

THE MERCY OF GOD IN AN AGE OF FREEDOM

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HE WORLD and all the men in the world—doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief—are kept alive by a malignant illness called chronic optimism. This disease is just as natural to man as two feet. In fact as soon as he recovers from it he stops using his two feet and lies down to die of despair. In modern times we speak of this disease as the philosophy of progressivism, the endless historical movement of Becoming Better. The prophets of this ism tell us that everything is moving, everything is evolving, with the passage of times things get better and better.

The chronic optimists point with pride to the marvelous progress of modern science. By and large the world nods approval. The chronic optimists point with pride to the gradual flowering of political society—from barbarism to feudalism to monarchism to democracy. The war had begun to shake the faith of a few weak-kneed Believers. But now that the war is over, and everybody but the Axis can say “we won” the tide of belief flows on with hardly a ripple.

Now it is inescapably obvious to an acute observer that things do change with the progress of time. However, it is not quite so inescapably clear that things always change for the better. In fact, what is “better” with regard to human affairs? Moderns to a man tell us that you measure “better” in society in terms of freedom and liberty. Strangely enough, nobody says that slavery is the measure of progress. This is quite significant. It signifies that man is not progressing—at least not far; that man is not getting better—at least not noticeably better.

In the interests of good supernatural pessimism it might be worth while to take the ideas of freedom and slavery and focus them on the scale of human affairs. Hours could be spent exchanging pleasantries on the question of which is the top and which is the bottom of this scale. But an unprejudiced observer will readily admit that top and bottom become a question for outright disputation only when one of the disputants is standing on his head. In as much as the possibility of actually standing still but of apparently making great strides forward is reserved to a disputant in this ungentlemanly position of being

topside down, the question of top and bottom in the scale of human affairs must of necessity be postponed.

Man really isn't as free as men might think. He is not free not to breathe, or not to eat or not to sleep. He cannot dispense with the conventional circumstance of having parents. The illusion of freedom is possible in the realm of material things only in a well-fed, well-rested adult. And the pretence of absolute independence of matter is only temporary, for sooner or later an aching tooth sends even the modern off to the dentist, and an attack of the gout finds him patiently waiting his turn in the doctor's office.

However, there is indeed a certain relative freedom in the realm of matter. Certainly by art we can so determine matter that its power becomes cushioned and its claims less embarrassing. Man must eat but he can prepare his food in many delightful ways so that the physically necessary becomes pleasantly tolerable. Man indeed must sleep but can devise a comfortable bed to lessen the humiliation of his capitulation to the needs of his body. The same may be said for shelter. The structure which is necessary as a protection from the elements becomes in human hands a thing of beauty and an object of pride, a testimony of man's mastery over his environment. But ultimately man can never get completely away from subjection or slavery to matter. This subjection dogs the human footstep whithersoever it may lead. The best man can do is pare down this slavery to a minimum and disguise it by custom and ritual.

Now, most of the conquests of modern science take place in the realm of determining matter, in the realm of mechanical art. And it is this relative freedom of man over matter that modern optimists exploit in trying to prove that duration and development are interchangeable. Overconcentration on the element of freedom in the control of human environment breeds an illusion of freedom. The actual facts of daily life spell out a different story.

But in the realm of social contact, in the family and in political society—certainly here freedom now reigns supreme!! Certainly the insignia of monarchy, the whiskers of barbarism, and the symbols of feudalism have given way to the accoutrements of democracy, even in Russia. But is this really a conquest for freedom, an abolition of subjection? Babies are still disciplined and spanked. The intellectually sluggish and less talented are still led by the strong and pseudo-wise. And the most classless society manifests the grossest subject-leader relationship. What was formerly accomplished with clubs and whips is now done with tear gas and propaganda. Subjection has not disappeared from social life. It has merely donned new garments. What

is gained by franchise is lost by propaganda. But a portion of this subjection is inherent in the very inequality of individuals, in the childishness of the child, in the dullness of the dull, and in the talents of the richly talented. Progress consists not in the abolition of this subjection but in its exploitation. The realm of social living lends but superficial evidence to magnificent strides forward in terms of freedom.

Over and above the realm of the mechanical and the social lies the broad field of human activity which philosophers have traditionally referred to as virtue but which a modern will probably call psychology. In the modern progressive mind virtue has to do with Rotarians and Boy Scouts, with people who kill their neighbors with kindness and themselves with smugness. Regardless of the names used or abused, the matter at hand is not a question of controlling environment or other men, but a question of controlling self, a question of building a full and happy life. To the modern this is merely a process of freeing self from the out-worn phobias and superstitions of the past, a liberation of the interior well springs of action. To a traditional philosopher it means the victory of the intellect and will over the untamed urges of lower nature, freedom on the spiritual level at the price of subjection on the lower level, a freedom which does not exclude conformity to the norms of law and order, and a subjection that liberates the life of man from the uncertain ebb and flow of passion. Yet regardless of whether this realm of human activity be called virtue or psychological adjustment this much is clear: the number of neurotics is on the increase, the ranks of the egotistical are not decreasing. An age of psychological enlightenment is also an age of matrimonial disaster on a racial scale. At the very threshold of true human freedom the evidence for actual slavery is overwhelming.

