

## The Fruit of Freedom.

**B**ERDYAEV, in an illuminating phrase, calls our age "the end of the Renaissance." We, in the western world, are looking back over a few centuries during which a certain very definite process has been going on, the results of which are only becoming clear as the process works itself out to its fulfilment in our own time. What, then, was the Renaissance? What has been the guiding principle of our civilisation throughout the last five hundred years? In general terms we might answer these questions by saying that the Renaissance was the attempt to set man free from all the limitations imposed upon him by the idea of supernatural religion or supernatural moral law. The final value was seen not in God, but in man, and the broad tendency of these centuries has been to exalt human values and to seek for an ever-increasing measure of human freedom. You might sum up the spirit of the process in two lines from Swinburne:

"Glory to man in the highest,  
For man is the master of things."

Set free from the crushing weight of supernatural authority, it was believed that man would reach his full stature and build the perfect kingdom.

We stand now, if Berdyaev be right, at the end of that extraordinary historical experiment. The twentieth century has seen the final shackles fall. It has heard the final and absolute assertion of human freedom. And our modern bewilderment arises from this—that the end of the process has turned out in fact to be utterly different from all men's hopes and dreams throughout the centuries of the experiment.

It would seem worth while to look at the various departments of life in some detail, to see how all of them have met with the same fate and how all of them are contributing to-day to our disillusionment. Everywhere in life, men appear to exalt the human values and to assert man's absolute freedom; and everywhere, like an ironic echo of Rousseau's famous sentence, men find themselves in chains.

1. Let us think first of the struggle for scientific freedom, a struggle which has been central in the period under our review, and which in itself is typical of all that has happened to the human spirit in the Renaissance period. At the beginning of that period, scientific men found their freedom of speculation constantly being curbed by the Church, which spoke in the name

of supernatural revelation. Throughout the period, in every century, there has been a constant state of warfare between those, on the one hand, who have insisted upon the necessity for free speculation, and those, on the other hand, who have insisted with more heat than success that a place must be left in life for the supernatural.

There is, of course, the treatment of Galileo with which we are all familiar, and in which the Church appears as the tyrannical suppressor of man's right to think and to investigate his universe. Unfortunately, Galileo's case is all too typical. Even when scientific men have been seeking to apply their discoveries in beneficent ways, there have not been wanting religious men who have opposed their acts. Mr. C. E. M. Joad quotes an amusing passage from the writings of an American preacher in the nineteenth century who saw a close relationship between the invention of steam engines and the activities of the devil. He said: "If God had designed that His intelligent creatures should travel at the frightful speed of 15 m.p.h. by steam, He would have foretold it through His holy prophets. It is a device of Satan to lead immortal souls down to hell." In the same century, some Scottish divines were extremely doubtful about Sir James Simpson's use of chloroform as an anaesthetic, particularly for women in childbirth. They argued that pain was a divine institution and that the pains of childbirth for women were a part of the primeval curse laid on humanity at the "fall." To seek to avoid this by the use of chloroform was obviously a form of revolt against the divine will. Simpson cleverly evaded their strictures by replying that before God removed Adam's rib, He caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam. Thus it seemed that surgery could claim to be following the divine method. With examples of this sort before us, is it any wonder that scientists should have felt religion to be an intolerable burden? Surely men were justified in feeling that if they could sweep away the authority of the Church and the authority of the Bible, they could build a world in which truth and humanity would work their beneficent results for all men. Is it any wonder that men gradually came to feel that if only they could achieve speculative and practical freedom, all would be well with humanity?

In a sense they were right. The results of our scientific freedom have been extraordinary. In all the centuries during which men have inhabited this planet, no more wonderful civilisation than our own has been built. We know more about the universe than ever before. We have achieved a miraculous control over matter and over the natural forces. We have become at last something like the real masters of the material world. We have driven back, if not destroyed, the dark tides

of pain and disease and death. Surely in claiming his speculative freedom, man was on the right road?

But now, at the end of that process, we look with strained and doubting eyes at the world which we have built. Even as I write, I have before me pictures of Barcelona during and after an air raid. In this morning's paper I read that one thousand people were killed yesterday in Canton. All over the world the cold mist of fear is settling on the minds of men. In some strange and devilish way, the science which made us is devouring us. The ideal human kingdom towards which we blithely journey recedes further and further from us. The word "humanity" has become an empty symbol, a mockery, and our freedom has been turned into paralysing fear.

By a strange irony, the science which built our civilisation is being robbed by its own child of the freedom which is the breath of its life, so that in one State after another, science is being dictated to by powers which science itself has armed and made invulnerable.

