

*THE FREEDOM OF THE CITY OF GOD.*

(REVELATION XXI. 25.)

“THE gates of it shall not be shut by day, for there shall be no night there”; it is the Magna Charta of Christian liberty. The city here spoken of is not a city in the air. The glory which it unfolds is the glory of the present world. The seer looks forward to a time when the life of the Christian on earth shall be a life of liberty. He says that all liberty is the result of nightlessness; that the reason why any gates are shut by day is just the fact that night is coming on, with its facilities for crime and its protection for the criminal. In other words, the absence of freedom springs in St. John’s view from the absence of confidence. How easily can one verify this even in modern times. You go on the continent of Europe. You are asked for your passports. You are required to have your baggage examined. Your very newspapers are searched with suspicion. It is all very well for men in this tight little island to smile at such precautions. If our gates are open by day, it is because there is no night here, because the fear of the secret assassin is unfelt, because the dread of the lurking incendiary is unknown; we have parted from our bondage because we have parted from our night.

The connection here between increased liberty and increased light is a very remarkable one. The idea is that the Christian’s desire for freedom is not the result of a wish to break through the original boundaries. It comes from the fact that the rising light reveals these boundaries to have been wider than he imagined. The thought may be thus illustrated: Man dwelt at first in a garden in the midst of a dark night. The only light he had was that of a small candle, which illuminated merely a few steps in advance. He was afraid to go beyond these steps. He

had been strictly commanded not to stray outside the limits of the garden. He did not know these limits. He thought them to be very narrow. He feared the gate might be only a few paces distant. Therefore, he refused to go beyond the range of his candle, lest inadvertently he should get outside the boundaries. Suddenly the sun rises, and with the new light there breaks upon him a wondrous revelation of the whole thing. He finds that, instead of being at the gate of the garden, the gate is miles away. He finds that he has been imposing on himself a useless barrier, that he has been circumscribing himself to no purpose. The gate is far away. Between it and him there are pastures of unspeakable pleasure, through which he can range at will. The tree of life is there; the tree of knowledge is there; the gold of Havilah is there; the four rivers of paradise are there. He has been shutting himself in by an imaginary gate, and not less effectually because it was imaginary. But the light has opened the gate by revealing its delusion, by showing the wideness of the actual grounds, by disclosing to the eye the breadth of that travelling space which lies between its place of outlook and the limits of the garden.

Such is the allegory which, I think, floated before the sight of the seer of Patmos when he said, "The gates shall not be shut by day, for there shall be no night there." I greatly prefer this to the common interpretation, which makes the latter clause a parenthesis, "The gates shall not be shut by day. I need not speak of night, for there shall be no night there; if not shut by day, they shall never be shut." There is nothing wrong in the grammar of such a rendering. My objection is that it puts into a corner the most important piece of furniture in the room, treats as a subordinate clause the most striking part of the passage. The main feature of the city is the nightlessness. The liberty is but an effect. The gates of the New Jerusalem

are open because the hearts in the New Jerusalem are fearless. There is an absence of restriction because there is an absence of dread. It is not a breaking of old limits; it is not even an addition to old possessions; it is a recognition of the fact that the original estate was bigger than we deemed, and that the grounds of our first habitation gave more facilities than we had ever used.

There are four directions in which the Christianised earth has been increasingly opening its gates, and in every one of these directions the freedom has been the result of nightlessness. The first of these openings is the growth of that state of mind called charity. Its track has been indicated in modern times by a gradual widening of the field of toleration. Now, I am well aware that this has been attributed, not to the diminution, but to the increase of night. Mr. Leckie says that all toleration comes from the decline of faith. He must be confounding toleration with indifference. There is an indifference which comes from despair—from a sense that the game is not worth the candle. Toleration is always the fruit of hope. By its very etymology it implies the bearing of something. It is the sustaining of a burden in consideration of a brightness. All toleration which is not indifference comes, not from declining faith, but from declining fear. What is Christian charity? The common view is that it is the forgiveness we extend to our brother man through a persuasion of his weakness and a sense of the general impotence of human nature. That is a mistake. It would not be very far wrong to say that charity is just the reverse of this. It is the opposite of mercy. Mercy is the coming down to my brother on the ground of his helplessness; charity is the refusal to admit that there is yet *evidence* of my brother's helplessness. Mercy comes after the judgment has been delivered; charity is a plea for the suspension of judgment. Mercy results from a despair of the man's capabilities; charity

springs from a hope that his capabilities are not yet exhausted. Mercy is the product of the night ; charity is the child of real or imaginary vision—the belief that the day is at hand.

