

The Month
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1947

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY AND THE NEW POLITICAL FORCES

DURING the present generation the question of religious liberty has not only once more become a living issue; it may even become the key problem of our times. We still do not realize the seriousness of the situation in this country, owing to the undisturbed sediment of Victorian tradition which still covers large areas of our national life and thought. We are still in a relatively privileged position in the world and we find it hard to believe that this position is a privileged one and not the normal condition of mankind. Englishmen have been brought up to believe that religious freedom and political freedom had become the normal condition of civilized life and that they would inevitably extend from Western Europe to the rest of the world with the expansion of modern civilization.

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But already in our life time we have seen the tide turn and it has turned with terrifying rapidity. All the landmarks of nineteenth century liberalism and humanitarianism have been swept away, and the limit has not been reached yet. Whether we call it a tide of revolutionary change or a tide of barbarism, it is a movement which leaves no side of life unaffected and which profoundly changes the state of civilization. In particular, Western Europe which a century ago regarded itself as the civilized world has now become a group of minor states and they are finding it increasingly difficult to preserve their independence and their form of culture against the pressure of the great mass states that surround them.

How does all this affect the question of religious liberty? Will it be possible to preserve the right of religious freedom, if the other forms of freedom with which it has been historically associated disappear? Or is the idea of religious liberty the temporary product of a transitory phase of a particular civilization, which must vanish with the age and the way of life that gave birth to it?

What is a Catholic to think of all this? We cannot forget that religious freedom is a much older thing than the liberal civilization of Western Europe—it has its roots in the gospel itself: which is a message of liberation and freedom from fear—"that we being delivered out of the hands of our enemies should serve Him without fear." And in the same way the apostolic mission involved the assertion of freedom and the rights of conscience as clear as any that history has known. The answer of St. Peter to the Sanhedrin states the issue as clearly as possible when the representatives of the infant Church

first formally and publicly confronted the authorities of the synagogue. And subsequently the conflict between the Church and the Roman Empire was fought out largely on this issue and on the denial of the right of the state to coerce the conscience or to deny the corporate right of the Church as a free spiritual organism.

To-day, it seems that the Church is everywhere about to be faced by a similar situation, and that it will have to fight for its freedom, and for its existence in a non-Christian world against secular states and world empires which claim omnipotence.

The situation is, however, in many respects very different from what it was in the early Christian centuries. Then it was a case of a new religion asserting itself against a world state which possessed a state religion of sorts, and which recognized a considerable degree of religious freedom to unofficial cults. Moreover, the current philosophies which were the religion of the educated class put considerable emphasis on the freedom of the individual conscience and on the primacy of the spiritual.

To-day, Christianity is the established religion of Western civilization or rather the ex-established religion, and it has to maintain itself against the drive of various types of secularism which are attempting to dominate society. This means that the original situation has been reversed. During the last few centuries the Church has been regarded as the enemy of freedom rather than its champion, and the claim to freedom of conscience or freedom in general has been asserted against the Church—first by the Protestants against the Catholics, then by the religious minorities against the State church and finally by the Freemasons and secularist liberals against Christianity in general.

This has produced a very confusing situation which endured throughout the nineteenth century, and which was already manifest in the first great persecution of Christianity in modern Europe under the first French Republic, for this was directed more or less impartially against unbelievers like Anacharsis Clootz and Hébert as well as against Gallican schismatics and orthodox Catholics. So, too, in the ideological persecutions that have taken place in Russia and in Germany in our own times, the most diverse and incongruous elements have suffered together; in Germany it was primarily Jews and Communists who suffered, but also Liberals and orthodox Christians: in Russia, primarily Conservatives and Christians, but also Social Revolutionaries and Trotskyite deviationists.

And it was only a fortunate minority who suffered for their own opinions. As a rule the Christians were executed not as Christians but as capitalist agents, and the Old Guard Bolsheviks died as agents of Fascism. No one has described this new style of martyrdom better than Koestler in his "Darkness at Noon," and whatever one may think of his psychological analysis of the state of mind of his

C.D. likes Koestler

Church
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two principal characters—the persecutor and the persecuted—we must admit that the kind of situation he described has occurred and is occurring very widely to-day, and that it represents a new evil—a new kind of spiritual disease which is spreading rapidly and may become the characteristic evil of our times.

