“In Search of Truth Alone”:

John Locke’s Exile in Holland

As his extensive correspondence makes apparent, John Locke was fond of telling anyone who would listen how much he craved a quiet life. In fact, in December of 1684, he penned a lengthy letter to his well-connected friend the Earl of Pembroke almost entirely on this subject. “My unmedleing [sic] temper,” he wrote, has “always sought quiet and inspired me with no other desires, no other aims than to pass silently through this world”.¹ The very necessity of such a letter, however, would seem to call into question the sincerity of this assertion, as the circumstances surrounding its composition make apparent. Locke was writing to his friend from Amsterdam, where he had recently fled following accusations of treason, in order to avow his innocence and beg assistance in rescuing his reputation. Specifically, Locke’s accusers charged him not only with the authorship of numerous seditious pamphlets, but also with participating in a treasonous plot to assassinate the King.

The circumstances of Locke’s departure bear at least a brief recounting. Prior to the exposure of the so-called Rye House Plot (named for the location at which the assassination was allegedly to take place) and Locke’s subsequent flight from England, Locke had been employed since 1667 as the secretary and political advisor to the Earl of Shaftesbury, one of the most powerful men in England. Shaftesbury was also a man of strong political convictions and a firm opponent of the absolutist tendencies and pro-Catholic leanings of the current monarch, Charles II. Though in his letter to Pembroke,

Locke maintained that his years spent in Shaftesbury’s service were of “little advantage,” an objective evaluation of this period shows that it actually did a great deal to advance his career. Most significantly, it was during this period that Locke first completed a draft of what would eventually be published in 1689 as the *Two Treatises of Government*. However, Locke’s close relationship with Shaftesbury would also prove problematic for the philosopher when the Earl’s subversive activities were exposed in 1682. Shaftesbury and his fellow conspirators, who were mainly disaffected members of the old Cromwellian regime, plotted to assassinate both Charles II and his heir, the Duke of York in March of 1683. However, the exact details of the conspiracy are difficult to determine. As Phillip Milton points out in his discussion of Locke’s alleged involvement, “much of the evidence is vague, second-hand, inconsistent, or uncorroborated, and some of it is demonstrably untrue”, and this makes it exceedingly difficult to determine John Locke’s role (or if he even had one) in the whole affair.

Though Locke’s precise involvement in the Rye House Plot is unknown, for his part Locke was adamant that, “I never in my life did any thing undutifully [sic] against his Majesty or the government: I know of no thing in my life scandalous, or am conscious of any thing that ought to give any offense”. However it seems likely that, despite his claims to the contrary, Locke was at the very least aware of the treasonous intentions of his employer. After all, not only had Locke been a full-time member of Shaftesbury’s

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2 Locke complained to Pembroke that he felt it was unfair “that having reaped so little advantage from my service to him [Shaftesbury] whilst living, I should suffer so much on that account now he is dead” (Locke to Pembroke, 8 December 1684).


4 Locke to Pembroke, 8 December 1864.

5 This is Milton’s argument in “John Locke and the Rye House Plot.” However, as he acknowledges in his introduction, most recent scholarship on the subject charges that Locke was not only
household for seventeen years at the time of the conspiracy, but he is also known to have worked closely with the earl in developing his political ideology that is presented in his *Two Treatises of Government*. Even more damning is the testimony of several of his friends that during the summer when the plotting was at its height, Locke made a number of mysterious journeys, the destination of which he was most reluctant to reveal.\(^6\) In any case, Locke’s relationship with Shaftesbury unquestionably implicated him and as one of his close acquaintances and earliest biographers Jean Le Clerc wrote, “Mr. Locke did not think himself any longer safe in England; for though they could not hurt him according to a due Form of Law, yet ’twas possible they might Imprison him, and let him lie there some Time, to the endangering [of] his Health and Life”.\(^7\)

Locke’s decision to leave the country was certainly justified by his subsequent expulsion from his position at Oxford and, more frighteningly, the executions of several men only tangentially involved in the conspiracy on the vague charge of “guilt by association”.\(^8\)

Regardless of how much truth lay behind the accusations which precipitated Locke’s flight, embroilment in such controversy hardly seems indicative of someone who desired nothing more than to “pass silently through this world”. Furthermore, Locke’s portrayal of himself as the victim of unfortunate circumstances and unscrupulous men would seem a better explanation if this was Locke’s only brush with controversy. However, this is decidedly not the case. Locke may have professed to lead a quiet life and generally refrained from entering into the political games and machinations which consumed so many of his acquaintances, but nevertheless, he

\(^6\) Ibid., 649-651.
\(^7\) Ibid., 647.
\(^8\) Ibid, 666.
persisted in publishing ideas and theories which were far from moderate. In fact, Locke’s philosophy, most generally published anonymously, would be frequently challenged and questioned by both his contemporaries and his successors. As Locke biographer W.M. Spellman notes, by the time Locke died in 1704, his philosophy was not only famous but also exceedingly controversial.⁹

Again and again, these challenges seemed to circle back to the same essential theme: the true content of Locke’s religious beliefs. It may be argued that in a time characterized by confessional disputes and religious quarrels it is unsurprising that critics of Locke’s work should resort to accusations that Locke was promoting a variety of radical viewpoints and religious heterodoxy. It is true that, like the American habit of labeling enemies “communists” in the early twentieth century, these challenges were somewhat stereotypical. However, this does not necessarily make these criticisms false. Unlike the common perception of communist witch-hunts in twentieth-century America, they were not always uttered without evidence to support them.¹⁰ It is also important to note that Locke was certainly well aware of the tumultuous intellectual and religious climate—in fact, it was this tumult which inspired him to both write and publish many of his best-known works including the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, and *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. Locke sought to add his voice to the many arguing the true nature of faith and religious belief and in doing so actively courted controversy, calling into question the sincerity of his professed

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¹⁰ And, of course, the same was true for the so-called “Red Scare”—accusations of harboring communist sympathies were not always unfounded. A detailed account of this period in American history can be found in Fried’s history of McCarthyism and the Red Scare (Albert Fried, *McCarthyism, The Great American Red Scare: A Documentary History*, [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997]).
desire to live quietly and forcing him to spend vast amounts of time and ink defending himself and his philosophy from almost constant accusations of radicalism.\textsuperscript{11}

This contradiction invites a closer examination of both the content and the context of the religious convictions conveyed throughout Locke’s philosophy. Such an examination reveals not only a wealth of theological assertions which inspired the concern of many of Locke’s orthodox contemporaries but which also fueled his successors’ desire to read Locke in a far more radical light than he most likely intended. Voltaire presents perhaps the most notable example of this radicalization of Locke’s ideas. Writing on Locke’s \textit{Essay Concerning Human Understanding}, Voltaire attributed to Locke not only the destruction of the concept of innate ideas and knowledge proceeding from sources other than the senses (such as revelation), but also with proving incontrovertibly the mortality of the soul.\textsuperscript{12} Though it is easy to imagine Locke’s discomfort with such an interpretation, even the briefest study of the \textit{Essay} reveals that Voltaire’s analysis was by no means as far-fetched as perhaps Locke’s protestations would suggest.

With respect to determining the source of these strains of unorthodoxy, the task is slightly more complex. Obviously, there is no way to ever completely account for the development and eventual manifestation of these beliefs within Locke’s philosophy. However, the five-year period which Locke spent exiled from England, which he spent in the Dutch Republic, mostly living in Amsterdam, is undoubtedly highly significant for numerous reasons. However, it is often neglected or glossed over in biographies and


studies of Lockean philosophy. There is a strong case to be made that an examination of this aspect of Locke’s life will therefore shed new light on the often cloudy issue of the theology of Locke’s philosophy. There is plentiful evidence that not only was the intellectual climate of the Netherlands far more radical than much of the rest of Europe, but the primary topics of debate in this climate were theological in nature. Since this was the case, it provided the perfect opportunity for Locke to be both exposed to and absorb progressive or unorthodox ideas, perhaps without even fully realizing that he was doing so. Furthermore, Locke’s extensive correspondence with his Dutch associates demonstrates that this is exactly what was occurring. The enthusiasm with which Locke engaged in this culture of avant-garde intellectualism is well documented in his correspondence from this five-year period. Taken together, these circumstances hint at the influence which Locke’s sojourn in the Netherlands had on his later publications.

