

Servants of One Sovereign Master

God, Locke, and Equality. By Jeremy Waldron. *Cambridge University Press*. 263 pp. \$22 paper.

Reviewed by Robert T. Miller

The account of human equality that we find in the mature writings of John Locke is “as well-worked out a theory of basic equality as we have in the canon of political philosophy,” says Jeremy Waldron, the Maurice and Hilda Friedman Professor of Law at Columbia University and one of the leading legal and political philosophers of our time. But it is the sequel to this assertion that makes Waldron’s latest book, *God, Locke, and Equality*, so significant, for Waldron argues not only that Locke’s theory of human equality has essentially Christian foundations, but that this Christian theory of human equality may be essential to the liberal, egalitarian state. This is a fascinating book.

Waldron is concerned with what he calls basic equality—not a policy aim of ensuring equality of, say, wealth or income, but “our deeper commitment to treating all human beings as equals—a commitment which seems to underlie our particular egalitarian aims.” Waldron quotes Locke’s famous statement that human beings are by nature in a state “of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another,” each of us “equal to the greatest and subject to nobody”; and he argues that Locke accorded this principle of basic human equality “the strongest grounding that a principle could have: it was an axiom of theology, understood as perhaps the most important truth about God’s way with the world in regard to the social and political implications of His creation of the human person.”

The argument begins with human nature, made, according to Genesis, in the image and likeness of God. Agreeing with the traditional view that this verse refers to man’s intellectual nature, Locke faces a problem, for equality requires a sharp distinction between, on the one hand, those beings each of whom is the equal of the rest, and, on the other, all other beings. But intellectual capacity clearly comes in degrees, and “there is a greater distance between some men and others in this respect,” Locke says, “than between some men and some beasts.” Why not, asks Waldron, abandon equality and assume that our treatment of others be somehow proportionate to their intellectual capacity?

The solution is a purportedly sharp distinction between those beings that have (in Locke’s words) the “power of abstracting” and those that do not. In Waldron’s gloss, this is “the capacity to reason on the basis of general ideas,” and it is the intellectual capacity that is characteristically human. Brute animals never reach it, and if, because of infirmity or injury some human beings lack it as well, then Locke is prepared to say that such individuals do not participate in basic human equality. This does not mean, of course, that they are not morally entitled to certain kinds of good treatment, but it does justify their exclusion from, say, participation in the political community. The severely retarded and the insane, in other words, are not entitled to the same political rights as citizens with normal mental capacities.

Waldron argues, however, that there has to be some reason why exactly this minimum level of intellectual capacity is morally significant, and it is precisely here that theology comes into play. For with just this minimum level of intellectual capacity, human beings can attain (in Locke's words) "to the knowledge of their Maker and the sight of their own duties." Indeed, "the visible marks of extraordinary wisdom and power appear so plainly," Locke says, "that a rational creature who will but seriously reflect on them cannot miss the discovery of a Deity." In Waldron's explanation, therefore, the point of singling out the characteristically human power of thinking with general ideas is that any being with this power is one who can "know about the existence of God and who is therefore in a position to answer responsibly to His commandments." "Because creatures capable of abstraction can be conceived," Waldron says, quoting Locke, "as 'all the servants of one Sovereign Master, sent into the world by His order and about His business,' we must treat them as 'His property, whose workmanship they are, made to last during His, not one another's, pleasure,' and refrain from destroying or harming or exploiting them."

Waldron is at pains to show that Locke means, quite literally, that anyone with normal mental faculties can know by natural reason that God exists and has established a natural law that we are obligated to obey. Although sensitive to the fact that, say, the day laborers of his time had virtually no formal education and little leisure for metaphysical speculation, Locke is confident that they will nevertheless be able to work out these conclusions on their own. According to Waldron, Locke thought "the capacities and dispositions of ordinary people were much more reliable morally and politically than the effete, corrupt sensibility of 'all-knowing doctors' and 'learned disputants.'" In short, everyone with normal mental faculties is required to reason to the existence of God.

For Locke, whose religious views were not always clearly articulated but were surely Protestant, this claim is extraordinary, for most Protestant denominations eschew such claims about the powers of human reason. The doctrine that the existence of God can be rationally demonstrated is a characteristically Catholic one—indeed, it is a dogma of the Catholic faith defined by the First Vatican Council. But much more modest than Locke's, the Catholic position was never that the demonstration of God's existence was an easy or obvious one that everyone with normal mental faculties was expected to complete. Thomas Aquinas, for example, readily conceded that demonstrations of this kind are understood "only by a few men, and then only after long study and with a great admixture of errors" (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 1, 1). When Waldron argues that the foundations of Locke's account of basic human equality are essentially theological, therefore, we should bear in mind that one of the theological premises is at home neither in most forms of Protestantism nor in Catholicism.

