

## **Rousseau and Locke: Religion and the Times**

Although the great enlightenment philosophers John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau lived in a period when nascent scientific discovery promised to transform society, they did not, in writing their most highly influential works, lose sight of the most influential force in social culture of the period—religion. Indeed, even with the age of reason, religion dominated much of European politics—divine right was used to justify the rule of King Louis XIV of France, as well as others. Compounded with this was the Protestant Reformation, a period of upheaval of the Catholic Church that ultimately led to fragmentation and the establishment of Protestantism and Calvinism throughout Europe. In light of these aspects of European life during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, both Locke and Rousseau address the relationship between the state and the church in their political works, namely Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration*, his *Two Treatises of Government*, and Rousseau's *Social Contract*. In comparing how both thinkers limit the role of and find use for religion in society, it emerges that Locke advocates a complete separation of the church from the state, and in no way advocates manipulating religious doctrine for use as a political tool. In contrast, Rousseau argues for a complete overlap of the church and state, with the best civil religion being one completely used as a tool for political stability. Despite these differences, one agreement is clear—both Rousseau and Locke believed that the interaction of the state with religion must be managed, and that one, either religion or the state, must be subordinate to the other.

To understand the relationship between politics and religion for these two thinkers, it is necessary to first analyze the purposes and effects of government for the two. In Locke's works, we find that government is designed only to secure property; it is a tool for our welfare, and no

more. As he bluntly states in the second of his *Two Treatises of Government*, “The great and chief end therefore, of Mens uniting into Commonwealths, and putting themselves under Government is the preservation of their property” (350, §124). In the chapter (IX) that Locke devotes to laying out the “Ends of Political Society and Government,” there is not a single mention of morality, righteousness, or the hint of nationalism. Indeed, the other needs that the formation of the commonwealth satisfies are those for a “known law,” “a known and indifferent judge”, and “Power to back and support the sentence when right, and to give it due Execution” (351 §§124-126) None of these ends of government seem to overlap significantly with the ends of religious organizations, like the church. Even in terms of the ends of civil society, Locke establishes separate “spheres” for politics and religion that he argues are utterly distinct.

Rousseau binds our social and moral development to the development of our societies, however. Particularly, he is sure to point out that our morality comes from the state, stating in his *Social Contract* that “The transition from the state of nature to the civil state produces a most remarkable change in man...endowing his actions with the morality they previously lacked” (53 ¶1). In a period when morality stemmed primarily from religion, Rousseau’s position suggests a sort of native “compatibility” between religion and government. Not only can the state shape us morally, it naturally does so. Beyond this, he devotes a significant portion of this work to establishing the importance of cohesion of the general will within the state. If an individual is unwilling to conform to the general will, in fact, he will be forced to conform; as Rousseau puts it, “...whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the entire body: which means nothing other than that he shall be forced to be free...” (53 ¶8). It is difficult to ensure that an entire of body of people will conform to the general will at all times—indeed, this provision suggests that it is inevitable that many will not. Thus, it seems reasonable and logical

that Rousseau would turn to religion for the source of cohesion and unification that is necessary for the most functional state. If there is one thing that Rousseau and Locke certainly agree on, it is that the church, and religion in general, has immense power to make people conform to certain beliefs, practices, and lifestyles.

The question then becomes, in light of the thinkers' respective opinions of the chief ends and effects of government, do religion and religious institutions need to be subdued and managed by the sovereign of the state in order to maintain peace and stability? This question marks a divide between the two thinkers, especially in terms of the perceived division religion causes. For Rousseau, having a religion *not* completely tied to the state does, in fact, give rise to lethal division. As I see it, this is the same sort of division he found to be such a problem in giving any individual power over the sovereign, or the other types of imbalances that can result from unequal division of power. As Rousseau states in chapter thirteen of his *Social Contract*, "...the Sovereign authority is simple and single, and it cannot be divided without being destroyed" (111 ¶5). In the case of some religions, sovereign authority in the people seems to be at odds with the authority of the religion itself—Christianity in particular. Interestingly, Rousseau begins his chapter on religion within the *Social Contract* by discussing the pagan religion, the religions of the Romans and Greeks particularly. Within these societies, "...Religion was tied exclusively to the laws of the state which prescribed it," and "Political war was also theological" (144 ¶6, 143 ¶4). It seems to me that Rousseau really does not care about the effects of a religion itself, whether it is peaceful or warlike, but rather, merely cares that the state is unified. This notion harkens back to his description of laws within the state earlier in his treatise; as long as the general will decides to do something, it really doesn't matter what that decision is—unification is more important. This is fundamentally why, and explains in what way, I believe, Rousseau

thinks religion needs to be managed by the state.

