Prayer Before Studying Theology

O God, forasmuch as without thee we are unable to please thee;
Mercifully grant, that thy Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts.
--BCP, Trinity 19

Turn what is evil in me into good
And what is good into what is better;
Turn my mourning into joy,
My wandering feet into the right path,
My ignorance into knowledge of your truth,
My lukewarmness into zeal,
My fear into love,
All my material good into a spiritual gift,
All my earthly desires into heavenly desires,
All that is transient into what lasts forever,
Everything human into what is divine
Everything created and finite into that sovereign and immutable good,
Which you yourself are,
O my God and my Savior.
--Thomas à Kempis

"Reasonable Religion": The Rise of Deism and Empiricism in Great Britain

The eighteenth century may be regarded as a transitional period in Western thought, in which emerging notions of

- individual identity,
- individual commitment and
- individual experience

were separated from their religious basis, so that the reasonable individual (rather than revelation, tradition, or religious institutions) was increasingly seen as the locus of authority and value.

Here the interior conviction of truth and the certainty it brings (a theme we observed in Zinzendorf and Wesley) has been detached from its religious basis and secularized.

- The "breakthrough" of discovering the truth now occurs neither by the immediate action of God nor with salvation in Christ as its content.
- Instead, discovery occurs through human reason and its observation of natural order, these being linked with the past creative action of God, rather than his present action. (For this reason, the relating of personal narratives of the immediate, sovereign activity of God and his direct intervention in external events were no longer encouraged.)

One of the central contentions of the various figures associated with the emerging European Enlightenment was that traditional religious belief, practice and institutions were not an **answer** to the human predicament, but rather one of the chief **causes** of social evils (irrational dogmatism, intolerance, conflict, violence, persecution, etc.) and a major obstacle to progress and the advance of civilization.

Now if traditional understandings of God and the world were part of the problem (i.e. promoting division and conflict) rather than part of the solution (i.e., rational agreement on basic beliefs, leading to unity and harmony), it follows that one ought to reexamine and revise one's beliefs about God and the world in a way that was more likely to win the agreement of all reasonable people and provide a basis for enlightened discussion.

Since the Bible is cast in human words, the meaning of the biblical text is often not clear, leading to much disagreement and bitter conflict among its interpreters and this situation is only aggravated by the dogmatic presuppositions held by the different interpreters.

- Instead of dealing with the vagaries of the text and various ways in which it could be interpreted, one should instead focus one's attention upon the natural order, where we may see, by the use of reason, the character of God writ large in the providential ordering of the world he created.
- Human reason being sufficient to discern and investigate the nature of this ordering, we may expect all reasonable people to arrive at agreement about
    - the nature of the created order and the laws that infallibly govern it,
    - the precepts and duties to which one should commit oneself in view of this ordering, and
    - the consequences which follow when such rational precepts are or are not faithfully observed.

As rational agents, human beings are thus fitted with all the capacities needed to pursue their own well being, with the mind being ordered and empowered to pursue well being by

- removing obstacles (dogmatic presuppositions, superstition and whatever else hinders enquiry) and
- pursuing and assenting to the truth it discovers (which indeed is the purpose for which God designed the mind, subsequently ordering the world in such a way that the mind may attain this goal).

In England between 1660 and 1700, there were three ways one could proceed with this theory:

(1) The Cambridge Platonists (active 1645-1680), who belonged to the latitudinarian wing of the state church, argued for a perfect harmony between revealed religion and the natural religion that could be discerned through enlightened reflection upon the created order.
These individuals could perhaps be described as a kinder, gentler version of post-Puritan Calvinism that appreciated

- the value of contemplation,
- the world as God's creation (and the means by which the mind's rational powers can arrive at knowledge of God, seeing natural phenomena as products that reflected something of God's nature and attributes),
    - the mind is "the candle of the Lord," an effect and imprint of the divine nature within the human soul to make it able to understand the will of God as set forth in the laws of nature
- the pursuit and cultivation of higher moral values grounded in reason and
- the immortality of the soul and the importance of human freedom (understood as autonomous self-determination through the power of the will)
- optimism about the perfectibility of human nature.

