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Introduction to the Modern Political Thought Essays

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Introduction to the Modern Political Thought Essays

MODERN POLITICAL THOUGHT ESSAY CONTEST

These essays were selected by Professor Simeone as the three best in last fall's theory class. The full class title is Modern Political Thought: Liberalism, Religion, and the Nation State. Students in the theory classes work on their persuasive essay writing skills, and the key elements of political theory--definition, reasoning, and evidence--create a perfect opportunity to focus on this general education goal. The claim-objection-rejoinder and micro-essay formats force students to state their views with economy and precision. Students vote for the best essay and the writer then receives the coveted "Certificate of Merit" for that class. Among the three, which would you choose? The majority in the fall section chose Jillian Schmitz's essay. The original assignment follows below.

Locke limited toleration to religious beliefs and left the state free to control religious actions that supervene on the "civil peace." Further, non-religious beliefs could be controlled. Locke supports this approach to toleration by arguing that the state's characteristic tool of force is an inappropriate and irrational means to the end of persuading the conscience. This approach is limited in that it is curiously negative; it does not establish toleration as thing good in itself and it allows the state to act intolerantly in cases of Catholics, atheists, and any religious believer who for one reason or another is commonly believed to threaten civil peace. But should we be attracted to such a negative and limited view of toleration? This leads to our question:

Is Locke's approach to toleration defensible today?

Be sure to define key terms and include at least one claim-objection-rejoinder sequence.

The question stands on its own, but the contemporary backstory is supplied in the Alan Wolfe, Judith Shklar, and Anthony Marx readings. This is that liberalism is today once again caught between two (three for Wolfe) critical ideologies: Islam, standing in for Catholicism on the right; and evolutionary psychology, standing in for atheism on the left.

Shklar argues that liberalism should be defined as and limited to a political ideology, a fighting faith that works best when it thinks of itself as an underdog focused on limiting the power of a historically persistent overdog, the state. Locke's modest approach to toleration can be seen as fitting this image of liberalism. Marx argues that Locke's toleration was built a prior climatic moment of nation-building when the English Protestant majority came together over intolerance of atheists and exclusion of Catholics. Thus for Marx, Locke's liberalism is the template for today's model, a crusading philosophy of life that imposes individual self-development (Wolfe would say openness and a search for purpose in private) on all traditionalists.