

Locke and the Trinity

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Abstract: In *The Reasonableness of Christianity, as Delivered in the Scriptures* (1695), John Locke described faith in Jesus the Messiah, repentance for sin, and obedience to the divine moral law as the fundamentals of the Christian religion. According to Locke, adherence to these fundamentals, along with the diligent study of the Bible, is what the Christian Law of Faith prescribes as essential to salvation. All other beliefs and practices are non-fundamental and, hence, irrelevant to salvation. Thus, Locke did not cover non-fundamentals in the *Reasonableness*. One of the beliefs omitted from Locke's elucidation of Christianity is belief in the Trinity. This omission implicitly made belief in the Trinity unnecessary to salvation and was surprising to many, given also that the *Reasonableness* appeared in the middle of the Trinitarian controversy of the late seventeenth century. Therefore, some critics accused Locke of anti-Trinitarianism and Socinianism and also pressured him to explain his position on the Trinitarian doctrine. Although Locke abstained from publicly clarifying his views on the Trinity, he expressed, unsystematically and at times ambiguously, his views on Christ's nature and mission in the *Reasonableness*, *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St Paul*, and several theological manuscripts. Moreover, he focused on Trinitarian issues in "Adversaria Theologica", "Lemmata Ethica", and various other manuscripts. Locke's public as well as private writings denote a Messianic and non-Trinitarian Christology, which, although presenting Socinian and Arian elements, was essentially grounded in Locke's own reading of Scripture. Nevertheless, irenic and prudential reasons led him to avoid public discussion of the Trinitarian dogma, for he deemed it inappropriate and immoral to fuel pointless and divisive debates and he considered it unwise to cause himself unnecessary troubles with the authorities.

Keywords: Arianism, Christology, Messiah, Socinianism, Trinity

1. Introduction

In *The Reasonableness of Christianity, as Delivered in the Scriptures*, published anonymously in 1695, John Locke described faith in Jesus the

Messiah, repentance for sin, and obedience to the divine moral law as the fundamentals of the Christian religion. He argued that these fundamentals are plainly revealed in Scripture. Accordingly, adherence to these fundamentals, along with the diligent study of the Bible, is what the Christian Law of Faith prescribes as essential to achieve eternal life¹. All other beliefs and practices are non-fundamental and, thus, irrelevant to salvation. Locke maintained that much is not plain in Scripture. He regarded even only searching for religious truth as saving, on condition that one accepted the fundamentals of Christianity and studied Scripture conscientiously, and he claimed that error about non-fundamentals, when held after sincere search, did not impede salvation². Therefore, he did not take into account non-fundamentals in the *Reasonableness*. One of the beliefs omitted from Locke's elucidation of Christianity is belief in the Trinity. This omission implicitly made belief in the Trinity unnecessary to salvation. Furthermore, the *Reasonableness* described Jesus as the Messiah and utilized the term "Son of God" as a synonym for "Messiah". Locke maintained that Jesus had been charged by God the Father with a salvific mission and had hence reaffirmed the divinely given, eternally valid, and universally binding law of nature, complementing it with assurance of otherworldly rewards and sanctions and with the promise of God's forgiveness of the repentant faithful. But Locke did not talk of Jesus as a divine person.

Locke's disregard of the Trinity in the *Reasonableness* was surprising to many, given also that this book appeared in the middle of a Trinitarian controversy that caused turmoil in late seventeenth-century England. When attacking the Trinitarian doctrine, the English Unitarians drew mainly, but not exclusively, on the ideas of the anti-Trinitarian and anti-Calvinist Italian scholar Faustus Socinus (1539-1604) and his mostly Polish and German disciples. Socinian views had already reached England in the mid-seventeenth century, mainly thanks to the adventurer Paul Best and the schoolmaster John Biddle, and those maintaining anti-Trinitarian ideas were persecuted during the Civil War and Interregnum and after the Restoration as well. However, Socinianism raised new attention during the Trinitarian controversy of the late seventeenth century³. Thus, following the publication

¹ J. Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity, as Delivered in the Scriptures*, ed. by J.C. Higgins-Biddle, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1999, pp. 22-25, 109-12.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 168-71.

³ Concerning the vast historiography on Socinianism in England and the English Trinitarian controversy, see D. Lucci, "Reassessing the Crisis of the Trinity in Early Modern England", in *Cromobots: Cyber Review of Modern Historiography* 19 (2014), pp. 153-64. Relatively recent studies include the follow-

of the *Reasonableness*, the debate on Locke's religious thought revolved mainly around his disregard of the Trinity.

Two of Locke's critics, the Calvinistic divine John Edwards and the latitudinarian Bishop Edward Stillingfleet, pressured him to clarify his position on the Trinitarian dogma. Locke obstinately abstained from publicly explaining his views on the Trinity. However, he expressed, unsystematically and at times ambiguously, his views on Christ's nature and mission in his public writings on religion, including *The Reasonableness of Christianity* and the unfinished *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistle of St Paul*, and in various theological manuscripts. Moreover, he focused on Trinitarian issues in "Adversaria Theologica", "Lemmata Ethica", and several other manuscripts. Like Socinus and his followers, Locke put a strong emphasis on Christ's resurrection and exaltation. Furthermore, his analysis of Ephesians 1:10 in the *Paraphrase* indicates belief in Christ's pre-existence, thus denoting an incipient Arianism⁴. Conversely, Locke's writings on religion indicate no belief in the Trinity. Briefly, Locke's Christological reflections and his consideration of Trinitarian issues denote a Messianic and non-Trinitarian Christology, which, although presenting Socinian and Arian elements, was essentially grounded in his own reading of Scripture⁵.

2. *The Trinity in Late Seventeenth-Century England*

The publication, in 1687, of *A Brief History of the Unitarians, called also Socinians* by the clergyman Stephen Nye is commonly considered as the beginning of the Trinitarian controversy of the late seventeenth century. Nye's

ing volumes: S. Mortimer, *Reason and Religion in the English Revolution: The Challenge of Socinianism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010; P.C.H. Lim, *Mystery Unveiled: The Crisis of the Trinity in Early Modern England*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012; C.J. Walker, *Reason and Religion in Late Seventeenth-Century England: The Politics and Theology of Radical Dissent*, I.B. Tauris, London 2013.

⁴ Arianism, named after the third- to fourth-century presbyter Arius, is the doctrine maintaining that Christ was begotten by God the Father at a point in time before his conception and birth – according to most Arians, before all other creatures – and, hence, was not coeternal with the Father. While describing Christ as the Son of God, Arianism entails the denial of the Son's coeternity, coequality, and consubstantiality with God the Father. Arian ideas were condemned at the First Council of Nicaea of 325 CE, which affirmed a Trinitarian view of the Godhead, but Arian views were revived in the post-Reformation era, particularly in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England. See M. Wiles, *Archetypal Heresy: Arianism through the Centuries*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001.

⁵ Some of the issues addressed in the present essay are covered, more extensively and thoroughly, in my new monograph on Locke: Diego Lucci, *John Locke's Christianity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2021.

