

Paradigms in Political Theorizing  
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## **Toleration in Constantinople and Elsewhere**

John Locke's Use of the Image of Constantinople in *Letter Concerning Toleration*

by

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John Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* is primarily aimed at justifying toleration of and by Christian churches. Nevertheless, Locke uses examples referring to the relationship between Christians and non-Christians. For instance, he uses the image of two struggling Christian churches in Constantinople to present his claim that "No body ... have any just Title to invade the Civil Rights and Worldly Goods of each other, upon pretence of religion" (Locke 1983:33). As this foundation of toleration as duty is a central claim in the *Letter*, I will examine how Locke uses the image of Constantinople to support his claim. I will argue that the image works in two ways. On the one hand, it helps Locke establish a second line of reasoning for toleration aside from his general claims, while on the other hand it helps to rationalize toleration in the participating groups' perspectives. At first, I will examine how the image differs from the political context of Locke's times, and then I will explain how Locke draws arguments from it.

### **The context of the image**

In the image of Constantinople, Locke sets up a contemporary religious conflict in an unfamiliar environment by placing two quarreling Christian churches in a Muslim country. Though it is possible to imagine that the primary purpose of using Constantinople is to avoid using England explicitly, the transfer of the conflict from Europe to the Ottoman Empire plays an additional role in the *Letter*. The imaginary situation suggests that both religions are minorities while the majority is not a part of the conflict. Thus, no party has access to civil power or

can draw arguments from its power or number of supporters. This scenario shows Locke's premise that the outcome of the conflict should not be influenced by the actual power relations between the participants. Regardless of how skeptical or confident one might view Locke regarding possibilities of settling a conflict by finding the "true" religion, it is obvious that he rejects any claims that truth can be determined by finding what a majority holds to be true. In another passage of *Letter* he worries that truth "has seldom received ... much assistance from the power of great men" (46). This argument is especially plausible if one takes into account that Locke was a member of a persecuted minority in exile at the time he wrote the *Letter*.

In the image of Constantinople both Christian churches are not subjects, but objects of toleration, as "the Turks ... silently stand by" (32) and form a government that is indifferent towards both Christian sects. Locke attempts to make the groups not only objects, but subjects of toleration. In conclusion, Locke places the conflict in a setting that is as neutral as possible towards either party, as the strength of the religions seems equal and both are tolerated by the common government. Then he seeks an independent measure for deciding the dispute. He makes three arguments leading to the conclusion that the only possible choice is a non-decision of the actual conflict and the attempt to live together peacefully, which is toleration.

## Searching for an impartial judge

In his first argument, Locke uses the Constantinople image to prove the impossibility of finding a well-informed, impartial judge to settle religious conflicts. He rejects the argument that one can solve the dispute by determining the original, or "orthodox", religion, because "every Church is Orthodox to itself" (32). This argument is contrary to the persuasion that degrees of orthodoxy can be determined by measuring the theological distance to the Bible. Locke's argument is based on his conviction that "men of different religions cannot be Hereticks" (56) and that different Christian beliefs are distinct religions (56-7). Thus, both churches have an intrinsic right to claim orthodoxy; but, according to Locke, they don't have a right to judge others as heretics.

Furthermore, Locke rejects the option that the non-Christian government can act as judge in this matter for two reasons. The first one is Locke's general argument that civil powers don't have authority over religious matters. The second reason is the undisputed persuasion of his fellow citizens that a non-Christian government may never have religious authority over Christians: "An Infidel ... has himself no Authority to punish Christians for the Articles of their faith" (32). At this point he splits his argument into his general claim logically inferred by the nature of church, faith and religion (Yolton 1985: 77) and a second line of reasoning primarily based on contemporary intuitions. Some other references to the treatment of non-Christians show Locke's observation that his fellow citizens tend to make a distinction between conflicts with non-Christians and inter-Christian disputes (Locke 1983:40, 54). The rule of non-interference in

each other's religious matters was obviously accepted when non-Christians were involved. Locke argues that Christians should have at least as much religious freedom as Jews and Pagans (54) and that if a Muslim government has no power to judge over Christian religious matters, no Christian government should have this power either (32). It can be inferred that Locke presupposes that the readers would rule out the option of letting a Muslim serve as judge. In conclusion, Locke proves that neither the churches nor the Muslim government can be an impartial judge and consequently, it is impossible to decide the religious conflict.

