

MORE ABOUT FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Many persons of good faith have a difficult time in believing that freedom of the press, which has caused so much harm, they say, could be a required instrument for the regeneration of our society. We have already demonstrated that in muzzling this freedom — without which clearly all the others are no more than a lie — man has usurped the place of the infinite being, he has created himself as infallible judge of that which is good, of that which is evil: in a word, man has made himself God. Today we will consider this same question from another viewpoint. In addition, we will not leave to the most incredulous any pretext to attack this essential part of our beliefs.

There is no one who does not recognize as we do that social truths have been profoundly altered: every philosopher, every sect leader, each in his fashion, has explained them and commented on them. So much so that the truths believed with the most superstitious blindness by a particular party are no more true than those which the opposite party seeks to spread. It should come as no surprise: the ancient light of the world, the only one which illuminated the chaos, Catholicism, has stopped shining in all its brilliance. Today, the whole world has lost its compass; it plods along only atop Catholicism's ruins; and if, amid this frightening disorder, some generous voices make themselves heard to breathe new life into those ruins, would it be necessary to stifle them because they disturb the silence of the tombs? I would entertain this scruple, if truth, still standing, had to contend with them for influence. But when the mission of death is accomplished, when there is nothing left to destroy, to leave to error the freedom of its movements and at the same time to free the truth — until then mute and in chains — is to guarantee forever the triumph of the latter [truth]. What is more obvious than this triumph? The world's crying need for faith bears witness to this even to the most blind of persons. Have we ever before talked more about religious freedom while respecting it so little? Will religion never work

any more miracles than today in Poland and in Ireland? Do we often see an entire people rise up en masse as in Belgium for the defense of their religious rights? Do we not also see, in our midst, some men, impelled by a need for faith, forge for themselves some gods to believe in? What is even more evident than the decline of Protestantism and the upward movement of Catholicism in most of the countries which had adopted the Reform? Indeed, truth is still mighty: some people believe in it, others seek it. What makes you think that from now on it will be slow to appear? But for that, truth must be allowed to use the same weapons which error employed for so long and with such success. It is important to be able to share the faith by all avenues of publicity possible: for the faith to have a recurring, even daily, press; to be the principal, and I would say the almost sole way, to propagate ideas in a century when events follow each other with such rapidity that no one has the time to read anything but flyers and leaflets. It is a matter of combat, an immoderate struggle between truth and error. Must we then leave to error the full advantage of weapons?

Yet from now on, the struggle will not last very long; and when it is over, truth will have triumphed (and who can doubt it, even with the little faith left in his soul?). It will so take over the soul that the press will no longer frighten anyone. How many blasphemous books, scandalous works, researched with enthusiasm fifty years ago are today no longer read, given the progress of truth and its success against error, evident to anyone who has not closed his eyes to the light? Take as an example the works of most of the philosophers of the eighteenth century. We recall the incredible efforts attempted, a few years ago, to have all classes of society read them. Their disastrous influence is hardly felt today; further, these same efforts only ended up proving the impotence of error, in a century when truth, full of vigor, of life, and of freedom, could fight error in close encounter and with comparable weapons. Consider what those works, today half forgotten, will be in another fifty years; hardly will it be remembered that they ever saw light. It will be the same for all the harm which the press was able to do, albeit not exclusively, I repeat, because the work of destruction has ended. Nonetheless, a remedy must be applied by destroying openly the pernicious beliefs to which the press has given birth. Moreover, by reducing these beliefs through censorship, you only prove that you are afraid of them; and who does not realize that they will acquire all the more energy than the little you show in retreating before the combat? And so, today the press is indisputably the best way to do good, to do so without injustice, and to preserve the good after it has been obtained. Despite the press' numerous mistakes since it obtained its freedom, it has done less harm than did a month of censure.

Indeed, under this regime, the inscrutable meaning of certain phrases, the vague words, the hesitations, and even the silences which everyone can interpret in his own way: all these are surely more harmful than the most lively declarations which, in its common sense, the public usually expresses rightly. The complaint arises that the enemies of order turn to the press to publish and spread their doctrines: may it please God that they always have recourse to it since we are thereby able to combat them! If they did not publish, they would be scheming in the shadows. And so, you would never know that they plotted to harm you until you had already received the fatal blow.

