

Faith and Thought

A Journal devoted to the study of the inter-relation
of the Christian revelation and modern research

Vol. 90

Number 1

Spring 1958

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A Consideration of the Teaching of the Bible on Human Freedom

(Gunning Prize Essay 1957)

THE FREEDOM OF THE INDIVIDUAL IN MODERN SOCIETY

Prologue. In early Old Testament times the individual was submerged in the tribe, but gradually the idea of personal worth and responsibility and freedom emerged, and in the New Testament is dominant.

(1) *Freedom as a Philosophical Concept.* The two extreme views (absolute freedom and complete determinism) are negated by the facts of experience. The true view is that man is free within limits. In the Bible freewill is not discussed but presupposed.

(2) *Freedom and Authority.* Authority is essential to a stable society, but anything short of an objective and absolute (i.e. divine) authority cuts at the root of human freedom.

(3) *Freedom and the Welfare State.* The enactments of recent legislation, however beneficial, are fraught with danger to personal initiative and responsibility, and are thus a menace to freedom. Many recent writers are alive to this danger, but in as far as they ignore religion have no remedy for it.

(4) *The Root of the Matter.* According to the Bible human freedom is dependent on God's supremacy—i.e. on man's submission to God. Emancipation from God results not in freedom but slavery. The great principle is *Deo servire libertas.*

Envoi. The Bible must be read intelligently if its unique spiritual insight is to be made available for our day. In this way its relevance to modern needs and problems is demonstrated, and in particular the adequacy of its teaching on human freedom.

Except where other writers are definitely referred to and cited, the Essay is wholly original work.

THE BIBLE AND HUMAN FREEDOM

Prologue

At the entrance to one of our English harbours there is a breakwater, at either end of which is a lighthouse. The breakwater guards the safety of the haven, and the two beacon lights illuminate it for the guidance of approaching vessels.

The breakwater may be likened to the Bible as the great safeguard of the doctrine of human freedom, the bulwark of the liberty of mankind. The Sacred Book is a breakwater against the stormy seas of modern life, and its firm resistance to subversive ideas, ideas which menace the freedom and therefore the well-being of the human individual and of human society, was never more necessary than today. In the course of this Essay we shall be considering some of these ideas; but here, at the outset, let us complete the application of our analogy before discarding it.

At either end of the Bible there are two great passages which light up the whole of its teaching on this vital subject. The first of these two 'lighthouse' passages is the profound and pregnant statement which meets us on the very opening page of the Bible, that 'God made man in His own image'.¹ Here is the foundation truth on which the Biblical concept of human freedom rests. 'Man was made in the image of God', writes Dr R. W. Dale, 'because he is a free, intelligent, self-conscious and moral Personality'.² Free, intelligent, self-conscious, and moral; and it is eminently right that 'free' should come first of the four adjectives, for, as the same author goes on to say, 'the crowning glory of his [man's] nature is his moral freedom'.³

The thoroughgoing materialist holds that there is no essential difference between man and the rest of creation. If that is so, then there is no such thing as human freedom. Man is no more free than the animals, or, for the matter of that, than stocks and stones. A modern writer who is a prominent representative of this school, after saying that 'a star is not necessarily more important than a man, or vice versa', roundly declares that 'star and man . . . are both expressions of the same inner laws'.⁴ If this is true, then to speak of human freedom is of course ridiculous. It cannot be too much stressed that the freedom of man is bound up with that in him which differentiates him from the rest of creation; and this *differentium* is precisely what is specified in the passage from Genesis: that man was made in the image of God.

At the other end of the Bible, in its last book, we have a passage which, ever since Holman Hunt interpreted its meaning in a famous picture, has caught the imagination of all who think of the relations between God and man: 'Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in.'⁵ Here

¹ Gen. i. 27.

³ Ibid. p. 179.

⁵ Rev. iii. 20.

² *Christian Doctrine*, p. 178.

⁴ Fred Hoyle, *Man and Materialism*, p. vii.

we see God's respect for the freedom which, by His primal act of creation, He made an integral and essential element of human personality. Since 'His purpose in the creation of man was that there should be free persons, who would freely return the love which He gave to them', to quote the words of a recent writer, 'therefore He invites, He does not compel. He persuades; He does not condition.'¹

Too much emphasis cannot be laid on these two luminous passages. The first is the Magna Carta of the Old Testament. It is the *fons et origo* of human freedom. All that rightly pertains to the liberty of man is derivative from it. The second is its New Testament complement. The knocking, waiting Christ signifies that there is no coercion in the divine education of the race: that God will never override the human will, never infringe the prerogative of personal choice; that in His love for His human children He will never take away from them the dignity or the danger involved in possessing freedom.