Brief History was followed by many other anti-Trinitarian tracts, published mostly anonymously and mainly thanks to funds provided by the merchant Thomas Firmin. The Unitarians were encouraged to make their ideas public when, in 1687, a Declaration of Indulgence by James II extended religious liberty in a failed attempt to draw support from Nonconformists. The Trinitarian controversy was also triggered by problems inherent to the Protestant doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, according to which Scripture contains all that is necessary for salvation. Protestants rejected the Catholic dogma of transubstantiation as unscriptural and illogical. John Tillotson's *Discourse against Transubstantiation*, which received seven editions between 1684 and 1687, revived the debate on this subject in England. However, the Continental Socinians argued that belief in the Trinity, too, could not be inferred from Scripture. This enabled English Catholic polemicists to attack *sola Scriptura* and insist on the necessity to ground biblical interpretation in ecclesiastical tradition – the Catholic rule of faith – in order to salvage the Trinity⁶. English Protestants had three options to respond to Catholic attacks. They could maintain their commitment to Scripture alone as the rule of faith and prove the Socinians wrong about the Trinity. Alternatively, they could maintain their commitment to Scripture alone as the rule of faith and concur with the Socinians' denial of the Trinity. The last option was to renounce *sola Scriptura* and agree with Catholics that only ecclesiastical tradition could secure the Trinitarian doctrine. English Protestant theologians chose the first of these three options. Conversely, Nye and other Unitarians rejected both the Trinitarian dogma and ecclesiastical tradition, and they described themselves as the truly "orthodox" Christians adhering to *sola Scriptura*.

The Unitarians depicted the Trinitarian dogma as unscriptural, illogical, and absent from the first Christians' beliefs. Thus, they argued that this dogma should not be among the tenets of the Church of England or, at least, should not be forced on all members of this church. Their rejection of the Trinity provoked the reaction of various Church of England clergymen, who employed different philosophical theories to defend the Trinity and, hence, clashed with one another. For instance, William Sherlock described the three divine persons as three distinct "minds", self-conscious and reciprocally conscious of one another⁷. He was accused of tritheism (that is, the theory that the three

⁶ [A. Woodhead?], *The Protestants Plea for a Socinian*, London 1686; Anon., *A Dialogue between a New Catholic Convert and a Protestant*, London 1686.

⁷ W. Sherlock, *A Vindication of the Doctrine of the Holy and Ever Blessed Trinity*, London 1690, pp. 48-50, 55-57, 66-68.

persons of the Trinity are three distinct deities) by John Wallis and Robert South, who argued that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were three manifestations, aspects, or modes of existence of the same divine substance⁸. But the aforesaid John Edwards leveled the charge of modalism (that is, the view that the three persons of the Trinity are merely “modes” of God) against Wallis and South⁹. That internal conflict between Trinitarian apologists caused deep embarrassment to the ecclesiastical and political authorities. Moreover, the exclusion of non-Trinitarian Christians from toleration in the Toleration Act, which was passed shortly after the Glorious Revolution, and the persecution of various Unitarian authors proved ineffective to stop the spread of anti-Trinitarian ideas. Therefore, in 1696, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Tenison, persuaded William III to issue a Royal Injunction forbidding discussion of the Trinity in terms different from those contained in Scripture, the Apostolic, Nicene, and Athanasian creeds, and the Thirty-Nine Articles. One year later, the Parliament approved a Blasphemy Act that made denial of the Trinity a crime. However, these measures did not put an abrupt end to the controversy, which waned only gradually in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

The Reasonableness of Christianity appeared in the middle of that controversy. Both before and after Locke’s authorship was revealed, this book was accused of promoting anti-Trinitarianism, Socinianism, creedal minimalism, and even atheism, given also that some Trinitarian apologists, such as John Edwards, judged Socinianism to be a shortcut to atheism. Not only the omission of the Trinitarian doctrine and the characterization of Jesus as the Messiah, but also other elements of the *Reasonableness* led some critics to denounce it as a Socinian book. *Contra* both antinomianism and deism, the *Reasonableness* endorsed a moralist (and clearly anti-predestinarian) soteriology, arguing that both faith and works contribute to salvation. Moreover, this book presented mortalist ideas, as Locke believed that the soul is not naturally immortal, but dies at physical death and will be resurrected by divine miracle for the Last Judgment. Finally, the *Reasonableness* denied original sin and disregarded the satisfaction theory of atonement. These are all points in common with the Socinian theological tradition, which Locke knew well, for he owned, and often cited in his manuscripts, many anti-Trinitarian, Socinian, and Unitarian books,

⁸ J. Wallis, *Theological Discourses*, London 1692; R. South, *Animadversions upon Dr. Sherlock’s Book*, London 1693; W. Sherlock, *A Defence of Dr. Sherlock’s Notion of a Trinity in Unity*, London 1694; R. South, *Tritheism Charged upon Dr. Sherlock’s New Notion of the Trinity*, London 1695.

⁹ J. Edwards, *Theologia Reformata*, 2 vols., London 1713, vol. 1, pp. 282-90.

and he was friends with various anti-Trinitarian intellectuals¹⁰. However, Locke did not subscribe to all tenets of Socinianism, and he described his account of the Christian religion as based on Scripture alone. In fact, he always made sure that his religious views were consistent with, and indeed grounded in, the Scriptures. Nevertheless, shortly after the publication of the *Reasonableness*, Edwards described this book as a Socinian work in four tracts published between 1695 and 1697, prompting Locke to write, in 1695 and 1697, two vindications of his book¹¹. Moreover, Stillingfleet criticized Locke's way of ideas, and particularly his agnosticism on substance and his non-substantialist account of personhood, in *A Discourse in Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (1697). Although Stillingfleet did not consider Locke an anti-Trinitarian proper, he blamed *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* for providing the anti-Trinitarians – especially “the author of *Christianity Not Mystrious*”, namely, the freethinker John Toland – with a powerful weapon to question the Trinitarian dogma. According to Stillingfleet, Locke's rethinking of the concepts of essence, nature, and person in nominalist terms was harmful to the Trinitarian doctrine, which relied on a substantialist understanding of these concepts¹². Stillingfleet's attack on Locke in 1697 provoked a heated dispute, during which Stillingfleet composed two more writings and Locke responded in three replies. This harsh exchange came to an end only with Stillingfleet's death in 1699. Edwards's and Stillingfleet's critiques of Locke's theological and philosophical ideas encouraged other critics, including the nonjuror John Milner, to expose the Socinian elements of Locke's religious thought¹³.

Locke always refused to clarify his position on the Trinity and abstained from intervening in the Trinitarian controversy. This, however, does not mean that he was uninterested in this controversy. In fact, he corresponded with the Remonstrant theologian Philipp van Limborch, the Arminian scholar Jean Le Clerc, and other intellectuals about various Unitarian works, mainly Nye's *Brief History* and Arthur Bury's *Naked Gospel* – a book that caused great turmoil shortly after its publication in 1690. Bury's work of creedal minimalism, which

¹⁰ J. Marshall, “Locke, Socinianism, ‘Socinianism’, and Unitarianism”, in M.A. Stewart (ed.), *English Philosophy in the Age of Locke*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2000, pp. 118-19, 132-35.

¹¹ J. Edwards, *Some Thoughts concerning the several Causes and Occasions of Atheism*, London 1695; Id., *Socinianism Unmask'd*, London 1696; Id., *The Socinian Creed*, London 1697; Id., *A Brief Vindication of the Fundamental Articles of the Christian Faith*, London 1697; J. Locke, *Vindications of the Reasonableness of Christianity*, ed. by V. Nuovo, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2012.

¹² E. Stillingfleet, *A Discourse in Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity*, London 1697, pp. 230-92.

