/Festival/Holiday of the Sacrifice,” where pilgrims sacrifice a sheep (in modern times, many pilgrims donate money for this purpose rather than participating in the ritual themselves) and then shave or cut their hair in a physical demonstration of the spiritual change that has taken place. The food from sacrificed animals—in a manner similar to the blood-sacrifice rituals of Judaism and other ancient Near Eastern religions whence comes this practice—is donated to the poor.

This example of the Five Pillars of Islam hopefully has been illustrative of the ways in which many (most) religions are orthopraxies constituted more by specific codes of behavior than by belief. In contrast, because of the unique historical development of Christianity, belief—or, more precisely, assent to specific creeds or doctrines—constitutes the fundamental obligation and community demarcation of an adherent. Of course, there is a mixture of both belief and practice in Islam and Christianity, but practice largely constitutes the lowest common denominator of (all varieties of) Islam in a way that it does not for (all varieties of) Christianity.

The matter of belief or faith being at the heart of religion itself is so natural an assumption to Locke, however, that he does not recognize it for the unique reflection of Christian history that it is. The problem belongs not only Locke and his contemporaneous and subsequent commentators, detractors, and followers, who in the main likewise seem to have presumed or accepted that belief and faith lie at the heart of religion. Indeed, the power, success, and ubiquity of Christianity, as well as the largely Christian-influenced history of academia in the west, have led to a situation in which most world religious traditions have been colored by Christian understandings of religion. This is why other religions are also called “faiths,” why scholars often look to a religious tradition’s texts or scriptures as the most official or correct means by which to understand a given religious tradition, and why adherents to a religious tradition often are called “believers.”

In this section, we hope to have demonstrated three points. First, Locke's conceptions of true religion and of religious belief are specifically Christian, rather than universal, in character. Second, whereas most forms of Christianity (and certainly the forms of Protestant Christianity that were contemporaneous to Locke) can be said to be orthodoxies in that they consist primarily of assent and fidelity to certain internal mental propositions, most religious traditions, throughout most of history, have been orthopraxies. In orthopraxies, assent to certain mental propositions is of considerably less value than is fidelity to the performance of specific practices. Third, and accordingly, Locke's concept of "true religion" could apply only to forms of Christianity, and thus Locke's political arguments against the state establishment of religion, at least in their first instance, could only directly apply to Christian religious traditions. As we will see in the next section, however, later in the *Letter*, Locke shows a growing recognition of the importance of practice to religion and repurposes these political arguments to defend toleration with respect to practice.

4. Extending Locke's Three Arguments to Practice

Based on what we have learned in section three, it is incumbent upon Locke to find a way of extending his political arguments from religious belief to religious practice if he wishes to claim that the magistrate must tolerate both Christian and non-Christian religions. Without this, Locke's arguments could only be used to defend toleration within a Christian context (and more specifically only within a non-Catholic Christian context) where adherents share a conception of true religion. There are some scholars who argue that Locke's theory of toleration is only intelligible within a Christian context.⁵⁵ This would have immense consequences for our understanding of the intellectual history of toleration as well as its political employment. To take one well-known example, the *Letter* had a profound influence on James Madison and, so, on the political foundations of religious liberty in the United States, a liberty that ostensibly extends to both Christian and non-Christian religions alike.⁵⁶

At the same time, it would be misleading to say that Christianity does not rely at all on practice just as it would be misleading to say that non-Christian religions do not rely at all on belief. For example, one of Locke's reasons for rejecting antinomianism is that it

⁵⁵ For example, see Jakob De Roover and S. N. Balagangadhara, "John Locke, Christian Liberty, and the Predicament of Liberal Toleration," *Political Theory* 36, no. 4 (2008): 523–49.

⁵⁶ The most obvious example is the First Amendment establishment clause in the Bill of Rights. James Madison wrote the Bill of Rights (1791), and one can clearly see the influence of the *Letter* when reading Madison, "Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments, [ca. 20 June] 1785," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-08-02-0163>, which rehearses many of Locke's arguments in the *Letter*. One can also see Locke's influence on Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence (1776) as well as the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom (1786). However, in a contemporary context, see also Khyati Y. Joshi, *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America* (New York: NYU Press, 2020). She presents an argument against the existence of religious liberty in the United States.

