

Locke and the Spirit of Toleration.

THE recent tercentenary of the birth of John Locke, the eminent philosopher whom a modern scholar has described as "the greatest English name in the history of philosophy," was made the occasion of worthy commemoration by students of philosophical enquiry; he will repay further attention by the friends and upholders of freedom in Church and State. His name is historic and his work abides in the splendid but chequered story of Toleration.

Locke was born at Wrington, Somerset, of substantial middle-class Puritan parentage, on August 29th, 1632, and he died at Oates, about twenty miles north of London, on October 28th, 1704.

It is important to notice that his life covered one of the most troubled periods in English history, and that he had as his contemporaries some of the most gifted men in the intellectual history of Europe. The seventeenth century has been called "the century of genius," and we are in no mood to dispute that description when we recall some of its greater names: Bacon, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Harvey, Galileo, Newton, Descartes, Pascal, Boyle, Spinoza, Leibnitz, and Locke himself. Not all of these, of course, were Locke's exact contemporaries, but they all belonged to his century, and with some of them he had personal intimacy. One of the most important of his later friendships was with Newton, whom he often referred to as "the incomparable Mr. Newton," and of whom he wrote in a private letter of 1703: "Mr. Newton is really a very valuable man, not only for his wonderful skill in mathematics, but in divinity too, and his great knowledge in the Scriptures, wherein I know few his equals." Newton was knighted in 1708, four years after Locke's death. The two men probably first met in the 1670's, as members of the Royal Society.

After spending six years at Westminster School, where, with John Dryden, he sat at the feet of Dr. Busby, in 1652 Locke went up to Oxford as a Junior Student of Christ Church. In due course he became a Senior Student (or Fellow), but in 1684 he was deprived of his fellowship by Dr. Fell, under pressure from Lord Sunderland, acting on the initiative of Charles II.

The most important influences of Locke's life in Oxford

were his personal contacts with the then Dean of Christ Church (and Vice-Chancellor of the University), Dr. John Owen, and his reading of the philosophy of Descartes.

Locke's literary bequest to posterity can be easily stated, but it is far from easy to appraise its rich and varied quality, and the range and continuance of its influence. They have become a part of our English heritage. A bare mention of his more notable works must, therefore, suffice. They include four "Letters on Toleration" (1689, 1690, 1692, 1706); "Two Treatises of Government" (1690); "An Essay concerning Human Understanding" (1690; fourth edition, with Locke's final revision, 1700); "Some Thoughts Concerning Education" (1695); "The Reasonableness of Christianity" (1695). Through these writings Locke touched and influenced religion, in its principles and in its practice; politics; the theory of knowledge and the principles of metaphysics; and finally the methods of education of the young. His greatest book, it is generally agreed, is his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. "Locke's 'Essay' and Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason,'" says a modern philosopher, "are the sources of the philosophy of our epoch."

As an author, Locke has been cited as the first example in the English language of writing upon abstract subjects with simplicity and perspicuity, and the spirit that animated him throughout was earnest and irenic. Without a doubt, John Locke was a good man as well as an eminent thinker.

It is probably no accident, but rather significant of much in the essential man, John Locke, that his earliest published work (and his last) was "A Letter Concerning Toleration." Written in Latin during his enforced retirement in Holland, and probably completed by 1685, the first "Letter" was printed in Gouda in 1689, under the title "Epistola de Toleratione." It was rapidly translated into Dutch, French, and English. In its Latin form it was dedicated to Limborch, a liberal-minded professor of Theology at Amsterdam and a leader of those who protested ("the Remonstrants") against the extreme Calvinism of the Synod of Dort. Further "Letters" in defence of Toleration appeared successively in 1690, 1692 and (an unfinished "Fourth Letter") in 1706.

It is important and fitting to notice that Locke's tolerant spirit and outlook, and his subsequent powerful advocacy of the same, owed much to the quickening influence of the great Puritan and Independent divine, Dr. John Owen, who was Dean of Christ Church during his undergraduate days. Owen was a man of truly catholic spirit as well as a great theologian, whose works deeply influenced, among many others, some of the greatest preachers of British Nonconformity. His "Pneumatologia" is

still standard for students of the Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and according to the late Principal Thomas Rees, of Bangor, "his work constitutes the most elaborate, comprehensive, and systematic study of the subject in existence." Owen stands out, in addition, as a defender of toleration in days of warring sects, when the spirit of intolerant (albeit earnest) exclusiveness was rife. Locke proved an apt and responsive pupil. Although he left the Independency of Owen and of his own father in favour of the Church of England, his essential spirit remained unchanged, and he continued to advocate the claims of each separated religious group (within certain specified limits, to be noted later) to an equal right to respect and to freedom for independent development. His chief reason for joining the Anglican Church was that he came to believe it to be nearest to the historic traditions of the centuries and (which is very significant) to have the best chance of restoring theological peace to England by becoming an inclusive, comprehensive Church. The Anglican idea of comprehension owes a great deal to him and to his enlightened, persuasive, and consistent advocacy. Locke was ever a seeker of peace (some might say a compromiser!) through the generous toleration of mutual differences. He sought and pursued a middle ground, whereon moderate men of all parties could unite.

