

## REASON OR REVELATION? LOCKE ON THE GROUND OF RELIGION

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The religious thoughts of Locke, which have a prominent bearing on his philosophical as well as political writings, have been greatly misunderstood by many of his contemporaries and have been subjected to severe criticism. One of the main charges lodged against him relates to the inconsistency of his thoughts regarding the role of reason and revelation in religion. Against him, it is held that while in his earlier work *viz.*, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke emphasizes the role of reason in religion, he shifts his emphasis to revelation in his later works, namely, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, *A Discourse of Miracles*, etc. Those who bring this charge of inconsistency seem, however, to miss the real implication of Locke's religious views. The present paper purports to focus on the fact that whether it is the earlier or the later works of Locke, his concern all throughout is that of a committed Christian, struggling to establish a sure foundation for revealed religion in the modern world. However, even though the religious objective of Locke is the same in all his works of earlier and later periods, the emphasis regarding reason and revelation is found to be different owing to different circumstances. As far as the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (henceforth referred to as *Essay*) is concerned, Locke is anxious to save religion from the twin danger of Enthusiasm and Authoritarianism, while in the *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (henceforth referred to as *Reasonableness*) he is keen on saving it from the threat of Deism. Hence, in order to discern the inner consistency of Locke's religious thoughts, we shall have to look at his views against the proper backdrops in which they

are held.

### *Locke In The Essay*

In the opening of the *Essay*, Locke discloses the very purpose of his exposition of it. In the Epistle to the Reader, Locke states that his discussion with some friends about the principles of morality and revealed religion has prompted him to undertake the work of the *Essay*. In order to resolve our disputes regarding religion, once for all, Locke thinks it proper to take up an enquiry into the extent and limit of human understanding. Locke supposes that once the boundaries between reason and revelation are clearly drawn, it will be possible to know how far we are to be guided by reason and how far by revelation or faith. He distinguishes between the two in the following way:

“Reason ...I take to be the discovery of the certainty or probability of such propositions or truths, which the mind arrives at by deduction made from such ideas, which it has got by the use of its natural faculties, viz., by sensation or reflection. Faith, on the other side, is the assent to any proposition, not thus made out by the deductions of reason, but upon the credit of the proposer, as coming from God, in some extraordinary way of communication. This way of discovering truths to men are called revelation.”<sup>1</sup>

Thus clearly delineating the realms of reason and revelation, he seeks to drive this point home that we should not expect certainty in the domain of religion. Since religion deals with such things of whose existence, by the natural use of our faculties, we can have no knowledge at all. Religion, in Locke’s view, is not a matter of reason but of faith. Human mind, not being able to judge the truth or falsity of religious propositions from naturally acquired ideas, accepts them only on probable grounds. Locke contends that where reason falls short, revelation comes as another way of discovering the truth and provides the mind with determination on the ground of faith. Although human knowledge does not reach the level of absolute certainty in the realms of religion and morality, Locke assures,

“it yet secures their great concernments, that they have light enough to lead them to the knowledge of their Maker and the sight of their own Duties.”<sup>2</sup>

Such knowledge, in Locke's opinion, is the chief purpose of our life. It is this commitment for revealed religion which makes Locke alert about the threat in the Enthusiast's notion of an 'inner light'.

Locke calls those persons Enthusiasts who used to claim that they are possessed of some internal light within themselves, by virtue of which truth is revealed to them. In Locke's contention if something is revealed to be true it must be justified to be so either by the principles of reason or by the miracles of God. The Enthusiasts, however, fail to provide any evidence for their claim. Their claim for a revealed truth, in Locke's view, turns out to be nothing but an unfounded presumption of their minds. As Locke says,

"For all the Light that they speak of is but a strong, though ungrounded persuasion of their own Minds that it is a Truth."<sup>3</sup>

Locke argues that a simple mental assurance without any other ground of support cannot serve as an evidence for the truth of a revealed proposition. He stresses that when God reveals some truth, He either evidences that truth by the usual methods of natural reason, or else convinces us that it is from Him by some marks recognizable by reason. To prove his point Locke holds that our holy men of old days, whenever they had some revelation from God, were provided not only with some outward marks but also with the power of performing some miracle to justify the divine authority of the revelation. Locke thus endeavours to disdain claims of those individuals who only pretend to have direct revelation in order to secure their opinion and beliefs.