For a more detailed description of the Cambridge Platonists, see the entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cambridge-platonists/

(2) Locke as a transitional figure
- Locke still believed in the immortality of the soul, miracles (principally the resurrection of Jesus as authenticating revealed religion) and revealed morality;
- Locke, however, saw revealed morality not as something new and unique, but rather as a republication in a less severe and strict form of the natural morality already previously made known by the light of nature.

(3) The Deists (e.g. Lord Herbert of Cherbury; d. 1648) believed that
- natural religion (i.e. the existence of God and the ordering of the world, as known by reason) is superior to revealed religion;
- although God created the world and is the ultimate source of the truth and values found in the world, he does not intervene in the world after its creation, neither intervening in human affairs nor suspending the laws of nature (e.g. by a miracle, prophecy or special revelation, beliefs the Deists thought arose from ignorance, superstition, and self-serving mystification perpetuated by the clergy/organized religion ["priestcraft]).
    - The ordering of the world reflects God's perfections; were God to alter these later, one would have to assume either
        - that he was now making it less perfect or
        - that he had originally made it imperfectly and now needed to fix it,

      either of which would reflect poorly upon the character of God (cf. Peter Annet, *Supernaturals Examined in Four Dissertations on Three Treatises*, London, F. Page, 1747, pp. 44-46 in Robert A.H. Larmer, *Water into Wine?: An Investigation of the Concept of Miracle*, Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988, p. 120);
    - This allows for the notion of a divine providence to be kept very loosely in play (although there is no intervention or particular providence) and one could (if one wished) still offer prayers such as "I am thankful for…" and responsive affirmations such as "I affirm the goodness and benevolence of God."

- God ordered the world in a certain way and desires humans to live a moral life, seeking out self-evident truths (truths which could be accepted by all) by the light of nature and the use of reason;
- Jesus should be regarded not as properly divine, but rather as a human moral teacher who merely attempted to republish truths that can more properly be discerned in all their fullness and complexity within the natural order. (Cf. the superiority of natural religion to revealed religion, as mentioned above.)

Deism became very influential in England between 1690 and 1740 and prepared the way for the coming of the French Enlightenment.

John Locke (1632-1704) and British Empiricism: Sense-Experience, Reasoning, the Limits of Certainty and the Rejection of Religious Dogmatism

- *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1692)
- *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689)

A. The Distinction Between

- **the Essence of Religion**
  - **Which Can Be Known With Certainty Through the Use of Reason and**
- **Peripheral Sectarian Beliefs**
  - **=the Doctrines of "Orthodoxy"**
    - **Which Cannot Be Grasped with Certainty by the Use of Reason and**
    - **Do Not Command the Assent of All Reasonable Persons**

- The essence of religion lies in a relationship between the individual and God (compare Pietism).
- Personal relationships that are private in nature cannot and should not be regulated by public institutions like the state (compare radical pietism).
- More specifically, the essence of Christianity lies in what the various Christian groups have in common, not in their points of difference (compare Zinzendorf and the Moravians).

The existence of religious differences, however, is valuable in that it calls our attention to the fact that the human mind has limits upon its understanding.

- All reasonable people may be expected to arrive at certain basic truths (which will be what may be known by the light of nature and will be reaffirmed by examining what the different Christian groups have in common); there is a kind of unity of knowledge that will appear when those things that may be known are investigated.
- There are also certain other things that the mind may not know (at least not with any clarity and certainty) and when one takes a position on these

matters, diversity, conflict and irrational dogmatism will inevitably the result (cf. p. 46,57).
    - As an example of the negative effects of seeking the power to dominate (ed. Vernon, pp. 17, 27=trying to impose one's own subjective views on others), cf. the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, which led to the renewed persecution of the French Protestants (see Vernon, *Locke on Toleration*, xi).
- Tolerance may arise (and society and nation strengthened and preserved from conflict) only where what may and may not be known are properly distinguished.

The different Christian groups must therefore recognize the limits of human knowledge and of their own authority.

- These groups will only be able to contribute to the development of a tolerant, peaceful, rationally ordered society when they
    - cease to insist upon those doctrines that are peculiar to themselves (which they claim to be correct, i.e. "orthodoxy") and cause division and conflict and
    - instead recognize that no one group can lay exclusive claim to the whole truth about who God is (ed. Tully, cf. pp. 57-58).