If such an argument can be supported, then it should significantly influence our understanding of both the philosopher and his philosophy. John Locke, it hardly needs to be said, holds an enormously influential position in the progression of the European Enlightenment. A largely mainstream philosopher, Locke was in a position to encourage an understanding of both human nature and the purpose and role of religion that previously had only been discussed on the peripheries of the intellectual landscape.\(^\text{13}\) That he did in fact do this is evidenced by the reception of his philosophy by his contemporaries as well as the impact it has had on the modern understanding of

\(^{13}\) Jonathan Israel’s *Radical Enlightenment* provides what is unquestionably the definitive account of the fringe movements which composed the early Enlightenment and which, he argues, were so crucial to its later, mainstream development, (Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750*, [New York: Oxford University Press, 2001]).
these issues, all of which have been discussed ably elsewhere. Discussed less frequently, however, is the topic which is of primary concern for this paper—namely, the circumstances which placed Locke in this influential position between the mainstream and the unconventional. How did Locke come to hold such controversial beliefs? The source of these beliefs, I will argue, is in the interaction between the radical environment of Holland, which offered a plethora of unusual and radical ideologies, and Locke, who was obviously more inclined to accept such radicalism than he was comfortable admitting.

**The Significance of Holland**

Indicative of the significance of his decision to spend his exile in Amsterdam, Locke himself felt compelled to explain this choice when he wrote to Pembroke at the end of 1684. He complained that his accusers were scrutinizing his every move, seeing guilty motives in innocent decisions. He refused to acknowledge that he had been forced out of the country, pretending instead that it was desire for a change of climate which motivated his sudden departure. “It has been asked too,” he wrote, “why I chose Holland, and not France for change of air”. He must have known he was fooling no one, but nonetheless stubbornly maintained the charade that his poor health was the sole reason for his precipitous relocation to Amsterdam, saying that he preferred the clean air of Holland to that of France. For a middle-aged man to go abroad seeking a more salubrious climate would have been fairly commonplace, but clearly in Locke’s

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15 Locke to Pembroke, 8 December 1684.
case the motive was not so innocuous. From Locke’s remarks it is apparent that his choice of Amsterdam occasioned comment and was seized on by some as confirmation, if any was needed, of his guilt—unsurprising, given the questionable reputation of the Dutch Republic.

Surviving accounts of European travelers to the Netherlands demonstrate just how different this country was in many respects from its European counterparts. Perhaps the most significant difference was the Dutch attitude toward religious toleration. More than merely a theoretical possibility in the Dutch Republic, it was a reality with a long and complicated history behind it. Though formerly part of the Spanish empire, the Dutch had revolted in the sixteenth century following increased persecution of Dutch Calvinists by their Spanish overlords. The rebellion was one of the few successful in the early modern period, and the fact that it had been instigated by the issue of religious intolerance was a significant factor in determining the policy of the new Republic. Another contributing factor was the explosive economic growth which took place throughout the Netherlands during the seventeenth century. Soon a diverse and religiously pluralistic population lived, crammed cheek-by-jowl, in the same cities and made use of the same public institutions. Given this reality, the Dutch took a mostly practical approach to the highly contentious issue of religious toleration. Observing the

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16 Locke did apparently, however, suffer from numerous legitimate health complaints which, he claimed, prevented him from engaging in a more active lifestyle. His various illnesses and symptoms were another of Locke’s favorite topics of discussion, and he often refers to them often throughout his correspondence. Locke’s preoccupation with his poor health was also strategic. In his letter to Pembroke, Locke cited it as a reason why he entered into Shaftesbury’s employ, writing that it was a “fault in [his] health” which prevented him from entering into public practice as a physician (which was his trade), and forced him to seek what seemed like at the time to be a more retired position as the earl’s secretary (Locke to Pembroke, 8 December 1684).


violent and destructive disputes which afflicted much of the rest of seventeenth-century Europe, the Dutch adopted a policy of religious toleration as the most expedient way of avoiding the same or perhaps worse fate.\textsuperscript{19}

However, religious toleration was not the only way in which Dutch society differed significantly from its European counterparts. The economic boom precipitated a great deal of change in a short period of time and influenced more than just the Dutch policy on toleration. Consequently, the social atmosphere of the Dutch Republic was unlike any other in the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{20} The rapid population growth which coincided with the economic boom created a unique set of priorities for the governments of the various provinces. As mentioned previously, rather than focusing on confessional unity or religious purity, the Dutch governments were primarily concerned with both maintaining and encouraging the sudden economic boom while establishing order and security. Furthermore, the social burdens created by the impoverished, orphaned and elderly were dealt with primarily by the state, although admittedly with some Calvinist influence. This secular focus was both highly unusual for its time and roundly condemned by the Europeans who observed it.\textsuperscript{21}

Most importantly for John Locke, however, was the intellectual climate which this unusual society created. Though censorship laws which would undoubtedly be considered stringent by today’s standards were still in place, they were relatively liberal compared to the rest of Europe and books which could not have been published elsewhere sought publication in Amsterdam and other provinces of the Dutch

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 130.
\textsuperscript{20} Schoffer, 103.
\textsuperscript{21} Price, 206.
Political and religious exiles like Locke flocked to cosmopolitan centers, especially Amsterdam, both to escape the wrath of their native governments and to take advantage of this lax censorship policy to continue criticizing their homelands’ political and religious conventions. Naturally, their presence also contributed significantly to this radical climate. Religious dissent was another important element. In the Netherlands, though religious debates were often intense and were sometimes discouraged or suppressed by the government, they rarely resulted in the violence and disruption which characterized religious differences and confessional disputes in England and elsewhere. Consequently, certain religious issues were discussed more freely and with less fear of repercussion, legal or otherwise, than was generally the case in early modern Europe. Within this climate, freethinkers and dissenters flourished. With a little prudence, these individuals could both disseminate their own ideas and challenge others’ with far less fear for their safety than in England or France.

This liberality did not come without a price, however. The Dutch Republic was perceived not only as an oddity by its fellow European nations, (who were, almost without exception, monarchies), but also as a threat. Misunderstanding fed by miscommunication meant that the Dutch way of life seemed highly suspicious, and even unnatural, to its more traditional neighbors. The enormous economic success of the Dutch and their unwillingness to apologize for or explain their customs to foreigners only fueled this suspicion. Mistrust escalated into hostility and by the end of the seventeenth century, the Dutch had been invaded by both Britain and France. Among

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23 Price, 205.
the numerous other contributing factors fueling this hostility was frustration with the willingness of the Dutch to harbor political exiles like Locke. Authorities looked the other way while these expatriates continued writing and publishing the same criticisms of their native governments which had resulted in their exile. That such a practice should provoke resentment is perhaps only to be expected. In fact, in their declarations of war both the British and the French explicitly listed this among their grievances and causes for war against the Dutch in 1672.25

Though it is easy to get carried away discussing the liberality of the Dutch society and policy, so unusual for its time, the limitations deserve notice as well. Firstly, there was little legal provision for either toleration or freedom of the press, which were both more the result of tradition and culture than of law. Secondly, the Dutch did not completely secularize their government; the Dutch Reformed Church maintained its position as the official church of the Dutch Republic. As a function of this policy, members of other denominations and religions could not hold public office. Finally, the Dutch themselves were by no means entirely comfortable with their own liberality, which was the source of constant debate and concern. A notable example of this discomfort occurred in 1672 invasion of the Republic by the French. Hard pressed, the Dutch defended themselves only by bursting the famous dikes which held the ocean at bay and flooding vast portions of their own land—a catastrophe only slightly less devastating than being conquered by France. In the aftermath, the Dutch experienced somewhat of an identity crisis. Some critics from within the Republic began to blame the Dutch liberality and tolerance for the French invasion, even going so far as to speculate that it

25 Ibid, 276.
may be divine punishment. Therefore, while the Dutch policies of toleration and freedom of the press far surpassed much of the rest of Europe, they are by no means comparable to modern conceptions and practices.