Unfortunately, the unregenerate optimist suffers a perpetual bias, a crick in the intellectual neck. From his lofty perch, as master of the universe, he can survey nature, and by judiciously closing his eyes to the embarrassing side, proclaim himself lord of all, but only by standing on his head! Dare he look up a little, who knows what he might discover? It is not that he lacks humility. He does have that, but it is of a very queer sort, rather like pride in reverse. His great great grandfather was a monkey who swung from his tail in the aboriginal forests, and he has pictures to prove it. Actually all that he does is create the illusion of advance by pushing the starting point as far back as he can.

What strange perversity! Modern thought has constructed a marvelous hierarchy right up to man and there it stops! It is danger-

ous and unscientific to go on, for if we ascend one more step, man is left playing second fiddle to the angels. Suppose we were to discover that our minds didn't know everything, or that our machines were not all-powerful. Personal and political morale would be severely shaken. And on top of that, to recognize a Transcendent, All-Knowing God, this would be intolerable! But the most crushing blow of all would be for modern thought to acknowledge that man had made a mess of things, so complete a mess that some colder hearts and minds have begun to wonder if the anthropological tag, *homo sapiens*, were not a scientific joke.

If it were suddenly announced on the highest scientific authority that man is a slave, always was a slave, and can find his true happiness only in acknowledging his slavery, there would undoubtedly be a terrific furor. But after it had subsided, some intrepid soul would be found bold enough to ask, "How, and of whom, are we slaves?" The answer—of Him Who said, "Without Me, you can do nothing?" That word *nothing* may be a bitter pill to swallow, but there it is, *nothing at all!*

Let us explain what we mean. Whether the truth be set down flippantly or fearfully, it all amounts to the same thing. The world has done a lot of lying and corner cutting in the last five hundred years, and now even the most fundamental laws of life are overlooked, for fear that they will cramp its style. The law of man's absolute dependence upon God is the most fundamental law of human life, but it deals a deathblow to human pride and ambition, therefore it must go! Instead of seeing the whole picture, modern men have cut off a part, indeed the most important part. They have cut off the heavens and all that is left is the earth. So man is now an uneasy king in a strange castle, his robe is too long, the crown does not fit him, the task of governing is too great. The order is all wrong.

If religion is put back in its proper place at the top of the picture, all, this subtle democratising of man's relations to God must cease, for true religion brings men face to face with slavery, call it by what sweet name they will. To those who consider what God is, and what man is, man's relations cannot be other than that of slavery yet without in the least weakening his freedom of will. Of course, if men prefer not to recognize it as such, that is their fault.

Once man sets foot in the domains of God, all his control automatically ceases. God has made all things, and sustains all things by an act of His Ineffable Will. He is, as it were, the divine Organist, and creatures the notes, continuing in existence as long as His fingers remain on the keys. "In Him, we live, and move, and have our being."

It is He Who at every moment keeps renewing the existence of all things, and were He to withdraw for a moment His loving care from them, it would be as if they had never existed. This is truly a terrible, yet a consoling truth.

God owes His creatures nothing. He had no obligation to create them, to sustain their existence from moment to moment, to send His Own Son to undo the evil situation into which they had gotten themselves. These were acts of Divine Mercy, done to succor their misery. Mercy is not given to equals, but to inferiors. The only claim men have to His Mercy is to acknowledge themselves as they truly are, by holding up their misery to Him, as a beggar shows his sores and deformities, to move the passerby to pity and almsgiving. Still, if they dare to approach Him in pride, demanding their rights, or if they hold themselves aloof from Him, echoing the cry of the fallen angels which has floated across the reaches of eternity, "I will not serve," He will still show them mercy, because they are fools, for His purposes are above men's purposes, and His thoughts are not their thoughts.

But men have a higher goal in life besides mere existence. That goal has been marked out by God, and purchased by the blood of His Divine Son. The door to a new and undreamed of life has been opened wide by the death of Jesus Christ. Yet they will pass through it only accepting his terms, by placing themselves in thralldom to His Will. The Catholic Church proclaims that those who seek true liberty will find it only in the apparent paradox of wilful, absolute submission to Jesus Christ, God Incarnate, "to serve Whom is to reign."

The disease of modern optimism is widespread and deepseated. Bold and able men are needed to apply the remedy. It is a mixture of patience, which springs from love, a holy cynicism of man's sustained advancement apart from subjection to God, and is founded upon divine grace. Supernatural pessimism is the antidote; the cure, the theological virtue of Hope.