

FREEDOM OF INSTRUCTION

Article III¹

(25 October 1830)

Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, OP

After freedom of religion, freedom of opinion is the most precious of goods. Indeed, the number of enduring truths is rather small; the number of changeable truths is limitless, and the world lives among them as a ship riding the waves. Dreams, doubts, reveries, echos about something which no longer exists, forecasts of what will happen: the world is thereby always rocked between a thousand ideas which recede and another thousand which rise up — inevitable waves of that deep sea on which it is carried. He who would arrest the vibrations, stop the movement; he who would restrain thought, would be enchaining truth. Opinions are free so that truth may be free; they are free because they occupy half of mental life; they are free even when the Charter would not want them to be because, by nature, they seek unrestrained expression.

The French have a right to have their opinions made known and printed, so says the Charter. Consequently, every Frenchman has the right to hold his own opinions. Otherwise, the right to publish one's ideas would carry with it a prohibition on having personal opinions; that would be a mockery. Moreover, freedom of opinion is not the freedom enjoyed by one citizen, but, more basically, the freedom of all Frenchmen, a freedom which dates from the cradle, since the cradle makes the Frenchman. The day when our children are born, they inherit from us, all at once, life, name, and country; and because our country is France, their soul enters the universe as free. No one can lay claim to this freedom; it belongs entirely to them. As soon as nature will have loosened their tongue and their ideas, they will be, among other men, judges of everything, sovereign judges. What civil authority can claim for itself the right to form the opinions of those who are born with inalienable rights exceeding those of civil authority?

There are no children in France; this is one of the first maxims of public law. At his emergence from the womb of his mother, the Frenchman has the right to think, to speak,

to write, to publish what pleases him concerning everything; we do not believe that, on this matter, this was an oversight on the part of the legislator. Every modern civilization would be transformed if laws fixed a certain period of life before which freedom of opinion would not exist. If that were the case, this would revive the principle of the ancient republics, that the mind of the child belonged to the State, which had the right to bend it to its will: an abominable principle today, as much as it was fallacious then. It is abominable for those Christians who refuse to grant the exclusive right of instruction to a human authority; abominable for liberals who recognize in no authority the right to place minds under a yoke. It is to prevent a return to that order of things that the Charter declares that the French have the right to make known and to publish their opinions. The Charter has emancipated infancy and thus the Frenchman was born an adult.

Today, is freedom of thought in fact respected in childhood? Does the State treat infancy according to that imposing legal fiction which blankets our cribs with the adult toga? Ah! The world knows it; the world knows whether there is a childhood more dishonored than ours by reason of arbitrary and forced instruction. These Frenchmen, who, even in their swaddling clothes, have the right to plead any cause, are able to learn human and divine matters only with the consent of a clique presided over by a lawmaker? The University,² like Omphale,³ makes Hercules spin thread. On leaving that intellectual cell which we call a classroom, every student can write against his teachers; but he is obliged to compose their themes or translate their versions, at the risk of remaining ignorant all his life. For ten years, he is forced to parrot strange opinions, like victors who spell out their language to a conquered race. For that to happen, he would have to be wild about war under Bonaparte, wild about the Jesuits under Mr. de Villèle,⁴ wild about doctrinaire freedom under Mr. de Broglie⁵ — alternately toy and victim of the most dissimilar thoughts. Indeed, in our divided and unstable societies, there does not exist, as among the ancients, a national spirit, uniform and perpetual, which gave instruction a serious character, worthy of the childhood of man. It is sad today to see our Ministers, who cannot uphold their ideas two days in a row, purport to direct the education of a nation. See here, Gentlemen! The child on the knees of his mother knows as much as you do; let him play with his century, and do not bother to restrain him, especially since the Charter does not give you the right to do so.

We should not delude ourselves about the intentions of the government concerning the monopoly of instruction, and believe that it does so out of concern for the sciences, for a purely literary purpose. If the government held this thought, it would be

very wrong; the University kills science, literature, all possible advances, especially in rural areas. But the actual intention of the government is to keep youth under its control, to mold its ideas at will, that is to say, to violate openly freedom of opinion. If the monopoly of instruction were merely a monopoly of versions and themes, the Minister of Instruction would be seen as a curiosity; he would truly be in charge of the department of absurdities which was what the Regent had designated for Voltaire.⁶

Come now, they will say. Is childhood able to have its own opinions, and if we do not form them, will not paternity take over the duty? I admire you: in view of the two confiscations, if one was necessary, why do you prefer your own? Do you love the child more than his father? Has nature imposed on you the sacred obligations which derive from the transmission of blood and name? If the Charter forbids the father from influencing the minds of his children, God makes that his duty, God grants him the right. Show us your mandate to that effect.

In reality, we need not go that far. Every Frenchman is free to have his opinions, and, since opinions depend on books, conversations, fellowship with other men, it follows that every Frenchman is free to read what he chooses, to converse with whomever he wills, and to choose his guides in life, as he sees fit. That being the case, it is not a question of knowing whether children are capable of having personal opinions, but whether they prefer the ideas of their father to those of uncaring persons and strangers, the paternal hearth to the University. It is a question of learning when, even in their childhood, they became aware of the oppression from that required instruction which suddenly toppled their primitive ideas, and when they protested indignantly against it. We call as witnesses those families who, for thirty years, have lost domestic tranquility because of the tyranny of the University. Did those families not notice, in the early years, that their children, returning home with troubled hearts, complained that every day their innermost sentiments were offended? Did they not, twenty times over, dry their tears and regret living in sacrilegious times? Yes indeed, let it be known to you, princes of instruction, outlandish despots — know that childhood hates you, that it is aware of its harmful condition, that something has revealed to them their rights, and that, one day, freedom will sweep you away in its progress like the earth in its course took away the critics of Galilee.

In olden days, childhood was sacred because it was weak; its rights were placed under the protection of God. Today, those rights are under the protection of the Charter which, on two occasions, in two revolutions, has freed the soul of suckling infants. And

yet, in this century, the cries of the oppressed reach the powers-that-be only with the clashing sounds of the sword, and the generations come into the world only at age twenty.

ENDNOTES

1. Article published in *L'Avenir* newspaper (1830). Later collected in: ***Lacordaire Journaliste***, P. Fesch. Delhomme et Briguet. Paris, 1897.— Translated by the Brothers CHRISTIAN: Richard L. & George E. © 2010
2. The body of teachers, chosen by the State, to administer instruction at all levels. - Trans.
3. Queen of Lydia who enslaved Hercules for three years. - Trans.
4. Jean-Baptiste Séraphim Joseph, comte de Villèle (1773-1854); statesman. - Trans.
5. Léonce-Victor de Broglie (1785-1870); head of liberal party under the Restoration. - Trans.
6. François-Marie Arouet de Voltaire (1694-1778); French philosopher, historian, dramatist, and poet. - Trans.