This evil is not religious persecution in the old sense: it is not even the evil of physical cruelty although that is bound up with the ruthless suppression of minority opinion and the liquidation of unpopular races or classes. It goes deeper than all that to the destruction of the conscience of the individual by the organized pressure of the group. It means the removal of the moral landmarks which set limits to every exercise of human power, even when that power was theoretically sovereign or absolute. No doubt an absolute government of the traditional type did possess a considerable power of coercing public opinion, but it usually exercised this power in a negative repressive way and did not attempt to re-make men's minds after a new pattern. Moreover it relied itself more or less on the existence of common moral standards, and even on common religious beliefs which were regarded as indispensable guarantees of social order. No doubt the police state as it existed in the Austria of Metternich or the Russia of Nicholas I did tend to weaken the sense of individual moral responsibility, but it never attempted to create an artificially conditioned collective consciousness as the sole driving force of the social organism. There is a difference between the old police state and the new totalitarian state similar to the difference between gunpowder and the atomic bomb. It is only since the advent of the new scientific techniques for the measurement and control of public opinion and of the new psychological techniques for the mass-conditioning of the emotions that the new form of spiritual despotism has become possible.

Now even if this new despotism is not directly hostile to religion, it obviously creates a difficult situation for the Church and involves a whole series of new problems for the Christian conscience. For in such a state the Church must either form an underground movement of spiritual resistance which will be ruthlessly persecuted and suppressed, or it will have to conform to the totalitarian order and play its part as a subordinate instrument in the work of conditioning the masses according to the pattern laid down by the supreme central authority for social planning.

Neither of these alternatives is possible. It is a choice between Scylla and Charybdis—between total destruction and total surrender. Therefore it seems essential, if Christianity is effectively to survive, that every possible effort should be made to preserve at least some societies which protect man's spiritual freedom and refuse to be carried away by the drive towards total planning and unlimited collective power. This does not seem much to ask when one thinks

of the Atlantic Charter and the Charter of U.N.O. and all the proclamations that have been made about Freedom and Democracy and the Rights of Man all over the world during the last years. But all these things are mere scraps of paper by the side of that mighty engine of organized power which is the modern mass state, and they give no more protection to the concrete human person than a white flag affords against an atomic bomb. The only thing that matters is the internal social structure of the state. If this is built to protect personal rights and personal relations, then religious freedom will follow as a matter of course. But if it is built as a unitary machine of mass power, then there is no room for religious freedom or for any kind of freedom whatever.

Now the problem is how a state which sets limits to its own powers and puts the personal rights of its citizens first can compete with a state which sacrifices every other consideration to power and treats its citizens as means to its own ends. Must not the power state always be stronger than the free state by its nature? This is not a new problem since it already existed before the rise of totalitarianism in the conflict between absolute military states and free constitutional ones. It is the problem which Burke stated so clearly in one of his last writings.

The states of the Christian World have grown up to their present magnitude in a great length of time and by a great variety of accidents. . . . Not one of them has been formed upon a regular plan or with any unity of design. . . . In all these old countries the state has been made to the people, and not the people conformed to the state. Every state has pursued, not only every sort of social advantage, but it has cultivated the welfare of every individual. His wants, his wishes, even his tastes have been consulted. This comprehensive scheme virtually produced a degree of personal liberty in forms the most adverse to it. That liberty was found, under monarchies stiled absolute, in a degree unknown to the ancient commonwealths. From hence the powers of all our modern states meet in all their movements with some obstruction. It is therefore no wonder, that when these states are to be considered as machines to operate for some one great end, that this dissipated and balanced force is not easily concentrated, or made to bear with the whole nation upon one point.

And he goes on to contrast the case of a state like England which made personal liberty a direct object of government with the revolutionary dictatorship which "left individuality out of its scheme of government" and made "the state all in all"—a state in which "everything is referred to the production of force; afterwards everything is trusted to the use of it."

In the past the most absolute states have not been the strongest states because so much of their total available energy is absorbed internally in the work of controlling their subjects that their capacity for external action is reduced. The force that the government

New weapons of control

Burke
on
new
powers

total. individuality

employs in stopping people doing what they want to do reduces the force at its disposal for doing what it wants to do.

