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# Everyone Orthodox to Themselves: John Locke and His American Students on Religion and Liberal Society by John Colman

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[See table of contents](#)

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### Article abstract

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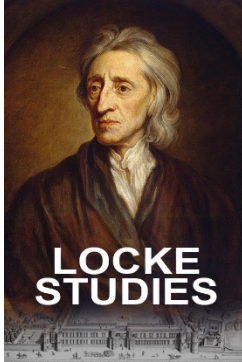
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## **Review of *Everyone Orthodox to Themselves: John Locke and His American Students on Religion and Liberal Society* by John Colman**

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### *Abstract:*

A review of John Colman's recent book *Everyone Orthodox to Themselves: John Locke and His American Students on Religion and Liberal Society* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2023)

*Keywords:* Locke, Founding Fathers, religion, toleration

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**John Colman. *Everyone Orthodox to Themselves: John Locke and His American Students on Religion and Liberal Society*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2023. 256 pp. \$49.99 (hbk). ISBN 978-0-7006-3501-6.**

**Reviewed by BENJAMIN HAINES**

As liberalism's power wanes, its detractors' voices grow in number and fervor. One group of critics, the so-called post-liberals and integralists, decry liberalism as responsible for undermining tradition, religion, and societal bonds through the promotion of individualism; they especially blame John Locke for his rejection of classical natural law, elevation of natural rights, and relegation of conscience from the public to the personal.

Whether this critique of Locke is true, and what to do about it, is the subject of John Colman's *Everyone Orthodox to Themselves: John Locke and His American Students on Religion and Liberal Society*. Colman's argument and contribution to the history of political thought is twofold: that Locke's repudiation of "orthodoxy" as sectarian and partisan was an integral component of his theory of toleration; and that three of Locke's "students"—Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, and Thomas Jefferson—followed Locke's teaching on orthodoxy and sought to apply it to the American regime. "According to Locke," Colman says, "an 'orthodox' understanding of Christianity was incompatible with an order of limited government and the realization of religious liberty and the right of free inquiry. Orthodoxy . . . inevitably gave rise to sectarianism and intolerance" (2). Similarly, Franklin, Madison, and Jefferson advocated for a political system based upon the "cultivation of a theological humility in keeping with the inalienable right to religious liberty and free inquiry" (9). For Colman, the type of orthodoxy opposed by Locke and his students here simply denotes a confessional and exclusivist faith: any variety of Christianity which claimed its doctrines were undoubtedly true and therefore universally binding.

Colman begins with Locke's "theology of liberalism." Working primarily with the *Reasonableness of Christianity* and the *Letter Concerning Toleration*, he first shows the importance of Locke's only criterion for salvation: belief in Christ as the Messiah. All other doctrinal concerns were to be demoted to the level of things indifferent, for it was only Christ's person that offered clear parameters concerning how to live and how to establish a morality consistent with reason and the law of nature. As stated in the *Letter*, this made the chief characteristic of a true church one that allowed for freedom of conscience, or toleration, which "according to the argument of the *Letter*, would appear to be the new orthodoxy" (42). The essential "truth of Christianity" could not therefore be easily identified in the various theological minutia of partisan sects but rather in its "moral teaching" (44). That moral teaching was consistent with the law of nature, making Locke's gospel an instrument of reason—a tool, that is, for defeating priestcraft and superstition. Locke's reasonable Christianity was not necessarily required for the learned philosopher but was rather useful for teaching the masses how to live in accordance with the rational order. Christ's contribution to public and moral life was simply to articulate "the law of nature and the necessary incentives to get the bulk of humanity to understand their duties" (75).

Colman's close reading of the *Reasonableness* seems to suggest that Locke was no traditional Christian. Colman's Locke seems to believe in Christ as Good Teacher, but that is all; he does not seem concerned with any other component of historical Christian theology. In this presentation, Locke's real focus is the political: to establish a policy of toleration in which natural rights are preserved and the state of war is avoided.

