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## Locke and His Philosophy of Religious Toleration

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### Abstract:

*John Locke, the byword English political philosopher of 17<sup>th</sup> century is also known as father of liberalism. He advocated for the supremacy of individual over state as he was of the opinion that the base of state is the consent of masses. Though he was not first to separate religion from politics, but being an individualist, he always gave emphasis on freedom of religion of individual as he was of opinion that state should not interfere on religious realm of an individual. The then political milieu compelled him to separate religion from politics. In one of his magnumopus "Letter Concerning Toleration" he was that person who laid the foundation of modern secularism. He designed his theory of religious tolerance to establish the concept of modern secularism, to prevent the abuse of political power. His theory rest on the principle of conscience which was the ultimate source of religious truth to him. This article deals with Locke's philosophy of religious toleration. This article reveals how he had discussed the role of state in the religious matter or his notion on religious toleration and library method is used for this purpose.*

**Key Words: - Freedom, Natural Rights, State, Toleration.**

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John Locke, the English political philosopher was born in England in 29<sup>th</sup> August 1632. It is no denying the fact that the contemporary milieu left a great impact in the mind of every philosopher and there is a reflection of it on their writings. John Locke is not an exception in this regard. When John Locke was born The English civil war covered by time but struggle between king and Parliament for supremacy was alive very much. The period from 1632 to 1688 was not a period of tranquillity. This English philosopher was witness of political turmoil. The historic glorious revolution of 1688 which changed the political scenario of the then England had influenced Locke greatly. The two swords namely Pope and Monarchy, which curtailed human freedom, dignity, came to a limited extent which resulted in strengthening masses to raise voice. The divine right of a king lost its significance as constitutional form of Government was established. The authority of Pope and the peaceful change of political power by replacement of absolute monarchy by a dutiful Government made him realize that human soul is pure, peace-loving, and good. They possess a keen desire to establish and retain a healthy civil society free from violence, immoral practices and the like. They don't desire any disturbance.

Theodore J. Koontz was of opinion that “religion was variously and widely viewed as a major threat to political authority, although it was sometimes seen also as a necessity for morality and public spirit, for undergirding political legitimacy. Most theorists devoted large portions of their works to the problem of religion and politics. Twentieth-century political theorists, in contrast, have given scant attention to religion and politics.” (Koontz, 1981:97)

According to Locke human beings are cooperative, rational, social and moral beings. The contemporary social, political milieu induced him to produce a positive thought. Locke accentuated on property right and freedom of individual which laid the outset of a strong civil society. This resulted in germination of the theory of liberalism and the concept of liberty.

John Locke’s voice was also echoed in America and France because the American declaration for liberty, equality and fraternity and French revolution began a new chapter by the assorted writings of this dynamic and prolific writer. Let’s take a glimpse on the fruits of his mind:

1. Letter concerning Toleration published in 1689 in Latin.
2. Essay concerning Human understanding (1690).
3. The two Treaties on Civil Government. (1690)
4. A second letter on Toleration. (1690)
5. A third letter on Toleration. (1692)
6. A fourth letter on Toleration. (1706)
7. Some thoughts on Education. (1693)
8. Fundamental constitution concerning California. (1706).

The two great philosophical works i.e. Two Treaties of Government (1689) and Letter on Toleration (1689) by Locke, the renowned philosopher had sown the seed of secularism in West. John Locke was voracious reader and he was neither completely radical nor reactionary philosopher. John Locke was of the opinion to assign limited power in the hands of monarchy. Dipak Kumar Dash in his “Western Political Thought” has highlighted Wayper’s thought in this regard. He quoted “C.L.Wayper has produced a very positive and new conception to the Lockean state. He says Locke’s state is a transformer state. It transforms the individual’s self-interest into public good”. Wayper again said that “the state holds in check self-interest and the mechanism whereby men acting as they must are in the end brought to act as they ought to do that is for public happiness.” (2018:164-165) Locke’s state is not absolute as he enumerated that first and foremost duty of state is to meet the needs of people because the base of state laid on the consent of people. Locke’s state is not static rather compatible with the changing scenario. Though the concept of secularism or separation of ethics from politics was induced and publicized by Machiavelli firstly, but Lockean state was also secular in nature. It was against the religious dogma and narrowness. He said that “law is a true notion, to give proper direction to run a perfect state, the goal of law is not to abolish or restrain but to preserve and enlarge freedom.” (2018: 164-165) In this aspect Locke opined that individual should not make any conflict, or religious

disturbance. He always pleaded for religious tolerance. He staunchly denied the interference of state on matter of religion. As a good Christian he was, he believed that every people should use religion for personal rise and purity of soul. He never accepts the interference of state in religious matter. As an individualist he was, he wanted to curtail the role of state to protect individual's right to freedom, property, and life. M.G. Gupta in his "History of Political Thought from Hobbes to Laski" said that "This confusion is fully reflected in his Letter on Toleration. It seeks to repudiate the view that religion is a matter of supreme communal concern and belongs to man's public or social life. Locke's essential arguents is that states are constituted for the maintenance and enhancement of only the secular interest of man and that they have nothing to do with things spiritual. Our knowledge of spiritual matters being so confined (it derives from Scripture as justified by Reason or from Reason as enlightened by the word – a really impossible exercise) and limited an act of persecution in the name of religious faith lacks all justification." (1973: 65)

George Kateb in his "Locke and the Political Origins of Secularism" quote Locke in such a way that he in his great work *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1989), said "religion which should most distinguished us from beasts, and ought most peculiarly to elevate us, as rational creatures, above brutes, is that wherein men often appear most irrational, and more senseless than beasts themselves" (2009:1006) John Locke had deep faith in God but to him God is not scriptural. According to Locke Church is a voluntary society and it obtain status like other social and philosophical clubs and so on. Locke depicts that free societies always help to foster moral values. He was of the belief that Christianity is superior to all other religion as it develops morality.