Christianity, in juxtaposed to paganism, is a naturally divisive religion according to Rousseau. Indeed, "...Christian law is at bottom more harmful than useful to a strong constitution of the State," particularly because it is "...a wholly spiritual religion, exclusively concerned with the things of Heaven (146 ¶14, 148 ¶25). If the general will is threatened by an ambitious individual, Christians would find that "Driving out the usurper would trouble ones conscience; it would require disturbing the public repose...all this accords ill with a Christian's mildness" (148, ¶26). If, under Christianity, a threat to the general will cannot be contained—since the sovereign is "divided" between duty to the state and duty to God—how can the state survive? Rousseau believes it cannot, and I believe that this is precisely the reason he finds that religion, Christianity particularly, poses a large threat to the welfare of the state unless it can be forced to become one with the state (like paganism); without this, there is always the threat of lethal division from within.

Like Rousseau, Locke also certainly thinks that, to avoid potential problems, religion must be managed. However, the main distinction between the two lies in the fact that, for Lock, care must be taken not because damage to the state may result, but because damage to religion, and the soul, is possible. He begins his *Letter Concerning Toleration* by outlining three reasons why care of the souls (religion) is not a matter of the state—"Because the Care of Souls is not committed to the civil magistrate, any more than to other Men," "...because his Power consists only in outward force," and because "...the rigour of Laws...would not that help at all to the Salvation of their [Men's] Souls" (26-27). Locke fails to mention how or why religion should be kept out of the political sphere almost entirely in this letter, making it seem that, to Locke, religion is not a political problem that needs to be managed—politics is a religious problem. This

reversal in thought may be due, in part, to the time period preceding Lock's writing of this work—the period of the Protestant Reformation. In the European Wars of Religion, religious and political authority overlapped greatly, and in the name of religion much blood was shed. This no doubt left a bad taste in Locke's mouth, as he was a youth when the Treaty of Westphalia ended the wars. Locke indeed finds religion and politics, together, as an issue that needs to be managed. This management comes in the form of bounds between the state and the church: "The Boundaries on both sides are fixed and immovable" (33). This is how Locke advocates the management of both the state and religion, for their mutual good—simply keep them completely and utterly separate from one another. By not allowing their respective laws or authority become jumbled together, he seems to believe that one will not be allowed to become a tool for the other, particularly religion for the state. As I will describe, this is a consideration that Locke finds crucially important.

Fundamentally, I think believe Locke and Rousseau differ with regard to what they believe the true end of religion to be. For Locke, it is clearly salvation. For Rousseau it is the distribution of morals and law, as well as the preservation of the state. Fundamentally to Locke, religion is *not* a tool for the state. Locke abhors such treatment of something sacred like the church; he asks "...who sees not how frequently the name of the church, which was so venerable in the time of the apostles, has been made use of to throw dust in Peoples Eyes, in the following ages?" (37). By "throwing dust," religion has been made to "blind" people to proper actions and just ends, as Locke sees it. Indeed, he seems almost disheartened by the treatment that religion has endured at the hands of society, becoming something to be "made us of." Given its use by the various monarchs of Europe during the Protestant Reformation, I can hardly blame him for being so disheartened. By the standards that Locke lays out in his letter, there is no justifiable way for

