Monarchical Sovereignty and Christology in John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government* and *The Reasonableness of Christianity*

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**Introduction**

One of the central tensions in the scholarship on John Locke is the compatibility of his political thought with his religious thought. While certain scholars have questioned or minimized his Christian beliefs, Locke’s personal commitment to Protestant Christianity is almost certain. John Locke’s interleaved Bibles, housed in the Bodleian Library, demonstrate that Locke grappled with the interpretation of the Old and New Testaments throughout his adult life. In correlation with his mature writings on theology, namely the *Reasonableness of Christianity* and *Paraphrases and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*, and his epistolary admissions on believing in the biblical clarity of the Christian faith, these manuscripts show conclusively that Locke took the Christian faith seriously on both a personal and theological level.

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For examples of political theorists who tend the other direction and insist on Locke’s Christianity as crucial to his political philosophy, see most notably John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) and Jeremy Waldron *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations of John Locke’s Political Thought*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). See especially Waldron’s introductory remarks (12-20). It is interesting to note that Waldron, along with Strauss, rejects a dogmatic contextual read of Locke, arguing that while context doubtlessly illumines textual meanings, meanings should not be reduced to contextualization. In this regard, Waldron rejects any notion that Locke’s mode of thinking is epistemologically antiquated and irrelevant to 21st century discussions of political rights. This approach is typical of political and legal scholars who study Locke, even if they disagree with one another about Locke’s attitudes toward Christianity.

2 See note above.

3 Locke, in particular, annotated two Bibles heavily. The first was his interleaved 1648 Bentley edition of the King James Bible (LL 309, 16.25) that he annotated and commonplace over his entire adult life. The other is a five volume polyglot New Testament (LL 2864, 9.103-107) that he annotated and commonplace over the last years of his life, most likely in preparation of his *Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*. While Locke’s commitment to certain Christian doctrines can be questioned, Locke’s commitment to Christianity in general can hardly be doubted.

4 John Locke, *The Correspondence of John Locke*, Volume V., ed. E.S. de Beer, (Oxford: The University of Oxford Press, 1979), 368-372. In May of 1695, Locke wrote to his Dutch colleague Philippus Van Limborch about Locke’s inquiries into the Christian faith. Influenced by Limborch’s own *Theologia Christiana*, Locke wrote that he had spent the previous winter months searching the Scriptures for the foundations of the Christian faith. Locke continued, “From an intent and careful reading of the New Testament the conditions of the new covenant and teaching of the Gospel became clearer to me, as it seemed to me, than the noontide light, and I am fully convinced that a sincere reader of the
Whether or not Locke intended for the theology of *The Reasonableness of Christianity* to square with the political theory of the *Two Treatises* is less clear. On the one hand, Locke in the *Two Treatises*, even when addressing the foundations of monarchical sovereignty in the Hebrew Bible, outlined his project in terms of “natural right” and the “Law of Nature.” Locke made little use of the New Testament in either of his treatises, and as Jeremy Waldron has noted, Locke’s silence on religious toleration in a treatise intended to minimize executive sovereignty is difficult to explain. Thus, Locke’s reticence on religious issues within the *Second Treatise* has led many scholars to highlight such passages as “the Freedom then of Man and Liberty of acting according to his own Will, is grounded on his having Reason, which is able to instruct him in that Law he is to govern himself by, and make him know how far he is left to the freedom of his own will.” These passages, certain scholars argue, demonstrate that Locke had nothing theological in mind when composing the *Two Treatises* and certainly nothing mirroring the biblical theology he would espouse in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*.

