

FREEDOM OF INSTRUCTION

Article I¹

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When religion falls from its place with a people, it could enrich its ruins with a grandeur that would be decidedly respected; it could become free, after having been queen. Men respect equally power and freedom; by the will of God, at least one of these two is always within our grasp. Now freedom is expensive, especially for the one who descends from the throne. We would see then a rather reduced religion groveling before the new majesty, asking of it the support which misfortune never refuses to those who knock. It will wait for a long time at the gates of the palace; one day, the prince will catch sight of it in passing and he will say: "God be praised! There is still faith among my people." Religion will bow deeply because the new majesty deigned to speak to it. The prince will open his purse and, noting that etiquette forbids him from offering alms directly to God, he will say in a loud voice: "Reverend Cardinal, you are my chaplain." Religion will bow down even deeper; it will return to its deserted basilicas, amid the indifference of the people, but with the gold of Caesar.

From that moment on, there will no longer be any limits to its misfortunes, to the outrages from its enemies, and especially to those from the State. In its homeland, it will be neither mother, nor daughter, nor spouse; it will not even be a stranger because the rights of hospitality are sacred. One day, this unfortunate Church will remember that its Master had told her: "Go and teach all nations."² And seeing around itself the posterity of a great country, deprived of its historical lessons, it will cry in pain at the discrepancy between remembrance and reality. It will recall that Corinth³ did not refuse Denis⁴ the responsibility of schoolmaster, and that a religion financed by a people who dare not entrust their children to it, who do not allow that religion to rear its own faithful, is without doubt the most contemptible religion that has ever spoken of God to men.

But about what could religion complain? It is no longer queen, and it had not wanted to be free. The State hired it to chant the psalms, to bury the dead, and after, reply its *Amen*. The State is right. It is true that a law had declared that all creeds were free; but the greatest misfortune of those who had once tasted servitude is not even to understand the jailer who comes to tell them: “You are free.” Yet it is said that Athens uttered such cries of joy as to make birds fall from the sky when a Roman general declared that he wished to restore her former freedom. It was her final cry; indeed, the soul of a renowned people can at some time emerge from its tomb. Would that the Church of France, like Athens, utter this exalted cry, even if it were to be her last! The time has come for her to reclaim especially that freedom — without which all religious freedom is a laughing matter — the freedom to teach its children from the cradle to death. The priest is a man who teaches; the church is a place where teaching occurs; faith is something which can be taught: teaching, then, must be free, or the freedom of religion is only a hollow word.

Someone will say: “Are there not secular sciences and instruction?” What I understand is this: when there is a question of God, of good, of evil, of future penalties and rewards, of the destiny of mankind, everyone is allowed to teach anything he chooses; if there is a question of some languages which are older than the people and that exist only in books, no one has the right to them outside the University.⁵ That which is sacred belongs to everyone, that which is secular belongs to the University. Yet if it were found that religion and science, the bible and history, were indivisible, how could a person be free with regard to one, and a slave with regard to the other? If the Pope who divided the new worlds between greedy conquerors had told them: “Everything which is to the East of the meridian will be free, all that is to the West will be slave,” where would freedom be under the sky? Thus the moral world is a sphere where faith and reason, the East and the West, meet each other at some point on man’s itinerary; to close off one of the routes is to shatter the sphere under foot.

Languages, history, astronomy, physics, mathematics, philosophy: all of these are filled with God. Languages, for example, allow us to speak about Him, to convey His name from nation to nation, from the past to the future; they are monuments to God even more than to the nations which spoke them. They are God Himself because it is written somewhere that the Word is God.⁶ And yet we have made them prisoners! One faction stops the word and the thought of primordial times at the gates of the future; it has set itself

up as the necessary channel for the traditions of the human race, and so, its permission is required before God is allowed to speak of eternal matters that encompass the Alpha and the Omega!

Let us set aside this ridiculous distinction of the sacred and the profane. It would be truly strange for the University to determine limits and to compile a list of earthly sciences the better to establish its monopoly. Besides, if all creeds are equal, what is secular can become sacred, and what is sacred can become secular, at the whim of each. Should I make my God from Mohammed, behold all of history is turned upside down in the University; should I adore the sun as did the ancient Persians, the astronomy class would not know what to become; should it please me to build a temple to the Egyptian crocodile, the Royal Council of Public Instruction would thereby lose heart. Only one thing is certain: with the monopoly of so-called secular instruction, there is not one father in France who would be able to teach his faith to his children, no family where schism, mockery of hereditary beliefs, the impossibility of addressing God in a common prayer, did not penetrate.

Indeed, though there be sacred sciences and profane sciences, in children there is only one head to learn them. What must be done, then, to reconcile the rights of religion with those of the University, of liberty with servitude? Well! Solomon gave the intact child to his real mother, while the State leaves us nothing of our own. What a strange judgment! If the State created a lottery to see which newly born individual would be free and which one a slave, perhaps religion would receive its share. If it used a roll of the dice to determine who should wear the eternal tunic of truth, perhaps fate would throw it on the shoulders of Atlas.⁷ But no! The secular gets the better of the sacred! Bondage is everywhere, when there is some place left for it in anything!

Catholic Christians! Here is what you have been deprived of for thirty years, what millions from the State will never reimburse, what will keep you only as a shameful flock of slaves until that day on which you decide to reclaim a right that God, nature, and the Charter do not allow to be taken from you in such an offensive manner.

Endnotes

1. Article published in *L'Avenir* newspaper (1830). Later collected in: *Lacordaire Journaliste* by P. Fesch. Delhomme et Brigue, Paris. 1897. – Translated by the Brothers CHRISTIAN, Richard L. & George E. © 2010
2. See *Matthew* 28:19. - Trans.
3. City of ancient Greece, evangelized by St. Paul. - Trans.
4. Biblical figure, early convert of St. Paul. - Trans.
5. The body of teachers, chosen by the State, to administer instruction at all levels. - Trans.
6. See *John* 1:1.
7. In Greek mythology, a titan compelled to support the vault of heaven. - Trans.