Colman's account of Locke's political theology is well done and serves specialists and nonspecialists alike in understanding the public applications of the philosopher's Christology. The rest of the book—three chapters concentrating on Franklin, Madison, and Jefferson's subscription, respectively—is similarly successful, contingent upon its historicity. According to Colman, these Founders each took to heart Locke's warnings about the sectarian nature of orthodoxy, as well as his tolerant solution to the problems it posed. Drawing from their public writings and select correspondence, it is argued that in each their own way, the three political thinkers drew upon Locke for their defenses of religious liberty. Franklin, for instance, thought that Christianity was “reducible to the acceptance of a single article: that Christ is the Messiah”; consequently, it was not possible for Christians to impose their theological opinions on others (86). Madison also took the “right to freedom of conscience” as “inalienable”; what was required to be a Christian was contingent upon the truths one's reason revealed (125). Most radically of all, Jefferson identified “dogma” as the very “enemy of free inquiry, freedom of speech, writing, and printing” (153). In all cases, the three were interested in the same “nondogmatic Christianity” as Locke.

At the level of the abstract, Colman proves his point: Franklin, Madison, and Jefferson all closely followed Locke's teachings on the dangers of orthodoxy and the need for religious liberty; his analysis is forceful. Yet, that the Founding Fathers read and were influenced by Locke is well known. Colman's originality, therefore, lies not in the contention that the Founders were wary of religious faction (see *Federalist* no. 10), or in that they saw the solution to that problem to be freedom of speech, conscience, and association (see the First Amendment), but rather in the implicit assertion that Franklin, Madison, and Jefferson expressly and consciously followed Locke's teachings in the *Reasonableness* and the *Letter*. This is a more historical, rather than theoretical, claim, one which Colman does not prove. For example, in his discussion of Madison's *Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments*, in which Madison famously defended religious toleration, Colman is only able to go so far as to show that Madison's argument is “akin” to that which Locke argued in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* but does not otherwise demonstrate how closely Madison intended to follow Locke (125). The closest Colman comes to offering historical evidence for one of the three Founder's express channeling of Locke comes in his chapter on Franklin, in which Colman suggests, based upon another scholar's work, that “among the readings in polemical divinity that Franklin credits in [his] *Autobiography* as having convinced him of the truth of deism might have been the *Reasonableness*.” Yet even this “possibility is difficult to establish with certainty” (86).

Perhaps this criticism of Colman is beside the point. His book is first and foremost a work of political theory, not history, and is therefore not primarily concerned with the past but with Locke and the Founders' commentary on public life. And it is, indeed, with

public life that Colman is ultimately worried: specifically with the challenge to religious liberty posited by post-liberals and especially Catholic integralists. The latter group in particular, Colman says, seeks to establish a new constitutional order based upon narrow confessional boundaries, boundaries which amount to the type of orthodoxy Locke warned against all the way back in the seventeenth century and inevitably contradicts the principles of religious liberty established by his American students. More broadly, to Colman's mind, the post-liberal critique of modern political philosophy (best exemplified in Locke), fails to solve the problem that liberalism identified: the "inherently contentious, divisive question of the good," which is "particularly combustible when those competing ideas are tied to religious sectarianism" (177).

The political (but also religious) alternative Colman offers is defensible enough: that the "Christian faith be reformed so that it might ally itself to a new political form," which would "regard religious pluralism as a positive political good, not merely something to be tolerated given the minority status of their own individual confession" (180). Undoubtedly, this suggestion is one with which classical liberals (and everyone to their left) will be comfortable. But to more traditional, conservative Christians—that is, many of those who make up the post-liberal movement—Colman will have to offer more explanation than he does regarding how implicitly ceding ground to disagreeing religious groups is not contradictory to the fundamental epistemic and theological assumptions of one's confession or church; indeed, it is an obstacle that seems insurmountable. If Colman could somehow chart a path through those troubled waters, perhaps he could convince liberalism's religious opponents. Yet as it stands, Colman's offering to opponents of liberalism is simply more liberalism, which is not the most effective olive branch.

Its dubious political prognoses notwithstanding, *Everyone Orthodox to Themselves* is a cogent work of scholarship. Of particular importance for students of Locke is the book's close reading of the *Reasonableness of Christianity*, which offers a well-evidenced, alternative account of Locke's (unorthodox) religiosity from those recently argued by Diego Lucci and Victor Nuovo. For students of American political thought, too, at least those in the discipline of political theory, Colman's book once again affirms the importance of Locke's thought to the American project, this time in a uniquely religious way. If only he made clearer the historical limitations of how closely we can tie Locke's rejection of orthodoxy to Franklin, Madison, Jefferson, and their fight for religious liberty in America, Colman would be well-situated to help define exactly what kind of founding occurred in the United States, and exactly what kind of future is held in its constitution.

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