Because there are real limits upon human knowledge and no one group can claim to possess the whole truth about God, it makes no sense for a group to try to force its set of beliefs upon the individual, since the group's set of beliefs contains more than may reasonably be known with certainty and can never be a matter of inward conviction (cf. ed. Tully, pp. 27,38,46,48).

- Forcing such beliefs upon individuals can therefore only result in hypocrisy (since the mind cannot will to believe what it knows to be uncertain or contrary to reason) and outward conformity, which is contrary to the essence and nature of religion (since religion aims at an inward conviction which is required for salvation) (ed. Tully, pp. 27,38-40,46-48).
    - See the quotation from Locke (ed. Vernon, p. 8), which is discussed on Vernon, xvi: "[The] care of souls cannot belong to the civil ruler, because his power consists wholly in compulsion. But true and saving religion consists in an inward conviction of the mind; without it, nothing has value in the eyes of God. Such is the nature of the human understanding, that it cannot be compelled by any external force."
    - What Jonas Proast and other early critics of Locke pointed out (drawing on Augustine's previous justification for the use of force against the Donatists) was that the state church was not interested in using violence to compel belief, but in requiring people to attend to what the Church was saying.
        - Without this, they argued, no true freedom is possible, since it is always the nature of a sect to try to limit the possibilities available to its adherents and this invariably involves limiting the information and opportunities available to the latter).

        - This invites, but cannot compel, agreement in judgment.
    - Locke's response to Proast: Inducements to belief compromise the absolute freedom and autonomy required to adopt a belief as <u>one's own belief</u> (which is a requirement of the true religion that is pleasing to God) (see ed. Vernon, p. 7; note that Locke does allow the ruler/magistrate to engage in instruction as a private citizen on ed. Vernon, pp. 8, 17).
        - With Proast, one might wonder whether beliefs can only be one's own when no pressures (e.g. inducements or threats) are placed on the individual.
            - For example, the fact that one takes a class with a seminary professor who has strong beliefs (dispensationalism or Calvinism or whatever) does not deprive one of the liberty to arrive at one's own judgments regarding these matters.
            - Even if the professor were to offer the student inducements to accept the professor's strongly held beliefs, the student would still be at liberty to disagree.
            - If the student suffered certain penalties for non-compliance (which would be an abuse of the academic process), in that very experience the student might find a renewed commitment to that alternative point of view <u>precisely as their own point of view</u>.
                - One's own convictions are never so clear as when one must make sacrifices to defend them.
            - Thus, far from creating insincerity, inducements and penalties can create a more intense commitment to personal beliefs.

B. The Fundamentally Different Roles of Church and State

Furthermore, there exists a real and important distinction between the purpose and powers of the church and those of the state.

- Ultimately <u>the care of a person's soul lies with them alone</u> (ed. Vernon, pp. 9,16,21,32-34; ed. Tully, pp. 35-36,38,48-49).
- Churches are based upon <u>the voluntary association of individuals</u> (i.e. people may join or leave freely) (ed. Vernon, p. 9,13).
- <u>The church's duty is only to care for the soul of such consenting persons</u> (promoting the edification and salvation of the soul and teaching how by faith and good works one may enter the next life) (ed. Vernon, p. 11; ed. Tully, pp. 28-29,33,39,44-45 [Christ instituted no commonwealth or form of government],47.55).
- <u>Churches are</u>
    - to confine themselves to laws pertaining to the organization of their voluntary association alone (e.g. terminating the membership of the recalcitrant; ed. Vernon, pp. 12-13), and
    - <u>not to concern themselves with civil and worldly goods or the use of force, since these matters belong to the mandate of the state</u>

[civil authority] alone; see ed. Vernon, 11; ed. Tully, pp. 30,33,39,53.
    - Neither the church nor the state can change this arrangement because neither has the authority to bestow new powers upon the other; see ed. Tully, p. 31.
    - Nor does it matter whether the magistrate is a member of a particular church or not, for he fulfills his role precisely as magistrate, apart from any faith he may or may not have as a member of any church; see ed. Tully, pp. 31-33,37,39,49-50,52

The state is based upon a social contract whereby persons seek to preserve the safety of their persons and property within this present life by permanently relinquishing to the state the right to enforce certain standards relevant to morality and social cohesion and punish those who transgress these standards and therefore threaten the cohesion of the society itself (see ed. Vernon, pp. 17-18, 32-34; ed. Tully, pp. 26,28,46-49,55).