'God sent His Son,' wrote the author of the Epistle to Diognetus in the long ago, 'not in sovereignty and fear and terror, but in gentleness and meekness. . . . He was saving and persuading when He sent Him, not compelling, for compulsion is not an attribute of God.'² Compulsion is not an attribute of God: that is the inscription on one side of the medal which bears on its other side the motto of the inalienable freedom of man.

Between these two classic passages stretches the vast range of Bible teaching on the freedom of man. But though vast, the main line of development can be easily discerned. It runs parallel with a development in social outlook and conditions. In the early days of the Israelites the individual man was submerged in his tribal relationships. 'The centre of worth lay not in persons who conferred worth on the group, but in the group, which gave to persons any significance they might possess.'³

This, of course, is a characteristic emphasis—indeed, it may be said to be the basis—of what we know today as totalitarianism, and it is a curious and noteworthy fact that this modern ideology, which is regarded by many in our time as the political *dernier cri*, should have been discarded in the early stages of Biblical thought and practice.

By the time of Ezekiel, the great prophet of Individualism, who rebuked his countrymen for attributing their sufferings not to their

¹ Alan Richardson, *Science, History and Faith*, p. 195.

² *Ep. Diag.*, vii. 3, 4 (Loeb Classical Library trans.)

³ Fosdick, *Guide to Understanding the Bible*, p. 55.

own sins but to the sins of their fathers¹—or, as we might put it nowadays, for being too group-conscious and not sufficiently individually-minded—the danger of Israel's early conception of social solidarity, in enfeebling the sense of personal responsibility and the significance of the individual unit, was practically over as far as the Old Testament is concerned.

Just as the Old Testament starts with social solidarity so complete that the individual has practically no rights, and moves on to a firm grasp of the meaning and worth and possibilities of personal life, so the New Testament begins with personalities as in themselves supremely valuable. Our Lord's teaching is shot through and through with His sense of the infinite worth of each individual soul, and the early Christian Church was organised on the basis of the free co-operation of free individuals. 'St Paul, though insisting on the corporate life of Christians, lays equal stress on the individual. . . . The Body of Christ is to be a fellowship of free spirits.'²

I *Freedom as a Philosophical Concept*

The question of human free will, which has played such a large part in the course of philosophical thought, is not discussed in the Bible. But it will be helpful to take a brief glance at the history of the idea in extra-Biblical thinking, in order that the position taken up in the Bible may be appreciated.

There are two extreme views. Some philosophers, of whom Fichte may be cited as an example, have contended that man is absolutely free. This view has received very little support from the great thinkers of the ages. It has recently been revived in the so-called 'existentialism' of the French writer Jean Paul Sartre,³ but it is more than doubtful if this latest assertion of complete human freedom is destined to win any large degree of acceptance from modern philosophers. The belief that man is absolutely free is negated by the ineluctable facts of experience.

At the other extreme is the view that man has no freedom at all. This view—generally known as Determinism, or the doctrine of Necessity—is by far the commoner one, and has a great following in our time. In book after book—novels, plays, as well as more serious

¹ Ezek. 18.

² Dean W. R. Matthews, *Daily Telegraph*, 12 January 1957.

³ *Being and Nothingness*, English translation, 1957, *passim*.

writings—it is taken for granted that we cannot help being what we are, and that we are not to blame for any of our actions or their consequences. In fact, according to the determinist position, words like blame and merit, vice and virtue, right and wrong, good and evil, are without meaning—except the arbitrary and variable meanings which human societies choose to place on them for their own protection. Determinism asserts that human beings only do what they cannot help doing, since they are mere puppets in the hands of an inscrutable Fate.

But though as a theory Determinism looms large, practically it does not play a great role. The determinist lives almost always as if he was not a determinist, and in his relations with other people takes it for granted that they are not 'determined'. It must be so if social life is to be possible. That human communities cannot be organised along the lines of determinism (that is, of irresponsibility) is sufficient evidence of the falsity of this view.