Out of the same concern for revealed religion Locke also repudiates the claim of innate religious principles. The proponents of this theory, having declared the religious principles as God Given, ask for the blind credulity of men regarding the views dictated by them. According to Locke, these people try.

"to make a man swallow that for an innate principle which may serve to his purpose, who teacheth them."<sup>4</sup>

Locke feels that the doctrine of innate religious principles is prone to exploitation by conservative and reactionary forces. The 'innateness' of morality and religion can be easily used as a shield against any challenge to

prevailing authority and interest. Locke detects danger lurking in the doctrine of innate principles to freedom of thought and enquiry. Under these circumstances with the intention of rescuing revealed religion Locke, appeals to man's rational capacity. Locke upholds that God has not imprinted in the minds of men all that they ought to know of Him or ought to do in obedience to His Will. In Locke's contention God has endowed men with faculties (Locke here refers to the faculties of experiencing and reasoning) which are sufficient for the discovery of all things they need to know. In his words:

“...a Man by the right use of his natural Abilities, may, without any innate Principles, attain the knowledge of a God, and other things that concern him.”<sup>5</sup>

In order to demonstrate his point Locke asserts that we are capable of knowing the existence of God with certainty through deduction from the indubitable knowledge of our own existence. Locke argues as follows: Man has a clear intuitive perception of his own being. Next, man knows with intuitive certainty that nothing or non being cannot produce a real Being. Hence it follows that there is an Eternal Being as the source of all beings. If it were not eternal then it would be produced by something and that again by something else and so on *ad infinitum*. Again, a man finds in himself some degree of knowledge and power. It is evident that a being who has being from another Being (God) must have everything (that belongs to it) owing to that Being. Therefore the Eternal Being must also be the Source or Origin of all power and knowledge. To quote Locke.

“Thus from the considerations of ourselves, and what we infallibly find in our own constitutions, our reason leads us to the knowledge of this certain and evident truth, that there is an eternal, most powerful, and most knowing Being...”<sup>6</sup>

Locke also argues that when a rational creature reflects on the visible marks of extraordinary wisdom and power present plentifully all around the works of creation, he cannot but miss the discovery of a Deity. Locke thus strives to show how our natural power of reasoning enables us to acquire knowledge in religion. However, Locke advocates the role of reason not only in the acquisition of religious knowledge, but also in certifying and interpreting revelation. He warns us not to accept any

proposition as a revealed truth without judging it to be so by reason. He implies that whatever is claimed to be a revealed truth demanding assent can by no means be contrary to reason *i.e.*, we should never receive anything for a truth that is directly opposed to our clear and distinct knowledge. He also cautions us that for the proper grasp of the meaning of the scriptural truths, we must discover through reason the ideas and thoughts of those who set them down. We should not accept a report of revelation on the basis of traditional truths, which being far off from the original truths, do not provide any sure or forceful ground. Therefore, as far as religion is concerned, in Locke's view,

"Reason must be our last Judge and Guide in everything."<sup>7</sup>

Unless reason verifies the truth of revelation, there are chances of mistaking delusions and false interpretations as revealed truths. Hence, all his emphasis on reason in the *Essay* springs from his concern to rescue revealed religion (specifically, Christianity) from the hands of the Enthusiasts and the Authoritarians. Out of his urge to make revealed religion acceptable to the modern mind, all his attempt in the *Essay* is to present it as well grounded in reason. Richard Ashcraft's comment is quite relevant here.

"Locke's primary commitment was to certain principles of the Christian Faith, and that it is within that context the *Essay* should be read in order to gain an appreciation of Locke's viewpoint."<sup>8</sup>

Now, however noble be the intention of Locke, his views regarding reason and revelation in the *Essay* give rise to some grave implications. It is in this context that Peter Byrne comments,

"Followers of Locke's Way of Ideas (as his epistemology was described) could find plenty of ammunition in his narrow conception of reason and his frank discussion of the problems surrounding the attestation of revelation if they wanted to dismiss the certainty of revealed truth."<sup>9</sup>

The above paragraph actually refers to the Deistic movement of thought of that period. Locke's ideas in the *Essay* have been appropriated by the Deists in favour of an entirely rational and natural religion. Consequently, Bishop Edward Stillingfleet accuses Locke of laying the philosophical foundation for Deism and of destroying 'faith' in the name

of saving it. Under this newly developed situation, Locke finds it incumbent on him to check the Deistic turn of religion and thereby, to defend it from the attack of the churchmen.