But though this was true enough in the past, it is doubtful if it is still true to-day. The nightmares of the hive—the insect society—or Leviathan—the monstrous social organism—nightmares which have so long haunted the imagination of men of letters—seem to be passing from the sphere of phantasy to the world of everyday experience. Thanks to science, there is no longer any limit to the amount of power which the state can exercise. A technocratic system which operates through scientific planning, economic control and psychological conditioning is no longer a political absolutism of the traditional kind: it is a unitary mass organism in which the individual personality is absorbed and obliterated or transformed. The danger of such a system to religion is not so much the danger of persecution or open hostility: it is simply that it leaves no room for religion to exist. The total psychic energy of the community is absorbed by its planned activity and nothing is left over for other ends. In the past, religion has always been able to make use of the free surplus of psychic energy. Caesar demanded his tribute, and the man himself was left to serve God or not, as the case might be. But now Caesar no longer asks for anything. He is everything. He takes the whole man. He is the people's state and therefore the whole life of the people is in him and for him. This is the end of Caesar in the old sense, but it is also the end of the citizen and ultimately the end also of the human person.

All this may seem to be a nightmare, but it is no more a nightmare than the atomic bomb, which is the arch-achievement of technocratic civilization. And it is a nightmare which is just round the corner—there is no need to read Koestler's novel to see that, we can read it in the daily papers and in sober descriptions of what is happening to-day in many parts of the world.

Unfortunately the trend in this direction comes not only from the Fascists and the Communists who have inherited the traditions of the autocratic police state and are going into it with their eyes open. It also comes from the mass civilization of the Western democracies which are going into it with their eyes shut. As Professor Karl Mannheim pointed out years ago in "Man and Society" there is a growing similarity between the liberal democracies and the totalitarian states. And this is not only due to the reason he gives that the old liberal state has become a social services state which is committed to economic and social planning. It is due even more to the mechanization of social and economic life which has developed furthest in the United States where private capitalism and free enterprise still maintain themselves. For in the U.S.A. no less than in U.S.S.R. we are conscious of the victory of the mass over the individual. Moreover we see in America how material prosperity and technical

distopian

Mr. Spinoza is dead

efficiency produce social conformity, so that without any intervention on the part of the state, men of their own accord tend to think the same and look the same and behave in the same way. None of these things is peculiar to the United States. It is only that in America the standard of material prosperity is higher and the counter-balancing forces of authority and tradition are weaker. And consequently the United States has been the pioneer of a popular hedonistic mass civilization which is the chief alternative to the totalitarian ascetic mass civilization of Communism.

Now the American way of life is not openly hostile to religious freedom. On the contrary, it has always been sympathetic to the widest and wildest developments of sectarian Christianity from the fossilized relics of ancient European traditions like that of the Schwenkfeldians to the latest products of negro spirituality, like the Fire Baptized Holiness Church of God in the Americas. Nevertheless it is questionable whether this unrestricted freedom of religious opinion which exaggerates the centrifugal tendency that was always present in Protestantism is not more harmful to spiritual freedom in the positive sense than persecution itself. If you have on the one side a triumphant material civilization dominated by standardization and technical efficiency and on the other a chaos of competing sects, each of them a law to itself, many of them without any standard of theological culture and some of them extravagantly eccentric or obscurantist, it is obvious that the cause of secularism will prevail. The remedy for this state of things must be found by the Christians themselves. They have had their freedom—too much of it—and they have allowed the leadership of culture to pass out of their hands. And it is not only in America that this is true. In this country also and throughout Western Europe, more or less, the secularization of culture has taken place, while religion was still free and while Christians still possessed a privileged position and the nominal leadership of culture. Only too often we have been defeated not by the violence and oppression of secular power, but by our own failure to use our freedom, as it might have been used, for the service of God and the development of a Christian society. Science has given modern man vast technical resources and undreamed possibilities of power. But science has not decided who shall use these gifts. They have been offered freely in the open market to the first comer and these chance comers were not concerned with spiritual ends, they were concerned entirely with the immediate exploitation of the new techniques for economic gain or political power.

The result has been that we have seen the ultimate control of human life pass out of the hands of the traditional representatives of the spiritual power into the hands of the technicians and the specialists who are themselves controlled either by the politicians and the men of business, or in the totalitarian countries by the party bosses and the secret police.