Therefore, when John Locke left England in 1684 under a cloud of suspicion, his choice of Holland as a sanctuary must have done little to help his case. Nonetheless, having left the political complexities of England behind him, Locke immersed himself wholeheartedly in the lively intellectual debates taking place in Amsterdam. He virtually ceased to write on strictly political matters—his correspondence from this period never even references the manuscripts for the *Two Treatises of Government* which had absorbed so much of his time in England. Instead, Locke turned his mind and his pen toward issues which appeared to be much more personal. Firstly, he began to work almost immediately on the long-neglected project which would become *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. This project would take up a great deal of his time and energy during his time in exile, as Locke worked to revise and refine his complicated arguments with the support and friendly criticism of his closest associates. In addition, surrounded by energetic debate and religious diversity, and ever conscious of the strife which religious intolerance had caused, and continued to cause, in his

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26 The Dutch were well aware of their poor reputation throughout the rest of Europe. Furthermore, the concerns that their liberal policies were the reason for the French invasion were not by any means baseless, as mentioned previously.
28 Locke’s interest in the mind and religious faith appeared to stem mainly from his own curiosity. If nothing else, the persistence of his interest in these topics throughout his life testifies to this fact. Furthermore, in his correspondence with Van Limborch and others, he seems as much, if not more, concerned with seeking a way to reconcile his own apparently contradictory beliefs as with making any kind of political or social statement.
29 Locke wrote his friend Edward Clarke in 1685 to complain that rumors were being spread about his activities in Holland. He told Clarke that his work on the *Essay* gave him an “innocent and (as I thought) safe employment for my solitary hours”. (Locke to Edward Clarke, Utrecht, 1 January 1685, in *The Correspondence of John Locke: Volume 2: Letters nos. 462–848*, edited by E. S. De Beer, [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976], in *Electronic Enlightenment*, edited by Robert McNamee et al.)
homeland, Locke became more and more interested in issues of toleration and confessional differences. Finally, stemming from this interest in confessional clashes, Locke sought to better understand the true nature of Christianity through careful reading and discussion of the scriptures. In fact, not long after his arrival in 1684, his close friend Damaris Masham wrote to him expressing her surprise and amusement at his increased knowledge of scripture: “You have learnt more scripture there than you ever Knew in your whole life before, whom I little thought once would ever have writ me a letter not to be understood without turning to St Paul, and St Peter’s Epistles”. Locke’s Dutch associates and friends, who primarily belonged to the liberal Remonstrant movement, were wholehearted participants in the debates surrounding all of these topics.

**Philippus van Limborch, the Remonstrants, and Toleration**

The debate between the Remonstrants and the Counter-Remonstrants was, in many ways, the expression of an identity crisis within the Dutch Reformed Church. Originating in the sixteenth century and reaching its height in the seventeenth, the debate paralleled similar crises taking place within many other Christian denominations throughout Europe. The Remonstrant movement followed the theologian Arminius, who was convinced that the narrow and unforgiving doctrines of Calvinism were in desperate need of reform, especially as they regarded certain theological issues. Specifically, the Remonstrants proposed the modification of the harsh doctrine of predestination into a more forgiving one of universal grace. Their primary goal was to

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31 Price, 42.
stress certain fundamental doctrines of Christianity as crucial to salvation and to diminish the importance of cultural styles of worship, which were the source of many of the confessional disputes. In other words, rather than stressing the differences between various confessions, the Remonstrants searched for commonalities. In the course of this, however, they excluded many doctrines traditionally considered essential to true Christian faith; some of the more fringe members of the group even went as far as to include belief in the Trinity and in the dual nature of the person of Jesus Christ among these supposedly superfluous doctrines.

The Counter-Remonstrance, which represented traditional Calvinist theology, was naturally vehemently opposed to all these proposed alterations to Reformed Church doctrine. With the Reformed Church thus split down conservative and liberal lines, there seemed to be no simple resolution to the Remonstrant dispute. Consequently, a prolonged and often vicious debate ensued and escalated throughout the early seventeenth century. Finally, in 1618, the Reformed Church convened the Synod of Dort in order to bring an official resolution to the Remonstrant–Counter-Remonstrant split. Influenced by political intrigues which were occurring in the Dutch Republic simultaneous to the Synod, the members voted in 1619 to officially reject the teachings of Arminius and his Remonstrant followers as heresy. However, despite or perhaps because of its official suppression, the Remonstrant movement persisted in the form of a fringe movement of ministers and theologians who remained in Amsterdam

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32 Ibid., 41.
33 Such a belief would seem to stray dangerously close to Socinianism—a fringe religious movement begun in Poland which advocated the use of reason in religion and sought to do away with many crucial dogmas of the Christian faith, including the divinity of Christ and, by extension, the Trinity.
34 The political enemies of the powerful protector of the Remonstrant movement, statesman Johann van Oldenbarnevelt, sought to influence the Synod to reject Arminianism as a way to ensure his political ruin. In this they were more than successful—on the 13th of May, 1819, only four days after the Synod reached their decision, Oldenbarnevelt was executed for treason.
and scattered throughout the Dutch Republic, influencing theological discussions far into the seventeenth century.

One of the best known of these dissenting ministers was also Locke’s closest friend in Amsterdam, if the stability and abundance of their correspondence is any indication. Philippus van Limborch achieved much of his prominence through publishing, and he both wrote and edited a number of influential Remonstrant works. The primary purpose of most of his writings was to both expound the tenets of the Remonstrance movement and to defend them against their many critics. Van Limborch’s relationship with Locke was based on their mutual fascination with religious issues and of all his correspondents, he appeared to find the most in common both theologically and philosophically with Locke. Locke, for his part, expressed to Van Limborch his surprise to find that he held so many beliefs in common with both the Remonstrant movement in general and Van Limborch in particular. After his death in 1704, his old friend Damaris Masham wrote to Van Limborch concerning this similarity: “I imagine that the sentiments that he [Locke] found in vogue amongst you in Holland pleased him far more, and seemed to him far more reasonable, than anything that he used to hear from English theologians”. In fact, testifying to both the strength of their friendship and its foundation, Locke addressed his famous Letter Concerning Toleration to Van Limborch. Over the course of their lengthy correspondence, the two would discuss and debate a wide range of theological issues.

Perhaps of primary concern to the two correspondents, however, was the issue of religious toleration. Not only did the two appear to have discussed the topic at great

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35 “Philippus van Limborch,” in Electronic Enlightenment, ed. Robert McNamee et al.
36 Spellman, 22.
37 Quoted in Fraser, xxxvi.
length, but inspired several other discussions on related topics. During Locke’s stay in Amsterdam, both men were working on their own treatises on toleration and the similarity in their ideas suggests that the two often directly compared and discussed their ideas while together in Amsterdam.\textsuperscript{38} Though their letters from this period indicate such a discussion, unfortunately the two rarely engage this topic directly in writing. Undoubtedly, their close proximity to one another usually made writing lengthy and detailed explanations of ideas unnecessary. However, despite this limitation, their correspondence does make apparent that toleration was never far from either’s mind. For example, Van Limborch, writing to Locke in 1685, praises a new acquaintance by relating his “tolerant attitude towards those who disagree with him” and confesses that he is eager to learn this acquaintance’s opinions “on a number of things, especially on the question of toleration in matters of religion”.\textsuperscript{39} This and other such casual references would seem to indicate a well-established understanding of mutually shared ideas on the topic.

