

The Promulgation of Right Morals

John Locke on the Church and the Christian as the Salvation of Society

Jonathan S. Marko
Cornerstone University

In this essay, I argue that John Locke's belief that Christianity is epistemologically vital to the spread and maintenance of right morals in society is demonstrated by the mutual reinforcement between Locke's argument against innate ideas that is most prominent in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and his conclusion in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* that a great shift in moral thinking started with Christ's advent. Right moral principles are neither easily wrought nor innate but can seem to be so because we often take for granted the Christian (or Christianized) milieu in which we have been raised. As a result, the removal of Scripture's authoritative position from the public square will result in an inevitable decline in its quality and safety as society starts toward a morality of convenience. The conclusions of this article run counter to the frequent claims that Locke's advancement of the Christian faith is feigned or in some way intentionally divisive, and it establishes an important logical link between two of Locke's greatest works that scholars have failed to reconcile.

An apparent diastasis between two of John Locke's (1632–1704) most noted works, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (henceforth *Essay*) and *The Reasonableness of Christianity (ROC)*, concerning the epistemology of moral principles has caught the attention of Locke scholars in recent generations.¹ In the former work, he lays out arguments against the innate idea or principle tradition, and the thought of one of their number, Lord Herbert of Cherbury,² noting among other things that because we have faculties that can prove so-called innate principles to be certain, it is unlikely, therefore, that they are innate: "no less unreasonable would it be to attribute several Truths, to the Impressions of Nature, and innate Characters, when we may observe in our selves Faculties, fit

to attain as easie and certain Knowledge of them.”³ In fact, some think that due to Locke’s emphases on moral principles and human reason in the *Essay*, and his professed desire elsewhere to produce a work demonstrating moral principles, that his magnum opus is at least in part a ground-clearing project toward that desire.⁴ Locke’s *ROC*, however, which he claims to be ecumenical in thrust but in opposition to the natural religion of deism, stresses the need for divine revelation for ascertaining right moral principles. This seeming incongruity regarding Locke’s differently described attainment of moral principles in his two works has perplexed some.⁵ One noted scholar sums up the problem, asking, if Locke did not think morality was demonstrable, as seems to be the case in *ROC*, why did he write the *Essay*?⁶ That Locke changed his position in the mid-1690s would be befuddling since the *Essay* continued to go through revisions up to the end of his life, with Locke maintaining in all editions that moral principles can be proven and made certain.

Scholarship has responded to this quagmire and other apparent inconsistencies between the two works in different ways. The significant group of scholars that reads Locke as religiously surreptitious see this inconsistency as evidence that Locke appeals to the Bible (exoterically) while simultaneously trying to undercut its authority (esoterically). For instance, one of these scholars argues that Locke’s *ROC* is a covert attempt to nudge his readers toward the fully natural theology promulgated by deism, the very position against which Locke claims to be debating in that work. On a related note, some find his ecumenical claims insincere and read *ROC* as being religiously sectarian.⁷ Yet others, as alluded to above, take Locke’s claims in *ROC*, such as his assertion that a moral society needs the Bible and the Christian faith, as sincere, though they acknowledge that there are apparent, though not definitive, inconsistencies between his two noted works, not the least of which is indicated above.⁸

It appears, however, that scholarship on all sides has not sufficiently considered the implications of a few important consistencies between the *Essay* and *ROC* that show them not to be at odds, at least pertaining to the epistemology of morals. In both works, Locke opposes the innate principles tradition. As I will argue below, while he explicitly enters the lists with Lord Herbert of Cherbury and the innate principles tradition in the *Essay*, he does so implicitly in *ROC* when he discusses five advantages of Christ’s advent and, thus, advantages of revelation in his offensive against the natural religion of the deists. Moreover, in both he admits that morals are demonstrable and can be made certain and, further, insists that we tend to take our intellectual milieu for granted.

In this article, I will argue that John Locke’s belief that Christianity is epistemologically vital to the spread and maintenance of right morals in society is

demonstrated by the mutual reinforcement between Locke's argument against innate ideas that is most prominent in the *Essay* and his conclusion in *ROC* that a great shift in moral thinking started with Christ's advent. Right moral principles, though demonstrable, are neither easily wrought nor innate but can seem to be so to the many who have taken for granted the Christian (or Christianized) milieu in which they have been raised, such as the deists. As a result, the removal of Scripture's position of authority from the public square will result in an inevitable decline in its quality and safety as society starts toward a morality of convenience. The conclusions of this article run counter to the frequent claims that Locke's advancement of the Christian faith is feigned or in some way intentionally divisive, and it establishes an important logical link between two of Locke's greatest works. They further index why Locke did not alter the *Essay* based on what is found in *ROC* regarding the epistemology of moral principles.

