

# BLACKFRIARS

---

VOL. XXI

JUNE 1940

No. 243

---

## WHERE IS FREEDOM?

VERY illusive is the thing we call Freedom or Liberty, presenting a variety of notions to the men and women who in every age pursue it. Lord Acton, concerned mainly with its political aspect, saw liberty as 'the delicate fruit of a mature civilization,' and declared that 'the most certain test of the real freedom of a country' was 'the amount of security enjoyed by minorities.' (But then, as Creighton remarked, Acton demanded that history, as primarily 'a branch of the moral sciences, should aim at proving the immutable righteousness of the ideas of modern liberalism—tolerance and the supremacy of conscience.') Dr. Johnson argued that private liberty was the essential thing—'Political liberty is good only so far as it produces private liberty.' The later Johnsonian dictum: 'we are all agreed as to our own liberty: we would have as much of it as we can get; but we are not agreed as to the liberty of others: for in proportion as we take, others must lose,' still commands wide assent.

Misgovernment in one form or another provokes the passionate cry for freedom; the perennial revolt that to achieve its end turns to revolution or is suppressed by force of arms. Misgovernment within—*Remota justitia quid regna nisi magna Patrocinia?* The Augustinian sentence expresses consciousness of robbery that must be stopped. 'Freedom in the governed to complain of wrongs and readiness in rulers to redress them constitute the ideal of a free state,' is the ideal free state of Erskine May, distinguished nineteenth century English constitutional lawyer. Drawbacks to political freedom were ironically dis-

cerned in the same Victorian time: 'under free institutions it is necessary occasionally to defer to the opinions of other people; and as other people are obviously in the wrong, this is a great hindrance to our political system and the progress of our species.'

Correction of misgovernment within is not, of course, the whole story of nineteenth century effort towards political democracy. (The ideal of a free state precedes the French Revolution which so immensely enlarged it.) Misgovernment by alien rule aroused similar passion in the minds of liberals bent on abolishing all government without justice, whether at home or abroad. Poets voiced this passion. Dryden could declare

'of all the tyrannies on human kind  
the worst is that which persecutes the mind.'

Byron and Shelley are not content to moralise.

'Yet, Freedom, yet thy banner, torn, but flying,  
streams like the thunder-storm *against* the wind.'

It is Byron's own banner and enlisting under it, dreaming 'that Greece might still be free,' he dies at Missolonghi. Shelley, enraged at the neglect of the 'condition of the people question' by the British Government—and in the years of peace after Waterloo social conditions were probably at their worst in England—invokes the 'men of England, heirs of glory, heroes of unwritten story,' to 'rise, like lions after slumber, in unvanquishable number,' and do tremendous deeds. But the poet's appeal imaginative never reached the multitude. Cobbett's prose invective was stuff that proved more stimulating, for neither invective nor extravagance of language could obscure much good common sense in Cobbett's prolific output. (Perhaps Shelley's ideal of freedom for the labourer 'in a neat and happy home' was not far from Cobbett's.)

Shelley under Godwin's influence saw political freedom as the removal of restraints that blocked the way to the

promised land. Man's natural perfectibility guaranteed universal brotherhood. To Shelley, as later to Swinburne, kings and priests must be abolished before real progress could be made. Robert Owen and the socialists who succeeded him also saw utopia, the promised land—just round the corner, so to speak—and were persuaded that capitalist and landlord once exterminated, man would achieve all happiness. Freedom from obnoxious rule in church and state, from the overweening power of rich men, would usher in the new and glorious era of nineteenth century idealists. As indeed well it might have done but for the obstinate persistence of original sin, and the unruly wills and affections of sinful man that will not be denied existence, however admirable the order of society.

Liberalism concentrated on the political rather than the economic freedom, to become vociferously articulate over oppression of Italians and Hungarians by Austrians, of Bulgarians and Armenians by Turks. Palmerston spoke to all nations as the mouthpiece of British high-and-mightiness. Gladstone had the moral fervour of Christian statesmen, conscious of his calling. Liberalism did not sanction war on behalf of oppressed nationality. Our interference did not extend beyond verbal rebuke. In itself an irritation to foreign rulers aware of shortcomings in British liberal rule of India, Ireland and Egypt.

The weakness of Gladstonian liberalism, enthusiastic for political freedom, was indifference to the social question. It was characteristic of Gladstone the inability to be interested in a rising labour movement with its ideal of a working class set free from the grinding poverty that brought prosperity to manufacturers and urban landlords. Preoccupation with purely political questions of reform is in every land apt to mean neglect of social justice.