Examining Van Limborch’s views of toleration (as expressed in both his \textit{Theologia Christiana} and the epilogue to his \textit{Theological Institutions}) makes their similarity to Locke immediately apparent. Van Limborch defended a policy of toleration which was espoused in the main by the Remonstrant movement and which limited the role of civil authority in religion solely to the regulation of public aspects of religion. According to him, civil authorities who meddled in matters of conscience and personal

\textsuperscript{38} Luisa Simonutti, Political Society and Religious Liberty: Locke at Cleves and in Holland", \textit{British Journal for the History of Philosophy} 14, no. 3 (2006): 429.
belief were acting contrary to the will of God. In the *Letter Concerning Toleration*, Locke echoed this assertion, aligning himself with not only Van Limborch but the entire Dutch Remonstrant movement. He explained that God desires all men to love him both as a free choice and according to the dictates of their individual consciences. “Whatsoever is not done with [the] assurance of Faith,” Locke wrote, “is neither well in itself, nor can it be acceptable to God. To impose such things therefore upon any People…is in fact to command them to offend God”. For both Locke and Van Limborch, the most important argument in favor of this policy is the rationality of it—the government cannot command a person to alter their inner beliefs to fit the official religion and expect to be obeyed. The best that can be hoped for is outward conformity, something that it is apparent both thinkers believed could not be equated with sincere devotion.

Furthermore, both Locke and Van Limborch were skeptical about the ability of anyone to determine conclusively the validity of a given religion. Van Limborch argued in *Theologia Christiana* that, because each is convinced of the truth of his own religion, it is impossible to determine the infallible truth about which is really correct. Consequently, prosecution of religious heretics is impossible. Furthermore, Van Limborch distinguished between those elements of religion which are essential to salvation and those which are not. Fundamental components include those which are clearly reasonable and which are expressed in the Holy Scripture. Locke reiterated this point in his *Letter*, labeling nonessential elements “indifferent things” and including

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40 Simonutti, 425.
42 Simonutti, 426.
among them traditions and styles of worship. Any person, he wrote, who conscientiously follows Christ to the best of his ability cannot be considered a heretic.

These similarities provide the structure which both men use to define the ideal Christian church. Such a church is composed of men who have freely chosen to be members, who adhere to the divine laws of charity and Christian love and who are consequently both peaceful and tolerant of others’ beliefs.

Perhaps when Locke and Van Limborch chose to define the ideal church in this way, they had a specific example in mind. During Locke’s years in Holland, both men attended meetings of disaffected Christian intellectuals, mainly Remonstrants, known as the Collegiants. Strongest in the mid to late seventeenth century, the Collegiant movement was at its height during Locke’s residence in the Netherlands. Though a relatively small movement which operated mainly on the periphery of Dutch intellectual culture, the Collegiants still managed to influence this culture by pushing for the same religious reforms espoused by the Remonstrants. As a way to achieve this reform, the Collegiants practiced a form of worship which lacked the structure characteristic of orthodox Calvinism and completely rejected the hierarchy of authority typical of many Christian denominations.

These meetings functioned more than just as a form of worship—they were a way for intellectually-inclined members to discuss and disseminate ideas. Collegiant meetings were characterized by free discussions not only of scriptures, but of the new

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43 It would appear that Van Limborch and Locke placed greater emphasis on the rationality of these essential elements than on their presence in the scripture. This position is further illuminated in a lengthy discourse on the content and authorship of the New Testament, as will be discussed below.


ideas of the Early Enlightenment. The Collegiants not only facilitated the spread of these ideas, but also shaped and even, to a certain extent, radicalized them. Putting into practice the liberal principles that defined their movement, the Collegiants welcomed not just dissenters from the Reformed Church, but anyone who wished to take part in their discussions. Perhaps the most famous, or perhaps infamous, example of a Collegiant who was not a Calvinist (or even Christian) is Benedict de Spinoza. There is evidence which suggests that Spinoza was influenced by these meetings which he attended in the early seventeenth century while developing his own highly unorthodox philosophy. It is evident that, by its very nature, this movement was especially attractive to a bolder group of intellectual elites, of which John Locke proved to be a member.

Locke’s correspondence reveals he attended Collegiant meetings in Amsterdam sporadically throughout his residence in the Dutch Republic and was well acquainted with the group’s members, whom he referenced frequently in his letters to Van Limborch. In turn, Van Limborch, who was a regular at these gatherings, frequently passed on greetings from the Collegiants. The similarity between the Collegiant meetings and Locke’s ideal form of worship, which he outlined in the *Letter*, are unmistakable. Furthermore, Locke also apparently valued the group’s opinion, for he sent them a copy of the incomplete draft of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in 1688, which they discussed at length. Van Limborch reported back to

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46 Ibid.
Locke that “from time to time there is vigorous argument about your meaning,” and cited specific areas which the group found vague or difficult to understand.\textsuperscript{48}

Locke’s theory of toleration, with its focus on the commonalities between all Christians, probably does not seem at all unusual or groundbreaking to the modern reader. However, the reception of \textit{A Letter Concerning Toleration} when it was published soon after Locke’s return to England in 1689 demonstrated that many of Locke’s contemporaries felt quite the opposite. Immediately after its anonymous publication (initially in Latin, though it was translated and published in English only a few months later), the \textit{Letter} was attacked by supporters of Anglican hegemony as crossing the line of acceptable opinion, albeit in a different way than their other adversaries, the Puritans. Unlike the Puritans, who also espoused a kind of a separation of church and state, Locke did not seek to free the search for spiritual truth from the demands of secular politics. Rather, in the minds of his critics, Locke went too far the other way—he wished to liberate rational thought from religious restrictions.\textsuperscript{49} They protested that, while perhaps some toleration could possibly be justified, a policy of universal toleration was not only completely absurd, but also sinful. In fact, some of the \textit{Letter}’s more vigorous critics even implied that it was part of an elaborate Jesuit plot to bring chaos to Protestant England and therefore facilitate the restoration of Catholicism as the country’s dominant religion.\textsuperscript{50} Indicative of both the importance of the \textit{Letter} to Locke personally and also its less than warm reception in Britain, by the time of his death in

\textsuperscript{48} Van Limborch to John Locke, Amsterdam, 3 April 1688.
\textsuperscript{50} Tully, 1.
1704, Locke had written more than three hundred pages defending the original twenty-five page letter.\textsuperscript{51}

At the heart of both Locke and Van Limborch’s defense of toleration was the debate concerning which elements of the Christian faith were essential and which were extraneous. The Remonstrant stance, with which both Locke and Van Limborch essentially aligned, favored fewer essential elements and therefore courted controversy by embracing many dissenters as true Christians, despite their peculiar or heterodox beliefs.\textsuperscript{52} Such a stance had even more radical implications, however. The source of a great many of the confessional disagreements in the seventeenth century was conflicting interpretations of scripture. By denying the necessity of the vast majority of these disputes and essentially dismissing them as petty, Locke, Van Limborch and the Remonstrants came dangerously close to challenging the scriptures as a source of divine authority and revealed knowledge.

\textbf{Jean Le Clerc and the Role of Divine Inspiration in Scripture}

In reading and discussing the writings of their mutual acquaintance, Jean Le Clerc, they would come closer still to challenging this once unassailable relationship between scripture and revelation. In 1685, only a year after Locke’s arrival in Holland, both Locke and Van Limborch obtained a copy of Le Clerc’s newly-published treatise on scriptural exegesis, \textit{Sentimens de quelques thologiens de Hollande sur l’histoire critique du Vieux Testament composée par le P. Richard Simon}.\textsuperscript{53} Le Clerc was well-known to

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{53} Unfortunately, the Simon-Le Clerc debate is currently only available in manuscript form. Consequently, all information about its content comes from Klauber’s discussion of the debate.
both men—he played a key role in the publishing of some of Locke’s best-known writings including the *Letter Concerning Toleration* and, upon Van Limborch’s death in 1712, Le Clerc delivered an oration at his funeral. Though Le Clerc had taken the double precaution of both publishing the treatise anonymously and attributing its ideas to a nameless “friend,” the authorship of the treaty was an extremely poorly kept secret and everyone, including Locke and Van Limborch, knew he had written it.\(^5^4\) Moreover, he had quite the reputation for expressing controversial opinions, especially about biblical analysis, meaning that even those who did not know for certain that he had written the treatise would have been suspicious. Le Clerc, however, found himself in somewhat of the same situation as Locke—he professed to be a devout Christian all the while publishing theories which seemed to his critics to strike at the heart of the Christian religion.