The true view, with which the Biblical conception of human freedom links up, is a mid-way one between the two extremes of absolute freedom and complete determinism. That *within limits* man is free, self-determined, has been the general conviction of the human race in all countries and in all times, and no philosophical demonstration of the theory of Necessity has ever seriously shaken this conviction, just as no attempt to prove man's absolute and untrammelled freedom has ever been successful.

The limits within which man is free may not be capable of precise definition, but we instinctively recognise them in practice, just as we instinctively recognise and act upon the overall fact of freedom. Here comes in—to mention one point only in this connection—the question of motive. At any given period in our experience motives have to be accepted as existing. *How* they came into existence—whether they are an outcome of our personal behaviour in the past, or an inheritance from former generations, as we inherit many of our physical and mental characteristics—need not detain us for purposes of our present argument. They exist; and they certainly limit our freedom. But as certainly they do not annul it.

Freedom, as Bishop Gore says, 'never means independence of motives but only the mysterious faculty for choosing the motive we will act upon'.¹ It is in this faculty of being able to choose between our motives that the reality of human freedom consists. To quote to the same

¹ *Philosophy of the Good Life*, Everyman Edition, p. 235.

effect a writer of former days who made this field his special study, and whose work is far from superseded: 'The freedom of the will does not mean the ability to act without a motive, as some of its opponents still stupidly seem to suppose. But it does mean the ability to create or co-operate in creating our own motives, or to choose our motive, or to transform a weaker motive into a stronger by adding weights to the scale of our own accord, and thus to determine our conduct by our reason; whence it is now usually called the power of self-determination.'¹ And this power of self-determination is a more basic and elemental feature of human personality than any pressure of motives.

But it must be reiterated that, as has already been pointed out, the Biblical writers are not concerned with free will as a philosophical problem. In the Bible the freedom of man is presupposed as a matter of course because it is taken for granted that man is always responsible to God. It may be difficult to reduce this mid-way view between the two opposite extremes to clear-cut logical terms, or to solve all the problems it presents to abstract thinking. We are here at the entrance to a region where logic and prose are not adequate vehicles for the expression of reality. Only the language of poetry and a disciplined imagination suffices, and even this is not sufficient, for there is always a residuum of mystery. It is our wisdom to trust that instinct within us which assures us that all the ramifications of argument and all the profundities of speculation and all the clash of divergent points of view, concerning such antinomies as God's foreknowledge and man's free will, God's power and man's volition, and so on, are all ultimately resolvable into the essential truth of things as it exists in the Being of God:

He lives and reigns, throned above space and time; And, in that realm, freedom and law are one; Fore-knowledge and all-knowledge and free-will Make everlasting music.²

2 *Freedom and Authority*

The course of history makes it abundantly plain that human society cannot exist without authority holding it together. The chaos produced by an unrestrained individualism is illustrated by the state of affairs portrayed in the Book of Judges, as a result of the fact that 'In

¹ Illingworth, *Personality Human and Divine*, p. 33.

² Noyes, *The Torch Bearers*, 2, p. 374.

those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes'.¹ A significant if amusing modern instance is afforded by a story of the Russian revolution of 1917, as related by Mr A. G. Gardiner:

'A stout old lady was walking with her basket down the middle of a street in Petrograd, to the great confusion of the traffic and with no small peril to herself. It was pointed out to her that the pavement was the place for foot-passengers, but she replied: "I'm going to walk where I like. We've got liberty now." It did not occur to the dear old lady', comments Mr Gardiner, 'that if liberty entitled the foot-passenger to walk down the middle of the road, it also entitled the cab-driver to drive on the pavement, and that the end of such liberty would be universal chaos'.²

When liberty is thus equated with a do-as-I-like attitude on the part of the individual, when there is no cohesive principle of authority, whether in ancient Israel or in modern Europe, anarchy is the inevitable result, and anything worth calling freedom goes by the board.

But where is true authority to be found, and what is its nature? The more this question is pondered, the more clearly it will be seen that, to be adequate for the needs of man, authority must be absolute. That is, it must derive from an ultimate standard, something independent of human vagaries and unaffected by human distractions; like the pole-star in questions of navigation. In other words, it must be the authority of God.

