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FREEWILL IN THE MODERN WORLD

VARIOUS answers are given to the question, 'What are we fighting for?' but it now seems to be commonly accepted that we are fighting for something greater than our national independence, for something vastly more important than the British Empire. It is not precisely democracy; we use the word indeed, but with a certain hesitation as we remember how signally we failed in another war 'to make the world safe for democracy.' Freedom is now more often the slogan. We are fighting against totalitarian powers which restrict the use of freedom and claim a quasi-religious authority over their subjects, and we know that we cannot conquer them merely by an appeal to national feeling, and still less by the aid of material resources. We too need a religious impulse to enable us to meet unflinchingly the armies of fanaticism. And as we cannot all appreciate the Catholic spirit which alone can extirpate the newest heresies, we have to appeal to something which is the result of the Catholic influence on Europe, but which is understood by all. And that is freedom.

By 'freedom' here is meant not precisely the power of the human will, but its exercise. That man possesses a certain power which is called the will, distinct from the power of intellect but rooted in it, is indisputable. Similarly there can be no doubt that he is capable of choosing the direction towards which this power should be directed.

Because the intellect can always make a comparison between the objects which the will proposes to itself and can find them lacking in that complete attraction which God, the Universal Good, alone possesses, the will is never compelled to accept any one of them. The will, in a word, is free.

This, however, is not the freedom for which we are fighting, for the simple reason that its existence is independent of man's power. Whether he likes it or not, his nature is such that he cannot but possess freedom of will. Even the totalitarian powers cannot crush this. Even though they impose the strongest pressure to compel their subjects to act in a certain way, the will can always refuse its assent to the Government's decree. If assent is refused of course the subject must be prepared to face the penalty, and, as this is usually of the gravest kind, there are very few who are prepared to exercise their will in a manner contrary to the command of the State. But it is a question of *exercise* and not of the power of the will itself.

The possibility of exercising freedom is mainly dependent on two institutions, one of which has been historically closely related to the other: the Catholic Church and private ownership. In the ages before the birth of Christ, private ownership was restricted to a comparatively small number and freedom itself was limited. Over the greater part of the civilised world slavery was an integral part of the accepted order, and large masses of men not only did not possess anything, but were themselves regarded as the property of the privileged few. They possessed free will, but this power simply could not be exercised over the goods of this world, and to exercise it in a manner contrary to the master's will involved such frightful consequences that few were prepared to accept them.

On the other hand, those who had scope for the exercise of their freedom, the property-owners, very quickly degenerated through the very excess of liberty. Having complete and absolute power, being unrestricted by the

revealed law of God, they became completely corrupt, and their loose morals and cruelty gave tone to the ancient world, a world 'seated in wickedness,' a world of darkness which cried out for the light of the Saviour. It was His task to restore true freedom, to give the propertyless a chance to exercise their God-given power and to persuade the 'free' men to use their power in accordance with God's law.

Slowly, very slowly indeed, the Catholic Church, continuing its mission of its Founder, set about restoring to man the facilities he needed for the exercise of his free will. It was a process which stretched over many centuries, but which bore manifestly the sign of a Divine plan. In apostolic times, as we know from the Epistle to Philemon, men were already learning to appreciate that the slave had a dignity as man equal to that of his master, and that obedience as a free response to kind treatment was nobler and more human than a terrified obedience, enforced by brutal penalties. Emancipation came centuries later not as a result of the Church's direct influence on State legislation, but indirectly through her insistence on the dignity of human nature, ennobled by its contact with the Divine in the Person of Christ. But the highest point of the Church's influence and the most balanced appreciation of human freedom came towards the end of the Middle Ages.

Here, above all, we see the connection of freedom with the institution of private property. The whole basis of the feudal system was the property, especially landed property, which a man possessed, and at the lowest scale of that system was the serf who, though humble enough, was still distinguished from the slave by this very fact that he was an owner and could enjoy some limited fruits of ownership. He, too, had the opportunity to exercise his freedom, and the most extortionate overlord had to restrain his greed on account of the sanctions imposed by a Catholic society.