¹³ J. Milner, *An Account of Mr. Lock's Religion*, London 1700, pp. 180-88.

described belief in the Trinity as unnecessary to salvation, was condemned by a convocation of the University of Oxford as “impious and heretical” and was consequently seized and burnt. Moreover, Bury was deprived of his rectorship of Exeter College at Oxford in July 1690. Locke sent copies of Nye’s *Brief History* and Bury’s *Naked Gospel* to Le Clerc, who promptly wrote a defense of Bury’s treatise¹⁴. Locke also referred to Nye, Biddle, and other anti-Trinitarians, including several Continental Socinians, in some of his manuscripts. Locke himself was unorthodox when considering Christological and Trinitarian issues in some of his manuscripts and, in less explicit terms, in his theological writings intended for publication. His Christology indeed deviated significantly from the Trinitarian norm. Locke’s Christology has much more in common with the Socinians’ *Messianic* Christology than with the *incarnational* Christology that is a crucial element of Trinitarian Christianity. These two types of Christology are conceptually distinct, as Victor Nuovo has observed:

Although both make Christ the centre of salvation, a Messianic Christ achieves this goal through deeds, and, he being a king, the benefits of his saving activity are distributed to those who become his subjects after a judicial process; an incarnational Christ, although not inactive, accomplishes salvation through the communication of his divine being, which he makes available to his beneficiaries by becoming human¹⁵.

Along with these two kinds of Christology, there are two other Christological models: “One represents Christ as a mediator between God and man, the *Logos*, the other as a heavenly man, the founder of a new race, the second Adam”¹⁶. These two models, too, play a role in Locke’s Christianity, as is demonstrated by his soteriology, which is centered on the saving power of the Law of Faith revealed by Christ. Briefly, Locke’s Christology is predominantly Messianic and also describes Christ as a mediator and as the second Adam – namely, as a literal son of God, miraculously conceived in a virgin’s womb. However, Locke’s Christology is non-incarnational and, accordingly, non-Trinitarian.

¹⁴ J. Le Clerc, *An Historical Vindication of the Naked Gospel*, London 1691. For Locke’s correspondence concerning Unitarian works, see J. Locke, *Correspondence*, 8 vols., ed. by E.S. de Beer, vol. 3, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1978, no. 1120 (Locke to P. van Limborch, 12 March 1689); *ibid.*, vol. 4, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1978, no. 1248 (J. Tyrrell to Locke, 18 February 1690); *ibid.*, no. 1325 (B. Furlly to Locke, 16/26 October 1690); *ibid.*, no. 1329 (J. Le Clerc to Locke, 22 October / 1 November 1690).

¹⁵ V. Nuovo, *Christianity, Antiquity, and Enlightenment: Interpretations of Locke*, Springer, Dordrecht 2011, p. 76.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

3. *Locke's Theological Manuscripts and the Corruption of Early Christianity*

The manuscript “Adversaria Theologica”, composed for the most part in 1694-95, contains several entries on different theological questions, including four pairs of entries concerning Trinitarian issues – namely, “Trinitas” and “Non Trinitas”, “Christus Deus Supremus” and “Christus non Deus Supremus”, “Christus merus homo” and “Christus non merus homo”, and “Spiritus Sanctus Deus” and “Spiritus Sanctus non Deus”¹⁷. These eight entries present only eight arguments supporting the Trinitarian doctrine and thirty-six arguments against it. This imbalance is partly due to Locke’s use of the anti-Trinitarian John Biddle’s *Twelve Arguments drawn out of the Scripture* (1647) and *A Confession of Faith touching the Holy Trinity* (1648) as his main sources in these eight entries. The anti-Trinitarian arguments in “Adversaria Theologica” endorse the theory that Jesus had only a human nature – a theory consistent with Socinian Christology. However, despite the numerical prevalence of anti-Trinitarian arguments in “Adversaria”, Locke’s position on Christ’s nature in this manuscript is still a matter for discussion. In this manuscript, both Trinitarian and anti-Trinitarian arguments are accompanied by supporting references to scriptural texts. Moreover, Locke endorsed with his initials only one argument in the eight entries on Trinitarian questions, precisely in a note under the entry “Christus non merus homo”. Based on 1 Peter 1:11 (“Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them [*i.e.*, the prophets] did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow”), this argument maintains that “his [*i.e.*, Christ’s] spirit was in the ancient prophets”¹⁸. This argument might be taken as signifying the pre-existence of Christ’s *spirit* to his conception and birth and, hence, as compatible with a later suggestion on Christ’s pre-existence in *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St Paul*, which I examine below. However, even if we suppose that Locke accepted the notion of Christ’s pre-existence already in “Adversaria Theologica”, several years before drafting the *Paraphrase*, this does not mean that he believed in Christ’s *eternal* pre-existence and, thus, this does not make him a Trinitarian. Locke’s endorsement of the theory of Christ’s pre-existence, in the

¹⁷ J. Locke, “Adversaria Theologica 94”, in J. Locke, *Writings on Religion*, ed. by V. Nuovo, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002, pp. 23-28.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27. In this article, all biblical citations are from the King James Version, which Locke, too, used.

Paraphrase and possibly in “Adversaria”, might actually denote an Arian notion of Christ as *pre-existent but created* – namely, begotten by God the Father *at a point in time* and, hence, not co-eternal with the Father. At any rate, there is no evidence to conclude that Locke pursued a specifically Arian agenda in “Adversaria Theologica” or in other theological writings, including the *Paraphrase*, as I explain below. Moreover, when considering his reference to the pre-existence of Christ’s *spirit* in “Adversaria”, it is possible to reach a different conclusion. It is indeed possible that, when writing the aforesaid note on 1 Peter 1:11, Locke intended to call attention to Biddle’s disregard of this biblical verse and (indirectly) criticize Biddle’s view of the Holy Spirit. In fact, while the Continental Socinians regarded the Holy Spirit as God’s power, Biddle’s early writings depicted the Holy Spirit as the “principal Minister of God and Christ, [...] singled out of the number of the other heavenly Ministers or Angels”¹⁹. 1 Peter 1:11 contradicts this view of the Holy Spirit, in that this verse describes the spirit of the prophets as the spirit of Christ – not as a heavenly minister or angel. Therefore, it is possible that, when mentioning the “spirit” in his note on 1 Peter 1:11 in “Adversaria”, Locke meant the Holy Spirit, which had inspired first the ancient prophets and then Christ. Thanks to his divine inspiration, Jesus was not a common man. To Locke, Jesus was indeed the Messiah. But acknowledging Jesus’ divine inspiration and Messiahship is still consistent with a view of Christ as *created as a man* – and not as an *uncreated divine person* or as a *creature pre-existing his own conception and birth*. Therefore, this interpretation is compatible with the hypothesis that, in “Adversaria Theologica”, Locke upheld a view of Christ’s nature consonant with Socinian Christology, while in the *Paraphrase*, which he composed several years after “Adversaria”, he developed a different understanding of Christ’s nature, consonant with Arian Christology in regard to Christ’s pre-existence, as I clarify below. Furthermore, this interpretation is consistent with the views on Christ’s nature and divine inspiration that Locke expressed in several other manuscripts of the mid-1690s.

In 1695, Locke took several notes on some Trinitarian questions in the manuscript “Lemmata Ethica”. In one of these notes, under the heading “Trinity”, he wrote that “the papists deny that the doctrine of the Trinity can be proved by the Scripture”²⁰. Moreover, in the entry “Unitarians” in this manuscript, Locke made reference to anti-Trinitarian authors, such as the Socinians Johann

¹⁹ J. Biddle, *A Confession of Faith touching the Holy Trinity*, London 1648, p. 44. This view echoes Arius’s notion of the Holy Spirit as an angel.

²⁰ J. Locke, MS Locke d. 10, “Lemmata Ethica, Argumenta et Autores 1659”, p. 167.