Wordsworth's well known lines point in the right direction:

All true glory rests,
All praise, all safety, and all happiness,
Upon the moral law.³

But this, though abundantly true, does not go far enough. Moral law, unless it is the law of an eternal law-giver, is not sufficient for the human situation. William Penn goes to the heart of the matter when he says that 'Man must be governed either by God or by tyrants'.⁴ And the entire course of world history is a commentary on the truth of Penn's words.

When there is no authority of a spiritual nature the door is open

¹ Judges xvii. 6 and xxi. 35.

² *Leaves in the Wind*, p. 223.

³ *Excursion*, Book 8.

⁴ Quoted Arnold Lunn, *Memory to Memory*, p. 235.

to dictatorship of one sort or another; and to speak of spiritual authority must mean, ultimately, the authority of God. All other forms of 'spiritual' authority—public opinion, ethical idealism, humanitarian principles, etc.—are subjective, and therefore unstable and evanescent. Just as they are man-made so they can be man-destroyed. What is needed is something outside the human scene and independent of it, something unaltering and unalterable, something 'the same yesterday, today, and for ever'. Nothing else answers this description except the Will of God. And so it comes about that in practical affairs—in life as we have to live it—there is no mid-way course between an acceptance of the authority of God on the one hand, and the anarchy of individualism or the anarchy of dictatorship on the other. And as each of these two forms of chaos is the antithesis of freedom, we reach again the same conclusion: the condition of human freedom is acceptance of the authority of God.

In one of John Galsworthy's novels¹ a young woman who professes to be an atheist remarks: 'I am decent because decency is the decent thing.' Whereupon her mother says to her, 'If there is no God, why is decency the decent thing?' And to that question there is of course no answer, for, as H. J. Massingham writes, 'if God is left out, words like responsibility, independence, and indeed any valuation whatever, are totally devoid of meaning'.²

It is astonishing to note how blind some eminent writers seem to be to this fundamental truth of Biblical revelation, so underlined and emphasised as it is by the tragic human story on this terrestrial globe. Here for instance is Mr Bertrand Russell: 'To the extent to which a man has freedom, he needs a personal morality to guide his conduct.'³

Which is much like saying that a traveller on an unfamiliar road, not knowing the direction he should take, needs to be guided by a personal sense of direction. But his personal sense of direction is as likely to lead him astray as in the right road unless he checks it up against the stars in the heavens, the eternal landmarks, objective and unchanging.

And here is Dr Julian Huxley: 'Man as scientist can provide practical control of phenomena. It is for man as man to control that control.'⁴ But it is as certain as anything can be that he can only control that control as he himself is controlled by a higher control—by the control of God. In other words, 'man as man' is insufficient for the task. All

¹ *Maid in Waiting*.

³ *Authority and the Individual*, p. 109.

² *This Plot of Earth*, p. 93.

⁴ *What Dare I Think?* p. 73.

these assertions of human omniscience, so frequent in our day, of which Dr Huxley's is one, are mere rationalisations of a need beyond man's power to fulfil. And they are sternly rebuked by the facts of experience in all generations, and never more so than in this mid-twentieth century.

To take one other example, Mr Charles Morgan speaks of 'the humane individualism that is the philosophic root of democracy'.¹ Individualism, in the best sense of the word, is a good thing; humane individualism is still better; but the root of any democracy which is to survive must be quite different from any form of individualism. Indeed, no mere 'philosophic root' is adequate at all. Democracy must grow from and be sustained by a religious root or its fate will be that of Jonah's gourd.

But not all eminent writers are thus blind to the teachings of Scripture and human experience. Dostoevsky, the famous Russian novelist, writing nearly a hundred years ago, predicted with uncanny insight the despotism which we witness in his native land today. (Incidentally, it may be noted, as a word of hope in the present situation, he also predicted that this despotism, which he describes as being 'possessed by devils', would be followed by a spiritual reformation.) The lessons Dostoevsky so powerfully enforces in his books—that those who give up God soon come no longer to believe in man, and that once a nation loses the foundation of the divine law, chaos descends upon it—are all summed up in the great principle which he states in these memorable words: 'If there is no God, then all things are allowable.'²

This is the calamity which has befallen the world in our day. When the authority of a transcendent divine Power becomes uncertain, the idea of authority among men tends to disappear altogether. For a time the authority of the State may be substituted for the authority of God, but this cannot last, and while it does last two inevitable results follow: there is no respect for the individual, and no minority is to be tolerated. The individual must be blindly obedient, and any sign of disobedience, whether on the part of individual or minority, is at once crushed. And when we consider that practically all reforms and all progress, during the entire course of human history, have sprung from minorities, the seriousness of this predicament is realised.

