

TORCH OF REASON.

"TRUTH BEARS THE TORCH IN THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH."—*Lucretius*.

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Honor.

SAY what is Honor? 'Tis the finest sense
Of justice which the human mind
can frame
Intent each lurking frailty, to disclaim.
And guard the way of life from all offence
Suffered or done.

—[Wordsworth.]

The First Stage of Free Thought: Its Nature and Limitation.

BY G. J. HOLYOAKE.

"He who cannot reason is defenceless; he who fears to reason has a coward mind; he who will not reason is willing to be deceived and will deceive all who listen to him."—Maxim of Free Thought.

FREETHOUGHT is founded upon reason. It is the exercise of reason, without which freethought is free foolishness. Freethought being the precursor of Secularism, it is necessary first to describe its principles and their limitation. Freethought means independent self-thinking. Some say all thought is free since a man can think what he pleases and no one can prevent him, which is not true. Unfortunately, thinking can be prevented by subtle spiritual intimidation in earlier and even in later life.

When a police agent found young Mazzini in the fields of Genoa, apparently meditating, his father's attention was called to the youth. His father was told that the Austrian government did not permit thinking. The Inquisition intimidated nations from thinking. The priests, by preventing instruction and prohibiting books, limited thinking. Archbishop Whately shows that no one can reason without words, and since speech can be, and is, disallowed and made penal, the highway of thought can be closed. No one can think to any purpose without inquiry concerning his subject, and inquiry can be made impossible. It is of little use that any one thinks who cannot verify his ideas by comparison with those of his compeers. To prevent this is to discourage thought. In fact, thousands are prevented thinking by denying them the means and the facilities of thinking.

Free thought means fearless thought. It is not deterred by legal penalties nor by spiritual consequences. Dissent from the Bible does not alarm the true investigator, who takes truth for authority, not authority for truth. The thinker who is really free is independent; he is under no dread; he yields to no menace; he is not dismayed by law, nor custom, nor

pulpits, nor society—whose opinion appals so many. He who has the manly passion of freethought has no fear of anything, save the fear of error.

Fearlessness is the essential condition of effective thought. If Satan sits at the top of the Bible with perdition open underneath it, into which its readers will be pushed who may doubt what they find in its pages, the right of private judgment is a snare. A man is a fool who inquires at this risk. He had better accept at once the superstition of the first priest he meets. It is not conceivable how a Christian can be a free thinker.

He who is afraid to know both sides of a question cannot think upon it. Christians do not, as a rule, want to know what can be said against their views, and they keep out of libraries all books which would inform others. Thus such Christians cannot think freely and are against others doing it. Doubt comes of thinking; the Christian commonly regards doubt as sin. How can he be a free thinker who thinks thinking is a sin?

Freethought implies three things as conditions of truth:

1. Free inquiry, which is the pathway to truth.
2. Free publicity to the ideas acquired, in order to learn whether they are useful—which is the encouragement of truth.
3. The free discussion of convictions, without which it is not possible to know whether they are true or false, which is the verification of truth.

A man is not a man unless he is a thinker; he is a fool, having no ideas of his own. If he happens to live among men who do think, he browses like an animal on their ideas. He is a sort of kept man, being supported by the thoughts of others. He is what in England is called a pauper, who subsists upon "outdoor relief" allowed him by men of intellect.

Without the right of publicity, individual thought, however praiseworthy and however perfect, would be barren to the community. Algernon Sidney said: "The best legacy I can leave my children is free speech and the example of using it."

The clergy of every denomination are unfriendly to its use. The soldiers of the cross do not fight adversaries in the open. Mr. Gladstone, alone among eminent men of piety, has insisted upon the duty

of the Church to prove its claims in discussion. In his introduction to his address at the Liverpool College (1872 or 1873) he said: "I wish to place on record my conviction that belief cannot now be defended by reticence any more than by railing, or by any privileges or assumption." Since the day of Milton there has been no greater authority on the religious wisdom of debate.

Thought, even theological, is often useless, ill-informed, foolish, mischievous, or even wicked; and he alone who submits it to free criticism gives guarantees that he means well and is self-convinced. By criticism alone comes exposure, correction or confirmation. The right of criticism is the sole protection of the community against error of custom, ignorance, prejudice or incompetence. It is not until a proposition has been generally accepted after open and fair examination that it can be considered as established and can safely be made a ground of action or belief.

These are the implementary rights of thought. They are what grammar is to the writer, which teaches him how to express himself, but not what to say. These rights are as the rules of navigation to the mariner. They teach him how to steer a ship, but do not instruct him where to steer to.

The full exercise of these rights of mental freedom is what training in the principles of jurisprudence is to the pleader, but it does not provide him with a brief. It is conceivable that a man may come to be a master of independent thinking and never put his powers to use, just as a man may know every rule of grammar and yet never write a book. In the same way a man may pass an examination in the art of navigation and never take command of a vessel, or he may qualify for a barrister, be called to the bar and never plead in any court. We know from experience that many persons join in the combat for the right of intellectual freedom for its own sake, without intending or caring to use the right when won. Some are generous enough to claim and contend for these rights from the belief that they may be useful to others. This is the first stage of freethought, and, as has been said, many never pass beyond it.

Independent thinking is concerned primarily with removing obstacles to its own action, and in contests for liberty of speech by

tongue and pen. The free mind fights mainly for its own freedom. It may begin in curiosity and may end in intellectual pride—unless conscience takes care of it. Its nature is iconoclastic and it may exist without ideas of reconstruction.

Though a man goes no further, he is a better man than he who never went as far. He has acquired a new power and is sure of his own mind. Just as one who has learned to fence, or to shoot, has a confidence in encountering an adversary, which is seldom felt by one who never had a sword in hand or practiced at a target. The sea is an element of recreation to one who has learned to swim; it is an element of death to one ignorant of the art. Besides, the thinker has attained a courage and confidence unknown to the man of orthodox mind. Since God (we are assured) is the God of truth, the honest searcher after truth has God on his side and has no dread of the King of Perdition—the terror of all Christian people—since the business of Satan is with those who are content with false ideas; not with those who seek the true. If it be a duty to seek the truth and to live the truth, honest discussion, which discerns it, identifies it, clears it and establishes it, is a form of worship of real honor to God and of true service to man. If the clergyman's speech on behalf of God is rendered exact by criticism, the criticism is a tribute, and no mean tribute to heaven. Thus the free exercise of the rights of thought involve no risk hereafter.

Moreover, so far as a man thinks he gains. Thought implies enterprise and exertion of mind, and the result is wealth of understanding, to be acquired in no other way. This intellectual property, like other property, has its rights and duties. The thinker's right is to be left in undisturbed possession of what he has earned, and his duty is to share his discoveries of truth with mankind, to whom he owes his opportunities of acquiring it.

Free expression involves consideration for others on principle. Democracy without personal deference becomes a nuisance; so free speech without courtesy is repulsive, as free publicity would be, if not mainly limited to reasoned truth. Otherwise, every blatant impulse would have the same right of utterance as verified ideas. Even truth can only claim priority

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