This article will be presented in three parts. In part 1, I will briefly delve into the thought of Lord Herbert of Cherbury on the topic of innate notions or principles and his brand of "natural religion," which will be followed by Locke's response to him and the innate principles tradition in the *Essay*. I will defend my suggestion that Locke's criticisms of innate ideas guard against the deistic notion that Christ was just a restorer of natural religion and vice versa in part 2. Thus, I will show how *ROC* is built on the *Essay*'s position on innate principles to prove humanity's need for divine revelation without contradicting the earlier work. In the last part, I will discuss the implications of these notions and the importance of the church and the Christian in keeping society together in Locke's day. There I will qualify Locke's thoughts from the *Essay* and *ROC* regarding Christianity and society with his work, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (henceforth *Letter*). In the end, Locke's voice in *ROC* will be described as neither surreptitious nor sectarian but rather sincere and ecumenical.

Locke's Assault on Innate Principles

The notion of the *tabula rasa* or blank slate is one of the reasons that Locke's *Essay* has received so much attention since its first edition. He was not, however, the first or last to critique the widespread teachings of innate ideas or principles, notions that are allegedly impressed on our minds. Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583–1648), Locke's main interlocutor in his assault on innate ideas, writes in *De Veritate*:

Let us have done with the theory that asserts that our mind is a clean sheet, as though we obtained our capacity for dealing with objects from objects themselves. For while we can think of the mind as a closed book in so far as

it is not open to objects, it cannot be justly called a clean sheet, as an appeal to consciousness, the final test concerning objects, shows.⁹

As will be demonstrated later, one is remiss in approaching *ROC* without some understanding of John Locke's arguments against innate ideas in the *Essay* and those of his predecessor and fellow countryman, Lord Herbert, for innate principles or common notions.

Some may find it strange that Lord Herbert would receive attention from Locke even though his work was not very current at the time. Although *De Veritate* was penned nearly seventy years before the 1690 publication of the first edition of the *Essay*, the *Essay* itself had been growing in the mind of Locke for a considerable length of time. Furthermore, despite the fact that perhaps Lord Herbert might have been an example that few intellectuals would have cared to defend, he is to this day associated with natural religion and is fashioned by some as the "Father of Deism," the deists being those who Locke claims to be preaching to in *ROC*. Whatever the case, Lord Herbert receives an explicit response to his thought in the *Essay* and an implicit one in *ROC*.

Lord Herbert of Cherbury's most noted treatment of common notions or innate ideas appears in the fifth chapter of *De Veritate*: "Common notions are so called because they are understood by all normal men, so long as their objects, whether they be things, terms or signs, remain constant."¹⁰ However, Lord Herbert acknowledges, some notions that are commonly held are not necessarily common notions in the strict sense. We can identify a common notion as such if it has the following six characteristics. First, common notions or principles have priority; they serve as the givens in our discursive reasoning. Second, they are basic or are not derived from other notions; they are independent. Third, they are universal, except in those with mental impairment, insanity, or in those that have actively suppressed them. Fourth and fifth, respectively, they are certain and they have utility for our preservation in this world and the next. Finally, their truth is seen immediately.¹¹ The reason that these are grasped immediately and without the use of discursive reasoning is due to the fact that we have numerous faculties within called natural instincts that conform to these principles without. When we are confronted with some common notion, the associated faculty or natural instinct is activated, so to speak, and we are made instantaneously aware that we are confronted with truth. Both the expressions of these faculties that bring this awareness to the mind and the external notions themselves can be referred to as common notions. As a result, the reader of *De Veritate* is informed in what sense common notions can be said to be imprinted on our minds.¹²

It is Lord Herbert's subsequent description of the five common religious notions that earns him the moniker, the Father of Deism. In short order, the five religious common notions are:

1. There is a supreme God.
2. The sovereign deity ought to be worshipped.
3. Virtue and piety are the most important aspects of our religious obeisance.
4. We must expiate our sins by repentance.
5. There is reward or punishment after this life.¹³

These five notions are ultimately our religious authority, and they stand in judgment over any purported revelation or doctrine constructed from it. He writes, "Every religion which proclaims a revelation is not good, nor is every doctrine which is taught under its authority always essential or even valuable." Therefore, common notions afford us with the ability to definitively rule out some religious claims as being legitimate. Everyone is responsible for his or her own beliefs, and therefore God gave all normal people common notions by which to adjudge the various positive religions. Lord Herbert remarks, "I value these so highly that I would say that the book, religion, and prophet which adheres most closely to them is the best."¹⁴ This is the foundation of the true catholic church. While Lord Herbert does not dismiss special divine revelation and at points expresses appreciation for it, such revelation must not contradict the common notions concerning religion if they are to be considered as such.¹⁵

In Locke's interaction with the teachings of innate principles or common notions, he does not immediately offer an explicit critique of Lord Herbert's thought. He opens his discourse: "It is an established Opinion amongst some Men, That there are in the Understanding certain *innate Principles*; some primary Notions, *Koivai 'évvoiai* [common notions], Characters, as it were stamped upon the Mind of Man, which the Soul receives in its very first Being; and brings into the World with it." He states that his goal is to "set down the Reasons, that made me doubt of the Truth of that Opinion, as an Excuse for my Mistake, if I be in one, which I leave to be consider'd by those, who, with me, dispose themselves to embrace the Truth, where-ever they find it."¹⁶ Locke then embarks into his famed attempt at deconstructing teachings on innate ideas or principles. He starts with an analysis on speculative principles (e.g., whatever is, is, and the law of noncontradiction) and from there moves to moral or practical principles. For both, he is adamant that even if principles have universal assent (and he does not think that any actually do) that does not prove them to be innate.¹⁷

