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A HISTORY
OF FREEDOM OF THOUGHT

By J. B. BURY, D.LITT., LL.D.

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A HISTORY OF FREEDOM OF THOUGHT

CHAPTER I

FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND THE FORCES AGAINST IT

(INTRODUCTORY)

It is a common saying that thought is free. A man can never be hindered from thinking whatever he chooses so long as he conceals what he thinks. The working of his mind is limited only by the bounds of his experience and the power of his imagination. But this natural liberty of private thinking is of little value. It is unsatisfactory and even painful to the thinker himself, if he is not permitted to communicate his thoughts to others, and it is obviously of no value to his neighbours. Moreover it is extremely difficult to hide thoughts that have any power over the mind. If a man's thinking leads him to call in question ideas and customs which regulate the behaviour of those about him, to reject beliefs which they hold, to see better ways of life than those they follow,

it is almost impossible for him, if he is convinced of the truth of his own reasoning, not to betray by silence, chance words, or general attitude that he is different from them and does not share their opinions. Some have preferred, like Socrates, some would prefer to-day, to face death rather than conceal their thoughts. Thus freedom of thought, in any valuable sense, includes freedom of speech.

At present, in the most civilized countries, freedom of speech is taken as a matter of course and seems a perfectly simple thing. We are so accustomed to it that we look on it as a natural right. But this right has been acquired only in quite recent times, and the way to its attainment has lain through lakes of blood. It has taken centuries to persuade the most enlightened peoples that liberty to publish one's opinions and to discuss all questions is a good and not a bad thing. Human societies (there are some brilliant exceptions) have been generally opposed to freedom of thought, or, in other words, to new ideas, and it is easy to see why.

The average brain is naturally lazy and tends to take the line of least resistance. The mental world of the ordinary man consists of beliefs which he has accepted without questioning and to which he is firmly attached; he is instinctively hostile to anything which

would upset the established order of this familiar world. A new idea, inconsistent with some of the beliefs which he holds, means the necessity of rearranging his mind; and this process is laborious, requiring a painful expenditure of brain-energy. To him and his fellows, who form the vast majority, new ideas, and opinions which cast doubt on established beliefs and institutions, seem evil because they are disagreeable.

The repugnance due to mere mental laziness is increased by a positive feeling of fear. The conservative instinct hardens into the conservative doctrine that the foundations of society are endangered by any alterations in the structure. It is only recently that men have been abandoning the belief that the welfare of a state depends on rigid stability and on the preservation of its traditions and institutions unchanged. Wherever that belief prevails, novel opinions are felt to be dangerous as well as annoying, and any one who asks inconvenient questions about the why and the wherefore of accepted principles is considered a pestilent person.

The conservative instinct, and the conservative doctrine which is its consequence, are strengthened by superstition. If the social structure, including the whole body of customs and opinions, is associated intimately with

religious belief and is supposed to be under divine patronage, criticism of the social order savours of impiety, while criticism of the religious belief is a direct challenge to the wrath of supernatural powers.

The psychological motives which produce a conservative spirit hostile to new ideas are reinforced by the active opposition of certain powerful sections of the community, such as a class, a caste, or a priesthood, whose interests are bound up with the maintenance of the established order and the ideas on which it rests.

Let us suppose, for instance, that a people believes that solar eclipses are signs employed by their Deity for the special purpose of communicating useful information to them, and that a clever man discovers the true cause of eclipses. His compatriots in the first place dislike his discovery because they find it very difficult to reconcile with their other ideas; in the second place, it disturbs them, because it upsets an arrangement which they consider highly advantageous to their community; finally, it frightens them, as an offence to their Divinity. The priests, one of whose functions is to interpret the divine signs, are alarmed and enraged at a doctrine which menaces their power.

In prehistoric days, these motives, operating

strongly, must have made change slow in communities which progressed, and hindered some communities from progressing at all. But they have continued to operate more or less throughout history, obstructing knowledge and progress. We can observe them at work to-day even in the most advanced societies, where they have no longer the power to arrest development or repress the publication of revolutionary opinions. We still meet people who consider a new idea an annoyance and probably a danger. Of those to whom socialism is repugnant, how many are there who have never examined the arguments for and against it, but turn away in disgust simply because the notion disturbs their mental universe and implies a drastic criticism on the order of things to which they are accustomed? And how many are there who would refuse to consider any proposals for altering our imperfect matrimonial institutions, because such an idea offends a mass of prejudice associated with religious sanctions? They may be right or not, but if they are, it is not their fault. They are actuated by the same motives which were a bar to progress in primitive societies. The existence of people of this mentality, reared in an atmosphere of freedom, side by side with others who are always looking out for new ideas and regret-

ting that there are not more about, enables us to realize how, when public opinion was formed by the views of such men, thought was fettered and the impediments to knowledge enormous.