### ***Locke In His Later Work***

In the later work *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke's attempt is to arrest the rationalistic tendencies of the Deists by a clearer defence of the concept of revelation. In it, he undertakes the task of explicating the content and justification of revelation. Before entering into Locke's defence of revelation, it seems necessary to have a brief acquaintance with the basic position of Deism. The beginning of the Deistic movement of thought, roughly speaking, is contemporaneous with the Revolution of 1688. The Deists oppose revealed religion and present themselves as champion of natural religion. By natural religion, they signify that religion which is possible for any man to discover for himself through the exercise of his own individual reason. Some of the prominent names in this movement are John Toland, Anthony Collins and Matthew Tindal. Toland, in his famous work *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696) claims to be drawing the natural consequences from the premises of Locke's philosophy. He strives to show that there is nothing in the Gospel either contrary to reason or above it and that no Christian Doctrine can properly be called a mystery. In his view, large portions of early Christian literature are the outcome of superstition and occultity. Anthony Collins advocates an enquiry into the credibility of prophecy and miracles. He reiterates and emphasizes the claim of reason to pronounce upon the contents of revelation. The process of thought initiated by Toland and Collins has been brought to its logical conclusion by Matthew Tindal. He insists on the duty of every man to fashion his own religious belief for himself.

Even though neither does Locke intend nor does he approve of Deism, it cannot be denied that there are some common elements of thought between Locke and the Deists. Both hold reason at a high esteem and oppose religious dogmatism of any sort. The Deists share with Locke the importance of freedom of thought in religious matters. In spite of these points of similarity, however, we should not miss the main spirit of Locke's religious thought which distinguishes him from the Deists. What Locke attempts to affirm is not a rational but a reasonable religion. Locke's

*Reasonableness* is directed against two main propositions of the Deists. The first one is that there is no need of revelation at all in Christianity, and the second one is that the Scriptures should not be accepted as revealed truths as they are above reason.

Since Locke does not want to limit religion to the rational sphere, he recognizes a realm of faith in addition to the realm of reason. He holds that the ground of faith is completely different from that of knowledge and has nothing to do with the certainty of knowledge. In a letter to Stillingfleet, he expresses his views in the following words:

“Faith stands by itself, and upon Grounds of its own, nor can be removed from them, and placed on those of knowledge.”<sup>10</sup>

Hence, Locke explains that faith has a unique ground by which it is induced. This ground is God, whose testimony alone is sufficient to secure belief. Man gives assent to the revealed truths because he believes that it comes from one

“who cannot err, and will not deceive”<sup>11</sup>

Thus, Locke implies that faith, though founded on probability, is sufficient to persuade man to the revealed truths of the Scripture. In the *Reasonableness*, he contends that even though some doctrines of religion can be demonstrated and are therefore certainly known the common people accept such doctrines and others upon mere faith. In his view, either people lack the time and inclination, or they are incapable of carrying on such demonstration. To quote him,

“The greatest part of mankind want leisure or capacity for Demonstration, nor can they carry a train of proofs which in that way they must always depend upon for conviction.”<sup>12</sup>

By this, Locke imports that ordinary people can apprehend miracles done by divine power more easily than they can follow a chain of proofs.

Locke also emphasizes that religious truths are too high for the grasp of our natural powers of experiencing and reasoning. Hence, we require

“some light from above.”<sup>13</sup>

*i.e.*, direct revelations of these truths by God. He reminds us that although some of the revealed truths may be confirmed by reason, that does not

entail that these truths are derived from reason.

In order to vindicate the necessity of revelation, Locke produces five reasons in the *Reasonableness*, which are as follows:

1. Knowledge of God
2. Knowledge of the correct forms of worship
3. Knowledge of man's duties
4. Knowledge of immortality, encouraging virtue and piety
5. The promise of assistance of the Holy Spirit.

Locke asserts it as a historical fact that mankind has not clearly discovered the true nature of God and all of man's duties before Jesus revealed them. According to Locke, the teachings of the ancient thinkers on these matters were too hard to be comprehended by ordinary people. He lays stress on the fact that it is difficult for unassisted reason either to establish all of the parts of morality by reason, or to convince people about it. In his view, it is Christ who has provided men with an 'unquestionable' morality. The truth and obligation of his precepts have been established beyond doubt by the evidence of his mission from miracles and his resurrection. Locke thinks that for the majority of mankind,

"Hearing plain commands, is the sure and only course to bring them to obedience and practice."<sup>14</sup>

As another ground of necessity for revelation, Locke holds that it is Christ who has taught men about after-life in which the virtuous who has suffered in this life is rewarded. Being rewarded in the after life, in Locke's view, is a great incentive for leading a virtuous and pious life. Christ has testified the existence of the after life by his resurrection.

