

HS 101: Making of the Modern World: Europe
Guided Questions for John Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration*
Spring 2020
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Though brief, John Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration* is not an easy text. Nonetheless, Locke's ideas are central both to concluding Part 1 of the course and to foreshadowing many of the themes to come. We will therefore spend a class day discussing this text (January 31) and your first essay will require you to incorporate the text. Use the following questions to guide your reading. By answering these questions in your notes, you will be both well-prepared for our discussion and ready to begin brainstorming your essay:

Key Terms: Can you define the following terms?

Toleration
Dissenter
Church
Commonwealth

Magistrate
Religious Liberty
Civil Liberty

Introduction

The middle of the introduction describes Locke's main idea: "because force cannot change belief, imposition creates either hypocrites or enemies, unites all the sects into one hostile opposition and thereby causes what it is supposed to correct. Toleration removes the cause of hostility, creates trust and tends to cause the proliferation of sects, thereby dividing and weakening their potential threat to peace and security" (7). Put this idea into your own words.

A Letter Concerning Toleration

Locke opens the letter by describing what he sees as Christian hypocrisy (23-25). What hypocrisy is he referring to and what is its relationship to his larger argument?

What are the duties of secular rulers and why do they not extend to religion (26-27)?

What limitations does the concept of toleration place upon the church and the state (this is the bulk of the letter)?

- a. Why should people who honestly believe it is their duty to save others nonetheless refrain from interfering with others' beliefs (30-35)
- b. Why should the state also refrain from enforcing religious conformity (35-48)

What should a person do if the magistrate passes a law that violates their religious conscience (48-49)?

What exceptions to toleration does Locke carve out and why (49-51)?

Are Locke's arguments relevant to contemporary society? If so, how? If not, why not?