

ACADEMIC FREEDOM

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IT was the opinion of the late Lord Oxford, an artist in living and an accomplished judge of human values, that the golden age of English history was the reign of George II. Many of the constituents of our present state of well-being were then extant. Many causes of our present discontents had not yet emerged. Life was comfortable and happy. There was less fanaticism, less ferment, a wider diffusion of equable common sense. Leisure was indeed leisure and peace was, indeed, peace in the days before steam and electricity had revolutionised locomotion and industry, or the factories set their desperate problems to the human conscience. Then there was a leisured class fully capable of entering into the heritage of the past, but not too large for comfort, and with less of restlessness and ambition than we find now. There is much to be said for Lord Oxford's opinion that the subjects of King George II were happily placed in the procession of Time. They remembered Blenheim, and knew that Britannia ruled the waves.

Now we Europeans live under a shadow. Over a great part of the Continent the lamps of humanity and reason are burning low. A savage civil war, fomented from outside, tears at the vitals of Spain. Italy lies in the clasp of an iron despotism. In the vast tracks covered by the Soviet Federation and the German Reich the population has been reduced to a level of conformity by the pressure of party tyranny, unexampled in its force and penetration, and such as would have seemed incredible thirty years ago. Academic freedom in these countries is a thing of the past. Books containing opinions obnoxious to the party are publicly burned. Professors go in peril if they deviate by one hair's breadth from the official creed of the party. The concentration camp, prison, the executioner's axe or revolver will strike down the political dissenter. It is impossible for a Jew, it is difficult for a liberal or cosmopolitan, to speak his mind under the Nazi régime. We witness the extraordinary spectacle of great European peoples, famous for their contributions to the arts of peace, going about in abject fear of the police, countenancing cruelties unspeakable, and submitting themselves in times of outward tranquillity to a fierce and concentrated preparation for war. In such an atmosphere, poisoned by mass propaganda and spies, truth does not

percolate. We seem to be descending into the abyss of barbarism.

Britain and the British Empire continue for the present to enjoy the sunshine of liberty. Their condition is the more enviable, as their contribution will be the more valuable to humanity, by reason of this contrast. The universities of Britain and of the Empire are free to students of every creed, class and race. For the most part they owe their origin not to state action, but to private initiative. Since the abolition of religious tests at Oxford and Cambridge in 1871, no denominational requirements have been allowed to hamper the academic freedom either of these two seats of learning or of the more numerous civic universities which have sprung up in recent times. No professor has lost his chair because his opinions were unpopular with the Government or the official hierarchy; and since the universities of Britain are only to a small degree dependent upon the State for financial support, and that distributed on the advice of a Committee recruited not from politicians but from men eminent in the world of learning and education, the sacred principle of academic freedom would seem to be firmly implanted in British soil.

The foundation of the first undenominational university is, therefore, an event of importance to the historian of civilisation. That event you now celebrate in Halifax. Your university, whose charter in its earliest tentative form precedes even that of University College, London, may claim to be the pioneer in that great humanitarian movement which has given to British academic life the characteristic and distinguishing note of freedom. Not indeed that the history of British liberalism can be comprised within the compass of a single century. So far at least as one of its sources goes, the river of freedom may be traced back to an event two hundred years ago, which is being celebrated all over the English-speaking world as these words are being written, to the conversion of John Wesley in May 1738; but as is the way with all great spiritual movements which shape the march of history, there are seasons when the waters are sluggish, and others when they move with an accelerated velocity, overthrowing obstacle after obstacle, and carving an ever widening channel in their onward course. The decade which witnessed the foundation of Dalhousie University was such an epoch of accelerated velocity. It was marked in England by the passage of the Reform Bill, by the Abolition of Slavery, by the democratisation of municipal government, and by the foundation in the heart of London of the first institute for higher education

which opened its doors to students of every religious profession. That was a time when the old order seemed to be crumbling away before the irresistible force of liberalism. When Gladstone in 1847 advocated the admission of Jews to the English Parliament, he spoke not as a suppliant, but as the champion of a winning cause. "You first contended for a Church Parliament", he told the Tories; "you then contended for a Protestant Parliament; in both cases you were defeated. You were not defeated owing to accident. You were defeated owing to profound and powerful and uniform tendencies, associated with the movement of the human mind—with the general course of events—perhaps I ought to say with the providential government of the world." The abolition of religious tests at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge was referred to by Albert Dicey, the great British jurist, as one of the few reforms carried out in Great Britain which brought with it no corresponding drawbacks. Belief in progress was general. It seemed to the Victorians that the age of the religious wars was past and gone, that the spirit of the Inquisition had been exorcised by the liberating influence of the French Revolution, by the spread of science, by the humanisation of the masses, and that the long enslavement of the human mind had reached its term. George Eliot, indeed, predicted that Islam had still some surprises for the liberals, and her prediction was verified by the rise of the Mahdi; but the idea that new political religions, equalling in intensity the first fury of the French Revolutionary doctrine, might sweep over Europe and establish, with the aid of modern scientific armaments, a complete ascendancy over formerly civilised peoples, would have seemed a dream too horrible and too fantastic to be true. Yet this is the position in which we now find ourselves. Progress has not been continuous. The enlargement of liberty has not been secured. The spirit of military fanaticism is still alive and powerful. It is only in the democratic countries, in Scandinavia, in France, in the British Empire, and in the United States, that the flag of freedom still floats proudly in the sky.