Crell and Johann Ludwig von Wolzogen and the Unitarian Stephen Nye, when observing that in the Bible there is “scarce one text alledgd by the Trinitarians which is not otherwise expounded by their own writers”²¹. He also maintained that the Bible contains “a multitude of texts that deny those things of Christ which can not be denied of god; & that affirme such things of him that cannot agree to him if he were a person of god. In like manner of the holy ghost”²². It is worth noting that “Lemmata Ethica”, particularly in its entry on the Trinity, denotes Locke’s interest in the corruption of early Christianity by unscriptural, pagan, Platonic ideas. Locke’s interest in this subject also emerges from other manuscript notes of the same period, including some notes in Locke’s interleaved copies of the polyglot New Testament and of *Censura celebriorum authorum* (1690) by Thomas Pope Blount²³. Locke showed his curiosity in this matter already in the late 1670s, as is proven by a journal note of 20 December 1678. In this note, he gave a description of several manuscripts of the New Testament that he had examined when visiting the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris with the clergyman and natural philosopher John Covel:

In the library of the Abbé of St. Germain, M. Covell and I saw two very old manuscripts of the New Testament, the newest of which was, as appeared by the date of it, at least 800 years old, in each of which 1 John c. v. v. 7. was quite wanting, and the end of the eighth verse ran thus, “tres unum sunt”; in an other old copy the seventh verse was, but with interlining; in another much more modern copy, v. 7. was also, but differently from the old copy; and in two other old manuscripts, also, v. 7. was quite out, but as I remember in all of them the end of the eighth verse was “tres unum sunt”²⁴.

This journal note refers to the Johannine Comma, namely, 1 John 5:7-8 (“For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one”). This biblical passage was the subject of a long controversy in the early modern era, since Erasmus excluded it from the first two editions

²¹ Ibid., p. 177.

²² Ibid.

²³ J. Locke, LL 2864, BOD Locke 9.103-9.107, *Le Nouveau Testament*, 5 vols., Mons 1673; J. Locke, LL 358, BOD Locke 15.38, T.P. Blount, *Censura celebriorum authorum*, London 1690.

²⁴ J. Locke, MS Locke f. 3, “Locke’s Journal, 1678”, p. 386, quoted in P. King, *The Life of John Locke*, Colburn, London 1829, p. 78.

of his Greek New Testament in 1516 and 1519²⁵. Erasmus maintained that the Johannine Comma did not appear in any ancient Greek manuscript of the Bible. Therefore, he would include the Comma in his New Testament only if at least one Greek manuscript containing it was found. When such a manuscript was shown to him, he added the Johannine Comma to the 1522 edition of his New Testament, but he accompanied this insertion with a note setting out his suspicion that this manuscript had been concocted to refute his position on the Comma. Later, among those who challenged the authenticity of the Comma, with different purposes, were Hugo Grotius, Isaac Newton, William Whiston, and Samuel Clarke, besides Socinus and his disciples. Moreover, the French Catholic priest Richard Simon indirectly questioned the Johannine Comma in his *Critical History of the Text of the New Testament* (which Locke recommended to Limborch in 1688, shortly before its publication in 1689)²⁶. Despite Simon's pious intentions, his work was harmful to the Comma because he had recourse to ecclesiastical tradition to uphold its "authenticity" and defend the Trinitarian doctrine. He indeed considered reliance on Scripture alone impracticable, given the numerous errors, corruptions, and interpolations that had affected the transmission of the biblical texts.

The rejection of the Comma as inauthentic was crucial to anti-Trinitarian biblical criticism in the early modern period, not only among openly anti-Trinitarian writers, but also among scholars who were hesitant to publicly express their doubts on the Trinitarian doctrine. One of such scholars was Isaac Newton. In 1690, Newton asked Locke to help him to publish *An Historical Account of Two Notable Corruptions of Scripture*²⁷. These two "notable corruptions" were the Johannine Comma and another passage commonly alleged to substantiate the Trinitarian doctrine, 1 Timothy 3:16 ("And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit,

²⁵ On this controversy, see G. McDonald, *Biblical Criticism in Early Modern Europe: Erasmus, the Johannine Comma and Trinitarian Debate*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2016.

²⁶ Locke, *Correspondence*, vol. 3, cit., no. 1058 (Locke to P. van Limborch, 12/22 June 1688).

²⁷ I. Newton, "An Historical Account of Two Notable Corruptions of Scripture", in I. Newton, *Correspondence*, 7 vols., ed. by H.W. Turnbull, A.R. Hall, J.F. Scott, and Laura Tilling, vol. 3, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1961, pp. 83-146. On this treatise and Newton's and Locke's aborted attempt at publishing it, see S.D. Snobelen, "'To us there is but one God, the Father': Anti-Trinitarian Textual Criticism in Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century England", in A. Hessayon and N. Keene (eds.), *Scripture and Scholarship in Early Modern England*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2006, pp. 128-31; R. Iliffe, "Friendly Criticism: Richard Simon, John Locke, Isaac Newton and the *Johannine Comma*", in Hessayon and Keene (eds.), *Scripture and Scholarship*, cit., pp. 137-57; Id., *Priest of Nature: The Religious Worlds of Isaac Newton*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017, pp. 354-89.

seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory”). These two verses were rejected as inauthentic by Stephen Nye in his *Brief History*, which drew attention to the absence of the Johannine Comma from the most ancient Greek manuscripts of the Scriptures, from Coptic, Arabic, Syriac, and Ethiopic Bibles, from the most ancient Latin versions of Scripture, and from the Church Fathers’ works²⁸. Concerning 1 Timothy 3:16, Nye argued that the word “God” in this verse was an interpolation, because it appeared neither in the most ancient texts of the Bible nor in the Fathers’ citations of this verse²⁹. Newton’s, and Locke’s, interest in these two passages was probably triggered by Nye’s remarks. Newton’s *Historical Account* actually presents arguments similar to Nye’s points, albeit developed more thoroughly. The controversy on Bury’s *Naked Gospel*, too, probably furthered Newton’s and Locke’s interest in the Johannine Comma, given also that the clergyman William Nicholls asserted the authenticity of the Comma based on Cyprian’s authority in order to refute Bury’s creedal minimalism³⁰. Newton drew on Greek, Syriac, Ethiopic, and other ancient versions of Scripture, on Patristic sources that disregarded the Johannine Comma, and on modern scholars, such as Erasmus and the Arian writer Christoph Sand, to argue that the Comma was an interpolation introduced by copyists. He sent *An Historical Account* to Locke with a letter dated 14 November 1690, in which he wrote that he wanted this tract to be first translated into French and then published³¹. He obviously intended to conceal his authorship of this treatise, although he also considered the possibility to subsequently publish it in English. In December 1690, Locke sent *An Historical Account* to Le Clerc, who accepted to translate and publish it in a volume with other tracts³². However, Newton later felt uncomfortable with the prospect of publishing his views on such a controversial issue. He was afraid that his analysis of those biblical passages would be understood by only a few and would cause him problems with the ecclesiastical and political authorities. Therefore, after providing Locke with some additions regarding Richard Simon’s and Gilbert Burnet’s comments on the Johannine Comma, as Le Clerc and Locke had recommended him to do, and after further corresponding with Locke on this subject, in February 1692

²⁸ S. Nye, *A Brief History of the Unitarians, called also Socinians*, London 1687, pp. 151-53.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 137-39.

³⁰ W. Nicholls, *An Answer to an Heretical Book called the Naked Gospel*, London 1691, p. 63.

³¹ Locke, *Correspondence*, vol. 4, cit., no. 1338 (I. Newton to Locke, 14 November 1690).

³² *Ibid.*, vol. 4, no. 1381 (J. Le Clerc to Locke, 1/11 April 1691), no. 1410 (J. Le Clerc to Locke, 21/31 July 1691).

he decided to call off the publication of *An Historical Account*³³. Of course, this decision upset Le Clerc, who, in the meantime, had completed the French translation³⁴. Almost two decades later, in 1709, Newton attempted, once again, to publish *An Historical Account*; and this time, too, the publication was held back. *An Historical Account* was eventually published for the first time, posthumously and imperfectly, in 1754.