Much that Locke wrote in his pleas for toleration has become so embedded in modern civilized thought and practice that it is easy to overlook both his originality and his courage. His chief principle is a sharp distinction between the spheres of Church and State: "I esteem it above all things necessary to distinguish exactly the business of civil government from that of religion, and to settle the just bounds that lie between the one and the other." According to him, the State is "a society of men constituted only for the procuring, preserving, and advancing their own civil interests. Civil interest I call life, liberty, health, and indolency of body; and the possession of outward things, such as money, lands, houses, furniture, and the like. It is the duty of the civil magistrate, by the impartial execution of equal laws, to secure unto all the people in general, and to every one of his subjects in particular, the just possession of these things belonging to this life." That is, the State is a secular or temporal device for the better and the more secure enjoyment of the goods of this world. It has no concern with "the care of souls," which is, moreover, a sphere or function quite beyond its competence. In the providence of God, the salvation of souls and the public worship of God are the proper concern of the Church. But whilst the State is one there may be, as there are, many churches, and the State must be fair to all, show no political favour to any,

and refuse to make membership in any one church a condition of public office or of promotion in civil life. A Church, then, Locke defines as "a voluntary society of men, joining themselves together of their own accord, in order to the public worshipping of God, in such a manner as they judge acceptable to Him, and effectual to the salvation of their souls. I say it is a free and voluntary society. Nobody is born a member of any church. 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 hope of salvation, as it was the only cause of his entrance into that communion, so it can be the only reason for his stay there."

These matters being thus determined, Locke proceeds to enquire "how far the duty of toleration extends, and what is required from every one by it."

First, he holds that "No church is bound by the duty of toleration to retain any such person in her bosom, as after admonition continues obstinately to offend against the laws of the society. . . . But, nevertheless, in all such cases, care is to be taken that the sentence of excommunication and the execution thereof carry with it no rough usage of word or action, whereby the ejected person may anyways be damnified in body or estate."

Secondly, "No private person has any right in any manner to prejudice another person in his civil enjoyments, because he is of another church or religion. All the rights and franchises that belong to him as a man or as a denizen are inviolably to be preserved to him. These are not the business of religion. No violence or injury is to be offered him, whether he be Christian or pagan." And so he concludes: "Nobody, therefore, in fine, neither single persons nor churches, nor even commonwealths, have any just title to invade the civil rights and worldly goods of each other, upon pretence of religion."

But, believing and affirming as he does that "Absolute liberty, just and true liberty, equal and impartial liberty, is the thing that we stand in need of," Locke contends that there are limits beyond which toleration must not go. Purely speculative opinions are not dangerous, but there are some practical opinions as to right conduct with which the State must be concerned lest its very existence be imperilled. The safety of the State sets the limit to complete toleration. There can be no toleration for opinions that are subversive of society, nor towards men who, under cover of religion, seek to gain control over the State for purely sectarian advantage. Further, the State cannot tolerate such religious groups as profess allegiance to a foreign prince, giving him an authority higher than or more binding than that of

the State. Finally, no toleration can be shown to atheists—men who deny the fact of God.

The last two of these limitations in his otherwise so generous scheme of toleration require comment.

The refusal of toleration to religious groups that owe a foreign allegiance was due to fear of the Roman Catholic Church. The Reformation was not so very far behind, and Roman Catholic association with the political absolutism of the Stuarts was fresh in English minds. That church still played a political part in Europe, and Locke could not agree to tolerate "a church constituted on such a bottom that all who enter into it do thereby deliver themselves up to the protection and service of another prince." Papal control over men's consciences, and therefore over their allegiance, he felt, endangered English self-determination and English social security.

His refusal to tolerate atheists was due to the theological basis which he gave to moral sanctions. In the long run, atheism, by its denial of order and reason in the universe, makes for the dissolution of society. To quote Locke's own words, "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. Besides also, those that by their atheism undermine and destroy all religion, can have no pretence of religion whereupon to challenge the privilege of toleration." Other forms of ethical theory are to be found in Locke's writings, but the view to which he constantly returned is that the one final sanction for morality is theological. The good life and the security of society alike depend upon belief in God—that God, we may add, who is revealed in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ.

Locke died, as he himself declared, "in perfect charity with all men, and in sincere communion with the whole Church of Christ, by whatever names Christ's followers please to call themselves."

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