The battle of freedom is, however, never entirely won. Intolerance lurks close below the surface, and works its way up by a thousand different and sometimes obscure channels. Can a university, depending largely for its financial support upon the contributions of a millionaire or a wealthy corporation, afford to disregard the prejudices of its patrons or to deviate from their view as to what may be sound or unsound in economic teaching? Is not the dead hand of the old alumni sometimes as fatal to

fresh developments as the constraint of an illiberal constitution? Is not an effective censorship of books exercised by wealthy churches through the power which they possess to control advertisements or withdraw their patronage? There have been cases, fortunately neither numerous nor important, when a British university has been unpleasantly reminded that the city which contributes to its fund may wish to have a say in the direction of its studies. Such dangers are not imaginary. Only a well educated and vigilant public opinion can keep them at bay.

The preservation of freedom in the universities is the more necessary since many forces now combine all over the world to the enslavement of opinion. Technology, indeed, continues to win startling triumphs. If we may believe the last sanguine predictions of the agrobiologists, the world stands upon the brink of an era of unexampled plenty, when the yield of land may be multiplied thirty-six fold, when our population may be increased with impunity to almost an astronomic figure, when the spectre of famine will be finally banished and one main motive which leads nations to work for conquests and colonies will disappear from the category of dangerous ambitions. But technology, however brilliant and progressive, though it may bring comfort to the many, does not in itself produce charity. Technology gives us power to achieve ends, not the heart to choose them. Indeed the general effect of advances in technology appears so far to be quite as likely to lower the ethical standard of mankind as to enhance it. To gain fresh power over nature is of little use if that power is to be used in barbaric ways for barbaric ends.

Man is an imitative animal. He does not think without pain or initiate without effort. It is far simpler and pleasanter for most of us to follow the beaten track than to shape a course for ourselves across untrodden ground. The great Press syndicates which do so much to standardise the appetites, emotions, and thoughts of their readers, are well aware of this fundamental weakness in human nature. They do not endeavour to form opinions, but to give back to their readers the opinions which they already hold. Men are echoes of one another, and the newspapers are echoes of echoes.

The value of our universities is to be measured by the extent to which they can raise an effectual barrier against the forces of mass suggestion which bid fair to threaten the intellectual integrity of our generation. Yet in many universities this function is wholly and flagrantly abandoned. In no totalitarian

state is the university permitted to encourage its students to follow the light of reason, to denounce patent cruelties, or to react against the official theology of the dominant party. In Turkey the historian is expected to teach the fantastic doctrine that all civilisation proceeds from the Hittites who, by a far stretch of the imagination, are identified with the Turks. In the German Reich the accredited historical doctrine is not less grotesque. Everything good in civilisation derives from the Nordic race: Christ being a Galilean was a Galatian, and being a Galatian was a German. Dante and Aquinas were not less certainly Germans. The Aryan race (a figment, as every ethnologist of repute now acknowledges) is held to have certain fixed characteristics designed to give it the leadership of the world. In the Soviet Federation where room is found for so many races, colours and creeds, there is, of course, none of this racial mythology. The Russian communist does not persecute the Jew or the Tartar, but absorbs them. The official religion of the Kremlin is not founded on blood and soil, but upon a material interpretation of the past, derived from the writings of Karl Marx, which diverges no less widely from the facts of history than the Hittite fallacies of Angora, or the romantic dreams of Berchtesgaden. All these extravagant mythologies infest the political mind of the European continent, and are now supported by such weight as subservient universities may supply. Over a great area of the world the appointed citadels of rational enquiry and honest knowledge have been forced to capitulate. Obscurantism, supported by aeroplanes and machine guns, reigns supreme.

It is the more refreshing to note that among the Anglo-Saxon peoples of the New World the dispassionate and scientific study of history has made a notable advance in the last half century. Alike in the Canadian universities and in those of the United States, students are taught to weigh evidence, to explore first-hand authorities, and to bring to the interpretation of the past an unpledged judgment. The books which now issue from the Press of the New World are of an entirely different order of merit from those which belong to the age of Bancroft. There is more light and less heat, more knowledge and less eloquence, more judgment and less prejudice. In this remarkable development of the historical spirit in your universities there is much cause for hope. The sober teaching of history is the foundation of sound politics. A university can make no more valuable contribution to the enlargement of knowledge or the improvement of man's estate.