Waldron never discusses the obvious objection here—namely, that while philosophers of religion disagree vehemently about whether the existence of God can be demonstrated, surely it strains credulity to think that anyone with normal mental faculties will be able to discover a convincing proof. Waldron is rightly concerned to show that, since this knowledge is the basis of human equality, Locke also thought that it is widely available, and in assembling texts from Locke to prove that he thought this, Waldron is surely convincing. But as to the inherent truth of the assertion, Waldron has little to say, not even mentioning the nature of the proof that Locke thinks is so simple and so persuasive. The reader who looks it up in Locke (the necessity for which

tends, I think, to undercut Locke's assertion that everyone can discover the proof for himself) will learn that the argument in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is a version of the traditional cosmological argument presented, I think, with less than customary clarity.

Let us return, however, to Waldron's reconstruction of Locke. We have, so far, all human beings with normal mental faculties reasoning (or able to reason, if they merely gave it some time and attention) to the existence of God and our common responsibility to Him under the natural law. Thus far, though the account is surely religious, it is not specifically Christian. Christianity enters because, although by natural reason we can know the existence of a natural law and our general responsibility to conform our conduct to it, we cannot know its full content. In Waldron's account, "there is no philosophical demonstration of morality"; on the contrary, to know how to live, we need "teaching drawn from or inspired by elementary Christian doctrine." All of us must reason "to the existence of God using the basic capacities of human rationality and to the idea of oneself as a person required to obey Him" and then turn our attention "to what God has taught and revealed, and the integration of all that into a roughly reasoned compendium of duty." According to Locke in the *Reasonableness of Christianity*, Christ is "one manifestly sent from God and coming with visible authority from Him," and so, in Waldron's account, "the teachings of Jesus Christ, underwritten by the miracles that demonstrate his credentials, inspired by the example of his life and ministry," are "the clearest basis for our knowledge of and obedience to the natural law." We cannot "get very far towards the truth about property and economy," for example, without at least some specifically Judeo-Christian content.

But we live in a pluralistic democratic society in which Christian teachings command nothing like universal assent. What are we to make of this Christian theory of equality? Is this the theory that Waldron himself accepts? As to the latter question, Waldron is cagey, but he finally says that he is "inclined to believe that a commitment to human equality is most coherent and attractive when it is grounded in theological truth, truths associated particularly with the Christian heritage." As to the former question, Waldron makes three provocative points. First, he refers to the Rawlsian view that in the sphere of politics and public reason there should be admitted only arguments that we can reasonably expect all others involved to accept (and thus no sectarian arguments like those essential to Locke's theory of equality), and he then argues that, if we explore the foundations of our commitment to equality and discover that it is impossible to articulate certain important egalitarian commitments without appealing to their religious grounds, then the Rawlsian view is itself unreasonable. If the true theory of equality is irremediably Christian, in other words, so be it.

Second, Waldron argues (as others have as well) that Rawls' own view of an overlapping moral consensus acceptable to all reasonable persons itself has presuppositions about moral personality, justice, and goodness that are unacceptable to many people in our society—"mostly sophisticated people," Waldron wryly notes—like Nietzscheans and Freudians, who think that talk about moral agency and objective values is nonsense. But if we have to make some assumptions about morality in order to engage in politics and political theory, there is no clear reason why we may make only the modest ones Rawls would allow us, especially if these prove insufficient to support an adequate theory of basic human equality.

Third, in an argument reminiscent of Richard John Neuhaus' *The Naked Public Square*, Waldron says that "equality cannot do its work unless it is accepted among those whom it consecrates as equals," and he notes that Locke thought that such general acceptance was impossible unless equality be founded in religious teaching. "Given our experience of a world and a century in which politics and public reason have cut loose from these foundations," Waldron concludes, Locke's cautions and suspicions may well have been justified. Although this argument might be read in a merely pragmatic sense (e.g., the American people are mostly Christians, and so if they are to believe in equality, a Christian theory has the best chance of convincing them), Waldron seems to intend a more substantive claim: the Christian theory is the only one that will command widespread assent because, in fact, it's the truth.

In sum, *God, Locke, and Equality* is a challenging and fascinating read. I have only a few reservations. Waldron devotes extensive space to issues that will be of more interest to Locke specialists than to the average reader: what Locke thought about the economic systems of Native Americans, for example, or why he cites the Old Testament so much more than the New in the *Second Treatise on Government*. Similarly, Waldron is often at pains to save Locke from unflattering interpretations by modern academic commentators whose opinions the general reader is not likely to share, such as those of feminist scholars who would make Locke, who held rather enlightened views about women, into a rank misogynist. Still, Waldron compensates with rejoinders to such silliness that are often amusingly devastating. Finally, Waldron limits the very important discussion of how such an explicitly Christian theory of equality fits into to a pluralistic democratic society to the final pages of the book; it is a topic that deserves much fuller treatment.

But these criticisms mostly amount to a desire to hear more from Jeremy Waldron, especially about the Christian foundations of human equality. I expect that, soon enough, we will.