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Ideals of Freedom.

AS Nonconformists, not to say Protestant Deputies,¹ we are accredited as the advocates and guardians of freedom. We claim, not without some justification, that the modern conception of freedom had birth in our church life. Even a historian like Troeltsch gives the "sects," as he calls them, the chief credit, as against Luther and Calvin, of being in this respect the pioneers of the modern world.

But what sort of freedom is it that we can advocate to-day? Is the word now anything more than an outworn shibboleth? Is there any real content, relevant to the modern world, that we can put into it?

I must say that I did not set down this subject because I felt I had a contribution to make, but, to be frank, because I wanted a contribution making. I do not offer light so much as ask for discussion. What I mean is we need to-day a new definition. The old concept has to be charged with fuller meaning. . . . And perhaps none more than religious people, and particularly ourselves, are called upon to think out that definition and present it to a confused and bewildered world.

Let us begin by looking at some of the aspects of the prevailing confusion.

Here is a statement by a doctor—that he does not believe in the blood test for motorists charged with being under the influence of drink because it would be an unwarrantable interference with the liberties of the subject. The "liberty of the subject"—it is quite a familiar phrase, and as you know, it is used to justify all kinds of action and legislation, or rather lack of legislation. It conveniently leaves out of account the liberty of the unfortunate people who are killed by the drunken motorist, and it reminds us of the very old story of the boy and the frog. . . . "What is sport for you," said the frog, "is death for us." There has been much freedom of that sort in all ages, freedom for the few at the expense of the many. It was that sort of plea that was used to justify almost every kind of exploitation, notably the exploitation of the workers by an unjust economic system in the era that is just closing. It is related, of course, to ideas of property—a man can do what he likes with his own. The revolt against that conception of freedom happily is widespread to-day, one of the features of our time—only those who rebel against it have not yet apparently found a satisfactory idea to put in the place of the one they reject, and often they claim

¹ Delivered at Annual Meeting of the Dissenting Deputies, October, 1938.

for themselves just the very kind of licence which they condemn when they happen to be victims of it. The French Revolution attempt and failure to establish liberty, equality and fraternity should warn us against expecting any easy solution.

How to secure the liberty of each and all in an ordered community, or in other words, how to resolve the conflict between the essential needs of the community as such and the legitimate desires of the individual—that is one of the major problems of all time, made not easier of solution by the complexities of our civilisation. The individual's legitimate desires have risen enormously, while the community has become almost coterminous with the race. Hence the matter which could be simply solved when it was a question of Hodge and the village pump has taken on altogether new dimensions, now that life has drawn to itself all the advantages and otherwise of a scientific age.

I only need to mention such anti-social influences as drink, immorality of different kinds, obnoxious publications, gambling, and so forth, to remind you of the difficulty. Almost all civilised nations have gone some way in the attempt to control by limiting individual action in the interests of the State. But almost everywhere we find lack of clear-cut principle. In England, for example, we have a certain control of the film and of literature, and a certain feeble control of the press, but it is not easy to see on what principle, if any, the censorships are based. It would look as though there are several conflicting interests combined, one of which undoubtedly is money. Witness, for example, the Football Pools, from which the State now draws enormous revenue.

Further, while the State is trying to feel its way in those respects, we have the modern humanism, which seems to encourage individuals in every form of self-expression, teaches the desirability of indulging instincts and passions, and would obviously demand from the State a fairly clear field for this indulgence. "The State and the law," says Bertrand Russell, "should take no notice of sexual relations apart from children"—that is to say, he would allow the fullest licence. Yet his very next sentence is that "No marriage ceremony should be valid unless accompanied by a medical certificate of the woman's pregnancy"—a very severe restriction and obviously quite unnecessary on any elevated conception of marriage.

So the problem arises on many sides, and with almost every aspect of life. Where must individual licence cease in the interests of the common good? And how can freedom be defined in terms of an enforced discipline?

When we come to propaganda and the attempt to limit the activity of mind and compel opinion we touch the most important

part of the subject. Many are ready to restrict anti-social actions, but what about anti-social ideas? It is easy to say that ideas are more potent than actions, and that therefore this restriction is both more urgent and logical. But how far can that go? and what about Milton's great argument for the freedom of thought and speech? How does that argument look in the modern world?

Hitler has a great deal to say about propaganda in his book *Mein Kampf*, and we see his theory being worked out in the new State forms that have arisen. The theory is—use every form of propaganda and use it vigorously and rigorously. Then if a State is doing that ought it not to allow contrary propaganda to exist? Logic would say "No!" Why spend money to advocate a theory and at the same time allow the enemy to nullify it? Does not propaganda, if taken seriously, carry with it the inquisition? I mean when it is a matter of life and death, as the old theologians thought and as the modern State-builders believe.

