

The Tradition of Liberty

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THE written record of human history extends back some six thousand years. Perhaps one of the most damaging things to be recorded in its pages is that, during these centuries, the conditions of life for the majority of people have never ceased to be harsh and unsatisfactory.

The human drama is, for the most part, the story of the efforts men have made to change these conditions to their own advantage. Some have immensely benefited the world through their work; others have brought down catastrophe upon humanity and themselves. Fortunately for mankind, the net result has been an increasing measure of progress. One vital lesson to be learned is that in a world of men, most of whom aspire to something better, there is no permanent status quo, no social structures or relationships which will not some day yield to change.

The challenge which has always confronted men is how to pursue these social values which are timeless and perfect by means of institutions which are passing and faulty, and to avoid confusing the two. Otherwise, the perpetuation of the institutions tends to become the

main objective rather than the values which those institutions were supposed to maintain. The status quo then becomes not a set of relationships, but a moral order, often defended as sacrosanct and inviolable, yet in reality empty and sterile, until it either collapses or is pushed into oblivion by the architects of a new order.

These great social values of life, liberty, justice and equality which stir the hearts of men did not come into being by the simple artifice of a pronouncement or declaration. Words are merely symbols, there is no magic in them, except as people recognize and are guided by the realities which they symbolize. Our own Declaration of Independence, setting forth for the first time in human history a new philosophy of government of and by the people, obtained its primary significance from the fact that it expresses the accumulated faith and convictions of an impassioned group of men. Indeed there could have been no Declaration if men had not, long before, brought to these shores the living concept that the individual had the inalienable right to live in freedom restricted only by his responsibilities to other men; that he

might freely choose his own government; that he might stand as the equal of all other men in the eyes of impartial law.

How is it that a new concept of human relationship is born? Whence came these basic beliefs which impelled men to leave the comparative security and comfort of an established community and seek a new life in the wilderness? How was it that some men would willingly give up their lives for the right to speak, think or worship according to their conscience and their earnest desires?

We have a name for this body of beliefs which reflects man's deepest and most strongly held convictions. We call it an ideology. No society is healthy or strong unless it has such a set of convictions, accepted intellectually and deeply felt with moral certainty, that give meaning and purpose to individual and group life. The beginnings of the conviction which form the bases of our own way of life go back to the time when men had painstakingly assembled enough strands of truth and knowledge to come to some fundamental conclusions about themselves.

The first of these insights was that man was not alone in his universe. There was not only man; there was God. The Hebrew religion perceived Him to be a personal Deity, one who could be sought out, who would answer prayers, a Heavenly Father who looked after his children and kept order in the universe. From this great insight there followed a second, that these earthly children must be individually important, since He watched over them, answered their prayers, was angry or pleased with them according to their behavior. Since He dealt with them as individuals, it meant

that the individual, not the group, was the basic social entity. As individuals, they were fully credited with the right of free choice, and equally bound to the consequences which flowed from the exercise of that right. And this, if logically pursued, could lead only in one direction: If the individual were really to be a creature of free choice, he had to be given the personal freedom needed to make his choice meaningful and to assume the responsibility which all freedom demands.

We should remember that the students of the Prophets had no monopoly upon this concept of individual freedom, rights and responsibilities. The citizens of the Greek cities and, later, of the Roman Republic had more or less independently arrived at similar conclusions, but from different sets of premises. To this concept of the worth and importance of the individual, the Hebrew philosophy made an enormously important contribution. It said that, while the individual was important, he was not supremely so. The very fact that man owed his existence to a Heavenly Father who created him constituted a denial of his own ultimate sovereignty. It implied the existence of a moral order and a system of absolute values entirely beyond the reach of man, which he might perceive and be guided by, but which he could never change or abrogate. It meant that man is accountable for his actions on the basis of certain standards set for him by a power beyond his own authority and his own will. He does not propound this moral order; he lives within it, and he remains forever subject to its dispensation.