Besides being receptive to researches concerning scriptural passages of dubious authenticity, as his involvement in the attempt to publish Newton's *Historical Account* demonstrates, Locke was critical of the corruption of early Christianity by scheming priests. In "Lemmata Ethica" and in his interleaved copy of Blount's *Censura*, he referred to various writings by Nye to expose the Platonic distortion of early Christianity. In the entry on the Trinity in "Lemmata Ethica", he pointed out the "parallelism betwixt the Ancient or Genuine Platonick, and the Christian Trinity"³⁵. This was a major topic of discussion in the seventeenth-century English debates on early Christianity, both before and after the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth attempted to justify this parallelism in *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678)³⁶. Cudworth argued that the Trinitarian doctrine had found "such Admittance and Entertainment in the Pagan World, and [was] received by the wisest of all their Philosophers, before the times of Christianity; thereby to prepare a more easie way for the Reception of Christianity amongst the Learned Pagans"³⁷. Despite Cudworth's pious intentions, his theory provided the Unitarian cause with more arguments to denounce the Platonic corruption of Christianity and the pagan roots of Trinitarian belief. In "Lemmata Ethica", Locke expressly made reference to Cudworth's theory on Platonic and Christian Trinitarianism – a theory that one of Locke's sources, Nye's *Letter of Resolution* (1691), employed to reject the Trinitarian dogma³⁸. Other books, such as Christoph

³³ Ibid., vol. 4, no. 1465 (I. Newton to Locke, 16 February 1692).

³⁴ Ibid., vol. 4, no. 1486 (J. Le Clerc to Locke, 1/11 April 1692).

³⁵ Locke, MS Locke d. 10, cit., pp. 167-68.

³⁶ D. Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom in the Age of the New Science: Histories of Philosophy in England, c. 1640-1700*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015, pp. 447-541; D. Lucci, "Ante-Nicene Authority and the Trinity in Seventeenth-Century England", in *Intellectual History Review* 28 (2018), 1, pp. 101-24.

³⁷ R. Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, London 1678, p. 625.

³⁸ Locke, MS Locke d. 10, cit., pp. 167-68; S. Nye, *A Letter of Resolution*, London 1691, pp. 11-18. See, also, Id., *Considerations on the Explications of the Doctrine of the Trinity by Dr. Wallis, Dr. Sherlock, Dr. S-th, Dr. Cudworth, and Mr. Hooker*, London 1693, pp. 13-19. Locke referred to Nye's *Considerations* in regard to the satisfaction doctrine in: Locke, "Adversaria Theologica", cit., p. 32.

Sand's *Nucleus Historiae Ecclesiasticae* (1669) and Bernard de Fontenelle's *Histoire des Oracles* (1687), proved helpful to Locke in his consideration of the "Platonizing" of Christianity. Locke drew on Sand and Nye when maintaining, in his interleaved copy of Blount's *Censura*, that "the fathers of the three first Centuries [...] speak rather like Arians than Orthodox" and that "all antiquity was Arian"³⁹. This thesis also appears in "Lemmata Ethica", in which Locke wrote that "the fathers before the Council of Nice speak rather like Arians than Orthodox"⁴⁰. Nevertheless, as Locke read in Fontenelle's *Histoire des Oracles*, and as he noted in his copy of Blount's *Censura*, Plato soon became a "philosopher in fashion among the learned Christians of the first ages", who regarded him as a "kind of prophet, who had found out several important matters of Christianity, especially the Trinity"⁴¹. Concerning the Church Fathers' views on the Godhead, in the mid-1690s Locke probably conversed with his friend, the anti-Trinitarian Alexander Beresford, about the difficulty to deduce Trinitarian concepts from the early Christian writers' works. In a letter dated 24 March 1695, Beresford informed Locke of his intention to "peruse" Eusebius and Epiphanius in order to understand "whether or not they are as much misrepresented as Irenaeus", whom Beresford considered to be "more against than for" Trinitarianism. Beresford also gave Locke his "own thoughts of the Trinity-texts of Scripture", rejecting Trinitarian interpretations of several biblical passages and maintaining that the Scriptures were "against" the Trinitarian doctrine. Moreover, he denied Christ's pre-existence, as he described Jesus as a man. However, Beresford, like Locke, regarded Jesus as literally the Son of God⁴². Although no letter from Locke to Beresford on Trinitarian and Christological issues has been found, Beresford and Locke remained good friends and correspondents. Thus, Beresford's letter of 24 March 1695 indicates that Locke was receptive to anti-Trinitarian ideas⁴³.

Another intellectual with anti-Trinitarian leanings, the Huguenot refugee Jacques Souverain, attracted Locke's attention. At some point in the 1690s, Locke had one of Souverain's manuscripts copied by his amanuensis Sylvester Brounower. This manuscript, entitled "Some General Reflections upon the Beginning of St. John's Gospel", presents ideas that Souverain also explained in

³⁹ Locke, LL 358, BOD Locke 15.38, cit., pp. 620-21.

⁴⁰ Locke, MS Locke d. 10, cit., p. 177.

⁴¹ Locke, LL 358, BOD Locke 15.38, cit., p. 119.

⁴² Locke, *Correspondence*, cit., vol. 5, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1979, no. 1865 (A. Beresford to Locke, 24 March 1695).

⁴³ Marshall, "Locke, Socinianism", cit., p. 135.

his treatise *Le Platonisme dévoilé*, published in 1700 and translated into English the same year, shortly after its author's death in 1699⁴⁴. Locke owned a copy of *Le Platonisme dévoilé* and knew of Souverain since at least 1691. Souverain was indeed an acquaintance of Locke's Unitarian friend William Popple. Moreover, during the 1690s, Locke kept himself informed about the persecution of various Huguenots, including Souverain, suspected of Socinianism by their coreligionists. Souverain's work actually presents many points in common with English Unitarianism, concerning in particular the Platonic corruption of Christianity. Furthermore, Souverain, like Locke, regarded faith in Jesus the Messiah as the core tenet of Christianity. In *Le Platonisme dévoilé*, Souverain described faith in Jesus the Messiah as sufficient for baptism into the Church and, in the manuscript "Some General Reflections", he advanced a clearly anti-Trinitarian interpretation of John's Gospel. He argued that John had conceived of Jesus not as a divine person, but simply as the Messiah – namely, as a prophet inspired by God the Father, through the Holy Spirit, in a more constant and excellent way than any other prophet before. To Souverain, Christ had a divine office, and his words were of divine authority because they were divinely inspired. In a manuscript note taken, probably, in the first half of the 1690s, Locke wrote some comments on Jesus' divine inspiration very similar to Souverain's views on this matter. The subject of this manuscript note is John 3:34 ("For he whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God: for God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto him"), although this note also presents an interpretation of Colossians 2:9 ("For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily"). Here is the text of this note:

The last & highest degree of Revelation was that given to our Saviour expressed here by the Spirit given not by measure. there was noe stint of it, noe intervals where in our Saviour had not the presence & assistance of this Spirit whereby every thing he said was of divine authority every thing he did was according to the will of god. And by this I think we may understand that expression of St Pauls Col. II. 9 for in him dwelleth all the fulnesse of the Godhead bodily viz. that the Spirit of god without stint or measure was as certainly & constantly in him to be the sourse of all his words & actions, as our souls are annexed & fixd to our bodys as the principle of action in us. The context will lead us to this

⁴⁴ [J. Souverain], "Some General Reflections upon the Beginning of St. John's Gospel", in J. Locke, MS Locke e. 17, 1690s?, pp. 175-223; Id., *Le Platonisme dévoilé*, Cologne [Amsterdam] 1700; Id., *Platonism Unveild*, London 1700. On Souverain, see Lim, *Mystery Unveiled*, cit., pp. 311-17; Id., "The Platonic Captivity of Primitive Christianity and the Enlightening of Augustine", in W.J. Bulman and R.G. Ingram (eds.), *God in the Enlightenment*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016, pp. 136-56.