This particular treatise was a point-by-point rebuttal of the theory of biblical analysis conceived by noted French Oratorian priest Richard Simon and published in the *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament* in 1678. Le Clerc’s response, which ignited what was to be a prolonged debate, was a significant milestone in the general movement of seventeenth-century biblical criticism away from the assumption of the complete infallibility of the Bible.\(^5^5\) Though prior to this debate scriptural exegesis had focused almost entirely on interpretation issues or concerns about the authenticity of certain translations, Le Clerc directly challenged both scriptural authorship and the traditional conceptions of divine inspiration. Cutting through all of the debate surrounding the meaning of certain obscure passages, Le Clerc essentially argued that

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\(^{5^4}\) Klauber, 627.

\(^{5^5}\) Ibid., 613.
“God has not given us the truth of the gospel to make us philosophers”. Instead, he asserted, it was far more likely that passages which were difficult to comprehend were the result of human error—mistakes by authors who were writing of their own volition rather than under the influence of the divine.

Still more radically, Le Clerc warned that even those passages of the Bible where God is depicted as speaking directly were suspect because of the possibility that the authors had misunderstood the true meaning of the divine message. But even while discounting large portions of the Bible (including most of the Old Testament) as error-ridden, Le Clerc still maintained that the integrity of the essential truths of Christianity was unimpaired. The ultimate test of scriptural authenticity, he claimed, was its adherence to rationality. The implication of this was fairly shocking for the seventeenth-century reader—if the only aspects of scriptural teaching that could be trusted were those which were rational, what need was there for divine revelation?

Le Clerc’s style of scriptural exegesis was undoubtedly progressive. It was not, however, the first of its kind. Though it is true that mainstream scriptural analysis had largely assumed infallibility and divine inspiration, some of the more radical examinations had questioned the authenticity of biblical revelation prior to Le Clerc and these certainly influenced his own methods. Perhaps the most notable of these pioneers was Benedict de Spinoza, the very embodiment of the freethinking fringe of the early Enlightenment. It was Spinoza who had famously challenged both Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and the validity of miracles. Furthermore, as Richard Popkin succinctly states, Spinoza’s treatment of biblical prophecy had succeeded in reducing it to nothing more than the “uninteresting opinions of some people who lived

56 Quoted in Ibid., 629.
long ago". Though it was extremely foolish for a seventeenth-century intellectual to admit any sort of agreement with Spinoza, Le Clerc had read and apparently harbored some admiration for the philosopher’s discussion of the Mosaic authorship and use of rationality in his exegesis. In fact, it is evident that Le Clerc borrows heavily from both these elements of Spinoza’s exegesis in his own treatise.

Le Clerc’s treatise provoked one of the most in-depth written discussions which Locke and Van Limborch engaged in during the period of Locke’s exile. Writing to Locke near the end of 1685, Van Limborch referenced the work, noting that it had been the cause of a great deal of controversy and had been much criticized by any number of theologians. These critics, Van Limborch reported, charged that Le Clerc had attempted to completely destroy the authority of the scripture. Locke responded that, after reading the treatise, he could easily believe Van Limborch’s report: “I seemed myself to hear cries of protest as if it meant the end of all religion”. However, both Van Limborch and Locke appeared more amused by the protests of these theologians than alarmed. “You know the ways of such people,” Locke wrote, “the less they are able to refute some heterodox opinion, the more they are roused in their anxiety not to appear idle in God’s cause, to outcries, accusations and calumnies”.

Significantly, Locke’s interest in the treatise appeared to stem from some preexisting concerns about the role of divine inspiration in the writing of the scriptures. The treaty, he acknowledged, raised some difficult questions about “the general

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58 The epithet “Spinozist” was the worst of insults in the early Enlightenment—it amounted to accusing someone of atheism. (Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 607.)
59 Klauber, 622.
60 Locke to Philippus van Limborch, Cleves, 6 October 1685.
61 Locke to Van Limborch, 6 October 1685.
infallibility and inspiration of the Holy Scripture”. He confessed he could find no answer to these questions. Still more troubling for Locke, this treatise forced him to directly confront the radical nature of his doubts. “Many things that I have come across in the canonical books, long before I read this treatise, have kept me in doubt and anxiety,” he wrote to Van Limborch on October 6, 1685, “and you will be doing me a most welcome service if you can relieve me of these scruples”. But if Locke believed Van Limborch would defend an orthodox position of biblical infallibility against Locke’s doubts, then he did not know his friend. Limborch’s response, while criticizing Le Clerc’s style and some of the weaker arguments which he employed, on the whole seemed to approve of his conclusions. His concerns were that the “subject dealt with in the treatise deserved careful consideration” and that Le Clerc’s brash statements and impulsive publishing of a treatise which Van Limborch believed unready for publication had provided Le Clerc’s critics with easy targets and fodder for their arguments.

Ultimately, despite his discomfort, Locke concurred with Van Limborch’s assessment of the treatise. Both seemed rather frustrated with Le Clerc, but their irritation did not stem from any moral outrage at his conclusions. Instead, they both appear convinced that, though Le Clerc’s conclusions had been valid, his method of relating them had been so flawed as to seriously diminish its impact. In fact, Van Limborch seemed to doubt the prudence of publishing such an opinion at all, writing that he believed it was “a matter for consideration whether it is expedient that truth of this sort should see the light when it is likely to give offence to almost the whole of the

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62 Locke to Van Limborch, 6 October 1685.  
63 Locke to Van Limborch, 6 October 1685.  
64 Van Limborch to John Locke, Amsterdam, 1 October 1685.
Christian world". Locke disagreed with the adoption of such a strong position, agreeing on the whole that the issue of divine revelation was a topic which should be handled very carefully, but arguing that it did indeed need to be discussed:

If everything in holy writ is to be considered without distinction as equally inspired by God, then this surely provides philosophers with a great opportunity for casting doubt on our faith and sincerity. If, on the contrary, certain parts are to be considered as purely human writings, then where in the Scriptures will there be found the certainty of divine authority, without which the Christian religion will fall to the ground? 

Locke’s approval of the discussion of such a sensitive topic seems to counter the claim that he was largely traditional in his religious convictions. Though he seemed uncomfortable with some of the conclusions he reached in his search for truth, he nonetheless trusted his intellect and ability to think rationally to ultimately lead him in the right direction. In fact, Locke described himself to Van Limborch, with a certain amount of pride, as someone “everywhere in search of truth alone” and claimed to accept this truth “with equal readiness whether I find it among the orthodox or the heterodox”. By carefully reading and discussing Le Clerc’s treatise, Locke proved that he was serious in this claim. As Van Limborch hinted, the publication of this treatise resulted in a firestorm of criticism from both Catholic and Protestant sources. Though Le Clerc’s criticisms of Biblical inspiration would become a dominant force in the intellectual discussions of eighteenth-century Europe, they brought a new and unquestionably revolutionary approach to Biblical criticism when they first made their appearance in the seventeenth century.