Concentrating on speculative principles, he notes that the lack of awareness children and the uneducated have of them argues against their purported innateness. An apparent common response to such an observation is that these principles are there but that these souls simply have not accessed them, to which Locke responds: “To say a Notion is imprinted on the Mind, and yet at the same time to say, that the mind is ignorant of it, and never yet took notice of it, is to make this Impression nothing.”¹⁸ If we allow some to assert that we do not have to be conscious of innate principles for us to know them or that one comes to know them when they come to a mature use of their reason, how might one separate acquired principles from innate?¹⁹

He finds the defense of innate moral principles even more dubious. Locke presents an array of insightful objections to the identification of any moral principle as being innate. While acknowledging that he does think that moral principles are capable of certainty, it is not through intuition, but as noted before, through a laborious logical demonstration akin to mathematical proofs whose connections of one step to another are unquestionably certain.²⁰ When any moral principle is subject to doubt, our response, Locke remarks, is to provide a proof that comes by way of discursive reasoning. This alone is evidence on two counts that moral principles are not innate because the fact that they are doubted strikes against their being such as does our natural proclivity to argue for them through logical proofs. Furthermore, if these moral principles were internalized, as the innate principles tradition thinks, one would always adhere to them. On a related note, moral principles that end in contemplation are not distinguishable from speculative principles. Moreover, Locke admits that nature has put within us the desire for happiness and the aversion to misery, but these are inclinations and not impressions of truth on the understanding.²¹ Add to these objections above the great diversity of moral opinions throughout space and time. For instance, while not acceptable in his day or part of the world, there are peoples who have widely practiced the exposure of unwanted newborns.²² Breaking a rule does not argue that it is unknown, but “the *generally allowed breach of it anywhere, I say, is a Proof, that it is not innate.*”²³

It is in the discussion of innate practical (or moral) principles that Locke pounces on the five religious common notions as presented by Lord Herbert of Cherbury (whether Locke reads *De Veritate* with accuracy and charity will not be decided here). Locke does admit that the five religious common notions are cogent and that a reasonable person will assent to them, though this hardly makes them innate. He notes first that if one were to abide by the marks of religious common notions that Lord Herbert actually employs, there would perhaps be hundreds more since none of the five religious common notions that he mentions have

the six qualifying characteristics of innateness that he discusses. In opposition to these notions being innate, Locke's position is that the notion of God and his existence is derived and, further, that the remainder of Lord Herbert's so-called common notions concerning religion presuppose this reasoned idea of a supreme Deity, thus disqualifying the remaining four as being innate. Similarly, some of the religious common notions contain general ideas such as sin, virtue, and piety that are arrived at through inductive reasoning that begins with specific ideas. The use of discursive reasoning, Locke argues, is evidence that these notions are not innate. But, if, for instance, the general concepts of vices and virtues were conceded by Locke to be innate as Lord Herbert seems to think, then there will be thousands of related but more specific rules and concepts that should also be admitted as being innate. In the end, however, Locke realizes that he has not definitively overturned Lord Herbert's teaching. His goal is to cast a pall of doubt on it and have the reader realize that there are other ways—better ways—to explain the ascertainment of these principles.²⁴

Fortunately, Locke does not only critique innate ideas but tries to explain the prevalence of the concept. Nurses and authorities inculcate doctrines into us from before the time we have memories and in the days before we were critical thinkers, “for white Paper receives any characters.”²⁵ In short, we remember the moral principles with which we have been raised, but we forget when or that we were taught them. Moreover, later in life, some might have reasons not to want to question their so-called innate tenets: doing so could result in the painful acknowledgment that they have abided by incorrect principles for a great portion of their lives, and they may even have to part ways with members of their party (political group, religion, and so forth).²⁶ It would then seem that ascertaining right moral principles requires humility, reflection, and the use of our reason to combat our prejudices, forgetfulness, and unreasoned, yet strong, assent to questionable morals and principles.

Locke's Argument for Divine Revelation

What has been detailed so far, namely Locke's argument against innate ideas, and, ensconced within that, his critique of Lord Herbert's teaching on religious common notions, is an important point of connection between the *Essay* and *ROC*. Regarding the latter work, this connection is found at its end. After a lengthy argument over justification that consumes most of the treatise (one is justified who): (1) believes in the one God, (2) believes Jesus is the Messiah, and (3) takes him as king),²⁷ he answers a few questions that the attentive reader might be asking, such as: What about those who have never heard the good news? Locke's

response is that it becomes apparent to humans in the course of their lives that we have a general duty to employ our reason. In using it, we have the potential to determine that there is a God and that there are some duties owed to him that we have not performed. Furthermore, a human, applying reason rightly, will notice that it is good and just when someone forgives one's own children and enemies upon their repentance, asking for pardon, and promising amendment. That person would be right to reason that our loving and merciful God would also forgive his children who likewise responded in the same way. Abiding by this reasoning, one could be justified without the gospel.²⁸

