

GOTTFRIED VON BERLICHINGEN OF THE IRON HAND¹

Henri-D. Lacordaire, OP

(20 October 1830)

How painful it is, and yet, how beautiful to live in an age wherein people struggle not only for or against freedom — which is only one half of the world — but wherein civil war is being waged between freedom and religion which constitute humanity.

Never before was a more fertile combat seen. One part of the universe was always at rest during those famous and transitory quarrels which were settled at the Forum [of Rome - Trans.], in Pharsalus,² Salamis, or at Chaerona. The religion of the people remained undisturbed, far beyond the range of popular movements. Indeed, it was not its grandeur that protected it from the furor of the parties, but its deep misery, which did not allow it to be something wherein thought was stirring. Moreover, all the dissensions of antiquity brought no advance to the question that makes modern Europe shudder; they left no education to our minds just as they left no trace on the globe. This entire world before Christianity was incomplete; its peoples, its customs, its revolutions all perished. What good is a revolution that dies before it has changed the universe?

Today, two immortal entities are involved in quarrels: immortal religion from God and freedom from Jesus Christ. And what a religion! What freedom! What nations! A religion that prevailed from the Euphrates to Thule, like the Romans, from Scythia to Spain with the barbarians; one that prevails in the two Americas, after three centuries of conquest; one that has shown itself impressive everywhere it did not display itself as victorious, and

whose the Gospel is divine even for him who does not believe it. Freedom founded on printing, that indestructible means of communicating thought, which has so capably brought minds together that the world is today less extensive than was the Roman Empire formerly; it allows us to understand how man's thinking could glimpse the infinite. Unlike the nations of the Orient, filled with imagination and softness, or like those of the North, argumentative and coldly logical, some people occupy the middle ground between the two ancient creations, clever in their two-fold power, and capable of pushing to the limits the consequences of a principle, through a thousand ruins and a thousand centuries. Moreover, the entire world is astonished; kings are dismayed; pontiffs listen attentively to see if heaven might not speak to them; peaceful souls feel themselves fainting away, and generous hearts, uncertain for the first time, long for death, not like Cato fearing to see Caesar, but out of fear of seeing endless misfortunes.

These will be long, they will be unimaginable because there are only three solutions possible: the complete extinction of religion, the entire ruin of freedom, or an alliance between the two of them. In fact, religion has never perished on earth, and freedom, which made frequent appearances before the Christian era, has become a necessary component of the Catholic establishment, since the latter cannot develop without boundless freedom. In short, we have never seen a perfect covenant between freedom and religion: during the Middle Ages only its shadow was perceived. The first two options face the absolute impossibility of winning out; but they do not see this, they cannot see this. They are two protective immortals whose reconciliation and life appear contradictory, except to God; they are likened to those two angels of Klopstock,³ one upright and the other condemned, both of whom see Christ die. Abaddonah, the fallen angel, asks his former brother a question, which is by itself a form of repentance, to learn if it is not the reconciliation of men that is dying there. The angel of light replies only with a nod of his head, stern and sad: Oh Abaddonah! But a more generous voice comes down from the cross and reveals to the two angels that no reconciliation is impossible for God. And so it is for religion and for

freedom, two primitive angels, of whom one fell from heaven, who will engage in a combat in which neither can die nor is willing to live on the same ground as the other.

There remains the third option, the simplest one of all, if one trusted more on time than on strength, if there were not hidden deep in the heart of all prejudiced men the dreadful idea: Death to all those who do not think as we do! — so strongly do men believe in living in a community of thought. But this savage cry is also divine: Death to those who do not think as we do! This is the cry of Christ against Hell; it is an admirable demonstration of that truth which says there is no degree of certainty where there is no degree of harmony of feelings. But behold: the sword does not unite; the sword kills the body only. The folly of the protagonists is to believe in the scaffold.

For all that, they will believe in it: alternately as oppressed then as oppressors, they will attempt to build for themselves a realm of a few years in the anarchy of time. Disheartened in having established nothing, twenty unsatisfactory attempts will not enlighten them; they will accuse a man, an army, famine: never the impossibility of their system. And the one they will pursue more with their hatred will be the third party, that of religion and of freedom. Some will call that party hypocritical, others revolutionary. But it should derive some consolation from the contest! Fortunate are they who love both religion and freedom!

When the Middle Ages — that symbol of liberal and Christian establishment, symbol of the future — was about to disappear from the midst of the people, at the dawn of the 16th century, there appeared a few men who wished to stop the decline of the liberal and Catholic civilization. Already, in fact, religion — slyly menaced — considered sheltering itself under absolute power while the abandoned people sought support within themselves. At the time, there were men who fought for the work of Charlemagne, as well as some popes; among these men, it was said, was one Gottfried von Berlichingen¹, whom

Goethe treated admirably — both him and his period — in the tragedy bearing this name. In it, three parties can be seen; that of the Empire being represented by the bishop of Bamberg. Therein are expressed only peace, quiet, the need to forge a unique power in the hand of the emperor, and the need to destroy the feudal opposition. Besides, the court of Bamberg was brilliant, polite, filled with intrigues, clergymen, flatterers, scholars; the manner of life was that of Louis XIV. On another level, there appeared the peasants of Germany, aspirants to the bloody wars of the reform and to the supremacy of the people, lusting for blood and pillage, mocking both the empire and God. As for Goetz of Berlichingen of Iron Hand, filled with memories of his early youth, at a time when he had seen the last rays of an age fading away, he lived in his castle, with his wife and children, his friends, his men at arms, and those who came from afar seeking a free man who could defend good order and the people. Banished by the emperor, besieged in his castle by imperial troops, he drinks to the health of the emperor and to freedom. The emperor, said he, will be our penultimate cry; freedom will be the last one. In the end, he is betrayed, arrested, condemned; but before he dies of his wounds and his troubles, the treachery of Bamberg, the disorders of the people, and the secret tribunal took their revenge on him. In the distance, there appeared those fearful destinies that the destruction of freedom was preparing for the world, and are here today, although incomplete.

As for us, successors of Goetz of Berlichingen of Iron Hand, we have little concern for the ban of the empire, for the ban of the people, yet we continue to protest against both the empire and the people. Let us raise a monument in the desert to inform the rescued generations that long before their rescue there existed one day some free and Christian men who would not be able to rejoice at their works, who knew this, and who nonetheless engaged in battle. The secret tribunal of posterity will render justice.

Fear nothing: if despotism and anarchy overshadow all Europe, there remain also bread and water throughout Europe. If life is chased away, death will remain. Fortunate are

those who die like Goetz of Berlichingen of Iron Hand when freedom is to be found only in Heaven, and the world is but a prison cell.

ENDNOTES

1. Gottfried "Götz" von Berlichingen (c. 1480 - 23 July 1562), also known as: Götz of the Iron Hand; a German (Franconian) Knight (Reichsritter). - *CDTansey*

2. Greek town, Greek island, ancient Greek city, respectively. - *Trans.*

3. Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1724-1803); German poet. - *Trans.*

Translation from the French © 2012 by George Christian, OP, & Richard Christian. All rights reserved.

Excerpt from *Lacordaire Journaliste*, 1830-1848, compiled by Paul Fesch. Published by Delhomme et Briguet. Paris, 1897.