

Freedom's Christian Roots

Freedom is a precious possession. Wars have been fought to defend it. But the question "what is freedom?" is seldom asked. In our Canadian welfare state there is a gradual equating of freedom with economic security. There seems to be no awareness that the liberties that are still operative in Canada are to a great degree the result of Christianity's influence. Freedom is increasingly seen as the product of a benevolent, secular government that is the provider of all things. Countless programs have been designed to regulate every aspect of the lives of Canadians. How can citizens lay claims to the most extravagant personal freedoms even as they rely heavily on the state for social benefits, control, and material support?

Loss of Freedom

In every field we are witnessing a general recession of freedoms, sometimes violent, sometimes insidious. By the mid-twentieth century, God was killed off in the public mind - or if not killed, then badly disabled. The recession of freedom in Canada coincides with the recession of *lived* Christianity, ignorance of God and the Bible, and the decline in church attendance. More and more Canadians now believe that the government should correct the injustices and evils in the world.

When the government becomes all pervasive, freedoms are lost. Canada is increasingly controlled from the top down. Its Charter converted its unelected judges into legislators. Canada's Parliament is now subordinated to their opinions. The legal plunder we call taxation, and the suffocating minutiae of regulations and bureaucracy under which so many modern workers and businesses groan to make a living, and rulings of human rights commissions against Christians, constitutes a burdensome system of non-violent political, economic, and social control.

Secularism

It bears repeating; ideas have consequences. We face a new form of tyranny all the more dangerous for not recognizing itself as such. It is secularism, the attempt to banish God and absolute moral standards from public life. Secularists cut the bonds of religion as being contrary to the dignity of an emancipated mind. They assume that dependence on God is a mark of human immaturity and an obstacle to human freedom. They preach tolerance. But they are tolerant only when it suits them. What they believe is total, or all-encompassing. They exclude what the religious believer believes. No atheist will say, "I don't believe God exists, but I believe he is there for you." Is it possible to sustain freedom and democracy without belief in God and without moral reference points for ordering public life that Christianity offers the public community?

Secularists fatally undermine the prestige of Canada's own Christian past as a source of knowledge. Their belief system is above all an attack on Christian political, social, and moral ideas. Secularism cannot give an adequate account of the origin of its most

cherished value, freedom. It becomes self-destructive. Freedom decays into license; anarchy threatens, and in the face of that anarchy hosts of devils appear, each promising security amid the chaos.

When a democracy does not recognize a transcendent moral standard, the only way to resolve the conflict within it is the exercise of force by one faction over another. The failure of secularism to protect basic freedoms is clearly demonstrated in the government's insistence that all children must attend the secular public school system, which is far from religiously neutral. If parents opt out of the system, they are financially penalized. Public school teachers act as trustees for the state. They clearly tend to side with the state and its officially promulgated views against those of the private family, which they deride as "Victorian," "bigoted," "homophobic," or most damning of all, "from the fifties." William D. Gairdner comments in *The Trouble with Democracy*: "A public (that is, government) school is now one of the most dangerous places to send your child. Many of these schools are outfitted with metal detectors, video-surveillance, and uniformed patrolmen, and one school I know of uses German shepherds to sniff the children's locker for drugs."

Political Ideologies

Liberals -secularist and supporters of socialism, communism, fascism, and other highly centralized governmental systems have a strong distaste for the freedom of the individual. They believe such freedom hampers and impede them from controlling the expressions and movements of the citizens of the land. They count on the coercive powers of government to ensure the good life for all. This assault on human dignity is the evil of our times. The consequences of these ideas have been disastrous for our civilization. Without freedom, a person is dwarfed, and all progress dies. Without God raw politics takes over and totalitarianism thrives.

Secular ideologues have thought to do without God. In these terrible words of Nietzsche's they proclaimed "God is dead." But they discovered that they were the first victims of this negation. We must never forget those decisive words of the Russian religious philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev: "Where there is no God, there is no man." Freedom without faith, says Alexander Solzhenitsyn, risks a "tilt toward evil." He maintains that "if I were called upon to identify briefly the principal trait of the entire twentieth century, here too, I would be unable to find anything more precise and pithy than to repeat once again, 'Men have forgotten God.'" In his book *Unspeakable: Facing up to Evil in an Age of Genocide and Terror* Os Guinness observes: "Secularists, and particularly secularists intellectuals and opinion-makers in the press and media, owe the public debate a larger dose of humility as well as candor." He points out that the history of the twentieth century various atheist and pagan ideologies proved that a defective understanding of freedom was responsible for mountains of corpses and oceans of blood. More than one hundred million human beings were killed by secularist regimes and ideologies in the last century.