¹ *The Empty Room*, p. 32.

² Fulton Sheen, *Thinking Things Through*, p. 151.

3 *Freedom and the Welfare State*

John Stuart Mill, in his celebrated book *On Liberty*, published in 1859, expressed his fears that the provision of State machinery would dwarf the individual. His fears have proved to be well founded. This is not to minimise the beneficent outcome of much parliamentary legislation from his day to ours, and particularly in recent years. A contemporary writer is certainly going too far in stigmatising the Welfare State as 'a cradle-to-grave policy of mollycoddle',¹ but there is a degree of truth in his contention that it 'stifles initiative, enterprise, and the spirit of adventure'.² We may recognise to the full, and with gratitude and rejoicing, the improvement in the lot of the less privileged sections of the community which has resulted from many of its enactments and innovations, while still lamenting some of their ill-effects in lessening that sturdy self-reliance which has been such a feature of the British character in former generations. The danger of the Welfare State is that it may promote the rise of a generation that is insistent on its rights but careless of its responsibilities; that is eager to receive but not to give; and that is prepared to hand over its mind and body to the State provided material needs are satisfied.

'State action', it has been well said, 'may eliminate social injustice and remove the terrible insecurity which preys upon so many of the poor; but it carries with it a threat to individual life and tends to abolish the feeling of personal responsibility. Pressed to its extreme, it may claim not only to provide for and control the bodies of the people, but to regulate their thoughts and beliefs as well. It then becomes a menace to religious as well as to political and economic freedom.'³

This is the position in which we find ourselves at present, not only in totalitarian countries, but also, though of course to a lesser extent, in democratic lands. And it is not only a matter of State action as such. Modern techniques have made possible a new intensity of bureaucratic control. Mass suggestion, ceaselessly conveyed through radio, television, cinema, press headline, and the vast apparatus of high-pressure advertising and salesmanship—all these features of the life of our day contribute to an insidious process of standardisation. The result of it all is the creation of the mass mind, and the freedom of the human individual is steadily and increasingly sapped.

¹ *Punch*, 29 May 1957, p. 683.

² *Ibid.*

³ Elliott Binns, *Religion in the Victorian Era*, p. 408.

The rapid advance of scientific research and discovery in recent years presents an obvious and alarming menace in the same direction. What is known as automation is likely to reduce the number of merely mechanical jobs, for purely mechanical repetitive jobs are those that can best be done by automatic means. The tremendous emphasis now being laid on technology is another sign of the times. The trend seems to be for education to become more and more a matter of training people to earn their living, rather than training them to become full personalities.

The contemporary situation may be stated in the words of two recent writers who, whatever their limitations, are keen observers of the human scene. 'I find individual liberty being everywhere lessened by regimentation', says Bertrand Russell in his latest book.¹ And Fred Hoyle, in a book published during the current year (1957), says this: 'Each one of us I think is coming to feel that all individuality is being hammered out of our lives. More and more as each year passes, we are being required to live as automatons, not as humans. Individual freedom is being lost and it is being lost rapidly.'²

But where writers like Russell and Hoyle come short is that, while they can diagnose, they have no remedy. They can point out the perilous possibilities of the predicament in which humanity finds itself, but do not tell us how those possibilities can be averted. Russell, in an earlier book than the one just quoted, declares impressively, and with utter truth, after a review of the tendencies of the times, that 'emphasis upon the value of the individual is even more necessary now than at any former time'.³ But that is just like telling a man in the grip of critical illness that he never needed health so much before. What is the way out of our present mounting dangers? How can we arrive at a more adequate sense of the value of the individual? What form or forms should the emphasis on such value take? Here we are left helpless by such writers as the two just quoted; and it is just here that we need to get back to the teaching of the Bible—so definite, so unequivocal, and so dynamic.

4 *The Root of the Matter*

The great thing to be noted, in expounding the teaching of the Bible on human freedom, is that the idea of freedom is not at the

¹ *Portraits from Memory*, p. 47.