Socialism promised a wider freedom when liberalism was found wanting. Social democracy gave confident assurance of true economic freedom to the toiling multitudes. Liberals with the vision of freedom 'broadening down

from precedent to precedent,' Tennyson acclaiming the future of world parliament, Browning espousing the cause of Italian liberty, were satisfied that democracy, *i.e.* government by elected representatives of the sovereign people, was the one good thing for all mankind, east and west. No matter what ancient traditions, habits, religion and degree of civilisation Erskine May's ideal of a free state, with its parliamentary constitution on the British model, was proposed as the political ideal for every nation. And the remarkable thing is that in the latter half of the nineteenth century the proposal met with universal acceptance, so manifest was the power of Britain, so apparent its political success.

Socialists also made their appeal to all mankind, exhorting in Marxian phrase the 'workers of the world' to unite, achieve solidarity and establish an international co-operative commonwealth. For the liberal with his representative government and the socialist with his 'emancipation of the working class,' freedom was the means that would bring happiness. The end was happiness in this world, the means freedom. Bentham's 'greatest happiness of the greatest number' was still the formula. Neither liberal nor socialist had concern with an ultimate destiny of man; pleading agnosticism, in reply to arguments for the truth of revealed religion. It was Acton who insisted that freedom was not a means to an end, but an end in itself. ('Liberty is not a means to a higher political end. It is itself the highest political end.') Father Bede Jarrett, discussing this dictum of Acton's and approving it, suggested that the time might be coming when the Catholic Church would be left a solitary witness to man's natural right to freedom. For the full exercise of the talents given by God man needed freedom; without freedom he was hampered in his movements. It was an end in itself, as health was, that man might the better fulfil his destiny, to the greater glory of God. Of course it meant a great deal more than Acton's political means and political end, and certainly a

freedom—relative as all our social arrangements must be—that included opportunity to earn a living wage by honest work. Where outside the Catholic Church could the lover of freedom look for sure and lasting foundations of belief?

Allied with the State, its bishops too often as royal nominees the instruments of government policy oppressive and hostile to the welfare of nations, the Catholic Church appears hateful to libertarian idealists; hateful as the handmaid of tyranny, for ever preaching 'what is, is best,' to the poor and heavy laden. It is difficult to name a country in any age where the close alliance of church and state did not in practice mean the subordination of the higher clergy to the commands of kings. Paid by the State, how can the clergy be regarded as other than state officials? Seen as state officials, the clergy are naturally the victims when revolution overthrows the existing order of government. The roots of anti-clericalism are in the antipathy to clergy identified with the crimes of government. Antipathy to the clergy passes easily to antipathy to the religion of the clergy. The Catholic Church becomes an institution that must be destroyed when the ministers of that church appear no better than other state officials, but rather worse. Yet the overthrow of the Church and the extirpation of its clergy has nowhere produced the reign of liberty, desired by anti-clerical idealists.

Liberalism for all its noble aspirations—and its utterly ignoble maxims of a political economy that stressed buying in the cheapest market and selling in the dearest as the guide to wealth and prosperity—failed to inaugurate social justice; being quite without understanding of the means to inaugurate, of the justice to be inaugurated. Principles of democratic government by elected representatives, serviceable enough to the British and kindred peoples long accustomed to manage their affairs by placing responsibility of management on persons periodically liable to removal, have in our own time been discarded in favour of dictatorship and negation of all political liberties in Euro-

pean lands that once strove for free parliaments. Socialism, with its vision of universal brotherhood and commonwealth of nations, has somehow produced a tyranny not less destructive to freedom than the tyrannies of dictatorship in Germany and Italy. The Muscovite dictatorship in fact presses more heavily on its subject millions than the old tyrannies of the Tzar.

Where is freedom? Imperishable on the earth while man holds it true that his first—and last—work is to love the Lord his God and his neighbour as himself. Imperishable unless the Catholic Church becomes extinct; and this fortunately is impossible, though extinction of local churches has taken place without return to life. Continually thwarted is the instinct to worship God in freedom, the desire to live in free and neighbourly social intercourse, freely to use talents to the glory of God and the enrichment of human life. Thwarted by men pursuing power—‘the desire of sovereignty is a deadly corrosive to human spirits,’ wrote St. Augustine—or pursuing the power that money brings; thwarted by the many, mainly concerned with the business of getting a living and securing domestic comfort, and for those ends ready to sacrifice civil and religious liberties, freedom cannot be driven out of its last stronghold—the Catholic Church. However precarious the liberty dependent on political institutions, the liability to rejection always painfully evident, the witness of the Catholic Faith to man’s natural right to freedom endures. The personal idiosyncrasies of Catholics can never utterly obliterate that testimony.

JOSEPH CLAYTON