2. Or consider how the process has revealed itself in the world of economics. Mr. R. H. Tawney, in his monumental book *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, has drawn for us a picture of the economic forces at work in the world from the fourteenth century to the eighteenth. We find that just as scientific men were fighting for their freedom against the Church, so in the economic sphere, bankers, merchants, industrialists and land-owners were struggling to cast off the yoke which mediaeval religion had bound upon them. Nor was the struggle a short one. The Church, both Catholic and Reformed, strove for more than two centuries to keep a grip upon the economic life of man and to insist that man's dealings in the market-place must be subject to the eternal laws of God. It is only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and particularly in the latter, that we find the full economic freedom of man achieved and the doctrine of *laissez faire* accepted without question as economic orthodoxy.

In this sphere, too, we must admit that men justified the freedom they claimed. Our abhorrence of the social conditions in which we find ourselves must not blind us to the fact that the industrialisation of the western world brought an infinitely fuller and richer life to men. Commerce brought to the cities of the West the strange and exotic products of the East. There was an unprecedented increase in the human population of the globe. The ancient spectre of famine was laid in its grave, as men thought, for ever.

Now, again, we stand at the end of the process and find that here, too, man's apparent freedom and advance has been his betrayal. He would be a courageous man who, looking at all

the facts to-day, would defend the economic doctrine of *laissez faire*. For we have in all industrialised countries a hungry army of unemployed men; boys and girls leaving school whom industry cannot absorb. We have all the uncertainty and misery of a poverty set off against a background of great wealth, and always underlying these, the ugly fear of a war between the classes. At the Renaissance men said in effect, "Strike off our economic shackles. Let us trade and compete freely, and the world will be wealthy." At the end of the Renaissance we have South Wales.

Strangely enough, the cry of the masses to-day is simply a repetition of the old cry. They say, "Give us real economic freedom and all will be well." The suggestion is that in the dictatorship of the proletariat we shall find our heaven on earth. Yet it should be obvious from a moment's reflection that the proletariat cannot dictate, and that if the world revolution of the Marxists' dream were to come, we should simply plunge deeper into slavery. Reinhold Niebuhr, in his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, sums up our bitter predicament thus: "There is as yet no clear proof that the power of economic over-lords can be destroyed by means less rigorous than communism has employed; but there is also no proof that communistic oligarchs, once the idealistic passion of a revolutionary period is spent, will be very preferable to the capitalistic oligarchs whom they are to displace." However we take it, economic freedom seems to lead to social slavery.

3. We see the same process repeat itself in the world of art. Before the Renaissance all art was religious. Painting and music and the drama all grew and flourished in the walled garden of the Church. With the Renaissance, art, too, cried out to be free. Why should painting be restricted to religious subjects? To the Madonna, to the Saints? Why should painting not express all the world of humanity with its teeming life and passion? Browning catches the spirit of the Renaissance when his painter complains:

"This world's no blot for us,  
Nor blank; it means intensely and means good.  
To find its meaning is my meat and drink."

Or why should music only express men's religious emotions? Why should it not seek to express the whole world of human feeling and thought?

Why should the drama present over and over to men only the Bible stories? What of all the human tragedy and comedy around us? And so men broke away from the Church and

claimed for their art the same freedom as they were claiming for science and for business.

Nor dare we suggest that this assumption of freedom was not productive of great good for the human spirit. It is only necessary to mention the names of Shakespeare and Beethoven to feel that the great emancipating impulse in art was justified. It would be idle to assert that either of these could have produced what he did produce, had he stayed within the safe but narrow confines of the Church. Art would be free, and art vindicated its freedom.

Yet the process must be judged by its ends. What are they? Where does the modern man go to seek his aesthetic satisfaction? It is true that he no longer seeks it in the Church, but neither does he seek it from the great spiritual rebels. When the modern man wishes to satisfy his artistic desires, he goes in company with thousands and thousands of his fellows to the nearest picture house and there finds an art divorced from religion, but divorced, too, from all human reality; an art which is as far removed from the Renaissance as it is from the Church. Man demanded his artistic freedom and he has it, but what is the result? That upon our generation there is poured, in the name of art, an endless torrent of trivial nonsense.

Nor, if we look a little behind the scenes, is the position less disquieting. In Cedric Belfrage's *Promised Land*, we have an unofficial history of Hollywood which seems to suggest that art has freed itself from the tyranny of the monk only to become the slave of the millionaire, without genius, without talent, without even taste, determined to give to men only "what they want." Once more man's claim of absolute freedom has resulted in a grotesque and hideous form of slavery.