The Peasants' Revolt and Luther's support of the princes who cruelly suppressed it indicate how little the Reformation helped the cause of freedom or limited its abuse. The Reformers did not even maintain freedom of thought, but persecuted those who opposed their views. The 'free' peasant in Europe rapidly lost his status, and the rise of industrialism created a new, unfree class. The proletariat was in existence, a class which was only free to pursue the most material activities of life. Although the wage earner could in theory choose his place of work and the man from whom he might accept employment, in practice he was tied to the factory and to the machine as truly as the serf was bound to the land; but the serf had at least a limited stake in the land, a piece of property of his own, while the wage-slave was dependent utterly upon his employer for his week-to-week existence, and had no claim either to the means with which he laboured or to any of the products of his toil.

It was not easy to mitigate the lot of the wage-earner, to restore his dignity, and provide him with a limited amount of property as a condition for the fuller exercise of his freedom. The Church had lost much of her influence in a Europe which no longer possessed Catholic unity, and the French Revolution let loose the forces of secularism which are completely hostile to Christianity, and which are now engaged on their final and decisive battle against it. But the effort was made, and that is the very reason why the battle is not yet decided.

Liberal Democracy had many faults, and the democratic governments seldom acted in a manner corresponding to their ideals, but the profession of democratic principles did at least make it easier for the Church to preach the necessity for social reform and expound the notion of Christian freedom and for the labouring classes to organise themselves to defend their rights. Humanitarian influences, inspired in the last resort by a fragmentary conception of the authentic Catholic teaching, also contributed

to the emancipation of the poor. Those efforts have not failed and cannot completely fail, but their achievement is gravely threatened.

The acceptance of the secular standards of their employers and leaders, the apparent association of the Church with those responsible for evil social conditions, inevitably led to the rise of anti-religious Socialism and of Communism which is its logical consequence. In one form or another, Socialism appeared in the different countries of Europe as the only system which really offered justice to the worker. In England, Socialism was not completely logical, and often bore a definite Christian character. On the Continent it was always anti-Catholic and generally anti-Christian. The Church, therefore, adapted herself to the diverse conditions and fostered the establishment of specifically Catholic organisations for the defence of labour on the Continent, but was content to advise English Catholics to make use of existing institutions in their own country.

The same thing happened with political organisations. Catholic political parties were active in the continental democracies but in England it was possible to bring Catholic principles to bear upon political life through any one of the parliamentary parties.

It has to be admitted that these Catholic political and social organisations, after making great progress and showing fair promise of even more wonderful success, have been overcome in the greater part of Europe by the forces of secularism. The latter, precisely because they are secular, have failed to defend human freedom and have been transmuted into the totalitarian systems of Fascism, Nazism and Communism. In Germany and Italy Catholic organisations were compelled to yield to the demands of an all-powerful State and other countries where Catholicism was exercising its influence through similar activities have fallen before the invader. France, which seemed at last to have recovered in face of extreme danger her traditional

Catholic spirit and where Catholic Action had made the greatest progress before the War began, is the latest victim. Whatever the outcome of the War, it will be generations before the Catholic forces on the continent can be reorganised for social and political action. Long before that becomes possible it will have been necessary to preach the rudiments of Christianity to peoples which have reverted to pagan ideals and practices and to provide a starving Europe with the prime necessities of life.

Meanwhile this island holds out, continuing to defend the causes of freedom, supported by the military forces of the Empire and sure of the practical sympathy of the freedom loving Americas. This is not the place to discuss the probabilities of military success, but it is clear that once this has been attained freedom, real freedom, may still be in the gravest danger.

Our success will be in vain if freedom remains to indulge in the exploitation of the democratic machine in order to establish a new dictatorship or if equal facilities are granted to Christianity and militant atheism. Not that we can expect our countrymen to rise at once after the grievous troubles of the present time to the conception of Christian freedom which was current in the Middle Ages. Preparing the way now, in the midst even of the struggle, we have to take advantage of the privileges we enjoy in England to teach the conception of Christian freedom and urge upon those who hold power the necessity of planning even now a just social order which will secure to each family that degree of true ownership which is necessary for the proper exercise of freedom.

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