Having discussed the necessity of revelation, Locke attempts to authenticate it by miracle and prophecy fulfillment, which serve as the ground of faith. According to him, the essential beliefs of Christianity are above reason, nevertheless, they bear the authenticating marks of miracle and fulfilled prophecy. In *A Discourse of Miracles*, he defines miracle as.

"a sensible operation, which, being above the comprehension of the spectator, and in his opinion contrary to the established course of nature, is taken by him to be divine."<sup>15</sup>

In Locke's contention, prophecy fulfillment as an accurate prediction of a future event also justifies a revelation as divine. Hence, Christianity is reasonable in Locke's interpretation. It is simple also because the core of Christian faith, in Locke's view, lies in the belief that Jesus is the Messiah (Messenger) of God. The essential revelation of Christ is that God is merciful and forgives the sinner who truly repents and aspires to live a moral life. In course of the end part of the *Reasonableness* Locke expresses that justification by faith is the subject of this treatise. By this, he entails that God considers those as just (even though they are not fully so), who have belief in Jesus as God-sent as well as in the morality of charity, love and divine mercy. Hence, we find that Locke believes in the uniqueness of Christianity which has been delivered to the poor, ignorant and illiterate with the clear, authoritative divine revelation of man's moral duty. In his view, the reasonableness of Christianity lies in its simplicity, intelligibility and effectiveness. His adherence to the belief in revelation thus sharply separates him from the Deists. Although Locke comes close to the Deists in assigning pre-eminence to the ethical teaching of Christianity, he differs from them significantly. In his view, Christianity has the force of faith in the moral realm, which the rational religion of the Deists lacks. Locke clarifies his view about the revealed religion of Christianity in the *Reasonableness*, in the following words.

“...as Christians, we have Jesus the Messiah for our king and are under the law revealed by him in the Gospel. And... every Christian, both as a Deist and a Christian, be obliged to study both the law of nature and the revealed law, that in them he may know the will of God and Jesus Christ, whom he hath sent.”<sup>16</sup>

This paragraph not only highlights Locke's commitment to Christian faith, but also contains his reply to the Deists who refute the need of revelation in Christianity.

### **Conclusions**

Thus, a study of Locke's religious thoughts in the *Essay* and in the *Reasonableness* with reference to their proper contexts reveals that his religious aspiration in both the works is the same. As a defender of revelation, he seeks a simple, moral Christianity based on faith. All throughout his

works, Locke is

“struggling to establish a basis for the essential claims of faith in a manner reasonable and convincing without thereby diminishing the independence, vitality and ultimate significance of faith.”<sup>17</sup>

His shift of emphasis regarding reason and revelation, has been found to be the need of the time. While in the *Essay* he strives to guard faith from the Enthusiasts and the Authoritarians, his effort in the later work is to save faith from the Deists. It is in the endeavour to establish a defensible base for religious faith that Locke’s various approaches to the subject find unity.

#### NOTES

1. Locke, J. *Essay*. Nidditch, P. H. (Ed.), Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1975, p. 689.
2. *Ibid.* p.689.
3. *Ibid.* p. 702.
4. *Ibid.* p. 102.
5. *Ibid.* p. 91.
6. *Ibid.* p. 91.
7. *Ibid.* p. 704.
8. Ashcraft R. “Faith and Knowledge in Locke’s Philosophy.”, In Yolton, J. W. (Ed.), *John Locke: Problems and Perspectives (A Collectoin of New Essays)*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1969, p.194.
9. Byrne, P. *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion*. (London: Routledge) 1989, p.49
10. Locke’s Works, Vol. I, p. 410, cited in *Locke : Critical Assessment, Vol. II*, Ashcraft, R. (Ed.), p. 158
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13. cited in Marshall, J. *John Locke (Resistance, Religion and Responsibility)*.

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  17. Pearson, S. C. "The Religion of John Locke". In Ashcraft, R (Ed.), *Locke:Critical Assessment, Vol. II*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, p. 143.

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