US + USSR the same

American Protest. = secularism

Signs of omission

like cont. capitalism

Now, in the latter case, under the full blown totalitarian system, there is no room for freedom whatever, and it is possible that when this has been achieved, it is irreversible and we are faced with the new phenomenon of a society of human insects. It is impossible to say whether that is so without studying the system at first hand and from the inside, which in the nature of things is excessively difficult. What I am concerned with, however, is the other alternative of the democratic mass state which still admits the principle of full religious liberty and the rights of man, though the foundations of spiritual freedom have been already seriously undermined. In this form of mass society it is still possible for Christians to do something and there is a tremendous responsibility on us to act effectively while there is still time and opportunity. But I do not believe that the obvious negative policy of opposition to the steadily increasing pressure of socialization or scientific collectivism by the assertion of the old principles of individualistic freedom is the right policy, for in this way Christians may be identifying themselves with a lost cause and in some degree involving themselves in a defence of the vested interests in the past. What we have to do is to assert the principle of spiritual freedom on the highest level in the sphere of science and education and social planning. If it is possible to convince the coming generation of planners and teachers and scientific specialists that spiritual freedom is something that must be preserved at all costs at every stage of social planning and under every system of scientific organization or collective control, then the introduction of a totalitarian order would be rendered difficult if not impossible.

It may be objected that there has never been any lack of liberal ideals and respect for freedom of thought among scientists and intellectuals, yet this did not prove any serious obstacle to Communists and Nazis: in fact specialists and intellectuals may be had two a penny by any political party which succeeds in capturing power. In so far as this is true, it proves how disastrous had been the divorce between liberal scientific culture and the living tradition of religious faith in our civilization. The liberal idealism which was such a real force in Western culture a century ago had been continuously undermined by scepticism and nothing has come to take its place except the totalitarian ideologies which are threatening to destroy civilization unless they can be restrained.

But although this liberal idealism has been undermined, it is by no means dead. There have been many scientists and men of learning who have been ready to suffer rather than to serve the totalitarian state, and there is an even wider body of liberal opinion that has shown its moral resistance to the naked inhumanity of the totalitarian régimes. There is, in fact, a very considerable body of opinion, outside the various Christian bodies, which stands for spiritual freedom, however vague and incomplete their principles may be.

The survival of our civilization depends to a great extent on the possibility of co-operation and mutual understanding between these two groups. They are not political parties, they are not even organized units. For the Christians are profoundly divided among themselves in questions of faith and order, and the Liberals (to give them a label which many of them would not accept) are an even more heterogeneous collection. Nevertheless each of the two has a certain continuity of tradition and some community of ideas, and they share between them the whole ideological territory of Western civilization down to the middle of the nineteenth century.

The rise of the third tradition—the totalitarian one—is something of a mystery. It was first recognized and diagnosed by Nietzsche (who was himself partially responsible for it) in the "Nature and History of European Nihilism," the first part of his "Will to Power" and very little serious study has been given to it subsequently. Now Nietzsche has traced very clearly the development of Nihilism inside Europe from the progressive exhaustion and devaluation of the spiritual elements of Western culture:—the European's loss of faith, first in Christianity, secondly in humanism and finally in himself. But he did not, I think, see that this Western scepticism and negative criticism would be turned against Europe and used as weapons by the new mass powers of the non-European world. These powers do not share the doubt and self-criticism of Western man, they are his doubts and his self-criticism—his funeral in fact—not theirs. On the other hand they can use the power techniques which Western man has created, more thoroughly and ruthlessly than he can himself. But all this is not the result of an ineluctable law of fatal necessity, as Nietzsche would regard it. Where the atheist sees necessity, the Christian sees the law of retribution and judgement and the existence of moral freedom and the hope of salvation. What is judged and found wanting is not Christianity, either Western or non-Western, but the opposite of Christianity—a civilization emptied of its moral values and detached from its spiritual foundations—a society which exploits its vast technical power and scientific knowledge for trivial and selfish ends.

But Western civilization is not merely this, and in so far as it is not, it still possesses the power of recuperation and the possibility of survival. The question of spiritual freedom is the crucial issue by which Western civilization is being tried. It is an issue to which the Western conscience is still highly sensitive. It presents itself in different forms to different peoples and different schools of thought, but it is relevant to all of them as perhaps no other issue is. And above all, it is relevant to Christianity as the source and fountain head from which Western man has received his original conception of spiritual liberty in the fullest and deepest sense.

we have little time

must fight for spiritual freedom

W. in the end grav. to down

Christ. a liberal w/ liberal

Nietzsche got FN: 3/16/49 *

ideologies and Nietzsche