This evokes the entertainment of another question that a careful reader would likely ask: What need is there then of Christ's first coming? Locke notes that we cannot know every advantage, but he proffers five: (1) awareness of the one and only true God; (2) revealing our true duties toward him—that is, morality; (3) disabusal of superstitious worship; (4) encouragement to a life of virtue and piety due to teachings about rewards and punishments that will be dispensed in the hereafter; and (5) assistance from the Holy Spirit.²⁹ This is another significant series of strikes against Lord Herbert of Cherbury's five religious common notions, though he or they are not mentioned. That is, the first four revealed advantages that Locke lists counter Lord Herbert's proposal that his five religious common notions—there is one supreme God, he ought to be worshipped, virtue and piety are due to God, the need of repentance, and the existence of an afterlife where one is rewarded or punished—are all innate ideas. Curtly stated, because Christ disabused us of polytheism and wrong morals and that he taught humanity that there was an afterlife, it would seem that none of Lord Herbert's common notions, all of which include one or more of those aspects, should be considered innate; rather, they should be considered derived. Furthermore, it is difficult to imagine that the high degree to which the elements composing the advantages of Christ's advent in *ROC* match up with the elements of Lord Herbert's common religious notions is not intentional, especially given Locke's attack on his thought in the *Essay*.

Locke's defense of these advantages is largely from historical evidence, and he attempts to describe the epistemological reasons for these ancient circumstances. For instance, he draws the reader's attention to the prevalence of polytheism throughout the world before Christ—evidence against the idea of God being innate—and how monotheistic it became—whether Christian, Muslim, or Jewish—only subsequent to Christ's first coming. All one has to do is turn to an ancient history book. He explains that there was ample evidence to reason that there was one supreme God, and some of the Greek philosophers did, but a

variety of factors worked against such reasoning: lust, carelessness, fear, priests who benefit from excluding reason from religion, and so forth.³⁰

It is in his discussion of the second advantage, the revealing of morality, where he offers up his most concerted effort in arguing explicitly for the need for divine revelation and implicitly for the falsity of innate ideas. In fact, these two arguments are intertwined and mutually reinforcing. In addition, his chain of reasoning therein demonstrates the unlikelihood of being justified without the gospel and argues against the deistic claim that Christ is merely a restorer of natural religion. As he turns to argue for the soundness of his assertion of this advantage, Locke returns to his description of the general state of the world before Christ. Like the knowledge of the one true God, “This part of Knowledge, though cultivated with some care, by some of the Heathen Philosophers; Yet got little footing among the People.” The priests actively suppressed the use of human reason and moral thinking for their own gain, and few studied in the schools of the philosophers.³¹ The laws of the nations were expedient and largely based on convenience:

So much *Virtue* as was necessary to hold Societies together; and to contribute to the quiet of Governments; the Civil Laws of Common wealths taught, and forced upon Men that lived under Magistrates. But these Laws, being for the most part made by such who had no other aims but their own Power, reached no farther than those things, that would serve to tie Men together in subjection; Or at most, were directly to conduce to the Prosperity and Temporal Happiness of any People.³²

In short, the laws actually worked against attaining true moral principles in a variety of ways, offering only a moral veneer for society. Frequently, virtues were not promoted but forced, and, at best, the people were shown that obtaining them would offer a better temporal life.³³ What is more, Locke remarks that moralities differed from country to country and sect to sect, a piece of evidence also laid out against innate ideas in the *Essay*, as established above.³⁴ In sum, then, a perusal of societies and their laws through history should make one doubt that moral principles are innate because most of the world throughout time lacked upright laws.

If anyone were to attempt to confute the need of revelation and the unlikelihood of innate ideas, one would have to contend further with the following chain of reasoning offered by Locke. He invites the reader to compare the best pagan philosophers’ teachings on morality with those of the Christians. He thinks that the difference in reasonableness between the two is staggering and asserts that the advantageous ingredient is, no doubt, the New Testament. “[A]s soon as they

[the moral teachings of the Christian philosophers] are heard and considered, they are found to be agreeable to Reason.”³⁵ He immediately points out that one should not suppose one would have arrived at these truths oneself just because one readily assents to them. Instead, experience shows us that

Every one may observe a great many truths which he receives at first from others, and readily assents to, as consonant to reason; which he would have found it hard, and perhaps beyond his strength to have discovered himself. Native and Original truth, is not so easily wrought out of the Mine, as we who have it delivered, ready dug and fashion'd into our hands, are apt to imagine.³⁶

In the context of *ROC*, this strikes at, among other things, the deists who claim Christ is simply the restorer of natural religion.³⁷ That is, it is not as if Christ came to humanity after a hiatus from true morality; rather there is nothing in history to conclude that individuals or communities practiced the true moral principles found in the New Testament. Also of interest here, one could envision this very argument being leveled in the *Essay* against the notion of innate ideas beyond what I have already indicated above. That is, just as we should not assume that quick assent to a moral principle means that we could have determined it on our own, neither should we assume that it is innate because of our quick assent. Add to this our propensity to take the intellectual milieu in which we are raised and the moral principles delivered therein for granted. Those thinking that the New Testament was conveying no significant new moral instruction and thus not being vital to society would hold this because they have not considered that their moral society, in which they had been raised and that had inculcated right principles into them from an early age, is such because of the New Testament's influence. Because they overlook this societal influence, they might view the New Testament's moral principles, again, as being easily wrought by just about anyone or perhaps as innate.