4. Lastly and briefly, we think of education. The revolt here has never been so powerful as in other spheres of life. In many lands the Church still has some power over the education of the young. But nevertheless here, too, the struggle has gone on and there has been a steady increase in the ranks of those who believe that education should be wholly secular, a function of the State with which the Church has no right whatever to interfere. All sorts of private experiments have already been made, and in general it is true that education is wider and more intelligent than ever it has been before. There are many reasons for believing, for example, that if the Churches in England were forcibly dispossessed of their educational powers, the results from the point of view of the general education of the children would be nothing but beneficent. Here, too, we who belong to this Renaissance period, instinctively feel that freedom from supernatural interference would solve many of our problems.

Nevertheless, one cannot but notice that the secular education which men receive, if not at school at any rate in the universities, has not quite had the results which were hoped. Modern people know more than their forefathers did. In fact, what we know is quite extraordinary. We know the number of light years to the spiral nebulae. We know the number of eggs laid by that most prolific of fish, the cod (or is it the herring?). Yet there is a strange blank in the very centre of the modern man's mind. Where once our more ignorant forefathers set their picture of God, we can only set a question mark. Our systems of education send men out into the world with extraordinary stores of knowledge about the circumference of life, and with a strange agnosticism about its heart and centre. We have succeeded in producing a generation which has no philosophy, to whom all fundamental questions are meaningless. This might not be so bad if man could permanently hold on to his question mark, that is to say, if he could permanently be an agnostic. But as Somerset Maugham has said, "The practical outcome of agnosticism is that you act as though God did not exist." And W. E. Hocking, the psychologist, says, "The pre-war experience of France in secularised education has furnished a striking instance of the principle that in education a vacuum is equivalent to a negation." The net result of modern agnosticism is that modern men have ceased to believe at all in the supernatural.

If you are a bold spirit, you will probably feel that this is a good thing, but consider what is happening. We are turning out from our schools and universities masses of men and women who are virtually atheists. We are letting these men and women loose in a world where the newspapers and the wireless are able to exert a propaganda influence of unbelievable power. The secularly educated modern man, without any religion, is powerless to resist these forces, and into the central blank of his life there comes the State or the Empire, or the Cause or the Leader. We say, "let children be freely educated and let them choose if they wish to worship in later life." The result is that our children do worship in later life. They worship the Mikado of Japan, or Kemal Attaturk, or Benito Mussolini, or Adolf Hitler, or Stalin, or even General Franco. In our attempts to set men free we have compelled them to be slaves.

So through all this Renaissance period, we see the same forces at work. In every department of life man cries out for freedom. For a time his freedom seems to work for good, and then at the last he finds himself back in a new and more hideous form of slavery. Can we interpret to our age the historical tragedy in which we all find ourselves actors? I feel that we can.

In St. John's version of the trial of Christ, the Jews shouted

to Pilate, "We have no King but Caesar." Now what these men wanted to shout was only the first part of that sentence, namely, "We have no King." They hated Caesar. In part they were destroying Christ because Christ had refused to draw the sword against Caesar. But the practical exigency of the occasion compelled them, if they would have Christ destroyed, to affirm Caesar. No doubt they did it with a mental reservation, but they did it. It is the strange destiny of man that if he will not affirm the highest, he appears to be inevitably condemned to affirm the lowest. For him there is no halfway house. At the Renaissance man attempted to cry, "We have no King." They stood midway between God and the Devil, and, repudiating both, they set up man in their place. But now history is compelling us against our own will to complete the text. We can no longer in these days say, "We have no King," but with whatever bitterness of spirit we are compelled to add, "but Caesar." Caesar has turned science into a curse. Caesar has turned economics into a blight. Caesar has enslaved art and uses education for his own purposes. Bitter and bewildered, men see all for which they had hoped, destroyed and repudiated, so that the youth of Italy can rejoice that they "are trampling on the stinking corpse of freedom." We have gone the full circle. Setting out to be free we trample on freedom itself. Setting out to have no King we have the lowest.

What the Renaissance man did not realise, and what we have not yet in the modern world realised, is that man is not absolute. Therefore human freedom can never be absolute freedom. Science was right in claiming freedom, but wrong when it set itself up as the absolute. Business men were right in claiming greater freedom, but wrong when they demanded absolute freedom. Art was justified in demanding a wider world, but wrong when she insisted that no bounds whatever could be set to her world. Educationalists who cry out for the best possible secular education are right, but wrong when they go on to assert that that can only be achieved by the repudiation of any form of religious education. Man's freedom is a relative freedom which he enjoys under the will of God. The curse of our day is that he has turned that relative into an absolute. There is deep truth in Tennyson's linking together knowledge and reverence, and in his further assertion:

"Our wills are ours, we know not how,  
Our wills are ours to make them Thine."

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