Thus the Judaic culture, together with that of the Greeks and Romans, had developed a substantial body of doctrine by the time the Republic became the Empire. The great difficulty was in determining the limits of its application. To the ancient Hebrews, it meant the descendants of Abraham. To the Athenians, it meant the citizens of Athens; to the Romans, the citizens of Rome. Thus a doctrine of universality was sought to be divided, and by this very process it lost the essential precepts it sought to teach, for, if these blessings could be extended to some and denied to others, then no one's right to them was really fixed and secure.

Then there moved across this confused and troubled scene the figure of Jesus of Nazareth. He had nothing whatever to say in support of the artificialities of a society which divided its people into master and slave, ruler and subject, Roman and Greek, Jew and Gentile, publican and Pharisee. He said only that men were brothers, loved alike of God, and equal in His sight. In a single, tremendous sentence — "Love ye one another" — he pronounced the unity of the Brotherhood of Man, and with it the universality of all human rights and responsibilities. For, if men were equal in the eyes of God and equally accountable under His moral order, it meant that they were likewise equally blessed out of His bounty.

Brotherhood, justice and liberty, equally available to all individuals under the moral order of a single, omnipotent Father — this, nearly two thousand years ago, was the simple thesis which came eventually to form the basis of our Ameri-

can Way of Life. It might have been everywhere acclaimed and made functional in the ways of man and his society; but, for a thousand years after its formulation, it lay subjugated and subordinated to the will of the earthly rulers among the relics of a world sunk in ignorance and superstition. The values were acknowledged, but to most people they had a transcendental look about them. They were something to be looked for in the next world, not in this one.

Gradually, however, the revival of learning began to fill in the vast empty spaces in men's understanding. The matter-of-fact study of history and science began to suggest the outlines of a universe which was not nearly so ominous and mysterious as had once been imagined. The intellectual revolution which took place between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries established the promise for the modern doctrine of progress, namely, that it lay within the power of men to improve infinitely the conditions of their existence on this earth. Reason would rule, and a physical world which behaved in a manner understandable to human reason might ultimately become subject to man's control.

Moreover, as it swept away the ignorance and superstitions of the ages, reason exposed the shallow foundations on which the eighteenth century kings and nobles had based their authority. What then happened is generally known to you. Beginning here in America, and extending around the world, the ordinary people asserted their right to govern themselves. Some succeeded; others failed; but the important thing is that this time they acted

more out of hope for the future than of protest over the past. Their ideology had lost some of its transcendental quality. It assumed first the posture of the possible and then the fabric of reality. It was something to be conjured with, here, now, on this earth.

Even with a new faith transformed to an adopted philosophy of life's reality and expressed in instruments of government and existing policies of law and order. This was not enough to open the vistas of hope that there might actually be a new world order. It remained for the technological revolution of the following two centuries to supply the democratic concept with the weapons and physical capabilities which gave the advocates of liberty both their greatest opportunity and greatest challenge. The enlightenment had gone far to free men's minds, but until about two hundred years ago, the world's work was done principally by the muscle power of men and animals. The margin between what was produced and what was consumed was so desperately thin that the majority of the population stayed virtually at subsistence level. It took the labor of five men in the field to produce the food required by one man working in the town. For one man to live well, ten had to live in abject poverty. In these circumstances the prospects for real freedom for all men seemed effectively cut off by practical economic necessity for human toil to provide an energy requirement that could be obtained in no other way. There seemed to be no way to reconcile political freedom, which the ideology stipulated, with economic serfdom, which the community seemed to require

as a basic source of energy.

Then, after thousands of years of virtually no progress in energy development, men learned to produce mechanical energy through the burning of wood and coal, and thereafter through the burning of petroleum distillates and gases. We are now on the threshold of an era in which the enormous potential of atomic energy is being made increasingly available to the peaceful purposes of human endeavor. Moreover, the sciences established during the previous three centuries opened up the floodgates of man's practical inventiveness, and there poured out a torrent of new machines, all designed to ease in some way the burdens of man's physical existence.

The effect has been staggering. The eighteenth century published to a world of suffering, oppressed and poverty-ridden people the thesis of a Golden Age, not alone in some remote and shadowy other world, but as a possible future state on earth of man's own devising. The twentieth, in the example of America, seemed to come close to vindicating that thesis. It has raised the incredible proposition that it might be possible to abolish poverty and oppression, and — most fantastic innovation of all — that ordinary men might actually come to enjoy their existence, and, through this enjoyment, to learn the rewarding experience that comes from the privileges of work that contributes to man's total store of understanding and development.