² *Man and Materialism*, p. 22.

³ *Authority and the Individual*, p. 44.

centre of Biblical revelation. The central thing, from which freedom is derivative, is God's supremacy, and man's acceptance of it. 'Freedom, rightly understood, is not the first, but a second word. The first word is dependence on God, God's lordship.'¹

This is a vital point. The truth that man's freedom is identical with his dependence on God, or in other words consists in his fellowship with God, or in still other words follows from his recognition and acceptance of the authority of God, is all-important. It is the crux of the whole matter. Here we are at the very heart of what the Bible has to say concerning the freedom of man. The essence of Bible teaching on this subject may be expressed in a single sentence which conveys a characteristic emphasis of Archbishop William Temple: the condition of human freedom is submission to God.² And this sentence, it is not too much to say, may be described as a summary of the wisdom of the ages, a résumé of all the long experience of the race.

But needless to say, this is the opposite of the usual point of view, which insists that man is free only so far as he is independent. The Bible, on the other hand, emphatically and consistently declares that he is free only so far as he is dependent—dependent on God. Incidentally, we have here the gist of the meaning of the doctrine of the Fall. Our first parents aimed at being independent of God, and fell into slavery—'brought sin into the world, and all our woe', as Milton puts it. 'The primal sin and the root of all sins', says Dr Denney, 'is the desire and determination to be independent of God.'³ Here is the doctrine of the Fall in miniature. And this desire and determination to be independent of God, because it is the root of all sins, so it is the root of all forms of spiritual bondage. The principle of the whole matter is *DEO SERVIRE LIBERTAS*, a principle which is the diametric contradiction of that self-sufficiency which man in his blindness regards as the *sine qua non* of freedom.

The tragic blunder of humanity in all generations, and of modern humanity in particular, has been to seek a freedom outside of and apart from God. All the trouble that has come upon us stems from that root. Man has developed his life on the lines of emancipation from God, and now learns from bitter experience, what he could have known from the Bible, that such emancipation is not freedom but direst slavery, whether slavery to the 'world, the flesh and the

¹ Brunner, *Christianity and Civilisation*, I, p. 140.

² Cf. *Nature, Man and God*, p. 381.

³ *Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, p. 62.

devil', or slavery under the domination of tyrants and dictators. And whether it is the one or the other, in both cases it endangers his present well-being and his prospects and possibilities as a spiritual personality.

The ancient fable of the kite is a mirror of universal human experience and is eminently relevant to the happenings of our own day. 'Let me break this cord which holds me in', said the kite as it swayed to and fro in the sky, 'and I shall soar upward in unimpeded flight'. So it snapped the cord—and plunged headlong to the ground. Modern man, in breaking away from God, brings upon himself the same fate: plunges himself into abject bondage.

The summary of Bible teaching on this subject is that there is a freedom which is perfect bondage and a bondage which is perfect freedom. The former is the outcome of the pride of self-sufficiency, and the latter is conditioned by dependence on God. This is the two-fold truth—so simple and yet so profound—revealed in the Bible. And this is the truth that the world of our day needs to face up to, if it is to avert the perils which seem imminent, and to enter upon the upward road of true progress and real prosperity. 'No man in this world', wrote Bishop Phillips Brooks, 'attains to freedom from any slavery except by entrance into some higher servitude'.¹ And when he enters into the highest servitude of all he finds the completest freedom. *Deo servire libertas.*

Envoi

Lord Acton, we are told, gathered between sixty and seventy thousand volumes 'to be the material for a history of liberty, the emancipation of conscience from power, and the gradual substitution of freedom for force in the government of man'.² Not one page of his projected history was ever written, and his huge collection of books is now preserved at Cambridge, awaiting some future historian.

But the future historian of human liberty need not go to Cambridge and wade through Lord Acton's enormous library in order to grasp the basal principles of human freedom. In the Bible—itsself the record of a thousand years of human experience and divine education, of man's thought and God's revelation—he has all he needs for this purpose.

¹ *Candle of the Lord*, p. 363.

² Mary Drew, *Acton, Gladstone and Others*, p. 8.