M. V. C. Jeffreys in his "John Locke" said "Locke was thus against obscurantism against religion and theologically a liberal" (Jeffreys, 1974:35)

Locke in his *Essay on "Toleration and A Letter Concerning Toleration"* was of the opinion that unless and until all the inhabitant of realm of same ruler believe in same faith, there would-be no civil peace. According to him a policy which gives emphasis on uniformity of faith provoke the dissenters to oppress other in the name of religion. Subsequently, being an individualist, he empowered the people to rebel when they will be oppressed and thus Locke depicts the notion of religious toleration but he extended this only to all Protestant Christian instead of Catholics. Shephali Jha in her "Western Political Thought from Plato to Marx" said that "Locke had written *Essay on Toleration* in 1667. He followed this up in 1685 with *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. In these writings, he argued against the uniformist position, unless all the inhabitants of a kingdom believed in the same faith, there would be no civil peace. A policy imposing religious uniformity, he pointed out, would, in fact, lead to a sense of oppression among the dissenters. According to Locke, when people feel oppressed, they have a right to rebel. So, it is not a policy to civil peace. Of course, for Locke this toleration extended only to all Protestant Christian sects. Locke did not stretch the principle of toleration to include atheists or Catholics, whose beliefs cannot limit the government's power to persecute them." His philosophy of secularism also signifies religious basis of limited Government. Locke was of the opinion that "God

judges' people on sincerity, not the truth if their beliefs... to profess or act contrary to one's religious belief, even if the magistrate so orders, is now the paramount sin of hypocrisy and it would lead to eternal damnation." (2010:136). She also includes that "A policy of religious uniformity was therefore unacceptable because it was a matter of personal it was ungodly. Just as the idea, that all our belief is probable rather than certain, leads to position that no absolute Government had the authority to impose its belief, similarly, the idea that religious belief was a matter of personal judgement and integrity, led to the principle of toleration as a limit to the power of Government." (Shephali Jha, 2010: 136) She further added that "this struggle over religious liberty also illuminates Locke's idea of limited Government, whether monarchical or parliamentary in form, needs to be limited." (Shephali Jha, 2010: 137).

In nutshell Locke gave full liberty to individual in the matter of religion. The most important feature of Lockean State was it was a tolerant state. The state will accept and respect religions. But Locke was of the opinion that the unity of a state will be at a stake if there will somany religions as there will be communal conflicts and he thought that it will similarly dangerous for the existence and unity of a state if the state imposed one religion upon its citizen. John Locke was not against freedom. He was a strong advocate for limited constitutional government because he never accepted the notion of despotic government as portrayed by Thomas Hobbes.

Law protects liberty. The then Parliament of England passed Clarendon Code which gave emphasis on uniformity in worship. Locke opposed this one because he believed that this initiative would hurt religious sentiments of people. Locke is considered as father of liberalism as well as he was also a staunch supporter of individualism. He was against all policies which curtailed individual liberty. To Locke, as a holistic organisation Church is so its function cannot be curtailed.

Theodore J. Koontz in his "Religion and Political Cohesion: John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau" "The Locke's attempt to separate religion and politics, allowing each full freedom in its sphere, but keeping the two spheres sharply separated. For Locke the central problem is that governments try to enforce religious uniformity, thus breeding discontent, and, conversely, that religious bodies become active in politics, thus creating cleavages in politics based on religious affiliation." (Koontz, 1981:98)

**Conclusion:** Locke was a great political philosopher and in 21<sup>st</sup> century and he is also of great significance for his notion on tolerant state. Religious toleration was of great importance in Locke's time. An individual should be free to profess any religion up to his /her will. The state had no power to "Locke's attempt to separate religion and politics, allowing each full freedom in its sphere, but keeping the two spheres sharply separated. For Locke the central problem is that governments try to enforce religious uniformity, thus breeding discontent, and, conversely, that religious bodies become active in politics, thus creating cleavages in politics based on religious affiliation"

(Koontz, 1981:98)

But he is subjected to criticism also. He was a renowned British philosopher and was associated with Anthony Ashley Cooper which led him to be a Government official. His works are characterized by opposition to authoritarianism. He was a greatest individualist. But he was against Catholics, Atheists and Muslims. He was against Catholics because they are intolerant. He opposed the Atheists because they are immoral and the Muslims are to him crude. Whenever we said that Locke is liberal and individualist but he is dividing over religion and community. M.G. Gupta in his “History of Political Thought from Hobbes to Laski” said that “in his Treaties he divides opinions into two categories – those, which are purely on intellectual matters and those that concern law and order. The state can suppress the letter but not the former. But then while non-conformists and pagans can be tolerated, Locke has no place for Catholics, for Atheists, and for Muslims – the Catholics because they are themselves intolerant and have extra territorial loyalties; the atheists because they are immoral; and the Muslims because they are odd and crude and their morals are sub-standard. These three, then, are outlawed. For the rest Locke is tolerant.” (M.G.Gupta, 1973: 66)

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