sense, for the Apostle there is persuading the Colossians to rest satisfied in the truth & wisdom of the Gospel revealed by Jesus Christ. JL⁴⁵

This note may be taken as supporting my interpretation of what Locke meant when, drawing on 1 Peter 1:11 in “Adversaria Theologica”, he talked of Christ’s spirit as present in the ancient prophets. As I have explained above, in this passage of “Adversaria” Locke most likely meant that the Holy Spirit had inspired other prophets before Christ. Likewise, Locke’s note on John 3:34 refers to “the fulnesse of the Godhead bodily” dwelling in Christ as denoting the presence of the “Spirit of god” (that is, the Holy Spirit) in Christ, and not a divine nature in Christ. Therefore, as John Marshall has aptly observed, this note seems “to indicate disbelief in the Trinity”, as does the fact that the *Reasonableness* was “silent about baptism in the name of the Holy Ghost, Jesus Christ, and God the Father, which many trinitarians adduced in support of the Trinity”⁴⁶. In the *Reasonableness*, Locke affirmed the miraculous conception and birth of Christ, “conceived in the Womb of a Virgin (that had not known Man) by the immediate Power of God”⁴⁷. Nevertheless, he used the term “Son of God” as a synonym for “Messiah” and mainly in order to parallel Jesus’ sonship with that of Adam. He never subscribed to the eternal generation of Christ and, in the *Reasonableness*, he did not even mention John 1:1 (“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”). This verse was commonly alleged to substantiate belief in the Trinity, but was interpreted in anti-Trinitarian terms by the Socinians, who argued that by “beginning” John simply meant the beginning of Christ’s ministry. And Locke, too, believed that John’s Gospel had the main purpose to teach that Jesus was the Messiah.

4. *Christ’s Mission and Nature*

Locke recognized Jesus’ reticence about his being the Messiah. Over one-third of *The Reasonableness of Christianity* is devoted to clarifying the reasons behind Jesus’ “Messianic secrecy”, which Locke described in the following terms:

⁴⁵ J. Locke, “Note on John 3:34”, in J. Locke, MS Locke f. 30, early 1690s, f. 43r, quoted in Nuovo, *Christianity*, cit., p. 66. See, also, Marshall, “Locke, Socinianism”, cit., p. 131; V. Nuovo, *John Locke: The Philosopher as Christian Virtuoso*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017, p. 233.

⁴⁶ Marshall, “Locke, Socinianism”, cit., pp. 131, 164.

⁴⁷ Locke, *Reasonableness*, cit., p. 113.

This concealment of himself will seem strange, in one who was come to bring light into the world, and was to suffer death for the testimony of the truth. This reservedness will be thought to look, as if he had a mind to conceal himself, and not to be known to the world for the Messiah, nor to be believed on as such. But we shall be of another mind, and conclude this proceeding of his according to divine wisdom, and suited to a fuller manifestation and evidence of his being the Messiah; when we consider that he was to fill out the time foretold of his ministry; and after a life illustrious in miracles and good works, attended with humility, meekness, patience, and suffering, and every way conformable to the prophecies of him; should be led as a sheep to the slaughter, and with all quiet and submission be brought to the cross, though there were no guilt, nor fault in him⁴⁸.

According to Locke, Jesus' behavior was part of a strategy of gradual self-disclosure. In order to explain this strategy, Locke focused on the history of Jesus' Messianic actions (that is, his miraculous birth, miracles, and resurrection) in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, which relate the fulfillment of Old Testament Messianic prophecies. Locke's consideration of Jesus' Messianic activity indicates his interest in the reconstruction of biblical harmony. This was one of the major projects of early modern biblical scholarship, as Victor Nuovo has observed:

The aim of this project, overall, was to rearrange all the parts of the Bible into a single chronological order, relocating whole books, transposing parts of them, and reconciling different accounts of the same events, fitting all the parts into a single continuous history. The general purpose of this undertaking was to facilitate the retrieval of the meaning of the several parts of the Bible by placing them in their proper context⁴⁹.

Locke was familiar with several harmonies, including those written by John Lightfoot, Jean Le Clerc, and William Whiston. Moreover, in 1679, he received from his friend, the French philologist Nicolas Toinard, a draft of the latter's harmony, which was published posthumously in 1707 as *Evangeliorum Harmonia Graeco-Latina*⁵⁰. Locke's reconstruction of Jesus' Messianic activity is similar to that of Toinard, in that it concentrates on the role of all those involved in the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies – not only Jesus and

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 40-41.

⁴⁹ Nuovo, *Christianity*, cit., pp. 114-15.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 37, 114-15; G. Di Biase, *John Locke e Nicolas Toinard. Un'amicizia ciceroniana*, Edizioni ETS, Pisa 2018, pp. 42-45, 154-65, 200-6, 233-39.

his disciples, but also the Jewish priests who were hostile to Jesus, the Roman officials and soldiers who condemned and executed Jesus, and even ordinary Jewish people who were awaiting the Messiah but conceived of him as “a Mighty Temporal Prince, that should raise their Nation into an higher degree of Power, Dominion, and Prosperity than ever it had enjoyed. They were filled with the expectation of a Glorious Earthly Kingdom”⁵¹. This was the main reason why Jesus revealed himself as the Messiah only gradually:

It was not fit to open himself too plainly or forwardly, to the heady Jews, that he himself was the *Messiah*; That was to be left to the Observation of those who would attend to the Purity of his Life, and the Testimony of his Miracles, and the Conformity of all with the Predictions concerning him. By these marks those he lived amongst were to find it out without an express promulgation that he was the *Messiah*, till after his Death. His Kingdom was to be opened to them by degrees, as well to prepare them to receive it, as to enable him to be long enough amongst them; to perform what was the work of the *Messiah* to be done; and fulfil all those several parts of what was foretold of him in the Old Testament, and we see applied to him in the New⁵².

Even Jesus’ Apostles, who were simple people, were often perplexed by his words. Locke thought that only after Christ’s resurrection could his Apostles understand his message completely. According to Locke, Jesus’ deeds were part of a providential plan placing him in circumstances suited to his mission, which unfolded in a time when the Jews were subject to the oppressive Roman power and lived in a period of decadence. In that time, their monotheism needed to be revived and perfected by the Messiah, who promulgated God’s universal dominion. As a result of Christ’s Messianic mission, the Law of Moses was replaced by the Law of Faith, before the Jewish theocracy eventually came to an end with the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. Locke saw the “destruction” of the Jews’ “state and religion” as a divine act of vengeance putting an end to the Jews’ “Church, Worship, and Commonwealth”, which were superseded by the Christian Church⁵³. To Locke, Jesus’ miraculous birth, miracles, and resurrection, through

⁵¹ Locke, *Reasonableness*, cit., p. 89.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 95; J. Locke, *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St Paul to the Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, Ephesians*, 2 vols., ed. by A.W. Wainwright, vol. 1, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1987, p. 174 (1 Corinthians 2:6); *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 506 (Romans 3:8); N. Matar, “John Locke and the Jews”, in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 44 (1993), 1, pp. 45-62; R. Russo, “Locke and the Jews: From Toleration to the Destruction of the Temple”, in *Locke Studies* 2 (2002), pp. 199-223.

which Jesus gradually revealed his Messiahship, were three important phases in a biblical chronology that did not end with Christ's death and resurrection, but looked ahead to the establishment of the Kingdom of God upon Christ's Second Coming, the resurrection of the dead, and the Last Judgment⁵⁴.