### **Separation of church and state**

The second argument Locke employs in the image of Constantinople focuses on the division of civil and religious power and the impossibility of imposing true beliefs. Even if one could decide which church was true, the "orthodox" church would not have a right to destroy the other church. This claim is based on Locke's concept that civil and religious powers should be separated and all instruments of force should be left to the state. Once again, the image of Constantinople functions as a way of making Locke's point more plausible. The common sense argument that two Christian churches in a Muslim state should not fight each other is linked to the claim that Christians should treat Christian religions just as any other religion. As a result, Locke demonstrates that churches don't have the right to use force to achieve their goals.

## **No use of Force in religious conflicts**

The third argument Locke presents for toleration among churches is that even if one could determine the true religion and one church had a right to destroy the other, any decision of the civil magistrate to favor one of the religions would be invalid, because governments don't have authority over religious matters. Again, Locke uses two methods to make his argument plausible. On the one hand, he bases it on his general claim that the "Care of Souls is not committed to the Civil Magistrate ... because it appears not that God has ever given such Authority to one Man over another" (26). On the other hand, he uses the scenario of the two churches in Constantinople and states that at least in this case nobody would grant the government the right to favor one church over another. He argues further that there is no reason why a Christian government should have "any greater authority upon the Church" (32) than a Muslim one. The background idea is the same as employed in the first and second argument: namely that different Christian churches are indeed different religions with equal rights and therefore cannot be judged as "orthodox" or "heretic". In this line of reasoning, Locke rejects the idea that any government may favor a religion on the grounds that the justifiable scope of governmental power is the same in all countries and doesn't include judgments of the value of religions.

## **Rationalizing toleration**

Assuming that Locke attempts to provide a rational justification for toleration (Yolton 1985:77), how does Locke try to convince the churches in the

image of Constantinople to choose toleration? And further, why should a religion forming a majority and controlling the government agree to standards of toleration?

Locke makes the observation that wherever groups don't have access to civil power and thus can't practice persecution but are rather victims of it, "they desire to live upon fair Terms, and preach up Toleration" (Locke 1983:33). He infers that intolerance is not a necessary feature of any religion (Tarcov 1999:187), but an execution of power. Applied to the image of Constantinople this means that the two Christian churches would advocate toleration facing the Muslim government because they are minorities. How does this argument work for the relationship between these two minority groups? Each group would not want the government to impose religious standards. Locke's three arguments explained above imply that no just solution to the conflict can be found, so the best decision for both groups is mutual toleration. Besides that, both groups wouldn't meet Locke's standards of the religions that governments must tolerate while they are fighting each other, because they "attribute unto the Faithful, Religious and Orthodox, that is ... themselves, any particular Privilege of Power above other Mortals" (Locke 1983:50). Thus, they would make themselves subject to oppression by the government. Consequently, in the image of Constantinople both groups will choose toleration in order to preserve peace and their own existence. In situations where one group is a majority with access to civil power, as in contemporary England, the choice might not be that clear. Locke's way to deal with this problem is to address a current majority as a

potential minority. Even big churches might find themselves to be a minority in Constantinople, for example, or in France. Therefore, it would be reasonable for any church to support toleration and the rule of non-interference of government in religious matters and vice versa. Another passage in *Letter* supports this reading. Locke argues that no government should establish a rule allowing the suppression of an "Idolatrous Church" (42), because using this rule, "another Magistrate, in some neighbouring Country, may oppress the Reformed Religion; and, in India, the Christian" (43). Thus, it can be inferred that the image of Constantinople is a way for Locke not only to make his arguments more plausible, but to make a distinct argument for the rationality of mutual toleration.

## **Conclusion**

The image of Constantinople provides two distinct sets of arguments for toleration. On the one hand, Locke infers the concept of toleration from his distinction between church and civil authority. On the other hand, he appeals to the intuitions concerning the toleration of non-Christian religions and applies those rules to the toleration of Christians by Christians. The shift of the setting from contemporary England to an imaginary Turkish city allows Locke to make the second set of arguments. The underlying claim that Christian churches form different religions is mainly founded in empirical observations, and therefore, easy to challenge by applying other criteria for establishing a "different" religion. Nevertheless, the Constantinople example shows an interesting line of reasoning

for toleration and illustrates the diversity of arguments employed by Locke for this cause.

Locke's attempt to rationalize toleration in the view of the participating groups explains why groups should support toleration regardless of their own moral considerations. The highest value justifying toleration is obviously social peace (33), but the prospect of mutual toleration in different situations and countries adds a reason for groups to tolerate each other. Still, these arguments are plausible for minority groups, but might fail to convince a current majority. As a result, it can be concluded that toleration might be a rational way to achieve social peace, but is primarily a morally justified enterprise.

## References

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