We all recognise that the State is bound to compel in the matter of hygiene (smallpox, etc.). There the propaganda, so to say, has to be swallowed. Then why not in the matter of State-craft, which, it is claimed, is equally important?

Our own attitude on the question of venereal disease is typically British. We urge people suffering from these diseases to get a cure, and we make it easy for them. But ought we not to compel? Ought not compulsion to be the penalty of contracting the disease? The danger, as any one knows, is to the unborn children. By the same argument men like Dean Inge would radically interfere with the individual life. Shall we say, then, that there is a place for compulsion and a place for persuasion, and that the real problem is to find when the one is right and the other wrong?

Again, how far ought teachers in our schools to hand on to the children their political views? How far can they avoid it? In fact, are not children always the victim of propaganda—*compulsory* education? And is not Hitler right in assuming that most people are just overgrown children? Something like this is the argument of the Soviet in the matter of religion—a reminder that many of the policies in Europe that are offensive to us are not mere matters of expediency but are based on ideas.

Take again the freedom of the Press in England. Do we mean by the phrase, freedom to publish the stuff that is published? And what about the taunt that our so-called freedom of the Press is only the freedom of moneyed interests? One has only to think of the devastating effect of advertisements to realise that here is a major issue. Has the Press the right to

tyrannise over the mind of the people merely because people are not able to discriminate?

Well, these are the sort of questions facing the mind to-day. It is not merely that old battles, as for example the right to freedom of worship, have to be fought over again. It is that new aspects of life demand a much more coherent conception of freedom itself. Even we who are the advocates of it become inevitably at points the strenuous defenders of restraint and compulsion. The paradox in such a phrase as "the Nonconformist conscience" is not always realised. We have some idea of binding men in order to set them free.

However, to point out these difficulties and inconsistencies is easy, although I venture to think it is not altogether unprofitable. How to move to some sort of constructive thought, that is the difficulty. I will point out some of the conflicts of ideals which are troubling the modern world and which, I think, have to be resolved before we can get forward. At bottom it is a question of philosophy of the interpretation of life, and that itself is uncertain in our time.

First, I think, we have to decide whether life has to be keyed up to the good of the individual or to the good of the community as such. Or is there a third alternative that both these "goods" come together? Our first inclination is to say that they are not and cannot be antagonistic, that the individual and society grow side by side, that man can never win through to complete satisfaction save in a completely satisfying society, and equally that a true society cannot exist without satisfied people. We have learnt in late years, and we are not likely to go back on it—that environment is part of personality. All thinking is now social, and rightly so. But while we admit all that, a decision has to be taken—and for the time being at least it is a decision of the "either/or" type. Either the individual first or the community. If we decide for the individual, then that will to a large extent determine the form of the resultant society. Or, again, if we make the community central, we subscribe to the production of a new type of individual.

In Germany the State is everything. Life is keyed up to the idea of the State. Ultimately, it is conceivable, the State may become a thoroughly well-organised community in which the inhabitants will live a reasonably ordered and sheltered life. But by that time the inhabitants themselves will be different. I think that is clear. In proportion as the totalitarian State is a success, in that proportion it will modify human nature. So you might have a machine-dominated age in which the inhabitants were far more automata than people are to-day. There is no strenuous communal organisation that does not have this effect

of moulding the individuals to a certain pattern. Is that individual pattern the supreme thing or is it secondary?

On the other hand, if we decide that all life and endeavour should move towards a certain development of the individual, then we are bound to put up with many weaknesses in the body politic. The communal organisation cannot be nearly so rigid. I do not see myself any real escape from that dilemma.

At the moment the democratic nations oscillate between the two ideals in peace-time, and go clean over to the State ideal in war-time. The totalitarian nations are on the war footing all the time. Is this the real difference between Democracy and Totalitarianism? Anyway, that is the peculiar nature of the challenge which Bolshevism and Fascism present to us who historically have always stood for the primacy of the individual. We have held that there is an ideal to which individual life should move. The moving towards it has involved a large amount of individual freedom—relying on persuasion wherever possible. So far we have been willing to take the risks to society which that policy involves. But can we continue to take those risks in the modern world?