Moreover, there is a further problem with systems of morality given before the time of Christ: the problem of authority. “Whatsoever should thus be universally useful, as a standard to which Men should conform their Manners, must have its Authority either from Reason or Revelation.” To this Locke adds:

He that any one will pretend to set up in this kind, and have his Rules pass for authentique directions, must shew, that either he builds his Doctrine upon Principles of Reason, self-Evident in themselves; and deduces all the parts of it from thence, by clear and evident demonstration: Or must shew his Commission from Heaven, that he comes with Authority from God, to deliver his Will and Commands to the World.³⁸

In short, to be authoritative and thus obligatory, the moral system must be shown to be indubitably certain, or it must be shown to be revealed, such as the accompanying miracles that testify to the prophet's or Messiah's or apostle's divine agency.³⁹ Locke therefore posits, even if all of the moral precepts promulgated in the New Testament had been collected from various other sources—a merely hypothetical situation—and put into one volume, one would still have this problem of authority. The people would have no obligation to adopt it until it is demonstrated or testified to by a miracle from God.⁴⁰ What is more, and what shows revelation to be the superior form of conveyance, is that few would have the wherewithal to follow such logical chains of reasoning: “The bulk of mankind have not leisure nor capacity for Demonstration; nor can carry a train of Proofs; Which in that way they must always depend upon for Conviction, and cannot be required to assent to till they see the Demonstration.”⁴¹ In short, as he pronounces in the *Essay*, most are not afforded with the ability to know and therefore must believe.⁴²

A few ironies in the scholarly literature focusing on *ROC* can now be pointed out. The very argument in *ROC* for the need for revelation in morality that is thought to be the most significant point of departure from the *Essay*, namely, regarding the claim in the latter that demonstration of moral principles is possible, is actually a continuation of his argument against innate principles that began in the latter work. (And as indicated, some of the historical evidence used for the five advantages in *ROC* is used against religious common notions advanced by Lord Herbert in the *Essay*.⁴³) What is more, Locke does not deny in *ROC* that demonstration of moral systems is possible. He in fact assumes such is the case in his remarks that only demonstration or clear evidence of divine revelation could make such a system obligatory.⁴⁴ It appears that Locke assumes that the attentive reader would make the connection between his argument against innate ideas and the argument for the need for revelation. If that is the case, he was wrong as evidenced by scholarship's perplexity.

Perhaps the fact that he does not treat divine revelation until the end of the lengthy *Essay* has been a source of confusion. His treatments of revelation in both works, however, are consistent: as long as a purported divine revelation has the discernible marks of being from God they ought to trump that which has no certainty but only probability. For instance, in the *Essay* he writes: “Whatsoever is divine *Revelation*, ought to over-rule all our Opinions, Prejudices, and Interests, and hath a right to be received with full Assent: Such a Submission as this of our *Reason* to *Faith*, takes not away the Land-marks of Knowledge”⁴⁵ While divine revelation will overturn things that are in Locke's economy only belief, that which is based on probability, it will not, because it is from God, overturn

certain knowledge such as the law of noncontradiction or demonstrable principles of mathematics. Again, Locke is concerned in both works that people do not take their Christian milieu or any other moral environment that influenced them for granted. The explanation of revelation and how it works is, in part, a means to this end.

In sum, there is mutual reinforcement between Locke's attempted offensive against the innate idea tradition and his argument for our need for revelation in morality (and elsewhere) in the *Essay* and *ROC*, respectively. Both, in effect, emphasize humans' tendency to take their Christian milieu, or whatever moral environment in which they are raised, for granted. Less important, but still relevant, the thought of Lord Herbert is used as a starting point in both.⁴⁶ And, Locke's claims of the possibility of moral demonstration spoken of in the *Essay* are not contradicted but assumed in *ROC*. It is the weakness of human moral reasoning, not its strength, with which he is much concerned in both works.⁴⁷

The Church and the Christian as the Salvation of Society

Locke has a great interest in maintaining the Bible's status of authority. Because his argument for the need of revelation in morality and his argument against innate ideas work toward the same effect, and are symbiotic, the claims that Locke is surreptitious in *ROC* regarding his affirmative statements of Scripture are incorrect. Moreover, something of the state of society before Christ throughout the world in Locke's mind has already been brought to the fore. At worst, the governmental laws forced humans into subjection under the power-wielders; at best, they helped people prosper and afforded them "temporal happiness."⁴⁸ The Bible has helped change all of this for the better.