denies the necessity of good works for salvation.⁵⁷ The performance of good works for salvation is, of course, itself a form of religious practice. Likewise, insofar as adherence to any religion involves a cognitive component, belief must be operative. It may be helpful, however, to make a distinction between two different kinds of belief. Conceptually appropriating the philosophical distinction between belief internalism and belief externalism, one might claim, in this context, that there is a distinction to be drawn between internal and external religious belief. Whereas for internal belief, the religious belief would be assent to a proposition, for external belief, the religious belief would be obligation to a practice. There can be epistemic relationships between these different forms of belief. For example, the Catholic can believe they ought to eat the bread at Communion (external) because they believe (internal) the whole substance of the bread will be transubstantiated into the whole substance of the body of Christ through the priestly eucharistic prayer of *hoc est corpus meum*. The main idea, however, would be that whereas Christian religion focuses largely (if not exclusively) on internal beliefs (orthodoxy), non-Christian religions (at least the ones that concern Locke) focus largely (if not exclusively) on external beliefs (orthopraxy).

Although scholars have not spilled as much ink on the topic, Locke does spend a significant amount of time talking about the toleration of religious practice, and so about external belief, within the context of the *Letter*. A foundational concept for this discussion is that of “indifferent things.” As noted at the outset, these are practices neither right nor wrong in themselves considered independently of religious belief. From the perspective of the magistrate, these are practices that do no harm to the public good. From the perspective of a Church, however, such things cease to be indifferent when tied to religious ends. Returning again to the baptismal example: sprinkling a baby with water seems to have no impact on the public good and, so, would be indifferent from the perspective of the magistrate. Such a practice within the context of certain varieties of Christianity, however, has direct implications for salvation and so ceases to be indifferent. This is a vitally important acknowledgement on Locke’s part since it strongly suggests that he would countenance both internal as well as external belief as constituting true religion notwithstanding his own definition of “true religion” early in the *Letter*.

Locke deploys a version of his *impermissibility* argument when arguing for the toleration of religious practice. He argues from analogy that since it is impermissible for the magistrate to punish “covetousness, uncharitableness, [and] idleness,” it would likewise be impermissible for the magistrate to punish the idolatrous practices of a pagan religion.⁵⁸ Even if Christian churches consider idolatry just as sinful as these other practices, it is irrelevant from the perspective of the magistrate since these practices do no harm to life, liberty, or property (the public good). Although different in its details from his argument for why it is impermissible for the magistrate to coerce belief (discussed in section two), this argument likewise trades on the separation between, and

⁵⁷ See Lucci, “John Locke on Atheism,” 230–34.

⁵⁸ *Letter*, 6:36.

respective limits of, civil and ecclesiastical power. The power of the magistrate does not extend beyond what is necessary for the public good. The power of the Church does not extend beyond its own voluntary membership. As long as the practices of a non-Christian “Church” do no violence to the public good, they ought to be tolerated, even if a number of other Churches find such practices sacrilegious.

Locke also repeats a version of the *inadvisability* argument within the domain of religious practice. Again, all princes are orthodox unto themselves and may oppress religious practice as they see fit. Locke warns Christians of how their practices could be oppressed in a foreign land ruled by a pagan prince, so they should consider being more tolerant of pagan religious practices in their own lands, especially if they were to grow to become the dominant religion and possess the power of the magistrate.⁵⁹ This is the “golden rule” corollary of the inadvisability argument, i.e., it is inadvisable for Christian majorities to persecute the practices of other non-Christian religions lest this intolerance be delivered back upon Christians when they are in the minority. As an extension of the idea of princes being *orthodox* to themselves, one might also add, in the current context, that they are *orthoprax* to themselves as well and often disagree as to what the correct religious practices are. Remember, indifferent things cease to be indifferent when tied to soteriology, and some practices—such as good works, according to Locke—may actually be required for salvation. If one were simply to follow whatever practices the prince dictates, then salvation and damnation would be arbitrary, depending solely on one’s fortune (or misfortune) of birth. Locke also says that forcing people to adopt religious practices that are contrary to their conscience would be “to command them to offend God.”⁶⁰ This echoes a point made in connection with the original inadvisability argument: feigned belief is itself sinful and creates its own roadblock to salvation.

Even if Locke redeploys his normative political arguments from impermissibility and inadvisability within the domain of practice, it is harder to see how his descriptive political argument from impossibility could be applied to practice. The impossibility argument relies on the distinction between practice and belief to draw its conclusion. Whereas practices are *external* actions that can be coerced by the magistrate (even if they ought not to be), Locke holds that *internal* beliefs cannot be similarly coerced. However, as we have argued above, external belief still has a cognitive component, viz. a normative cognitive orientation toward practice. Locke himself acknowledges that certain practices within the context of varieties of Christianity have implications for salvation, and this suggests to us that Locke could perhaps countenance both internal as well as external belief as constituting true religion, which could allow Locke’s descriptive political argument from impossibility to be more universally applicable.