I will merely point out here that it is becoming more difficult. Everywhere under the spirit of fear the freedom of democratic States is tending to shrink. Even in theology the old prison house of a closed dogmatic is being offered to us again as a safe and happy shelter against the winds of free criticism. In England we turn on our past and begin to visualise an united Church of England—one closely-knit State Church, or at least territorial Church, which will be an escape from the difficulty of living amid the clash of opinion and the variety of custom. If I said the movement towards unity in the Church is a step towards the totalitarian outlook, I should be criticised, and perhaps I should be wrong. But I do say it is an indication of a certain lack of faith in the democratic principle, even in democratic countries. We hold that religion cannot be compelled, that it ceases to be religion the moment the compulsion element is brought in. We maintain it depends entirely on persuasion. Then the logic of that position is the "sects," as history proves. Every scheme of unity has had to rely on some sort of compulsion at the last, and to me it is not without significance, and not by any means a feeble support for our conception of life that the most vital religion to-day is in the countries which have been "plagued," to use the current jargon, "with our unhappy division." It is here, perhaps, where we touch the nerve of the whole matter—compulsion cannot be used to condition the higher life of the soul without injuring that higher life and maybe destroying it altogether.

So much, then, for the problem of the individual and the community. The more limited problem raised by humanism hardly needs to detain us, as the guidance with regard to it is fairly clear. What measure of freedom is necessary in order that the individual may be truly himself? Well, we do not believe that a man steadily grows to manhood by the unbridled or even the carefully calculated indulgence of his appetites. If psychology of a kind supports the humanist, psychology of another kind and life especially supports his opponent. The appetite grows by what it feeds upon. Sex indulgence to-day demands sex indulgence to-morrow, and the end of licence in all these matters is not the doing away of awkward inhibitions, with the consequent release of personality, it is "slavery to sin." That story we have read many times, and it is not a story likely to impose on ministers of religion. The real freedom is related to the good life, and the good life comes only with the proper organisation of the instincts, which after all is the very nature of personality.

It may be, on this point, that the ground needs going over again. It may be that there is room for a re-statement of Christian Ethics for our time. Maybe some of the lingering shreds of an earlier asceticism need to be finally cast aside. But that will not affect the main position, namely, that personal freedom and inner stability cannot be attained apart from a life-long discipline. That the discipline need not be irksome when undertaken at the bidding of a religious sentiment we all know.

This leads to my last point. It would seem that freedom cannot be defined save in relation to the ideal. The average man usually means by it release from something difficult or troublesome. That is one of the pernicious notes of our time, struck by almost every publicist who wants the popular vote, and struck, too, by many who are quite unconscious of the implications of it. Take the old cry—"democracy in the workshop"—it was by no means always the expression of a desire to do good work in congenial environment. Often it became little more than the aim of doing the minimum for the maximum benefit. I mean there was no great idea of public service at the back of it. And that is the condemnation of quite a lot of democratic politics—the emancipation of self from particular burdens rather than a willingness to shoulder burdens that of necessity have to be borne. And when it broadens out beyond that it often becomes no more than the emancipation of class, rather than the good of the whole.

Of late years freedom has come to be defined almost exclusively in terms of escape. The race is tired, has lost its nerve. But obviously true freedom can only be conceived in relation to a full and positive ideal of man and human life.

What shall that ideal be? Lippmann says "Maturity." He doesn't make clear what he means by that, but he says it is the function of what he calls "high religion" to make it clear.

I accept his latter statement. It is the function of religion to present the ideal which alone can give content to words like freedom, development, maturity, and apart from which such words are utterly misleading.

It is an interesting question to ask how far our Christianity can foot that bill.

With that question I have to stop, for the simple reason that I cannot go any further. I do not believe that it is possible for any apocalyptic seer in the world to-day to sketch in detail the perfect state of society. The crowds of orators who are doing it are not, in my judgment, apocalyptic seers. J. S. Mill was frank enough to admit that if all his schemes were realised even then the race would not be happy. Nor do I believe it possible to sit down and sketch the perfect man. The truth is both man and the race are growing. And any solution on one level presents immediately new problems and new tasks. Which means that at any point freedom is always relative. There is no finality in a finite world. And if freedom is related to the ideal, then it is always an aspiration more than a realised state. That we have to remember. But to remember it is to save freedom itself. There is no mechanical fixed framework into which we can fit human life. Perhaps the truth is that while we cannot see the goal we have some indication of the way. And salvation is found by moving in the right direction, rather than by actually attaining. The direction, we believe, is given in the salvation connected with Jesus Christ. It is His truth which will make us free. If so, to interpret that and make it clear for our time is the supreme task of religious leadership to-day.

ARTHUR DAKIN.

Faith of our Fathers, by Florence Higham, M.A., Ph.D. (Student Christian Movement Press, 5s.)

It is not surprising that the literature of the seventeenth century grows apace, for that period had much that is pertinent to this day's problems. This study of men and movements is based primarily on sources, particularly the writings of the men themselves. Great figures pass before us: Lancelot Andrews, John Robinson, George Herbert, Laud, Baxter, Bunyan and others. They belong to the common heritage of the Church of Christ. We need to know all we can about them, and this book, written with sympathy and scholarship, is a valuable contribution towards a fuller understanding of them and their ideals.