religion to become a tool of the state, especially “For Obedience is due in the first place to God, and afterwards to the Laws” (48). This seems to run against what Locke implies in the rest of the letter, that the state and the church are separate but equal forces within their own spheres: It implies that, to a degree, the good of the individual comes before the good of the state. If anything, I believe that Locke suggests that it is, in fact, the state that can be an asset, perhaps even a tool, for religion and the church. If the sovereign takes correct action, in that he no longer favors one religion over another, civil unrest can also be solved. As he puts it, “The magistrate is afraid of other churches, but not of his own... These he treats like children... those he uses as slaves...” If “Religion were let alone...”, he argues, “seditious commotions” would diminish (52). He addresses Rousseau’s primary qualm about religion—that it often leads to war and dissension—in stating that, actually, if the sovereign takes correct action in that he no longer favors one religion over another, civil unrest can also be solved. But more fundamentally, I believe it shows that by becoming a tool for religious equality, political society can solve its most vexing issues. It is, in fact, only by becoming an element of religion that the state can find peace. Support of religion by the state, it seems, is a constitutive element of a good political community, and not the other way around.

Rousseau could not have a more different stance on the issue, and he states clearly in his *Social Contract* that “One should not from all this conclude with Warburton that among us politics and religion have a common object, but rather that at the origin of nations the one serves as the instrument of the other” (72, ¶12). Explicitly, Rousseau assures us that religion is an instrument of the state, and not the other way around. To what would be Locke’s dismay, it is perfect for “throwing dust in peoples eyes”—it makes them “blind” to some things to make them, overall better, more unified citizens. Indeed, this is less of a sacrilege to the church than a

vital service to the state, as Rousseau sees it. Is it a coincidence that his chapter seven on censorship falls immediately preceding his chapter on civil religion? I doubt it. Indeed, he concludes that “The Censorship maintains morals by preventing opinions from becoming corrupt, by preserving their uprightness through wise applications, sometimes even by fixing them when they are still indeterminate” (141, ¶5-6). If censorship in general is justified for the maintenance of morals, it seems almost immediate that censorship of, and control over, religion—a force of moral authority—is even more important.

Christianity “leaves the laws with only the force they derive from themselves without adding any other force to them, and hence one of the great bonds of particular societies remains without effect” (147, ¶21). From this, it seems clear that Rousseau believes religion can be a great force of cohesion—it is supplemental to the laws, and can strengthen the state. Here, he is sure to note that Christianity does not have this capability, since, as he states earlier, it is a religion that only breeds divisiveness. In contrast to this are the pagan religions. Indeed, those of the pagans “...were not jealous gods, they divided the empire of the world among themselves...” (141, ¶4). The gods of the pagans, though often with flaws and human-like follies, provides a healthy moral template for the state in that they, according to Rousseau, bred equality. Specifically, they lacked jealousy and were willing to “divide” the goods of the world equally. As Rousseau seems to imply, a pagan state, since it “drew no distinction between its gods and its laws”, would itself possess fair and equitable laws if its gods behaved in such a way. Through this, it becomes more evident to me that, to Rousseau, religion is an important force in the formation of a model state that breeds liberty and equality.

Overall, both authors do find a need to address, contain, and monitor issues arising from the interaction of government with religion. Their particular strategies and goals, however, are

not the same. Indeed, I believe that, with a view to the best forms and ends of government established by each, their respective opinions on religion make more sense. In particular, from the analysis above, it becomes apparent that while Rousseau finds religion to be a problem for society, one that must be contained to avoid lethal division of the state, Locke suggests that it is in fact the state that needs to be managed, so as to ensure it does not meddle with the superior business of the Christian church. Furthermore, Rousseau unabashedly argues that religion is the perfect tool for unification of the state—a notion that aligns with his support for a general will and distain for division in the state, among the people, or with respect to allegiance. This notion once again contrasts with that of Locke, who argues that not only is it shameful to use religion as a tool for political control, it is downright dangerous to the public welfare. In light of these points, I would argue that much of Lock’s insistence to have a state with a single task—protection of property—and no role whatsoever with religion, morals, or private interaction, stems from the horrors faced during the European Wars of Religion. Indeed, his *Letter Concerning Toleration* is sure to underscore the stupidity and futility of the division caused by hotly debated religious beliefs, like transubstantiation, that were used as political fodder during the period of the Protestant Reformation.

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