In this vein, one could argue that even if the magistrate is able to constrain the *practice* that the external belief concerns, the magistrate cannot constrain the normative *cognitive* orientation toward this practice. For example, even if the magistrate can constrain a Jew

⁵⁹ *Letter*, 6:35–36.

⁶⁰ *Letter*, 6:30.

from *practicing shechita* (ritual animal slaughter), the magistrate cannot constrain a Jew from believing that they *ought* to practice *shechita*. This would suggest that, just like internal belief, the cognitive component of external belief cannot be coerced. At the same time, however, when one looks at the history of crypto-Judaism, or of any “crypto” community forced to dissemble, when a practice is forbidden for long enough (e.g., by the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions), a community can lose the sense of obligation toward that practice.⁶¹ Alternatively, a practice can come to take on a new cognitive significance—*shechita* ceases to be “*shechita*”—that is compatible with the religious views of the magistrate and the dominant society.⁶² In either case, however, the coercive force of the magistrate, over enough time, *can* modify external belief. As we will argue below, this reveals an interesting feature of the relationship between internal and external belief.

Notwithstanding the objections to the impossibility argument within the domain of belief and Locke’s own rejection of its application to the domain of practice, however, we further believe there is a descriptive political argument that can be constructed for constraining the civil power with respect to religious practice. Returning to our distinction between internal and external religious belief, there are epistemic connections between these two forms of belief. To repeat a prior example, a Catholic can believe they *ought* to eat the bread at Communion (a practice or external belief) because they believe the substance of the bread wholly transforms into the substance of the body of Christ upon the pronouncement of the priestly Eucharistic prayer (an internal belief). These internal and external beliefs are, of course, linked. However, for the Christian, what matters more is the orthodoxic internal belief, the full and inward persuasion of the mind, rather than the external one.

The crucial idea, both conceptually as well as historically, is that internal beliefs can float freely from the external beliefs. Whereas Christian true religion consists mostly (if not exclusively) of internal beliefs, non-Christian true religion consists mostly (if not exclusively) of external beliefs. Put differently, while Christianity generally obligates *orthodoxy*, non-Christian religions generally obligate *orthopraxy*. As noted at the outset, whereas orthodoxy is lowest common denominator of all varieties of Christianity, orthopraxy (sometimes in conjunction with orthodoxy) is the lowest common denominator of most non-Christian religions. A key feature of the spread of Christianity (or of any proselytizing religion) throughout history often has been allowing a convert to maintain the practices they believe are essential to their religion (external belief) while changing the epistemic relations (assuming there were any) to a new set of internal beliefs. In essence, one continues one’s past practices, although one now does this for a different set of reasons. We have already alluded to this idea in connection with crypto-Judaism, but there is another excellent example from Christian history.

⁶¹ Many thanks to Shelley Weinberg for highlighting this example.

⁶² With crypto-Judaism, this has led to scholarly debate as to whether practices that seem Jewish are really Jewish at all. See Seth Kunin, *Juggling Identities: Identity and Authenticity among the Crypto-Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

Part of the long history of the shift in predominance around the Mediterranean from Greek and Roman polytheism to Christianity involved the Christianizing of Greek and Roman gods and goddesses. For instance, during the 3rd and 4th centuries, cults to Demeter, the Greek goddess of the harvest, agriculture, grain, fertility, and law, began to shift, along with the generalized conversion to Christianity, to the figure of Saint Demetrios of Thessaloniki (Greece). Saint Demetrios is known as a Warrior Saint and also as a patron saint of agriculture, peasants, shepherds. During the 4th century, as cults to Demeter began to wane, prayer to, veneration of, and offerings for—among other things—favorable harvests and blessings of grain (external belief of practice) grew up in their place, but now with Saint Demetrios's Christian identity, story, and significance in the place of earlier Demeter.⁶³ A similar shift took place for other so-called “Warrior Saints,” especial powerful martial saints from Early Christianity whose *Lives* (hagiographical biographies) tied them to the waves of early Christian martyrs produced during the most forceful persecutions of the Roman Emperors Decian (ca. 250) and Diocletian (ca. 303).⁶⁴ For instance, Saint Mercurius arose out of cults to the god Mercury, and Saint George arose out of cults to Zeus-Baal in the Eastern Mediterranean (Γεώργιος or *Geórgios*, the Greek word for “farmer” or “agriculturalist,” developed out of both the *function* of the saint for agriculturalists and the Zeus-Georgios cult of the 3rd century.)⁶⁵