Such, briefly, has been the story of the human hopes and aspirations which have reached their epitome for us in the American Way of Life. It is the story of what can lead to emancipation of human beings —

the gradual uplifting of men's minds out of the mire of ignorance and superstition, the partial rescue of their spirits from fear and avarice and distrust, the release of their bodies from drudgery and toil.

The great tragedy of our time is that, after all these thousands of years of suffering and sacrifice to gain a measure of freedom from the human spirit, there are now those who would reverse this great movement and direct its impetus in the direction of the autocracy of an all-powerful state. Ironically, this is being done in the very name of a people's government and what is brazenly described as the popular will. Yet there can be nothing more autocratic than a collectivism in which all slaves of the state, nothing more degrading to the individual, nothing more destructive of his rights and opportunities. Oddly enough, these specious offerings have the ring of plausibility because Communism offers itself as an extension of the forms of democracy. Under it people can step forward and cast some meaningless ballot; they can console themselves with the equality that results when all are equally enslaved and equally miserable; they can even find some measure of economic security, though it be the security of regimentation or a prison house.

What they cannot find within the Communist concept, because it cannot be corrupted, is liberty. Liberty is the property of the individual, the only thing that can give his individuality any meaning. He either has it or he does not. It is the one really strategic value of the liberal ideology, because, unless and until liberty is secured, none of the others are possible of achievement.

In this period the most dangerous policy our society can follow is to try to ignore what is going on around it, outside it and within it. We are most vulnerable when we stand still. Some of our greatest troubles have come upon us because our enemies seizing upon the knowledge things must move, seek to exploit what they regard as a free society seeking to maintain only a stagnant stability and not a forward march. They then use their full efforts to try to make a case against us in the court of world opinion. We are accused of imperialism and the exploitation of colonial peoples, ironically enough by the most ruthless colonial power since that of Genghis Khan. They never fail to remind us of what they would describe as the inadequacies and imperfections of our own system. Only when we are not militant are they vocal. Their very conduct gives eloquent voice to the principle that liberty never stands still. Not only its progress but its very existence demands unceasing expansion — the continuing necessity for it to be extended toward the grasp of those whose hands stretch pleadingly for the opportunities of freedom's world.

When we move forward in the right direction, our enemies are strangely silent. The reaction of Moscow to the Iran Oil settlement, the Suez agreement, the Trieste accord, and the recent London and Paris Conferences has amounted to scarcely a ripple. It is almost as if they recognized that Communism's only opportunity comes into being when we fail to move forward with the current of humanity's rising expectations.

The real revolution of our time is the emancipation of man. Communism is not the wave of the future. It is the wave of the dead past — a throwback to all that is cruel and ignoble in the character of man. Tyranny and dictators are as old as the pyramids. The world knew Caligula and Nero long before it knew Stalin and Malenkov. What is basically new in the world is the substantial possibility and the ordinary man might some day have enough to eat, enough of the world's goods to keep him in reasonable comfort; that he might order his own affairs under a government of his own choosing; that he might lift up his head and proudly give thanks to the God who created him a man.

America grew up in a tradition of liberty, and it has never been backward about acknowledging its responsibility to extend that concept of liberty to other peoples. This we must continue to do. We have the responsibility, through our own example, and through what help we can give to other people, to foster and introduce the liberal tradition wherever in the world it can flourish. Because we are its greatest

beneficiaries, it is our duty, more than that of any other people, to see that the revolution is not betrayed, that the wave of the past does not overtake the wave of the future. This means, importantly, military strength and solidarity for ourselves and our allies. But it means, just as importantly, an intense, continuing preoccupation with the ways to make life more decent and free and rewarding for the world's people.

This can only be done in concert with other peoples, and more than that, it is in a larger sense a concert between us and all those who had and all those who will have a part in bringing that goal closer to realization. For, wrote Edmund Burke:

"Society is a contract... It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection. And, as the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living; but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are yet to be born."

—*The New Age*, March 1955

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