Besides, the actual dangers of a free press have been exaggerated. Judging from the disposition of minds in France, it is obvious that the press has lost a great deal of its influence, and that the impact of newspapers is no longer what it was. In the past, newspapers were the ones that formed the opinions of their readers; today, it is the readers who fashion newspapers to their tastes. As witness to this, take those two papers of the Consultation Department which two weeks ago asked their subscribers, with admirable naïveté, what opinion they should hold, what course they should follow. Consider also those bills devoid of beliefs, astonishing instruments of destruction, when there yet remained something to be destroyed, which are today powerless even to place a stone for the new social edifice. They drift endlessly at the mercy of the winds, embrace a system only to reject it on the morrow, go forward because they had gone back one step too many, then go back because they had arrived too early. Whatever mask behind which they hide themselves, whatever clothing they choose, you will never perceive in their followers a glow of genuine freedom. Even the most mindless credulity will no longer be tricked; from today forward, we can predict with assurance that their reign is over. Needless to say, among the organs of diverse opinions which partition France, there do remain some papers which a noble independence honors; far be it from us to think of weakening their efforts and of discouraging their zeal!

Besides, it is futile to want to command nature. Today, the reading of newspapers ranks among the customs and habits of all the French, whoever they are, from the prince to the most lowly workman. It would have been folly to hope to attack effectively the direction of minds; subsequently the upholder of the good, rather than lament that direction, must enter into the arena, there to battle against evil beliefs by means of good

ones. He must multiply the organs of truth rather than withdraw fully alive from the world scene.

Moreover, one of the points about which the most divergent opinions today seem to be in perfect agreement is the need to restore on the most extensive bases the system of provincial administration. Indeed, there is nothing more favorable than a free press to the development of this belief which we are among the first to support, and which sincere liberals have frankly adopted along with most of the royalists. Note that in fact, every province, every department today, with the greatest independence, uses this freedom; note also that in their midst were founded newspapers with different viewpoints which highlight the competitive needs of the localities as well as the abuses of an administration foreign to the countryside. It is by means of the local press that the public spirit of the provinces will be formed, a spirit so necessary to counter-balance and even to neutralize the deadly influence of the capital. It is by the local press that recovery can occur and that there arises subsequently the ability to preserve this provincial frankness so necessary for good public order. By providing some incentive to diverse ambitions which gather together today around power, that openness will, by its acts or by those of its numerous agents, render power ineffective in contravening the overall interests of the country.

Do notice that, in fact, everything is linked in our system: one of the faults of attackers is to consider only one side of the issue. But on the contrary, when taken as a whole, not a single freedom is without favoritism, just as there is not one incapable of malevolence. In a government in which the nation counts for nothing, in which power is everything, in which the provinces, as in France, are perpetually sacrificed to the whim of a few men who inhabit the capital, freedom of the press takes on the charge of turning to account, to the great detriment of power, all the faults of its agents. It blames the Minister, the Prefect, and the village policeman. It deprives them of the moral force which they need to fulfill their various functions. It will even prevent them from feeling smug for the good they might do. This is how a disabled power atones, in powerlessness, for the unrestrained desires of a guilty ambition. But we look with similar longing to both freedom of the press and decentralization. With this latter, none of the abuses which we have just highlighted could occur: with power abandoning the services which are not of general interest, it is clear that the national press would have less to do; as for the local press, operating simultaneously on forty-four thousand different points, for which vast conspiracy could it

speak? In addition, one of the consequences of decentralization — to which power would necessarily have to consent or risk disappearance — would be to restore to the provinces the right to make appointments to most of the public offices of the localities. Consequently, on the one hand, attacks against those civil servants would be infinitely less numerous because, given their election for the well-known interests of the province, they would find it easier than central government agents to abstain from endless consultations about these same interests before taking action. On the other hand, should they commit any faults, the blame would never fall on the government, which would have remained a complete outsider to their election.

Thus, freedom of the press is a necessity for the times, a necessary condition for social regeneration — the most effective means for truth to be exposed in broad daylight. Moreover, in the system in which we find ourselves, a free press cannot bring about any of the abuses which a centralized government might have to fear. We dare to hope, therefore, that there will be not the least doubt in the minds of our readers on the need to preserve intact this most precious of our freedoms, by means of which we can legally acquire all the others.

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