Where society had advanced in the civilized world, Locke gives credit to the Bible and Christ's first advent. If the Bible is removed from the public square as the highest personal authority of its citizens, an inevitable decline will occur. The next generation might adopt a few nonbiblical principles that seem reasonable enough to them; the subsequent generation will likely take those nonbiblical principles for granted, and they will be accepted as natural, and so on, until the civilized world is back where it was before Christ came. In the words of New Testament scholar Michael Green, "'Progressive morality' and 'progressive thinking' often go hand in hand with progressive deafness to the voice of God."⁴⁹ Of course there will be those like the Athenian philosophers who stop the decline in their spheres of influence or regain some ground; Locke, as indicated above, points out the great gap in moral teachings between the Christian and

the pagan thinkers. With no revelation, there is no hope for widespread correct moral thinking. The only way to fully reap the benefits of God's law is to have Scripture as the societal authority. Natural law is helpful, but, as shown above, it can only go so far. A by-product of the conversions from the evangelism of the Christians, lay and clergy alike, is a better life in society. Each new generation of Christians who are truly following Scripture should be continually propelling society forward and making it better.

That said, keeping Scripture in the hands and minds of professed Christians is very important and perhaps not all that easy. Locke takes issue with those who simply rely on the systematic thought of another and not Scripture in his second published defense of *ROC*: everyone "should be persuaded of the Truth of those Opinions he professes."⁵⁰ He further remarks:

If the reading and study of the Scripture were more pressed than it is, and Men were fairly sent to the Bible to find their Religion; and not the Bible put into their hands only to find the Opinions of their peculiar Sect or Party, Christendom would have more Christians, and those that are, would be more knowing, and more in the right than now they are. That which hinders this, is that select bundle of Doctrines, which it has pleased every Sect to draw out of the Scriptures, or their own inventions, with an Omission of all the rest.... Which in effect, what is it but to encourage ignorance, laziness, and neglect of the Scriptures?⁵¹

In short, for Christians to be the best Christians they can be, they must have the Bible in their hands, not merely the opinions of another. Locke decries the practice of Christians basing their religious opinions on the opinions of another in both the *Essay* and *ROC*. Locke's stance in those works is that God has given each of us reason to employ and with which to answer questions for ourselves, especially in the very important spheres such as religion. Not to employ one's reason for oneself is an affront to God's design and a great cause of mischief in the world. At least, in Locke's economy, one's assent to the truths in the Bible will be more tenaciously held to by the Christian when assented from one's own persuasion and not simply the thoughts of another. The roots of such doctrines go deeper.⁵²

While Locke thinks that Scripture and Christianity help to create and maintain a healthy society, his concern for personal discovery and reasonable conviction in religious matters help explain, in part, why Locke never advocates a "Christian state" where the church and state are comingled. Some of the ideas found in the *Essay* and *ROC* are used by Locke in his *Letter* to argue for distinct jurisdictional boundaries between churches and the government. For instance, in the *Letter*, Locke also stresses the importance of the salvation of one's own soul, nominating

it to be everyone's highest priority; thus, each person must do and believe that which he or she thinks obtains God's favor.⁵³ As maintained in the *Essay* and *ROC*, Locke asserts in the *Letter* that religious beliefs and the performance of any accompanying duties are illegitimate if compulsory: "But true and saving Religion consists in the inward perswasion of the Mind; without which nothing can be acceptable to God. And such is the nature of the Understanding, that it cannot be compell'd to the belief of any thing by outward Force."⁵⁴ In other words, "Faith only, and inward Sincerity, are the things that procure acceptance with God."⁵⁵ What is more, Locke notes known instances where government officials have shown partiality to those of their own religious sects.⁵⁶ This may be in the spirit of other religions, but Locke is adamant that this is not the true spirit of Christianity: religious toleration is "the chief Characteristical Mark of the True Church" and anyone who is "destitute of Charity, Meekness, and Good-will in general towards all Mankind, even to those that are not Christians, he is certainly yet short of being a true Christian himself."⁵⁷ Similar sentiments regarding this tolerant characteristic of Christianity are found throughout the *Essay* and *ROC*.⁵⁸ As a result, the government ought to maintain an equitable disposition toward most religions, the exceptions being those religions having principles inherently "contrary to human Society, or to those moral Rules which are necessary to the preservation of Civil Society."⁵⁹

Giving others space to employ their God-given faculties to contemplate him and religion and demonstrating Christlikeness and its reasonableness in words and deeds is the way that true Christians should live. Christianity is an eminently moral, tolerant, and reasonable religion. In Locke's thinking, Christians imitating Christ is the surest way to more converts and a healthier society.