Now, the widening of our modern gates to the admission of Christian fellowship is the result, not of mere mercy, but of charity. It springs from hope, not despair. It is grounded on a larger and not a smaller view of the capacity of man. It is an act of speculation. It takes the risk of a man. It gives him the benefit of the doubt. It refuses to arrest him on suspicion. It insists on regarding him as true till he shall be proved to be false. Christian charity in its modern sense is the adoption of the principle of baptism—that a man is to be viewed from the very beginning as a member of the kingdom of God, that, ere ever he has a character, he is to have God's character imputed to him, that from his earliest infancy he is to be baptized into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. He is not to stand outside the gates of the kingdom until it is determined whether he is worthy to get in ; he is to remain within the kingdom until there shall be found some cause for putting him out, and the cause is not to be accepted on anything less than demonstrable evidence.

Such is the ideal conception of the kingdom of God as it appears in Christianity. It was involved in Christianity from the very beginning, but its recognition by the world has been slow. It is one of those gates which have only opened when they have been touched by the rosy finger of the morn ; the freedom has come from the fearlessness. The second of the openings may be described as that into the thoroughfare of worldly contact whether of books or of men. The latitude of worldly contact was originally supposed to be in proportion to a man's *distance* from the city of God ; in other words, it has been taken for granted that

the freedom of outside intercourse lies with those who *are* outside. It is the reverse. The freedom of going to find pasture in the outside is declared by our Lord Himself to belong to those who have entered within the door. There is undoubtedly a place for asceticism in the New Testament, but it is a place reserved for those who are either outside or on the threshold, "if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee." No man is asked to pluck out anything which is not to him a source of sin; and when he does pluck it out, the gain is not regarded as an unqualified one if it has involved a mutilation of human nature; he has entered into life "halt and maimed."

We may apply this to the principle of promiscuous reading. Is this world a free library? No; its tickets are issued only to those within the city of God. The opposite is the popular view—even the popular religious view. Frances Havergal in one of her letters complains that she has lost somewhat of the radiance which characterised her faith a year ago; she attributes it to the reading of Shakespeare. I have more than once been asked the question, "Ought I, a Christian, to read such a book as Renan's *Life of Jesus*?" The principle underlying the question is a curious one. It assumes that Renan's *Life of Jesus* must increase in its harmfulness in proportion as we penetrate within the precincts of the sacred temple. The opposite is the truth. The proper answer would be, "How far is your description of yourself a real one; what is the precise length and breadth of your Christianity?" It is safe to say that no man thoroughly saturated with the Christian ideal would experience the slightest danger from Renan's *Life of Jesus*. Its danger is to those who have either no ideal at all or a very defective one. The fascination of the writing is common property to all literary minds; but the danger is limited to minds which have not been impregnated with the New Testament portraiture.

And what is true of Renan is true of all works of fiction. It is the aim of every work of fiction, whether it be a novel with a purpose or not, to present an ideal to the mind. It is possible that this ideal may clash with Christianity; if so, it is a dangerous book. But it is dangerous to the non-Christian, or, at most, to the incipient Christian. I would forbid its reading, but I would forbid it to the uninitiated. I would forbid it to those outside the city, outside the light. The gates of the library are not shut where there is day. The man of the Christian ideal is allowed to study contrary ideals. Whether he can have any pleasure in such a study is another question. I am not here considering the subject of happiness; I am considering the charter of the city of God. And that charter is explicit in its terms. It declares that the citizen of the New Jerusalem is not even limited by the walls of his own environment. It declares that not only has he power to come out into worldly contact, but that, strictly speaking, he alone has that power. The charter of admission into the kingdom of earth is possession of the kingdom of heaven. Paul says, "he that is spiritual ruleth over all things"; a greater than Paul says, "seek ye first the kingdom of God, and all other things shall be added unto you." It is only another way of saying that the gates into secular life are the gates of the morning, that the man who dwells on the mountains has alone the right to explore the plain, and that the passport into the present world is assigned to those who have tasted the powers of the world to come.

The third of the great openings which mark the freedom of the city of God is its power to assimilate opinions which at one time were deemed adverse and irreconcilable. As a type and specimen of this, I shall take Darwinism. Mr. Darwin has latterly obtained a place in the New Jerusalem—has been recognised as a possible member of the kingdom of God. I do not mean that every member of the Christian

Church has recognised the truth of Darwinism. Personally, I do not. I have not the gift of faith sufficient to enable me to adopt the miracles involved in such a mode of evolution. It would require a greater amount of trust in the possibilities of nature than lies at my command. But while perhaps the majority of the Christian Church share this sentiment, there is no man who would now exclude a Darwinian, as such, from the table of communion. The question is, why? Is it because our confidence in the Christian creed has been shaken? Is it because a gloom has fallen over our vision of former days? Is it, in short, because the night has taught us *despair* that we have opened our gates to a previous foe? If so, this spectacle of modern toleration is one of the most repulsive and one of the most unhealthy which can be presented to the mind of man.