Returning to the context of Locke and following the example of history, a Christian magistrate could allow one to continue practices (orthopraxy) one has in the past, as long as one does it for a different set of reasons (orthodoxy). Insofar as the non-Christian understands the religious practices to be more important than the reasons for doing them, the deal is an attractive one, especially if this affords socioeconomic opportunity or allows one to avoid a fiery death.⁶⁶ The gods of ancient Greece and Rome, as we saw above,

⁶³ See Hans Kloft, *Mysterienkulte der antike: Götter, menschen, rituale*, 4th ed. (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2010), 25: “Der heliage Demetrius, Schutzheiliger der Bauern und Hirten, zugleich Beschützer des Ackerbaus, schient, wie es Nilsson vermutet hat, zumindest teilweise das Erbe der mächtigen paganen Muttergottheit angetreten zu haben.” “The holy Demetrius, patron saint of farmers and shepherds, at the same time protector of agriculture, seems, as Nilsson supposed, to have accepted at least a partial inheritance from the powerful pagan Mother Goddess (translation ours).”

⁶⁴ See Christopher Walter, *The Warrior Saints in Byzantine Art and Tradition* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003), 4, 22–29.

⁶⁵ Allaire B. Stallsmith, “The Name of Demeter Thesmophoros,” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 48 (2008): 116. See also Jean Jannoray, “Nouvelles inscriptions de Lébadée,” *Bulletin de correspondance Hellénique* 64–65, (1940): 54; Allaire Brumfield, “Cakes in the Liknon: Votives from the Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore on Acrocorinth,” *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* 66, no. 1 (1997): 170; Erica Ferg, *Geography, Religion, Gods, and Saints in the Eastern Mediterranean* (New York: Routledge, 2020): 145–146, 247.

⁶⁶ When talking about the duplicity of conversion through coercion, Locke notes: “For it will be difficult to persuade men of sense that he who with dry eyes and satisfaction of mind can deliver his brother to the executioner to be burnt alive, does sincerely and heartily concern himself to save that brother from the flames of hell in the world to come.” *Letter*, 6:23.

became the saints of Christianity (internal belief), but one continued to pray to a figure possessing similar attributes, to give offerings, and to engage in the seasonal rituals (external belief) to which one felt obligated.⁶⁷

Of course, it is *possible* for the Christian magistrate to eliminate religious practices, and, according to Locke, the magistrate should do so when such practices threaten the public good. As a matter of historical fact, however, the elimination of non-Christian religious practice has proven *dispensable*. Whereas Locke argued it is impossible for the magistrate to coerce religious belief, we are instead arguing it is unnecessary for the magistrate to coerce religious practice. The external belief is largely irrelevant for Christian conversion (where internal belief is more operative) and attempting to eliminate it could make the non-Christian less persuadable since, for her, the external belief or practice is likely what is most important. This *dispensability* argument is a descriptive political argument for the limitation of state power relative to religious *practice* within the Christian context.⁶⁸ Although this might limit the scope of the argument, the limitation is a virtue here since Locke is viewing the entire issue of toleration from a Christian lens (again, consider his Christian definition of “true religion”). Clearly, this is not an argument for the toleration of non-Christian religions *per se* because it would involve conversion to Christianity (internal belief). However, our argument is at least in keeping with Locke’s own form of argumentation for toleration in that it consists of a negative argument for why the magistrate’s power is or should be constrained (rather than a positive argument for religious toleration itself).

Locke’s negative arguments, however, only have their full force considered together. Just as Locke intended his original set of arguments to form an integrated and mutually reinforcing triad, the *descriptive* dispensability argument should be considered in conjunction with the *normative* inadvisability and impermissibility arguments as reapplied to practice. Even if the Christian magistrate accepts that a substantive change in external belief is unnecessary for conversion (internal belief), they might nonetheless persist in their desire to coerce external belief. Christian history has many examples of this, e.g., the Spanish Catholic practice of creating a culture of conspicuous pork consumption in formerly Muslim areas. This is where the normative arguments can be helpful in checking the desires of the magistrate by demonstrating that the coercion of external belief is both impermissible and inadvisable when those beliefs pose no threat to the public good.

⁶⁷ This underscores an important point of difference between Roman polytheists and Christians. Whereas the Christians could not bring themselves to sacrifice to the Roman gods since they viewed such practices as incompatible with their own internal religious beliefs (what mattered most for Christians), polytheists could eventually adopt Christian internal beliefs since doing so often could incorporate their practices (what mattered most to polytheists) as those Roman gods transitioned into Christian saints.