Communism

One of the great evils of our times consists in the degradation of the fundamental uniqueness of each human being. When God dies, human dignity shrivels up too. Atheist communism, the most dangerous delusion in history so far, has been accurately described as a search for the new Jerusalem without God. It exalts a mythical and far distant freedom. Wherever it is in power, it subjects the population to a wholly inhuman discipline. What counts is not personal, but class emancipation. The communist idea of freedom presupposes the total abolition of civil society and the market economy. Wherever communism is control, the population is subject to a totally planned economic and social system. "Freedom"? asked Lenin; "Why?"; "Who is to decide what is good for all?" Lenin argued that the unconscious proletariat, who preferred vodka to voting, must be led to the good by more elites. He believed collective freedom would never come from without, it would have to be imposed from without until the dumb got smart.

Communism is a crude caricature of humanist secularism. Its totalitarian politics strips men and women of their power of choice, of responsibility, and thus of their humanity. It strips the person of freedom, and thus of his or her personhood. In the mid-1970s Polish students were forced to memorize lines such as "The Individual is nothing, the individual is nil. The Party is everything." A communist-era joke in Poland express this fact well: "Party- boss: 'How much is 2+2? Polish worker: "How much would you like it to be?"".

One of the earliest and most consistent critics of communism is the Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn. In several stories and novels, but above all in the three volumes *The Gulag Archipelago*, he describes the Russian communists as committed from the first day of power to destroying everything they could not control. From day one, Solzhenitsyn notes, the Soviet regime engaged in deliberate genocide of its own subject to terrorize the remnant in total obedience. It was brutal, anti-Semitic, anti-Christian, and hostile to all autonomous or creative expressions of culture.

Nazism

National Socialism proclaimed collective freedom over individual freedom. Hitler abhorred Germany's Christian heritage. He wanted to restore the spirit of paganism in the West. He hoped for the victory of the mythological god Wotan over Christ. Yet he readily spoke of freedom and democracy. By 1934, Hitler was even referring to National Socialism as "the noblest form of democracy." Nazi theorists stressed that in their democracy, which could have but one single truth and hence required only a single party, the leader would be a living symbol not of the state, but of the whole people. Herman Göring said, "Hitler is the German people, and the German people is Hitler." The person and the political symbol were mystically fused in one body. Hitler's most famous marketing slogan was "One people, one state, one leader." He boasted, "The individual is nothing. The group [the Nazi Party] is everything." Even Nazism was utopian in Hitler's eyes. He declared, "Those who see in National Socialism nothing more than a political movement know scarcely anything of it. It is more even than a religion: it is the will to create mankind anew." But like all utopias, Nazism could bridge

the gap between the ideal and the real only through coercion and violence. The millions who perished in Nazi concentration camps are tragic reminders of an ideology without God gone amok.

Hinduism

In Hinduism freedom is liberation from illusion. Hindus experience the world as *maya*, a world of illusion, ignorance, and shadow - a world where individuality and diversity are thought to be real but are not. Therefore, freedom within Hinduism can never be freedom to be an individual. Freedom is always freedom from individuality. One may say it is an eastern religious form of collectivism.

Hinduism regards the Western passion for human rights as a form of vanity and pride as well as delusion. Human rights is an illusion. Life on earth is miserable because it imprisons each person within a perpetual becoming, without beginning or end and measured only births and deaths, by rebirths and redeaths, growth and decrepitude. One is imprisoned in the transmigration of the soul and desiring to escape from it. This view of life enslaves forever men and women in the cycle of rebirths. Consequently, in its classical formulation Hinduism does not pay the slightest attention to what is going in the world today. It is detached from the world.

Islam

In Islam freedom is linked with submission and servitude. The tradition of Islam allows slavery both in fact and in law, in the sense that Allah "has nothing to account for" to man in regards to the status in which He places him. A human being as defined by Islam is essentially the slave of God. This belief is expressed in the arabic word *islam* itself. This word means "submission." According to Islam, therefore, freedom means strictly "freedom according to consent," or "freedom by way of submission." In a Muslim state the idea of authority and power was never defined in terms of political freedom. The Muslim state is "an egalitarian theocracy." It is a theocracy because all legislative power belongs to the Koran and the fundamental principles of power and government is forever defined by the Koranic texts. Not only does all authority come from Allah, but strictly there is no other authority but Allah. And it is Allah alone who directly invests every temporal ruler with authority. Different forms of government can be accepted or tolerated, but only so far as they continue to be related to the fundamental norm of the typical Muslim state. This belief system does not favour a Western style of free democracy. In an Islamic state a Muslim rarely takes action to free himself from social injustice. There have been plenty of social and political rebellions in the past, but primarily they have taken place, at any rate where Sunnite orthodoxy has prevailed, in the name of Koranic laws.