But a moment's reflection will convince us that the change of front on the part of Christianity is the result, not of a diminished, but of an increased sense of God. We have arrived at the conclusion that, if the theory of Darwin errs, it errs not by excess but by defect. On the question of the identity of species the theologian believes not less, but more, than Mr. Darwin. Darwin claims an identity of origin for the animal and the man. The theologian has come to recognise that his own science cannot stop there, that he must claim an identity of origin for everything that exists. Darwin seeks the unity of *life*; the theologian seeks the unity of all things. He is rather Spencerian than Darwinian. Like Spencer, he would find a common origin both for the living and the unliving. Like Spencer, he would place that origin in an act of primal Force; only, it is not the force of an unknowable agent, but the force of a conscious Will, "the Spirit of God moved on the face of the waters." That is the Christian doctrine of the unity of species. The Spirit moved, and from its movement all

things, however diverse, came—the light, the firmament, the earth, the plant, the animal, the man. All are manifestations of force, one force—the movement of the Divine Spirit. There is nothing in the present universe which was not implicitly included in that impact of the Spirit. All forces slept in it; all types rested in it; all forms were prefigured in it. It has been the common parent alike of the organic and the inorganic. It has constituted the brotherhood of all things. It has linked in one chain the whole family of heaven and earth, and formed the one species from which everything in nature has descended.

I am not here discussing the scientific question. I am inquiring why it is that the gates of Christian fellowship have been opened to the Darwinian. I say that the cause of the toleration is not an increase of uncertainty, but an increase of confidence, that the gates have ceased to be shut simply from the fact that there has ceased to be night in the city. I may demur to believe that the man has come out of the ape or from any intermediate link *between* the man and the ape. Nevertheless, in my doctrine of God and His Spirit, the community of origin is already conceded, and a principle, not less but more drastic than Mr. Darwin's, binds together, not only them, but every other fragment of creation.

The last of the four openings of the city of God into secular life is that which peculiarly distinguishes Christianity from Judaism. It may be called the æsthetic gate—the amalgamation of religion with beauty. To the ancient Jew there was an antagonism between religion and art. Judea was the opposite of Greece. The Greek could adore nothing that was not beautiful; the Jew was suspicious of everything that was. He was greatly afraid of art galleries, of sculpture, of images, of anything that would suggest devotion to the creature. Religion was to him naturally associated with severity, and whatever broke the



severity seemed to detract from the religion. Hence arose his extreme sabbatarianism. The day of rest could easily have been turned into a day of pleasure ; it became necessary to circumscribe it more than all the other six. It would be a deplorable thing, he thought, if the hours of leisure should be the means of introducing into worship a love of those secular objects which the heathen idolised. And so the Jew limited the length of the Sunday road, and forbade the plucking of the ears of corn. He felt that, if the day of rest were to be a day of religion, it was necessary that the rest itself should be made monotonous, disagreeable, a thing to make restive. The only way to prevent it from becoming a luxury was to make it the child's penalty of being compelled to sit still.

Now, in Christianity, all this is changed, and was changed from a very early date. Christianity has linked itself with the idea of beauty ; it has blended the Greek and the Jew. It has found a new significance for the day of rest ; it has opened the cornfields to the steps of the Son of Man. It has unbarred the gates of art. In the true spirit of its central doctrine, it has incarnated its truths in human forms. It has allowed Angelo to paint "The Last Judgment," and Raphael to depict the "Child-Christ," and Dürer to portray the "Man of Sorrows." The gates of the temple called Beautiful had been to the Jew only opened on the chain, and men had approached it with lame feet ; Christianity broke the chain, and bade the worshipper enter in.

Now, whence this relaxation of the bond ? It will be answered, "because the Christian is more secular than the Jew." Paradoxical as it may sound, I say it is the reverse ; it is because the Christian is less secular than the Jew, because he sees a wider field for God. Why have we opened those galleries of artistic imagery of which the Israelite was so afraid ? It is not because we wish to give

more emphasis to the secular. It is because we deny that art *is* secular. It is not an increasing reverence for the *creature* that has prompted the opening of our art galleries. It is the recognition of the fact that the genius of the painter is not a creature, but itself a manifestation of the Divine. We feel convinced that the artist who believes himself to have a purely secular profession has already fallen; it is because we have restricted the range of the secular that we have opened that gate Beautiful which the Jew insisted on being kept closed. Or, why is it that we have relaxed the rigidity of the Jewish Sabbath? Why do we no longer forbid the disciple to pass an hour of enjoyment in the cornfields? Is it the increased reverence for the creature? No; it is the *diminished* reverence for him. It is because the creature has been made subject to vanity in the presence of the Creator. It is because God Himself has put on the robes of the cornfield. It is because bird, and flower, and tree have ceased to be viewed as mere secular manifestations. It is because the so-called hour of pleasure is recognised to be the pleasure of a service, the joy of a worship, the rapture of a prayer. Therefore it is that we have opened the gates of the Sabbath. Not in the interest of a secular system have we unbarred these gates. Not in obedience to an impulse which would banish God from His universe have we opened these doors. Our freedom has come from our extended view of the empire of our Father; our enlargement has sprung from our enlarged sense of God; the gates of the city have been opened because there is no night there.

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