Notes

1. John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity, As Delivered in the Scriptures*, 2nd ed. (London: Awnsham and John Churchill, 1696); John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity, As Delivered in the Scriptures*, ed. John C. Higgins-Biddle (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999). I have researched both and note the page numbers of the 1696 second edition in the endnotes and the corresponding pagination of Higgins-Biddle's critical edition in brackets. John Locke, *A Vindication of the Reasonableness of Christianity, etc., From Mr. Edwards's Reflections* (London: Awnsham and John Churchill, 1695). This defense was published with the 1696 second edition of *ROC*. John Locke, *A Second Vindication of the Reasonableness of Christianity, etc.* (London: A. and J. Churchill, 1697); John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, 3rd ed. (London: Awnsham and John Churchill, 1695); John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979). The 1695 third edition that existed at the writing of Locke's *ROC* and its two vindications has been consulted along with Nidditch's critical edition. John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 2nd ed. corrected (London: Awnsham Churchill, 1690).
2. Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, *De Veritate*, trans. Myrick H. Carré (Bristol: J. W. Arrowsmith, Ltd., 1937).
3. Locke, *Essay* I.ii.1.
4. Cf. Locke *Essay* I.ii.1; IV.iv.7. In the following letter, Locke speaks of his desire to write a work demonstrating moral principles though he confesses the gospel already contains "so perfect a body of Ethicks": John Locke, "L2059: Locke to William Molyneux, March 30 [c. April 5] 1696," in *The Correspondence of John Locke*, vol. 5, ed. E. S. De Beer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 593–96. Also, those who view the *Essay* as a ground-clearing project most likely find further evidence for their position in the *Essay*'s "Epistle to the Reader." There Locke fashions himself as "*an Under-Labourer in clearing ground a little, and removing some of the Rubbish, that lies in the way of Knowledge.*"
5. For example, John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the Argument of the 'Two Treatises of Government'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Richard Ashcraft, "Faith and Knowledge in Locke's Philosophy," in *John Locke: Problems and Perspectives*, ed. John W. Yolton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 194–223. Ashcraft admits that he is not sure how these two works can be reconciled at all points. J. T. Moore, "Locke on the Moral Need for Christianity," *The Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* 11 (1980): 61–68. Moore sees *ROC* as a salvaging of sorts of the *Essay*. He argues, however, that anyone who has cited reason *vis-à-vis* morality as a logical disjunction between the two works has overlooked an important subtlety: While morality is

presented being in fact according to reason in the *Essay*, it is presented as being above reason only in effect to most in *ROC*. In my estimation, this is consistent with Locke's assertion in the *Essay* and *ROC* that many people who do not have the time for knowing have recourse to believing.

6. John Dunn asks the question: If he did not think morality demonstrable, why did he write the *Essay*? He argues that while Locke may not have achieved complete logical alignment of the two works, they do move toward the same practical ends: promoting individual and social morality and presenting God as their basis. Dunn, *The Political Thought*, 189–98, cf. 263–67.
7. The following are notable examples of those who read Locke as being religiously surreptitious: Steven Forde, "Natural Law, Theology, and Morality in Locke," *American Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 2 (April 2001): 396–409 [ref. pp. 407–8]; Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Michael S. Rabieh, "The Reasonableness of Locke, or the Questionableness of Christianity," *Journal of Politics* 53, no. 4 (November 1991): 933–57; Jonathan Donald Conrad, *Locke's Use of the Bible in The Two Treatises, The Reasonableness of Christianity, and A Letter Concerning Toleration* (PhD diss., Northern Illinois University, 2004). David Foster, "The Bible and Natural Freedom in John Locke's Political Thought," in *Piety and Humanity*, ed. Douglas Kries (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), 181–212. Foster's earlier claims are in the same vein as Conrad's. He concludes his essay with the suggestion that Locke rejects "crucial elements of the biblical teaching on God, property, and the family." See also Nicholas Jolley, "Locke on Faith and Reason," in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke's "Essay Concerning Human Understanding"*, ed. Lex Newman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 436–55; Michael Ayers, *Locke, Vol. 1: Epistemology* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 122.

There is also a whole host of scholars who do not see Locke so much as surreptitious, as they do sectarian. They think that his appeals to Scripture as an authority are sincere but his conclusions in *ROC* are notably sectarian, even heterodox, thus exposing a narrow, yet still pro-positive-religious agenda. For the menagerie of views of these scholars and another argument against their lines of thinking from a different angle, as well as the more uniform line of thinking of those who read Locke as being religiously surreptitious in *ROC*, see Jonathan S. Marko, "Justification, Ecumenism, and Heretical Red Herrings in John Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity*," *Philosophy and Theology* 26, no. 2 (2014): 245–66.

8. In addition to the aforementioned scholars that have attempted to reconcile the two works, many Locke scholars approach his works as sincere articulations of his views: Nicholas Wolterstorff, "John Locke's Epistemological Piety: Reason Is the Candle of the Lord," *Faith and Philosophy* 11, no. 4 (October 1994): 572–91; Stuart Brown, "Locke as Secret 'Spinozist': The Perspective of William Carroll," in

Disguised and Overt Spinozism Around 1700: Papers Presented at the International Colloquium Held at Rotterdam, 5–8 October 1994, ed. Wiep Van Bunge and Wim Klever (New York: E. J. Brill, 1996), 213–34; Steven M. Dworetz, *The Unvarnished Doctrine: Locke, Liberalism, and the American Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990); Greg Forster, *John Locke's Politics of Moral Consensus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 141–42; Alan P. F. Sell, *John Locke and the Eighteenth-Century Divines* (Cardif: University of Wales Press, 1997), 186–88; John C. Higgins-Biddle, introduction to *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, ed. John C. Higgins-Biddle (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), xv–cxv.