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65 Van Limborch to Locke, 1 October 1685.
66 Locke to Philippus van Limborch, 6 October 1685.
67 Locke to Van Limborch, 6 October 1685.
68 Klauber, 612.
The Use of Reason in the Van Limborch-Orobio Debate

Le Clerc was not alone in revolutionizing biblical studies. Encouraged by an enthusiastic Le Clerc, Van Limborch also developed his own innovative style of biblical analysis while participating in an ongoing debate with an erudite member of Amsterdam’s Jewish community, Isaac Orobio de Castro. Discussion of this debate is another significant feature of Locke and Van Limborch’s correspondence throughout the mid 1680s. The debate may be broken down into two parts: an oral discussion, thought to have occurred in 1683 but about which little is known, and a written portion, which constituted the majority of the exchange. This written portion was published by Van Limborch following Orobio’s death in 1687 and is composed of three rounds of discussion, with each participant defending the doctrines of his respective religion.69

Such debates were relatively commonplace among intellectuals and theologians during this time, but this specific discourse is unusual for a number of reasons.70 Firstly, the context within which the debate took place was quite unusual. Amsterdam was one of the few places in all of Europe where Jews were able to live in relative security, Van Limborch’s exchange with Orobio also resulted in another project which Locke encouraged. Following Orobio’s death in 1683, Van Limborch revealed to Locke that Orobio had suffered at the hands of the Inquisition in his native Portugal. Locke was intrigued by Van Limborch’s revelation and encouraged Van Limborch to record this account formally. Five years later, Locke was still enthusiastic about the idea and advised Van Limborch to write a complete history of the Roman Catholic Inquisition. Locke explained his rationale in a tone of heavy sarcasm, writing that Van Limborch should give a “complete picture of the holiness of that Office, as may draw all minds to admire it. It would be a crying shame for so many striking examples of holiness to remain hidden in darkness; may they see the light at last and make known on what foundations the faith is established and propagated” (Locke to Van Limborch 22 June 1688). Van Limborch took the advice of his friend and, in 1692, the Historia Inquisitionis was published. Almost forty years later, an English translation by Samuel Chandler was published (Philippus van Limborch, The History of the Inquisition, translated by Samuel Chandler, [2nd ed. London: J. Gray, 1731]). The account attempted to use the some of the more questionable activities of the Inquisition to further both Van Limborch and Locke’s belief that toleration is the proper stance of government (Marshall, 640).

69 Van Limborch’s exchange with Orobio also resulted in another project which Locke encouraged. Following Orobio’s death in 1683, Van Limborch revealed to Locke that Orobio had suffered at the hands of the Inquisition in his native Portugal. Locke was intrigued by Van Limborch’s revelation and encouraged Van Limborch to record this account formally. Five years later, Locke was still enthusiastic about the idea and advised Van Limborch to write a complete history of the Roman Catholic Inquisition. Locke explained his rationale in a tone of heavy sarcasm, writing that Van Limborch should give a “complete picture of the holiness of that Office, as may draw all minds to admire it. It would be a crying shame for so many striking examples of holiness to remain hidden in darkness; may they see the light at last and make known on what foundations the faith is established and propagated” (Locke to Van Limborch 22 June 1688). Van Limborch took the advice of his friend and, in 1692, the Historia Inquisitionis was published. Almost forty years later, an English translation by Samuel Chandler was published (Philippus van Limborch, The History of the Inquisition, translated by Samuel Chandler, [2nd ed. London: J. Gray, 1731]). The account attempted to use the some of the more questionable activities of the Inquisition to further both Van Limborch and Locke’s belief that toleration is the proper stance of government (Marshall, 640).

70 Unfortunately, the discourse between Van Limborch and Orobio is no longer being published, therefore, all information on the content of this debate comes from Van Rooden and Wim Wesselsius’ article. (Peter Van Rooden and Jan Wim Wesselsius. “The Early Enlightenment and Judaism: The ‘Civil Dispute’ between Philippus van Limborch and Isaac Orobio de Castro (1687).” Studia Rosenthaliana 21 [1987]: 140-153).
tolerated for the most part by their Christian neighbors. In fact, by the time Orobio and Van Limborch were debating theological questions, the Jewish community in Amsterdam was one of the largest and most prosperous in all of Europe. As Stephen Nadler notes in *Rembrandt’s Jews*, his discussion of seventeenth-century Jewish Amsterdam, the Dutch toleration of the Jews was far more complex than a mere business arrangement.\(^{71}\) The origins behind this curious situation are too complex to discuss at great length here, but a brief summary of them will serve to put the Orobio-Van Limborch debate in context.

The Amsterdam community had its origins in late fifteenth-century Portugal when, not content with severely limiting the rights of its Jewish population, the government determined to forcibly convert them to Christianity. The Portuguese reasoned that, by converting the Jews, they could have their proverbial cake and eat it too—they could continue reaping the economic benefits of a Jewish presence, while eliminating their supposedly offensive religion and lifestyle. However, the Portuguese were still suspicious of these newly-converted Christians, many of whom were still secretly practicing Judaism. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, increased persecution by the Portuguese Inquisition, even more zealous and violent than its better-known Spanish counterpart, had made it increasingly dangerous for the so-called “New Christians” or *conversos* to continue to practice Judaism, even subversively.

Consequently, the *conversos* began to flee the Inquisition, and some of them looked to the economic opportunity of Amsterdam to create new lives for themselves. While a government fully cognizant of the economic benefits brought by the Portuguese *conversos* looked the other way, a Jewish community slowly began to establish itself.

Increasingly, this community began to openly assert its Jewish identity. Eventually, faced with the demand of the Dutch Reformed Church to expel the Jews, Holland was forced to directly confront the issue of a supposedly-illegal community of Jews now openly living in their midst. After much debate, the provincial government reached a conclusion perhaps best summed up by Hugo Grotius, a member of the commission assigned to decide the issue officially in 1616: “Plainly, God desires them to live somewhere. Why then not here rather than elsewhere?” As a result, the Jews continued to live and openly practice their faith in a way rarely allowed throughout the rest of Europe. Such unusual tolerance attracted scholars and intellectuals, giving the community a reputation for erudition and excellent scriptural scholarship. It is not surprising, therefore, that Orobio, a Jewish scholar of some renown, should have chosen Amsterdam as his home.

For their part, the Dutch were both fascinated by Jewish culture as well as keen to take advantage of their scholarship. Nadler provides two reasons behind this proclivity for Jewish culture and learning. Firstly, the Dutch saw strong parallels between their own history of Spanish domination and the Old Testament account of the trials of the ancient Hebrews. They viewed their own Jewish population as the link to the ancient Hebrews and valued their scholarship and knowledge of Hebrew as a way to better understand the Old Testament accounts to which they related so strongly. However, just because the Dutch related to the Old Testament did not mean they considered the contemporary Jewish faith to be valid. As Nadler explains, it was a desire to demonstrate to the Jews the errors in their beliefs which provided another

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72 Quoted in Ibid., 20.
motivation for knowledge of Jewish scholarship and culture. Armed with this knowledge, some Christians would then enter into theological discussions with members of the Jewish communities in the hope of converting them, convinced that until all of the Jews had been converted, the second reign of Christ could not begin. In light of these influences, Van Limborch’s desire to engage Orobio takes on new significance. Perhaps Van Limborch did not desire, as so many Christian theologians traditionally did, to humiliate his Jewish opponent—perhaps he sincerely desired to convert Orobio through his arguments.

The degree to which Locke himself became an active participant in this discussion is apparent by his frequent references to the debate beginning in 1685 and culminating in 1687. It is apparent from these references that Locke was not only interested in what was being said, but was actually influencing Van Limborch’s side of the discussion by proofreading and criticizing his drafts. In fact, when he published the totality of the exchange in 1687, Van Limborch sent the first copy to Locke, writing in the accompanying letter that he thought it fitting that Locke, who had influenced the final product so much, be the first recipient. “It is through your care,” he explained, “that this whole discussion is appearing in a more polished form. You have removed numerous blemishes, you have supplied arguments that had escaped me”. It is worthwhile to note that the evident trust which Van Limborch had in Locke’s criticisms and suggestions indicates the similarity of their viewpoints. This acknowledgement of Locke’s obviously important role in the development of this discourse makes it possible to analyze it with an eye to what it reveals about Locke’s theological convictions.

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75 Van Limborch to John Locke, Amsterdam, 10 September 1687.
The first aspect of this debate which is worth noting is its tone. Rather than emulating the harsh and polemic style of previous discussions between Jews and Christians, Orobio and Van Limborch maintain throughout a comparatively courteous tone. Rather than appealing to emotion and making points through the use of bombastic language and outrageous claims, the two debaters made use of rational arguments to prove their points and counter the other's claims. Van Limborch especially, as will be evidenced below, was careful to ground his arguments in the dictates of reason, with which any thinking person—Christian or Jewish—could follow and see the logic in.

