

## ENGLISH ASSIGNMENT HELP

### Question

This passage is from John Locke's A Letter Concerning Toleration. Can you tell me what it means or what he is trying to say?

Not even Americans, subjected unto a Christian prince, are to be punished either in body or in goods, for not embracing our faith and worship. If they are persuaded that they please God in observing the rites of their own country, and that they shall obtain happiness by that means, they are to be left unto God and themselves. Let us trace this matter to the bottom. Thus it is: an inconsiderable and weak number of Christians, destitute of every thing, arrive in a pagan country; these foreigners beseech the inhabitants, by the bowels of humanity, that they would succor them with the necessaries of life; those necessaries are given them, habitations are granted, and they all join together, and grow into one people. The Christian religion by this means takes root in that country, and spreads itself; but does not suddenly grow the strongest... Neither pagans there, nor any dissenting Christians here, can with any right be deprived of their worldly goods by the predominating faction of a church-court.

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### Answer-

This work of John Locke, which was published in 1689, appeared amidst a fear that England might be taken over by Catholicism. Locke responds to the problem of religion vs state by positing “tolerance” and peaceful coexistence as the solution.

Locke is in favor of a new understanding between state and religion, and he seems to garner tolerance for various Christian factions. The two pillars of society- statehood and governance on the one hand and religion on the other, have two very distinct functions according to Locke- while the government promotes affairs of an external nature relating to general welfare, the church’s job is to augur internal spiritual interests.

According to him, persuasion is the only way in gaining converts, and **not** the use of power primarily because power might be able to bring about obedience, but it cannot change one’s faith and beliefs. Also the magistrate (embodying state) is not made so by God, therefore individuals cannot allow secular forces/state to control their souls.

Toleration forms the core of Locke's philosophy. So, those factions of Christianity that support this idea of peaceful coexistence find place in Locke's ideal society.

(<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke-political/>)

Locke refutes claims by other philosophers that God has made all men subject to one supreme monarch, and believe, that all men, by dint of birth, have certain basic rights- the right to liberty, the right to health and the right to have claims on property etc, which cannot be brought under the jurisdiction of a church, or a state ruled by church orders these. We can further study these philosophies of Locke against the political background of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century- The Reformation divided Europe into warring religious factions, which led to civil wars and religious mayhem. A state that would allow religious differences could not be envisaged in that political atmosphere.

After the restoration to power of Charles II and the English civil war, Christian factions who did not agree with the state church were repressed. It is exactly this diktat that Locke argues against in his essay. He therefore, strongly advocates the separation of Church from State. Locke feels that another natural right of human beings would be the right to have the freedom to choose one's own road to salvation.

(<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke/index.html#HisBacLocLif>)

Proper spheres for politics and religion have therefore got to be established. He says, neither the teachings of Jesus nor that of the New Testament hints that the use of force is the proper method of proselytization.

In the light of the above study, the passage in question becomes more topical. In this passage, Locke clearly tries to further his point of religious tolerance- By "our faith and worship", Locke refers to Christianity per se (i.e. that Christianity that has not been divided into factions), and reiterates the fact that no religion can be thrust upon a race/tribe that one sets about to politically conquer. He feels that the true calling of Christianity is not proselytizing by coercion, but Jesus and the teachings of the New Testament propound that each religion is to be revered for itself... conversion is not the means to conquering people.

At times, it can be seen, as a natural process of acculturation, that when two (or more) different peoples come together, there is an exchange of beliefs, religious doctrines, faith and ideas... and thus Christianity spreads itself in

these countries. So far as Christianity is able to spread itself by these peaceful and natural means, the motives of a Church-state stand easily fulfilled.

However, if the case is not so, then, Locke strongly feels, the normal rights of these people (right to life, property, liberty and health) cannot be denied to them in any manner possible.

In this essay, Locke vehemently derides the collusion of Church and state, and he advocates tolerance as a basic key for Christianity to flourish in a manner that does not take away from man his very basic rights.