9. Herbert, *De Veritate*, 132.
10. Herbert, *De Veritate*, 126.
11. Herbert, *De Veritate*, 137–41.
12. Herbert, *De Veritate*, 122–23.
13. Herbert, *De Veritate*, 291–302.
14. Herbert, *De Veritate*, 289–91.
15. Herbert, *De Veritate*, 303, 312–13.
16. Locke, *Essay* I.ii.1.
17. Locke, *Essay* I.ii.3.
18. Locke, *Essay* I.ii.5.
19. Locke, *Essay* I.ii.6–7.
20. For example, Locke *Essay* I.ii.1; IV.iv.7; Locke, “L2059: Locke to William Molyneux,” 593–96.
21. Locke, *Essay* I.iii.1–3.
22. Locke, *Essay* I.iii.6, 10–13.
23. Locke, *Essay* I.iii.12.
24. Locke, *Essay* I.iii.15–19.
25. Locke, *Essay* I.iii.22–23 [citation from I.iii.22].
26. Locke, *Essay* I.iii.25.
27. Cf. Marko, “Justification, Ecumenism, and Heretical Red Herrings.”
28. Locke, *ROC*, 254–57 [139–41].
29. Locke, *ROC*, 259–93 [143–64].
30. Locke, *ROC*, 259–66 [143–47].

31. Locke, *ROC*, 267 [147].
32. Locke, *ROC*, 268 [147].
33. Cf. Locke, *ROC*, 273 [151–52], 278 [154].
34. Locke, *ROC*, 278 [154].
35. Locke, *ROC*, 269 [149].
36. Locke *ROC*, 269–70 [149].
37. Locke states several times that *ROC* was written to debate the deists: Locke, *ROC*, 1–2 [1–2]; Locke, *A Second Vindication*, xvii–xviii, 150–52, 376, 466; Cf. 77–78.
38. Locke, *ROC*, 274–75 [152].
39. Locke, *ROC*, 276 [153].
40. Locke, *ROC*, 271–72 [150–51].
41. Locke, *ROC*, 282 [157].
42. For example, Locke, *Essay* IV.xx.2 [xix.2 in the 3rd ed. and earlier].
43. Locke, *Essay* I.iv.7ff.
44. Note in his letter to Molyneux that he never dismisses the possibility of moral demonstration. It is assumed. Locke, “L2059: Locke to William Molyneux,” 595. Cf. Moore, “Locke on the Moral.”
45. Locke, *Essay* IV.xviii.10.
46. There are other interesting ironies between *ROC* and *De Veritate*. Both authors argue against implicit faith, that one cannot base one’s religious thought on that of another. Herbert, *De Veritate*, 290. Both works have significant related ecumenical claims as well. Lord Herbert, *De Veritate*, 289–90; Cf. James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 15. This is perhaps not so surprising given their religious and war-torn historical contexts.
47. While I would not agree with Moore that *ROC* is a salvaging of the *Essay*, he does, as noted above, somewhat accurately indicate that it seems Locke treats morals as according to reason in the *Essay* and in effect above reason in *ROC*. It is more accurate to say that many moral principles are treated as being effectively above reason prior to Christ’s advent in *ROC*, but that they are viewed largely as being according to reason in then modern-day England and Europe in the *Essay*. Cf. Moore, “Locke on the Moral.”
48. Locke, *ROC*, 268 [148].

49. Michael Green, *The Second Epistle General of Peter and the General Epistle of Jude: An Introduction and Commentary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 185.
50. Locke, *A Second Vindication*, 80, 84–84, 213, 214, 379–80, 400–401 [citation, p. 380].
51. Locke, *A Second Vindication*, 211–12.
52. Locke, *Essay* IV.xx.17–18; *ROC* 306 [170]; Cf. *Essay* IV.xvi.4; IV.xvii.19; IV.xx.2; IV.xx.7 [*Essay* IV.xx is IV.xix in the 3rd ed. and earlier].
53. Locke, *Letter*, 57–58, cf. 33.
54. Locke, *Letter*, 10.
55. Locke, *Letter*, 37.
56. Locke, *Letter*, preface, 35–36.
57. Locke, *Letter*, 1–2, cf. 6, 77.
58. The entirety of *ROC* is very ecumenical in its thrust. Marko, “Justification, Ecumenism, and Heretical Red Herrings.” The *Essay*, while framing the Bible or particular books as having the chief marks of epistemologically acceptable revelation, does not necessarily rule out other claims to special revelation.
59. Locke, *Letter*, 64. For instance, the civil government is not to tolerate adherence to religions that oblige people to maintain a foreign power as their primary human authority. Otherwise, the government would be tolerating those willing to overthrow it (64–67).