

BOOK REVIEWS

***John Locke's Theology: An Ecumenical, Irenic, and Controversial Project*, by Jonathan S. Marko**Douglas Groothuis¹¹ Cornerstone University<https://doi.org/10.54669/001c.142893>

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While John Locke is typically known for his empiricist epistemology and political theory and its influence on the American founders, he was a formidable, sophisticated, and influential theologian in his own right. We are in Jonathan Marko's debt for his meticulously argued, rigorously documented, and comprehensive account of Locke's theology.

Marko, associate professor of philosophical and systematic theology at Cornerstone University, not only develops Locke's theology carefully and assiduously, but also situates it within the intellectual debates of the day, thus placing Locke within a thickly articulated debate among peers and the broader intellectual tradition among pertinent theologians and philosophers. Marko sees Locke's theology as an attempt to be ecumenical and irenic amid the theological controversies of that era, which were largely adjudicated by Christians and deists (which is to oversimplify the positions). In so doing, Locke did not avoid controversy but at the same time did not seek it out. He was no polemicist, as were (and are) many theologians. Marko is also careful to distinguish Locke's ecumenical program from Locke's personal beliefs, although these, of course, overlap.

The book is divided into three sections after the introduction: part 1, "The Reasonableness of Redemption" (three chapters); part 2, "The Reasonableness of Revelation" (two chapters); and part 3, "Parallels in Locke's Larger Corpus" (three chapters). It concludes with a very helpful epilogue: "The Coherence of John Locke and His Theological Project," which is an apt summary given the depth and breadth of the book.

Marko is careful to read Locke as a nuanced and (mostly) diplomatic thinker. To do so, Marko resists easy generalizations. In fact, he challenges some of them. He explores the granularities with patient literary excavations of the Lockean corpus. One cannot possibly summarize a book so rich in detail and so vast in expanse, so I address but a few issues.

The first part takes up Locke's defense of Christianity, found mostly in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. Here Locke tried to defend a minimal doctrinal core instead of a thorough theology. He was a member of the Church of England. However, he denied hell as eternal torment and original sin as traditionally conceived. He did not include the Trinity as a core doctrine to be defended. Marko reserves detailed exposition of Locke's view on the Trinity for a later chapter. Locke's overriding concern in *Reasonableness of Christianity* and throughout his theological work was how to obtain eternal salvation. But unlike the Reformers, with whom he was well acquainted, he did not dilate on the meaning of Christ's atonement or on the precise nature of justification. Rather, Locke maintained that one can find eternal salvation through believing in God and by believing that Jesus is the Messiah. While some would take these beliefs as necessary conditions for salvation, Locke took them as sufficient conditions. However much we may agree or disagree with Locke, the attempt to defend the core beliefs of Christianity is a noble cause, and one well known through C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. As Marko says, "Locke thought of himself as a follower of Jesus Christ. Right or wrong, he did his best to produce unity and peace amongst the various sects" (318).

Marko's discussion of Locke's account of the relationship between reason and revelation (chapter 8) is extensively developed and addresses the three categories widely discussed in Locke's day. Christian beliefs may be (1) in accordance with reason, (2) above reason, or (3) against reason. Locke rejected the last category, arguing that Christian faith was not against reason, but he thought carefully about religious beliefs that are incomprehensible and thus above reason. How one addresses this category, which is a vital task for apologetics and theology, depends greatly on what is meant by *reason*. Marko elucidates the issues admirably and compares Locke's reflections with those of his contemporaries. This epistemological consideration is at the center of the concept of biblical revelation, much of which can be taken as being above reason. Fideists, such as Kierkegaard, take key doctrines of revelation, such as the incarnation, to be against reason, but not Locke. He is right in this, by my lights.

A recurring question about Locke's theology is his stance on the Trinity. Some have dismissed him as a unitarian who valued reason too highly and did not leave enough room for mystery, as pertaining to the Trinity, in biblical revelation. Marko demonstrates that this account of Locke is too simple. A case can be made that Locke avoided the doctrine but did not deny it. Another case can be made that he did not embrace the doctrine of the Trinity. However, Locke left room for truths above reason, which he called incomprehensible, and the Trinity may have been among them. Marko raises the question of whether Locke's overall philosophy left room for advancing

the Trinity, but even here there seems to be no definitive answer. Marko addresses the matter with extreme care and attention to all the evidence. This is historical and theological scholarship at its best.

John Locke's Theology proves that Locke was a bona fide theologian, whose thinking *qua* theologian should be taken seriously. As an apologist and philosopher of religion, I found Marko's discussion of Locke's views of faith and reason, as well as his discussion of Locke's defense of miracles (chapter 6), to be especially noteworthy. But anyone fascinated by Locke and the theological and philosophical climate of his day will benefit from this exceptional volume.

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