Christianity

What is freedom? What should we do with it? The most common political freedoms are the right to speak freely, to associate with people of your choice, to own property, to

worship, leave and re-enter your country, to be tried by a jury of your peers, to vote in elections, and so on. Freedom is not the same as license to do whatever you want. We are free to exercise responsibility and generosity, free to meet the challenge of serving humanity, free to live by the truth, free to defend it against whatever distorts and manipulates it, free to observe God's law -which is the supreme standard of liberty. A free democratic society requires a respect for the individual which will prevent him from being made into a mere instrument of a social or political process, and which will guard his integrity against collective powers. Without freedom of the individual there is no real freedom, whether it is on the economic, political, or religious level .

Freedom has its roots in the Christian faith. The great documents of freedom know nothing of group rights and collectivism, and neither does Christianity. For example, Christianity's accent on the individual was a necessary condition for freedom and liberty to surface in the Magna Carta (1215), in England's Petition of Rights (1628) and Bill of Rights (1689), and in the American Bill of Rights (1791). All freedom-loving people would do well to recall the words of Malcolm Muggeridge, once a non-Christian but later a defender of the Christian faith. Said he; "We must not forget that our human rights are derived from the Christian faith. In Christian terms every single human being, whoever he or she may be, sick or well, clever or foolish, beautiful or ugly, every human being is loved by his Creator." We are not accidents of biochemistry or history, adrift in the cosmos. Each human being is God's image bearer. He is an individual with the responsibility for his neighbour. He is his brother's keeper. The state may not take away people's responsibility. The state is not our keeper. For God we are unique. Our uniqueness is witnessed in the Incarnation, when the Word became flesh (John 1:1-14). It is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear. It was not for humanity that God's Son became incarnate and died, it was for each single person. "I thought of thee in my agony," Pascal makes Jesus say, "*this* drop of blood I shed for thee." "A great price," said the apostle Paul, "was paid to ransom you, do not enslave yourselves to human masters."

The individual has always been important in Christian thought and practice. The Christian idea of the equality of the individual before God led little by little to the abolition of slavery; it mitigated all forms of man's oppression by man, it broke down rigid class distinctions and the narrow seclusion of the old class system. Prominent Christian leaders proclaimed the right of individuals to believe according to their consciences. These leaders maintained this position even though they held firmly that there is no salvation outside of faith in Him. (Cf. John 14:6). Tertullian (d. ca. 220) said that "it is a fundamental right, a privilege of nature, that every man should worship according to his own convictions...to which free-will and not force should lead us." Martin Luther (1483-1546) told the German princes in a letter that it was not the function of government to "forbid anyone to teach or believe of say what he wants - the Gospel or lies."

While Christian values have in large measure provided the infrastructure for individual freedom and rights in Western societies, they have never minimized personal responsibility as more important than freedom and rights. We are free to cooperate with others, free to obey the law. We are called to a responsible exercise of freedom. Hence,

we must know the limits of freedom. The apostle Paul enjoined responsible behaviour (Rom. 13:1) Christian freedom was freedom from the world, fulfilled in humble service of God and without regard to one's social or economic state; male or female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile. Christianity triumphed in the Roman Empire its commitment to care for the sick, the elderly, the blind, the handicapped, and the orphaned. In obeying Christ's command to take care of the least of His brethren, Christianity became a movement that could attract and retain a large number of converts by offering a more human way of life. By serving men and women we serve the cause of Christianity and thereby serve the reign of Christ, in whom we are called to the freedom of God's sons and daughters.

The historian Carlton Hayes has remarked, "Wherever Christian ideals have been generally accepted and their practice sincerely attempted, there is dynamic liberty; and wherever Christianity had been ignored or rejected; persecuted or chained to the state, there is tyranny."As I see it, in Canada our freedoms are being undermined by reliance on the welfare state, the courts, and the laws to fix all society's ills. Do we realize that in losing our external freedoms, we are also losing the sense of real freedom and even the taste for it?

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