⁶⁸ Beyond changing the domain of application from belief to practice, all we are doing in this argument is modifying the *modality* of Locke’s claim. Instead of saying that P is *impossible*, we are rather saying that P is *unnecessary*.

Whereas some commentators have argued that Locke's arguments for toleration *cannot* be extended to non-Christian religions because of his Christian assumptions, we have argued, in contrast, that Locke's normative arguments can be extended to non-Christian religions and that a form of his descriptive argument can be extended to non-Christian religious practice. Conjoining Locke's impossibility argument with regard to belief with our dispensability argument with regard to practice, one has a two-step descriptive political argument for (at least) the limitation of civil power with respect to non-Christian religion. The case for tolerating non-Christian religions becomes even more robust when considering the modified versions of all three political arguments together.

Even more, however, the dispensability argument leads us to an observation about the potency of religious practice (external belief), the "life and power" of most religions. The world's religious traditions are replete with examples of practices that continue—with changed internal beliefs—into other religious traditions. In our own conversion example above, the non-Christian practice *ceases* to be non-Christian, but this is not because the external belief (practice) itself has substantially changed; rather, the internal belief to which the external belief is epistemically connected has been replaced. Similarly, continuation of practice involving changed internal beliefs is enormously common in the history of world religions and is not limited to cases of intentional conversion. For instance, returning to our examples from section three, we can see that all five Pillars of Islamic practice have their antecedents in earlier regional religious practices. The *shahādah* arose in the context of contemporaneous Trinitarian and Christological debates and perhaps as a means by which orthodoxically to distinguish early members of the Muslim community from their Christian and Jewish contemporaries. *Ṣalāt* practices have their roots both in Zoroastrian practice (prayer five times per day based upon the location in the sky of the sun) and in very early Christian prayer practices (prostrate prayer). *Zakāt* practices arose from charitable giving practices in contemporaneous Christianity. The monthlong fast during Ramadan emerged in a context of and with relation to Jewish and Christian fasting practices. Finally, the *Hajj* pilgrimage consists of the performance of rituals undertaken in remembrance of the life of the Patriarch Abraham, whose stories originate in the Hebrew Bible, and the *ʿĪd al-ʿAdḥa* sacrifice has its roots in blood sacrifice rituals practiced in Judaism and other ancient Near Eastern religions.

5. Conclusion

Most of the philosophical commentary dealing with the political arguments in Locke's *Letter* has uncritically assumed his conception of true religion, i.e., that it consists of the "inward and full persuasion of the mind," or orthodoxy. Limiting Locke's political arguments to orthodoxy, however, confines them almost exclusively to a Christian context. In other words, his political arguments could only be used to defend the toleration of different forms of (non-Catholic) Christianity. Locke himself, however, intends these arguments to apply to non-Christian religions as well (e.g., Judaism, Islam, and paganism). Whereas Christians focus mostly (though not exclusively) on *orthodoxy* (assent to a creed or doctrine), non-Christians focus mostly (though not exclusively) on

orthopraxy (obligation to the performance of certain practices). This poses a prima facie problem for Locke's political arguments in the *Letter*.

Although relatively little attention has been paid to the second half of Locke's *Letter* as compared to the first, in the second half of the *Letter* Locke talks at some length about the toleration of religious practice. He deploys variations of his normative political arguments (impermissibility and inadvisability) to the toleration of religious practices that do not threaten the public good. The trickier problem is how to make a descriptive political argument for toleration within the domain of religious practice. After all, the magistrate clearly has the power to eliminate religious practices if he so desires.

Consequently, one cannot rely entirely on Locke's *impossibility* argument. Instead, we constructed a new descriptive political argument for toleration that incorporates the historical insights of section three while retaining the Christian standpoint of Locke's *Letter*. We also offered an expanded definition of and a lowest-common-denominator test for the categorization of religions as orthodoxic or orthopraxic on the basis of those fundamental obligations shared by adherents across sectarian lines. All of this leads us to offer a perhaps surprising observation about religious history: religious *practice* has been far more resilient over the millennia than has religious *belief*. Whereas orthodoxies come and go, praxis stubbornly persists. Internal beliefs alter against an abiding background of external beliefs as religions rise and fall.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Many thanks to the anonymous referees at *Locke Studies* for their helpful comments as well as to the participants of the 2022 John Locke Conference at the American University in Bulgaria.

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