From an evidentiary standpoint, the theological assumptions behind the *Two Treatises*, if there were any, are impossible to demonstrate conclusively. While Locke published the *Two Treatises* in 1689 after the removal of James IV from the English throne, scholars believe that he composed them as early as 1679 and as late as 1682 in defense of a potential insurrection against Charles II. In addition, Locke admits in his preface to the *Two Treatises* that large portions of them were lost to “fate” and that they constitute only the “Beginning and End of a Discourse concerning Government.” It is also likely that when fleeing England for Holland in the wake of possible persecution, Locke had many of his notes and notebooks burned. Thus, the fractious nature of Locke’s life during the 1680s makes a conclusive reconstruction of Locke’s thought world during the composition of the *Two Treatises* untenable, as the evidence does not survive.

While the exact relationship between the *Two Treatises* and the *Reasonableness* is impossible to determine, I want to argue on philosophical grounds for a strand of compatibility between the *Second Treatise* and the *Reasonableness*: the compatibility of Locke’s views on monarchical sovereignty and Jesus Christ as a Messiah and king. Locke argued in the *Second Treatise* that both the executive (monarchical) and the legislative (parliamentary) forms of government were charged with implementing and executing laws that conformed to the universal standards of natural law, and the ruled, by virtue of their own reason, assented to these laws. When we read the *Reasonableness* with this theory of sovereignty in mind, we find that Locke implemented the same logic for Christ’s kingdom as established in the New Testament. By emphasizing only one office for Christ, that of king, Locke argued that Christ’s kingdom

Gospel cannot be in doubt as to what the Christian faith is” (370). This “intent and careful reading of the New Testament” led to the composition of the *Reasonableness of Christianity*.

5 Jeremy Waldron, “The New Testament in Locke’s Political Thought,” American Political Science Association, August 30, 2003. Waldron, himself, is unable to argue conclusively for any particular reason why Locke might eschew issues of toleration in the *Two Treatises* but suggests that perhaps Locke was simply wanting to minimize controversy in what he knew would be a controversial argument for limited executive power.


8 Locke, *Two Treatises*, 137.

9 Roger Woolhouse, *Locke: A Biography*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 190-196. Woolhouse also notes that many of Locke’s unpublished writings that do exist were perhaps purposefully opaque, in case of a search and seizure of his materials by the English crown.
corresponds to natural law just as the commonwealth does, even if Christ’s kingdom incorporates the law of faith to account for the temporal differences between a commonwealth and Christ’s kingdom. Still, like the commonwealth, Christ’s kingdom was made of individuals who, out of their own freedom, assent to Christ’s law of faith through rational belief.

**The Two Treatises and the Pragmatics of Legislative Rule**

Beginning with the *Second Treatise*, we must acknowledge that the word “sovereign” never appears in the treatise and the word “sovereignty” only a handful of times, and Locke’s treatment of monarchy (the “executive”) is quite terse compared to his treatment of legislative bodies. Further, Locke argued for the legislative power as the “supreme power of the commonwealth,” not the monarch. Yet, while Locke argued for the unsustainability of monarchical supremacy within a commonwealth, Locke also acknowledged the possibility of a just and supreme monarch, and it is this admission that best squares with his views of Christ in *The Reasonableness*.

Locke argued that commonwealths emerge when human beings, out of their own freedom, contract with each other to grant ruling power to a single man or group of men, who are charged with preserving the freedom of the commonwealth, especially individual rights to property. Since the legislative power is “delegated Power from the People,” it is most suited to preserve the law of nature within commonwealth society. However, Locke’s preference for legislative supremacy over the executive was highly pragmatic. While Locke equated legislative supremacy with “fundamental natural law,” his rationale centered on the relationship between the legislation and the populace, as the legislative branch represents the “consent of the Society” and is less likely to abuse its power. However, Locke explicitly stated in his chapter “Of Tyranny” that all branches of government are capable of engendering tyrannical rule.