The discussion began when Orobio composed a letter to Van Limborch requesting evidence from the Old Testament which would prove two key points. Firstly, that the laws contained therein were only foreshadowing of higher truths which were later revealed in the New Testament, and secondly, that belief in the Messiah was necessary for salvation. Orobio's requests were fairly standard within the context of the history of Christian-Jewish polemical debates. The Old Testament was typically used as the basis for such debates as it was recognized as valid by both parties. The theory of such debates, most generally, was that if the counter-claims of the Christian writer, based on his interpretation of the Old Testament, could be disproven, then the Jewish writer had demonstrated the validity of the continued existence of the Jewish faith, even after the life and death of Jesus. Of course, this was never actually allowed to have

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76 Van Rooden and Wim Wesselius, 140.
77 Ibid., 148.
happened and the debates would generally disintegrate into an exchange of insults, rather than ideas.\textsuperscript{78}

Although Orobio’s initiation of the debate was completely typical, it appears that Van Limborch’s response was anything but. Rather than making use of the traditional Old Testament passages to back up the claims that the intervention of a Messiah was required to reconcile God and mankind, Van Limborch readily acknowledged that the Old Testament cannot provide unequivocal proof of the claims of Christianity. Instead, he asserted that such proof is not, in fact, necessary. Firstly, he argued that the Old Testament is so difficult to understand as to make nothing in it absolutely clear—even the laws and prophecies which form the foundation of the Jewish faith are often obscure and vague.\textsuperscript{79} Secondly, Christianity is not based in Old Testament prophecy but in New Testament accounts of Jesus’ words and deeds.

Rather than engaging Orobio in an argument about the correct way to interpret the Old Testament, which Orobio clearly expected, Van Limborch instead chose to find a new common ground between the two—natural reason. In doing this, Limborch altered the character of the debate from one which assumed biblical infallibility to one in which the reliability of scripture was considered a contestable issue.\textsuperscript{80} He essentially challenged Orobio to contest the reliability and validity of New Testament accounts of Jesus’ life—a challenge which Orobio accepted, albeit reluctantly.

\textsuperscript{78} Van Rooden and Wim Wesselius,140.

\textsuperscript{79} This radical statement, which implicitly met with Locke’s approval, was undoubtedly influenced by Spinoza’s infamous analysis of the Old Testament in his Theological-Political Treatise. Van Limborch, according to Jonathan Israel, was fascinated, even obsessed with Spinoza and would consequently have been well aware of his theories (Jonathan Israel, Review of John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture: Religious Intolerance and Arguments for Religious Toleration in Early Modern and ‘Early Enlightenment’ Europe, by John Marshall, English Historical Review 112, no. 498 [November 2007]: 1043). By doubting the historical reliability of the events depicted in the Old Testament, Van Limborch is clearly making use of Spinoza’s theory, even if, understandably, he never mentions him by name.

\textsuperscript{80} Van Rooden and Wim Wesselius, 146.
provides evidence of both Orobio’s discomfiture with Van Limborch’s unconventional response and the unusual civility with which both sides conducted their discourse. “My learned lord has deigned to develop a new and different argument, full of subtlety, learning and wisdom,” he wrote to Van Limborch, “I have hesitated a long time whether I would answer again[...] I would not have done it had I not been aware of his honesty and civility, and had I not known that he would forgive my ignorance and temerity with his usual benevolence.”

Orobio concluded that it was impossible to argue rationally about religion, as one would always be forced to appeal to revelation to justify belief. In this assertion, he was in agreement with vast majority of seventeenth-century theologians, both Jewish and Christian. However, Van Limborch disagreed. There were, he argued, at the very least rational criteria by which one could both determine the meaning and judge the trustworthiness of a given revelation. Revelation, therefore, was only valuable after it had passed the basic tests imposed on it by natural reason. Because the revelations of the Old Testament were too obscure to be understood on a rational level, Limborch doubted that they had very much relevance or religious value for the modern believer. Because the revelations of Christ were rational and led to a better understanding of the natural law, they were genuine. Revealed knowledge, according to this logic, could not be trusted implicitly, and consequently was useless without rational knowledge.

Locke obviously approved of and encouraged Van Limborch to continue this innovative style of debate, with its revolutionary departure from previous debates of a similar style. The two often congratulated themselves on the originality of their

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81 Quoted in Ibid., 147.
82 Ibid., 148.
83 Ibid., 149-150.
arguments against Orobio, and appeared amused by what they considered to be the inadequate nature of Orobio’s response. In fact, when the debate was cut short by a decree by the leaders of the Jewish community forbidding any member from entering into any “religious discussion” with a Christian, Locke theorized that the brilliance of Van Limborch’s responses were the cause. “I believe it was done on purpose,” Locke told Van Limborch, “to enable him to withdraw from the arena without loss of honor and, so far as may be possible, of his case”.\(^{84}\) The two also seemed to accept with little concern the possibility that Van Limborch’s response would be disparaged by their fellow Christians. Locke seemed to feel that it did not really matter what the Christian critics said and wrote that he did not know if this new style of argument would “please certain petty and captious Christians, who approve of nothing that is not their own”.\(^{85}\)

**Reason and Revelation in Locke’s Philosophy**

Locke not only agreed with this assessment of the relationship between reason and revelation but went so far as to include it in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, a draft of which he was working simultaneous to his assistance in this debate. The similarity between the argument that Van Limborch makes in his discussion with Orobio de Castro and Locke’s account of revelation in the *Essay* is striking. Locke asserts that, “God when he makes the prophet does not unmake the man. He leaves all his faculties in the natural state, to enable him to judge of his inspirations whether they be of divine origin or no...*Reason must be our last judge and

\(^{84}\) Locke to Philippus van Limborch, Rotterdam, 23 September 1687.

\(^{85}\) Locke to Van Limborch, 23 September 1687.
guide in everything”. 86 Therefore, “[If any] proposition…which we take for inspired, be conformable to the principles of reason…we may safely receive it for true”. 87 If we do not use reason as the final judge, Locke warns, then “inspirations and delusions, truth and falsehood, will have the same measure, and will not be possible to be distinguished”. 88 This concept that reason must be the final arbiter of truth, even in matters of faith proves to be a consistent theme throughout the Essay.

It is this argument that, when taken to a natural conclusion, all but destroys the authority of revelation. It led Voltaire and others to cite Locke when attempting to render religion obsolete in the new, enlightened age. John Toland, a contemporary of Locke, gleefully cited the Essay in his delineation of Deism, Christianity Not Mysterious, as proof that reason was, to the exclusion of revelation, sufficient for every human enterprise. 89 In his typical style, Voltaire recounted the reaction of English theologians to Locke’s proclamations in his Letters on England: “Some Englishmen, devout after their way, sounded the alarm. The superstitious are the same in society as cowards in the army; they themselves are seized with a panic fear and communicate it to others. It was loudly exclaimed that Mr. Locke intended to destroy religion”. 90 Voltaire, of course, was quite delighted with the notion that by challenging revelation and innate ideas, Locke had challenged religion itself. Though Locke asserted often and vociferously that this was untrue, it cannot be denied that, whatever his intentions, Locke’s account of revealed knowledge, influenced both by the Orobio-Van Limborch debate and Le

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87 Ibid., 439.
88 Ibid.
90 Voltaire, 64.
Clerc’s treatise on biblical authorship, presented some ideas which threatened the religious establishment.

Locke’s denial of any intention to either challenge the establishment of religion or even express ideas that were at all radical in the *Essay* is yet another instance of circumspection on his part. This caution is perhaps in itself significant. Coinciding, as it does, with Locke’s previous claim of desiring nothing more than a quiet life, it seems to provide further evidence to support the contention that Locke’s philosophy contains hints of radicalism. If Locke did indeed hold unorthodox opinions, as certainly seems to be the case in his correspondence, then he would have been most reluctant to present them in the same brash style which he so disliked in Le Clerc’s treatise. This would suggest, therefore, that if evidence of such unorthodoxy is to be found in Locke’s writings it must be in subtle hints rather than bold statements.