Locke's emphasis on the Messiah's kingly office diverges from the Socinians' stress on his prophetic role, although the Socinians also called attention to the exaltation and reinstatement of Christ as head of the Church and lord in the Kingdom of God, thus emphasizing the Messiah's priestly and kingly offices as well⁵⁵. The *Reasonableness*, however, admits that Jesus spoke of himself as a prophet, albeit only incidentally, whereas it notes that Jesus never expressly claimed the title of priest for himself. But other writings by Locke demonstrate that he also believed in the Messiah's priestly office. In a note added, probably in the mid-1670s, to the 1667 manuscript *Essay concerning Toleration*, Locke characterized Jesus as "the Great high preist" and "the last preist" in whom "all preisthood terminated"⁵⁶. Furthermore, Locke focused on the Messiah's priestly office in a manuscript analysis of the Epistle to the Hebrews composed around the year 1700, perhaps in preparation of a paraphrase, since he (mistakenly) believed that Paul was probably the author of Hebrews⁵⁷. This epistle portrays Jesus as "a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec" (Hebrews 5:6), who was "priest of the most high God" (Hebrews 7:1). Drawing on a belief widespread among Jews since much before the time of Christ, Hebrews 7:15-16 associates the Messiah with Melchisedec and his priestly office: "After the similitude of Melchisedec there ariseth another priest, Who is made, not after the law of a carnal commandment, but after the power of an endless life". Locke argued that this epistle, besides emphasizing Christ's priestly office, attempts to demonstrate that "under the gospel the covenant is much better than that under the law"⁵⁸. The author of Hebrews indeed aimed to confirm the Jewish converts to Christianity in their belief that Jesus was the Messiah, in order to dissuade them from apostatizing back to Judaism⁵⁹.

⁵⁴ Locke, *Reasonableness*, cit., pp. 93-108. On the resurrection of the dead and the Last Judgment, see, also, Id., "Resurrectio et quae sequuntur", in Locke, *Writings on Religion*, cit., pp. 232-37; Id., *Paraphrase*, cit., vol. 1, pp. 246-56 (1 Corinthians 15); *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 578 (Romans 11:26).

⁵⁵ Marshall, "Locke, Socinianism", cit., pp. 175-76.

⁵⁶ J. Locke, *An Essay concerning Toleration and Other Writings on Law and Politics, 1667-1683*, ed. by J.R. Milton and P. Milton, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2006, p. 313.

⁵⁷ J. Locke, "On the Priesthood of Christ: Analysis of Hebrews", in Locke, *Writings on Religion*, cit., pp. 238-41.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

Whereas Locke saw the Messiah as a divinely appointed king, a prophet, and a priest, he never described the Son and the Holy Spirit as divine persons. *The Reasonableness of Christianity* completely disregarded the Trinitarian doctrine, and the word “Trinity” does not appear even once in the *Paraphrase*. In the latter work, Locke actually interpreted in non-Trinitarian terms several passages commonly alleged in support of the Trinitarian dogma (e.g., Romans 1:3-4, Romans 9:5, 1 Corinthians 1:2, and Ephesians 3:9). When examining, a few months before his death, Romans 1:3-4 (“Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh; And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead”), he deviated from the widespread view that these verses attest the “union of the two natures” in Christ. Although Locke abstained from expressly denying Christ’s divinity, which he did not mention at all in his paraphrase and notes on Romans 1:3-4, he took “the flesh” to be simply Christ’s body (and not his human nature) and he regarded “the spirit of holiness” as merely Christ’s “more pure and spiritual part” (and not a divine nature)⁶⁰.

Briefly, Locke’s considerations on Christ in his writings on religion denote a non-Trinitarian Christology. However, the Christology that emerges from the *Paraphrase* is not completely in line with a Socinian notion of Jesus, as Locke’s paraphrase and notes on Ephesians 1:10 demonstrate. This biblical verse reads: “That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him”. Locke paraphrased it as follows: “Until the Coming of the due time of that dispensation wherein he had predetermined to reduce all things again, both in Heaven and Earth under one Head in Christ”⁶¹. Furthermore, he explained in a note on this biblical passage: “Tis plain in Sacred Scripture, that Christ at first had the Rule and Supremacy over all, and was Head over all”⁶². Satan’s rebellion disrupted Christ’s unitary rule and supremacy over all, but, in Locke’s words, “Christ recovered this Kingdom, and was re-instated in the Supremacy and Headship, in the fullness of time [...] at his death

⁶⁰ A.W. Wainwright, “Introduction” to Locke, *Paraphrase*, cit., vol. 1, pp. 35-39; Marshall, “Locke, Socinianism”, cit., pp. 173-76. Locke benefited from Newton’s feedback when revising his paraphrase and notes on Romans 1:3-4: see K.I. Parker, “Newton, Locke and the Trinity: Sir Isaac’s Comments on Locke’s *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistle of St Paul to the Romans*”, in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62 (2009), 1, pp. 40-52.

⁶¹ Locke, *Paraphrase*, cit., vol. 2, p. 616 (Ephesians 1:10).

⁶² Ibid.

and resurrection⁶³. There is wide consensus among historians that Locke's paraphrase and notes on Ephesians 1:10 denote belief in Christ's pre-existence, although not in Christ's divinity, and hence reveal an incipient Arianism⁶⁴.

The section on Ephesians 1:10 in the *Paraphrase* is not the only place in which the theme of Christ's pre-existence appears in Locke's corpus. Locke also considered this subject some time before 1679, when he drafted a set of comments on twelve biblical texts in his interleaved Bentley Bible⁶⁵. In these comments, he made reference to the heterodox views on the Trinity expressed by a certain "G", whom Victor Nuovo has identified with the seventeenth-century clergyman Nicholas Gibbon, the Younger. Locke probably drew on an unidentified manuscript by this author, who maintained that the Godhead consists of three subsistences – the Father and Creator, the Word, and the Spirit. According to Locke's account of the views held by "G", immediately after the Fall the Father created the intellectual nature or soul of the Messiah, which was united with the Word and remained with it in the bosom of the Father until incarnation. This heterodox theory tended to Origenism, although Origen maintained that Jesus' (human) soul had become fused with the *Logos* only at incarnation. Nevertheless, Locke did not express any support for this theory. Conversely, his paraphrase of Ephesians 1:10 – especially the words "to reduce all things again, both in Heaven and Earth under one Head in Christ" – and his note on this verse stating that "Christ at first had the Rule and Supremacy over all, and was Head over all" essentially affirm Christ's pre-existence.

Locke's avowal of Christ's pre-existence in the *Paraphrase* is incompatible with Socinianism – even with the ideas of a second-generation Socinian like Jonas Schlichting, who believed that the term "Christ's pre-existence" meant, simply, that Christ's Coming had been foreseen⁶⁶. In fact, when commenting on Ephesians 1:10, Locke maintained that Christ had lost and then recovered his kingdom. But Christ could not lose his power if he had possessed it only as foreseen⁶⁷. That Locke's Christology was neither Trinitarian nor completely Socinian is confirmed by his citation of Colossians 1:15-17 as a gloss on Ephesians 1:10. In Colossians 1:15-17, the Son is indeed described as "the

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Wainwright, "Introduction", cit., p. 38; Marshall, "Locke, Socinianism", cit., pp. 173-76; Nuovo, *Christianity*, cit., pp. 36-37, 41-43.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 36. See, also, *ibid.*, pp. 100-1, for a transcription of these comments from: J. Locke, LL 309, BOD Locke 16.25, *The Holy Bible*, printed by William Bentley, London 1648.

⁶⁶ J. Schlichting, *Confessio fidei Christianae*, n.p. 1642, pp. 5-11.