Thus, theoretically, a supreme executive leader can preserve the laws of nature within the commonwealth, and Locke argued this explicitly in several passages of the *Second Treatise*. When discussing the beginnings of political societies, Locke observed that original commonwealths were typically ruled by one patriarch, as the father was the most able to “secure their property, and Interest under his Care, and the Custom of obeying him, in their childhood, made it easier to submit to him, rather than to any other.” Yet, hereditary rule undermined the stability of the patriarchal model. Locke believed that in original commonwealths, if a patriarch’s successor failed to rule according to the laws of nature, the people would “pass him by and set up the stoutest and bravest Man for their ruler.” But in a modern commonwealth, the consolidation of powers within families posed a grave threat to society’s freedom, an issue he addressed in the 14th chapter on prerogative.

Locke defined prerogative as “the Peoples permitting their Rulers, to do several things of their own free choice, where the Law was silent, and sometimes go against the direct Letter of the Law, for the publick good; and their acquiescing in it when so done.” Further, Locke admitted that throughout English history, wise princes often possessed large prerogatives, as the members

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10 Locke, *Two Treatises*, 356.
11 Ibid., 362.
12 Ibid., 356.
13 Ibid., 400.
14 Ibid., 337.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 377.
of the commonwealth recognized their efficacy for public wellbeing. Yet, Locke argued that the threat of princely prerogative was located within the very wisdom of certain princes, as less just successors would inevitably draw on established princely prerogative to deprive individual freedom, including exercising their prerogative to assemble parliament. Locke believed that when parliaments convene on the king’s prerogative, parliament’s power is ineluctably linked to that prerogative, making despotism all the more likely. These passages, and others like them, demonstrate that Locke never denied the theoretical capability of a supreme monarchy to enforce the laws of nature within commonwealth society. It is simply that within finite commonwealths, monarchical supremacy inevitably degrades into hereditary corruption, making legislative supremacy the only sustainable model for a lawful and free commonwealth.

**The Reasonableness of Christianity and Christ as Eternal King**

When turning to *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, we see Locke tracing the contours of a different kind of society, i.e. the kingdom of God as ruled by its one true king, Jesus the Messiah. Yet, if we account for the differing characteristics of the kingdom of God vis-à-vis commonwealths and further account for the juridical principles that follow from those differences, we discover an argument for Christ as king that is formally consistent with the foundational principles of governmental sovereignty articulated in the *Second Treatise*.

First, for Locke, a commonwealth is an earthly phenomenon that exists within finite space and time, among people in geographic proximity, making it susceptible to the ebb and flow of inevitable human corruption, especially the arbitrary rule of princes. For the commonwealth to be sustained in time and space, the laws of nature must be its foundation. In the *Reasonableness*, Locke argued that the Kingdom of God is consistent with the laws of nature, as the original Mosaic law of works was the implementation of the laws of nature for the Jewish people. To quote Locke, “Under the law of works is comprehended . . . the law of nature, knowable by reason, as well as the law given by Moses.” The difference, though, is that the kingdom of God, while it intersects with time and space, transcends them in essence and operates outside the ebb and flow of human corruption. Thus, Locke argued for the law of faith as a complement to the natural law of works within the kingdom of God. Locke defined the law of faith as the law for “everyone to believe what God requires him to believe, as a condition of the covenant he makes with him; and not to doubt of the performance of his promises,” including the belief in Jesus as the Messiah.

The issue of belief demonstrates the different juridical standards of the commonwealth and the kingdom of God. Belief plays no role in the establishment of commonwealths, and in fact, while he does not say so explicitly, Locke would not have condoned granting belief strong agency within commonwealths, as belief would provoke demagoguery of executives and legislatures. In the commonwealth, the law of nature as outlined by reason is the only standard for the