Of course, it is incredibly easy to abuse such an approach. Numerous Locke scholars, likewise convinced that there must be more to Locke than he claimed, have made some pretty incredible claims. For example, in a well-known and obviously controversial article, Locke scholar Leo Strauss attempts to prove that that Locke, whose philosophy is generally considered to be the classical opposition to Thomas Hobbes’ account of natural law, secretly agreed with Hobbes but wrote with the intention of concealing this in order to avoid controversy and ensure a warmer reception for both himself and his ideology.\(^9\) Other unusual constructions of Locke’s philosophy include charges that he was actually some variety of agnostic or atheist but feared that

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removing Christianity from society would lead to a disastrous decline in morality.\textsuperscript{92} Still others, somewhat more moderately, have charged Locke with playing a key role in the founding of Deism.\textsuperscript{93} Scholars who attribute such radical ideas to Locke theorize that his undeniable ambiguity must be intentional. With an almost palpable sense of simultaneous frustration and admiration, John Dunn describes Locke’s ideology as “profoundly and exotically incoherent”.\textsuperscript{94} Though any student of Locke will readily identify with this frustration, the accounts of John Locke’s so-called “real beliefs” which it has spawned have not received general acceptance, most generally because they are themselves too extreme. Despite this, it would be foolish to completely discount the evidence which suggests that, though he probably was not a secret Hobbesian or atheist, Locke seems to have possessed some rather unusual convictions, which he was reluctant to present directly in his writings.

**Return to England:**

**Accusations of Radicalism and Locke’s Defense**

Locke remained in the Netherlands until 1689. Until that point, the same charges of sedition and treason which had initially driven him from his homeland made return to England impossible. King James’ embrace of both Catholicism and the principles of divine absolutism meant that he was implacably opposed to all the things which Locke wrote about and stood for. However, in 1688, James’ enemies, both Protestants and opponents of absolutism, essentially invited the Dutch Stadholder, 

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.
William III and his wife Mary (James’ daughter) to invade Britain with the goal of deposing James. The success of this endeavor led it to be known to posterity as the Glorious Revolution. This change in power not only made it possible for Locke to return to England at the end of 1689, but meant that he departed the Dutch Republic with his reputation fully restored and in the retinue of the new Queen herself.

Upon his arrival home, Locke immediately began publishing (albeit anonymously, for the most part) the writing he had been working on over the past decade. The Two Treatises of Government, the Letter Concerning Toleration, and the Essay Concerning Human Understanding all appeared in short succession. Soon, Locke found himself defending against the wide variety of attacks on his religious convictions which have been discussed previously. He seemed genuinely disturbed by both the volume and intensity of the criticisms which his works drew, especially from theologians. The Anglican bishop Edward Stillingfleet penned one of the best-known criticisms of Locke’s theology as presented in his Essay. Stillingfleet accused Locke of encouraging Socianism through his philosophy, a charge which Locke took strong issue with, prompting him to respond in the form of a letter. Their exchange, later published by Stillingfleet, was one of the lengthiest which Locke participated in and was ended only by Stillingfleet’s death in 1699.95 Other critics maintained that Locke’s desire to reduce the dogmatic aspects of Christianity and his criticisms of “indifferent things” and traditions could only be categorized as Socinianism.96 Responding to these harsh attacks, Locke continued to maintain that he belonged to no fringe groups, nor had he

95 For more information on this extended and often intense exchange, see Campbell’s introduction to the Essay Concerning Human Understanding, xli-xlii.
96 Unsurprisingly, accusations of Socinianism dogged Locke as well as Van Limborch and Le Clerc throughout their careers.
been at all influenced by them. Rather, he claimed he had been motivated by only the most sincere and pious convictions to develop his ideas.

Locke must have been both frustrated and determined to set the record straight when he began work on *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, an exploration of reason and faith which would become the philosopher's final published work, in 1692. Locke seemed to believe that this treatise, which he claimed proceeded solely from his own reflections on scripture, would definitively demonstrate his Christian credentials. In reality though, when he published the work in 1695, Locke merely confirmed the opinions of his critics and detractors. They found nothing in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* but more of the same unorthodox convictions which he had expressed in both the *Essay* and in the *Letter Concerning Toleration*. Once again, Locke seemed to claim that revealed knowledge must be validated by its agreement with rational knowledge, in the same way he and Van Limborch had when debating the Jewish scholar, Isaac Orobio de Castro.  

97 Once again, he expressed a desire to reduce Christianity to the essential elements which all denominations held in common, the view he shared and discussed with Philippus van Limborch while in Holland. And once again, Locke embraced the controversial style of biblical exegesis, based on the claim that “God has not given us the truth of the gospel to make us philosophers” which he had first encountered in the treatise of his friend Jean Le Clerc.  

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98 “Every sentence of theirs must not be taken up,” Locke wrote of the authors of the New Testament, “and looked on as a Fundamental Article necessary to Salvation; without explicit belief thereof, no body could be a member of Christ’s Church here, nor be admitted into his Eternal Kingdom hereafter” (Ibid., 167).
Conclusions

If Locke sincerely believed that by expressing these same opinions again in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* he would somehow placate his critics, then he failed to truly grasp their controversial nature. However, this is consistent with the tension exemplified in the philosopher’s complaint that he desired nothing more than to “pass silently through this world” even while fleeing the country, suspected of treason. In a letter of introduction which Van Limborch wrote for Locke shortly after his arrival in Holland, he described his friend as “an indefatigable searcher after the truth”.99 Locke agreed wholeheartedly with this sentiment, describing himself to Van Limborch several years later as “everywhere in search of truth alone and to the best of my understanding embrace it with equal readiness whether I find it among the orthodox or the heterodox.”100 Perhaps this determination to search out truth, this disregard for the origin of an idea so long as it made sense, helps to explain the enthusiasm and ease with which Locke entered into the radical intellectual and theological discussions raging throughout Amsterdam. While his more timid compatriots may have had some compunction about engaging in discussions with members of fringe groups like the Remonstrants, by all accounts Locke rejoiced that he had found companions with whom he could identify and easily converse. Furthermore, not only was he merely open to the possibility of exchanging ideas with these groups, but it is evident from both this correspondence with Van Limborch and his philosophy that he did in fact do this. Yet

100 Locke to Van Limborch, Cleves, 6 October 1685.
again and again Locke reacted indignantly against any who looked askance on this somewhat unusual willingness to mingle among dissenters and freethinkers.

How, then, can we account for the enthusiasm with which Locke took to the radical ideas being bandied about in Holland? If Locke was really the thinker he publicly professed to be—the quiet man of moderate beliefs—then it would be impossible to reconcile this personality with his occupation and writings while living in Amsterdam. This version of Locke would have been horrified by the heterodox ideas of the freethinkers and dissenters, like Van Limborch and Le Clerc, that he encountered. But this could not be further from the truth. Ultimately, then, it seems we are left to conclude that Locke was far more open to embracing unorthodox beliefs than it was probably prudent for him to admit publicly. Furthermore, it seems likely, as his friend Damaris Masham suggested, that Locke was already inclined somewhat toward these unconventional beliefs himself before his sojourn in the Netherlands. His exile provided him an opportunity to develop these inclinations into something more like a coherent ideology, which would find expression in many of his most famous works and provoke the censure of the orthodox and the approval of radicals. If this is the case then, in many ways, what seemed in 1684 like a crisis in the life of a man ostensibly thwarted in his desire to “pass silently through this world” was actually a period of transformation in a setting both far more intellectually stimulating and far less restrictive than the tense and often hostile environment of his homeland. In fact, Locke acknowledged as much himself. Writing to Van Limborch for the last time before returning to England in 1689, he said this of his time in Holland: “I have found here another fatherland, and I had almost said other kinsmen[…] I call myself happy that my sojourn of these years among
you has been put to such good and profitable use. I know not whether there is ever to be an equally delightful period in my life; there has certainly never yet been one more advantageous".\textsuperscript{101}

\textsuperscript{101} Locke to Philippus van Limborch, Rotterdam, 16 February 1689.
Bibliography