⁶⁷ Marshall, "Locke, Socinianism", cit., p. 174.

firstborn of every creature” and as being “before all things”⁶⁸ (although these terms do not necessarily denote primacy *in time*). Locke’s paraphrase and notes on Ephesians 1:10, with his reference to Colossians 1:15-17, actually indicate a Christology echoing Arianism. Yet, Locke’s Christological considerations, taken as a whole, do not warrant the conclusion that he was an “Arian” proper. Even the passage indicating belief in Christ’s pre-existence in his analysis of Ephesians 1:10 denotes a purpose typical of Socinianism, as John Marshall has noted:

The note itself includes emphasis on Christ’s death and resurrection as reinstating him in his power, and leading to his position as head of the Church as what was significant for humans to know. Focus on that exaltation and on Christ’s lordship following the resurrection – his headship of the Church and position as lord in the kingdom of God – was thus what this note itself made most important, and the issue of his pre-existence only came up in this one note and nowhere else in the text. Such focus was more distinctive of Socinian emphases than of Arian or trinitarian emphases⁶⁹.

In Locke’s note on Ephesians 1:10, as Victor Nuovo has observed, “Christ is a far more exalted and sublime figure than the one represented in the Gospels and in the *Reasonableness*”⁷⁰. Christ’s resurrection and exaltation actually have an important role in the *Paraphrase*, as several passages in this work show. For instance, a note on Romans 1:4 in the *Paraphrase* describes “Christ’s resurrection from the dead and his entering into immortalitie to be the most eminent and characteristicall marke whereby Christ is certainly known and as it were determined to be the Son of god”⁷¹. It is worth noting that Locke’s emphasis, in the *Paraphrase*, on Christ’s resurrection as the distinguishing mark of his being the son of God denotes a subtle theological shift from the *Reasonableness*⁷². In his book of 1695, Locke portrayed Jesus’ sonship as being “The First-born from the dead” – a phrase borrowed from Colossians 1:18⁷³. However, the *Reasonableness* also described Jesus’ virgin birth as an indicator of his literal sonship of God, which entails immortality since birth.

⁶⁸ Locke, *Paraphrase*, cit., vol. 2, pp. 616-17 (Ephesians 1:10).

⁶⁹ Marshall, “Locke, Socinianism”, cit., p. 175. See, also, D. Wootton, “John Locke: Socinian or Natural Law Theorist?”, in J.E. Crimmins (ed.), *Religion, Secularization and Political Thought: Thomas Hobbes to J.S. Mill*, Routledge, London 1989, p. 45.

⁷⁰ Nuovo, *John Locke*, cit., p. 245.

⁷¹ Locke, *Paraphrase*, cit., vol. 2, p. 487 (Romans 1:4).

⁷² Parker, “Newton, Locke”, cit., p. 49.

⁷³ Locke, *Reasonableness*, cit., p. 114.

And, according to Locke, Jesus' sonship of God and immortality since birth distinguished him from the mortal descendants of Adam, who had forfeited the state of immortality when sinning and being subsequently expelled from Paradise:

God nevertheless, out of his Infinite Mercy, willing to bestow Eternal Life on Mortal Men, sends Jesus Christ into the World; Who being conceived in the Womb of a Virgin (that had not known Man) by the immediate Power of God, was properly the Son of God; [...] So that being the Son of God, he was, like his Father, *Immortal*⁷⁴.

In the *Reasonableness*, Locke maintained that Jesus' immortality since birth entailed that he did not have to suffer death, but Jesus chose to die because otherwise his resurrection and, consequently, the fulfillment of his Messianic office would not be possible. Locke also argued that "the great Evidence that Jesus was the *Son of God*, was his Resurrection. Then the Image of his Father appeared in him, when he visibly entered into the state of Immortality"⁷⁵. Nevertheless, in the *Reasonableness* Jesus' immortality since birth plays a primary role in his salvific mission, which Locke clarified when referring to the "*Spirit of Adoption*" mentioned in Romans 8:15. According to Locke, by the "*Spirit of Adoption*" the faithful become Christ's brethren and, hence, "adoptive" sons of God and are eventually admitted to eternal life: "And we by Adoption, being for his sake made his Brethren, and the Sons of God, come to share in that Inheritance, which was his Natural Right; he being by Birth the Son of God: Which Inheritance is Eternal Life"⁷⁶. Conversely, in the *Paraphrase* it is essentially Christ's resurrection that distinguishes him as the Son of God. Thus, the *Paraphrase* echoes the Socinian emphasis on Christ's resurrection and exaltation, instead of focusing on his virgin birth. However, there is still a significant difference between Socinianism and Locke's Christology, in that the Socinians conceived of Jesus as created mortal and then made immortal by divine miracle upon his death, while Locke, in the *Reasonableness*, affirmed Christ's immortality since birth, and he never recanted this position. At any rate, what really counts, in the Christology of the *Paraphrase*, is Christ's resurrection and exaltation, not his pre-existence or miraculous birth; and this is certainly a Socinian leitmotif. Moreover,

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 113.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 115.

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 114-15.

there is an important point of divergence between Locke and Arianism. While most Arians believed in the Son's primacy in time, Locke's paraphrase and notes on Ephesians 1:10 do not clarify whether he conceived of Christ's pre-existence as pre-cosmic⁷⁷. Briefly, the analysis of Ephesians 1:10 in the *Paraphrase* is the only place denoting belief in Christ's pre-existence in Locke's oeuvre, which presents no additional clarifications about this subject. This might indicate that the theme of Christ's pre-existence does not play a major role in Locke's Christology, which, instead, emphasizes Christ's exaltation and lordship following his resurrection.

5. Conclusion

Although Locke's views on Christ's nature and relation to God the Father denote several similarities with Socinianism and Arianism, his Christological considerations are essentially grounded in his own reading of Scripture. Yet, Locke always abstained from clarifying his position on the Trinitarian doctrine. During his dispute with Stillingfleet, he repeatedly blamed his opponent for pushing him to talk of a subject – the Trinity – which he preferred to avoid, because he intended to consider only principles that the Scriptures expound plainly. He made this point in acerbic terms in his last reply to Stillingfleet:

My lord, my Bible is faulty again; for I do not remember that I ever read in it either of these propositions, in these precise words, "there are three persons in one nature, or, there are two natures and one person". [...] I deny that these very propositions are in express words in my Bible⁷⁸.

Furthermore, when responding to Edwards in *A Second Vindication of the Reasonableness of Christianity* (1697), Locke openly disassociated himself from Socinianism, given also his actual disagreement with the Socinians about several topics, and he protested to have never denied the Trinity⁷⁹. Nevertheless, he never took the trouble to affirm belief in the Trinity. His silence on the Trinity was most probably due to irenic as well as prudential reasons. He indeed deemed it inappropriate and immoral to fuel pointless and divisive debates

⁷⁷ Marshall, "Locke, Socinianism", cit., p. 175.

⁷⁸ J. Locke, "Reply to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Worcester's Answer to His Second Letter", in J. Locke, *Works*, 9 vols., London 1824, vol. 3, p. 343.

⁷⁹ Locke, *Vindications*, cit., p. 126.

about non-fundamentals, such as the then ongoing Trinitarian controversy. Furthermore, he probably considered it unwise to cause himself unnecessary troubles with the ecclesiastical and political authorities⁸⁰. However, although Locke never committed himself to an unequivocally anti-Trinitarian stance, his considerations on Christological and Trinitarian issues definitely denote a Messianic and non-Trinitarian Christology.

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⁸⁰ G.A.J. Rogers, "John Locke: Conservative Radical", in R.D. Lund (ed.), *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response, 1660-1750*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995, pp. 109-12.

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