The problem with intolerance and persecution is that it rests upon a confusion about who does what.

- The church may not punish religious dissenters itself, since
    - it is not the type of institution to do this and
    - has no authority or mandate to enforce moral standards and punish transgressors (ed. Tully, pp. 30-31,54).
- The state also may not punish religious dissenters, since it aims
    - not at inculcating religious belief, regulating and prescribing forms of worship or providing care for the soul (for it has no mandate to do this; ed. Vernon, p. 7), but
    - only at decreeing certain moral standards and punishing those who violate them (ed. Tully, pp. 26-27,35,40-41,48,53), so as to preserve certain civil goods (ed. Vernon, pp. 6-7).
- Neither may any private person punish another or harm his person or property (ed. Vernon, pp. 12-13), since
    - the rights of maintaining moral standards and punishment has been relinquished by individuals to the state and
    - it is precisely the duty of the state to prevent harm to persons and property by the action of their fellow citizens; see ed. Tully, p. 31.
    - Furthermore, an individual's management of his private affairs (i.e. his property and household) ought not to be interfered with when it causes no harm the person and property of others or the continued existence of the society as a whole; see ed. Tully, pp. 34,42,46-47.

Note that Locke's argument
(1) is restricted to religious tolerance alone (not a tolerance of enquiry and expression generally considered) and in form is extendable to non-Christian religions (see ed. Tully, pp. 42-45; note the ambiguity of p. 50 [bottom]-51 [top]);

(2) is based upon an account of the way power is allotted and delegated and the exercise of power is consequently justified within certain carefully defined boundaries.

- In Locke, certain definite powers have (reasonably) been allotted to the state by its citizens under the social contract (not upon arguments about the innate rights of individuals or the harm done to individuals when these rights are violated or the obligations others have to desist from preventing such individuals from pursuing their chosen way of life and ideals).

(3) extends such tolerance only where and insofar as the continued existence and basic well-being of the society are not imperiled

- Individuals and groups may not be discriminated or persecuted for reasons of religion alone (ed. Tully, pp. 48,54).
- Religious groups or particular religious practices may, however, be suppressed by the state, but only when they pose a clear threat to the peace and/or continued existence of the society itself (ed. Vernon, pp. 26,35,40), e.g. by
    - associating themselves with a hostile foreign power (ed. Vernon, pp. 35-36),
    - practicing human sacrifice (ed. Vernon, p. 25),
    - teaching intolerance and challenging the civil authority, or
    - denying the existence and thus the moral authority of God, which is presupposed by the oaths and civil contracts upon which society is built and by which it is maintained (see ed. Vernon, pp. 35,37; ed. Tully, pp. 41-42,48-50).
        - Atheists by definition cannot be objects of religious toleration (ed. Vernon, p. 37).
        - The question of whether atheists should receive toleration will therefore naturally be evaluated on other grounds (i.e. what is necessary for the society's continued existence and what is required to preserve the well-being of that society).

(4) does not, like Mill's *On Liberty* and most twentieth-century liberal political theories, assume that diversity is a good in itself or that whatever/whoever inhibits the development of diversity (varieties of ways of life and ideals) should therefore be censured and restrained.

- As far as I can see, Locke does not believe that the state can or should promote or restrain the growth of any religious community with regard to religious reasons alone but should rather take a neutral position in regard to all such matters.

(5) unlike modern liberal political theories, assumes that there is a core of beliefs that can and should be arrived at through natural and/or revealed religion.

- In some sense, we are *compelled* to listen to reason and arrive at certain positions (ed. Tully, pp. 43,49); we do not simply choose to adopt religious beliefs and practices as a means to express some indefinable sense that there is more to life than the purely material).