And if the question is asked, as it often is in one way and another—Why go to such ancient sources as we have in the Bible for guidance on this pressing modern problem?—the answer is plain, and may be stated in the words of Professor Basil Willey: ‘The assumption behind the use of the phrase “modern culture” and “the modern mind” is that whatever is modern, enlightened, scientific, etc., is superior to what is primitive. . . . This may be true of sanitation, communication and the like, but it is not necessarily true of spiritual insight.’¹

It is the spiritual insight of the Bible that is the basis of its abiding worth. On all the great questions affecting human well-being its insight is unsurpassed among all the literature of the world. It has never been equalled, never been approached, and, we may confidently say, never will be.

But if this spiritual insight is to be made available for our day, the Bible must be used intelligently. To regard it as a fetish, as not a few present-day cults regard their sacred books—the Koran among Mohammedans, for instance—is stultifying.

In one of Mr A. S. M. Hutchinson’s novels there is a reference to a hunting enthusiast who says that she has arranged in her will that she is to be buried with a Bible under her head. ‘It’s the Bible that stands by my bed every night of my life and that I stuff in my hunting kit-bag every day I go into another county. I don’t read it, my dear, haven’t opened it in a score of years, but it was my mother’s Bible and she read it and I just keep it there to have a nod at night and morning just to remind me that the straight game is the right game’.²

Even this, it may be said, as a mode of using the Bible, is better than nothing. But it is very little better than nothing. The Bible was not meant to be used as a talisman, a mascot. It is meant to be *read*, and read intelligently; and to read it intelligently means to study it in the light of its contemporary background. The circumstances which led its various writers to affirm their ‘Thus saith the Lord’ must be, as far as possible, appraised. Only in this way can a fruitful application of the principles they discerned as a result of the revelation of God, and which the Bible enshrines for the guidance of succeeding generations, be made to the problems of the twentieth century.

This is particularly true in reference to the subject with which this Essay is concerned. The outward circumstances of the lot of mankind vary so much from age to age, and the question of human freedom

¹ *Christianity Past and Present*, p. 141.

² *The Uncertain Trumpet*, p. 290.

is so wrapped up nowadays with distracting considerations—economic, political, scientific, industrial, as well as moral and religious—that unless we get behind the letter of what has been written, and dig out the principles which the letter is meant to state and convey, we are not likely to profit by our use of the Bible. And certainly we shall not avail ourselves, to anything like the degree we otherwise should, of its wonderful insight into all the problems that perplex and distress us in these anxious modern days.

‘Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free’,¹ said ‘One who saw more clearly and deeply into the human dilemma, whether ancient or modern, than any other of whom we have a record’.² And that freedom-making truth is recorded and enshrined in the pages of the sacred Volume which is well described in our British coronation service as ‘the most valuable thing that this world affords’.

A Czech student of English who recently fled from his own country was asked why he had done so. He replied: ‘I was asked to sign a repressive cultural manifesto—I, who have read Milton and Wordsworth and J. S. Mill.’³ That is, having fed his soul from these apostles of liberty, how could he lend himself to an act infringing the freedom of others? And what applies to Milton and Wordsworth and J. S. Mill applies with infinitely more force to the Bible. Anyone who has learned from its wisdom, and imbibed its spirit, is inwardly fortified against anything and everything which would rob himself or his fellows of their God-intended liberty. And he is strengthened for service to the cause of human freedom in these critical present days, and in the still more critical days which, it would appear, are ahead of us.

In many an English town and village may be seen, high up on a wall and beside a window, a weather-worn plaque bearing the legend ‘Ancient Lights’. These two words, being interpreted, mean something like this: ‘This window was ours for receiving the blessing of the sun, for opening wide to the winds of the world, and we will not have it obscured. This light we had, this light we will keep.’⁴ The two words may be taken as the motto of the liberties of mankind in relation to the Bible. ‘This Book was granted us as “a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path”’, to guide us through the crooked and dangerous

¹ John viii. 32.

² Macmurray, *Freedom in the Modern World*, p. 68.

³ *Daily Telegraph*, 12 July 1957, p. 13.

⁴ Adapted from Beverley Nichols, *A Village in a Valley*, p. 66.

ways of life. This Book we will hold, this Book we will keep. We will allow nothing to rob us of the light imparted by its teaching, that so we may preserve for ourselves, and for our posterity, "the glorious liberty of the children of God".¹

¹ Rom. viii. 21.