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17 Ibid., 377-378. In the last chapter on the “Dissolution of Government,” hereditary power, for Locke, is the most common cause of the dissolution of government (408-412).
18 By drawing attention to the dangers of hereditary leadership, Locke was most likely appealing to the Stuart hereditary authority of Charles I and Charles II. Locke, in his chapter on tyranny, explicitly cited James I, who acknowledged that his power came from the people (399-400). Yet, Locke tacitly implied that under Charles II, the monarchy had devolved into tyranny. See footnote 199 on page 398 for Peter Laslett’s discussion of this inference.
21 Ibid., 32.
commonwealth, applied by citizens who collectively observe in real time whether their government conforms to natural law. If they discover governmental violations of natural law, they either correct it internally or dissolve it, violently if necessary, and begin anew. However, if the natural laws of the Commonwealth encompass the provisional, the kingdom of God encompasses the future and its intended perfection, a perfected future that defies the principles of observation, a perfected future that accords with the law of faith in addition to the laws of nature. Thus, if the criteria of commonwealth law are nature and reason, faith and reason are the criteria of law within God’s kingdom.

The need for both faith and reason within the kingdom enabled Locke to argue, in the *Reasonableness*, that Jesus’s life and death was rationally necessary for the establishment of his kingdom. For example, Locke argued that Christ conducted his miracles to persuade contemporaries that he was the Messiah while inevitably alienating himself from Jewish custom, a necessary step in the coming of his death and resurrection. These, in turn, were necessary for both the justification of believers and the promulgation of his kingdom, as Christ, and Paul, proclaimed that belief in Christ as messiah was the foundation of the new covenant. 22

Further, the combination of faith and reason bolstered Locke’s belief that when individuals assent to Christ’s kingdom, they do so from their own free rationality. Locke stated in the *Reasonableness* that the fall of Adam bequeathed to humans only their mortality but had no effect on their reason, and Christ’s establishment of the kingdom worked with (rather than upended) human reason. Locke in the concluding pages of the *Reasonableness* acknowledged the “frailty of man” and the inevitability of ignorance, but for Locke, reason did not always have to render knowledge perfectly. Within the capacity of reason lay the capacity of “indifference,” a concept he discussed at length in the *Essay Concerning Understanding*. 23 Indifference, Locke argued, is the capacity to suspend judgment on things not immediately clear, and it served as the most powerful active power of the Understanding. Locke appealed to this capacity when he acknowledged that when interpreting the Scripture, we inevitably struggle to find one coherent meaning. When a person reaches this precipice, he “must either interpret one by the other (biblical texts) or suspend his opinion.”24 Thus, not all parts of divine scriptural revelation will correspond exactly with our understanding. What does conform to our understanding, however, is Jesus as redeemer and King. To quote one of Locke’s more extensive but important lines on the connection between faith and reason as it relates to understanding the role of Christ portrayed in the Scripture:

He [God] gave him [man] reason, and with it a law, that could not be otherwise than what reason should dictate, unless we should think, that a reasonable creature, should have an unreasonable law. But considering the frailty of man, apt to run into corruption and misery, he promised a deliverer, whom in his good time he sent; and then declared to all mankind, that whoever would believe him to be the Saviour promised, and take him now raised from the dead, and constituted the Lord and Judge of all men, to be their King and Ruler, should be saved. 25

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22 Ibid. This is one of Locke’s main points when discussing the gospel account of Christ’s message (37-43).
24 Locke, *Reasonableness*, 75.
25 Ibid. Emphasis mine.
Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I have argued for the formal compatibility of Locke’s political and religious thought as espoused in the Two Treatises and Reasonableness concerning the legitimation of monarchical sovereignty. I have argued that the major differences between monarchical rule in the commonwealth and messianic rule in the kingdom of God are temporal and juridical in nature and that those differences are not in contradiction. Rather, they espouse the same principles of natural law, applied differently according to the different temporal and juridical standards of the commonwealth and kingdom of God. While this argument does not show conclusively that Locke’s Second Treatise influenced Locke’s theology, it does demonstrate that as Locke developed his mature theology over the last decade of his life, he did not theologically contradict the natural law theory espoused in the political writings of the 1680s. Rather throughout his mature life, Locke consistently upheld natural law and reasoned assent as the crucial lynchpins of human institutions, whether that be the finite commonwealth or the infinite kingdom established by the new covenant of Christ in the New Testament.