Questions for Discussion:

Break up into groups of four and discuss at least two of the following questions:

1) How do you assess Locke's claim that Christianity's internal diversity and conflicts (one group criticizing and rejecting the legitimacy of another group) make it necessary for one to look elsewhere to find a baseline for healthy life together in community? (See ed. Vernon, p. 45; contrast Jn. 17:20-23 !)
   a) Have you ever heard people refer to different Christian groups as "different religions" (cf. Locke, ed. Vernon, pp. 43-44)?
      - What is the significance of this?
      - What assumptions are being made when people speak in this way?
   b) Does Locke put
      - too much value on how one comes to belief, i.e.
        - considering matters
          - freely and without compulsion,
          - arriving by internal conviction at a belief, with a sense of certainty that the matter is self-evident;
        - changing such beliefs only when confronted with good evidence and good reasons

      and
      - too little value on the actual content, i.e. what specifically is believed?
        - Is Locke's skepticism regarding how much can be verified (and whether the truth of particular doctrinal beliefs can be verified) justified? Why or why not?
        - How should one interpret and evaluate Locke's claims,
          - "Everyone is orthodox in his own eyes" (ed. Vernon, p. 14; cf. pp. 3,36,42) and
          - "The conflict between them about the truth of their doctrines is undecidable" (at least by human beings and the hidden judgment of God is unavailable) (ed. Vernon p. 14; cf. pp. 20,34)
        - Doesn't this really demand that all parties surrender what they consider most important in the interest of arriving at some nebulous, minimally specified "common ground" (i.e. sincere and uncoerced adherence to an ethical code) that is supposed to
          - preserve the "common good" (i.e. the "charity, gentleness and goodwill toward all human beings" [ed. Vernon, p. 3; cf. p. 13,34],
          - by respecting the "innocence of life" [ed. Vernon, p. 4]) of those "whose doctrine is peaceful and whose morals are pure and blameless" (ed. Vernon, p. 41)?
        - Is it really accurate to say that the observance of a certain basic ethical code (virtually "the essence of religion" for Locke; cf. ed. Vernon, pp. 31-32) can make specific questions of belief (doctrine) and worship marginal (and increasingly irrelevant)? See, e.g., ed. Vernon, pp. 4-5.18,23,39,44-45 for versions of this claim.

2) If revealed morality is essentially a republication of the natural morality that can be discerned by reasoned reflection upon the structures of the mind and the order of nature, how will this affect
   a) the public significance of the Christian faith and
   b) the public roles which the Christian faith can legitimately play within the public sphere?
      - Would you agree with Locke's claims that
        - "under the Gospel there is absolutely no such thing as a Christian commonwealth" (ed. Vernon, p. 29) and that
        - "laws have no business with the truth of beliefs, only with the protection and security of the individual's property and of the commonwealth" (ed. Vernon, p. 31)?
      - Locke asserts that religions that interfere with "the preservation of civil society" need not be tolerated and may be repressed. Do you agree?
      - Religions are therefore tolerated to the extent that they
        - confine themselves to "a belief on divine worship and the salvation of souls" (ed. Vernon, p. 38) and
        - avoid other matters, engagement with which might be seen as an illegitimate exercise of authority and a conspiracy against the commonwealth.

        Do you agree?

3) To what extent do contemporary Americans continue to believe in some form of Locke's social contract and the limited, carefully circumscribed powers ceded by citizens to the government?
   - Roughly, what Locke argues seems to be arguing is
     - that the mandate of government is inherently limited and
     - that the demands of a civil/political authority must be justified in light of the interests of all those subjected to that civic/political authority (cf. ed. Vernon, p. 23).
       - How do you see this as related to recent political wrangling over
         - what that mandate of government is or is not and
         - what form of taxation or spending by the government should or should not take place?

4) Does Locke endorse

   (a) negative liberty (i.e. freedom from interference of others in one's affairs) or
   (b) positive liberty (i.e. unrestricted freedom of enquiry and expression as inherently good in itself and necessary for human flourishing/well-being)?

   (i) What practical difference does it make whether one's society adopts (a) instead of (b) or vice-versa?
   (ii) If (a) is adopted, will it be possible to arrive at social consensus about what beliefs and practices should be adopted in the society?
   (iii) If (b) is adopted, will it be possible to arrive at social consensus about what beliefs and practices should be adopted in the society?