Although the liberty to publish one's opinions on any subject without regard to authority or the prejudices of one's neighbours is now a well-established principle, I imagine that only the minority of those who would be ready to fight to the death rather than surrender it could defend it on rational grounds. We are apt to take for granted that freedom of speech is a natural and inalienable birthright of man, and perhaps to think that this is a sufficient answer to all that can be said on the other side. But it is difficult to see how such a right can be established.

If a man has any "natural rights," the right to preserve his life and the right to reproduce his kind are certainly such. Yet human societies impose upon their members restrictions in the exercise of both these rights. A starving man is prohibited from taking food which belongs to somebody else. Promiscuous reproduction is restricted by various laws or customs. It is admitted that society is justified in restricting these elementary rights, because without such restrictions an ordered society could not exist. If then we concede that the expression of opinion is a

right of the same kind, it is impossible to contend that on this ground it can claim immunity from interference or that society acts unjustly in regulating it. But the concession is too large. For whereas in the other cases the limitations affect the conduct of every one, restrictions on freedom of opinion affect only the comparatively small number who have any opinions, revolutionary or unconventional, to express. The truth is that no valid argument can be founded on the conception of natural rights, because it involves an untenable theory of the relations between society and its members.

On the other hand, those who have the responsibility of governing a society can argue that it is as incumbent on them to prohibit the circulation of pernicious opinions as to prohibit any anti-social actions. They can argue that a man may do far more harm by propagating anti-social doctrines than by stealing his neighbour's horse or making love to his neighbour's wife. They are responsible for the welfare of the State, and if they are convinced that an opinion is dangerous, by menacing the political, religious, or moral assumptions on which the society is based, it is their duty to protect society against it, as against any other danger.

The true answer to this argument for

limiting freedom of thought will appear in due course. It was far from obvious. A long time was needed to arrive at the conclusion that coercion of opinion is a mistake, and only a part of the world is yet convinced. That conclusion, so far as I can judge, is the most important ever reached by men. It was the issue of a continuous struggle between authority and reason—the subject of this volume. The word *authority* requires some comment

If you ask somebody how he knows something, he may say, "I have it on good authority," or, "I read it in a book," or, "It is a matter of common knowledge," or, "I learned it at school." Any of these replies means that he has accepted information from others, trusting in their knowledge, without verifying their statements or thinking the matter out for himself. And the greater part of most men's knowledge and beliefs is of this kind, taken without verification from their parents, teachers, acquaintances, books, newspapers. When an English boy learns French, he takes the conjugations and the meanings of the words on the authority of his teacher or his grammar. The fact that in a certain place, marked on the map, there is a populous city called Calcutta, is for most people a fact accepted on authority. So is the existence

of Napoleon or Julius Cæsar. Familiar astronomical facts are known only in the same way, except by those who have studied astronomy. It is obvious that every one's knowledge would be very limited indeed, if we were not justified in accepting facts on the authority of others.

But we are justified only under one condition. The facts which we can safely accept must be capable of demonstration or verification. The examples I have given belong to this class. The boy can verify when he goes to France or is able to read a French book that the facts which he took on authority are true. I am confronted every day with evidence which proves to me that, if I took the trouble, I could verify the existence of Calcutta for myself. I cannot convince myself in this way of the existence of Napoleon, but if I have doubts about it, a simple process of reasoning shows me that there are hosts of facts which are incompatible with his non-existence. I have no doubt that the earth is some 93 millions of miles distant from the sun, because all astronomers agree that it has been demonstrated, and their agreement is only explicable on the supposition that this has been demonstrated and that, if I took the trouble to work out the calculation, I should reach the same result.

But all our mental furniture is not of this kind. The thoughts of the average man consist not only of facts open to verification, but also of many beliefs and opinions which he has accepted on authority and cannot verify or prove. Belief in the Trinity depends on the authority of the Church and is clearly of a different order from belief in the existence of Calcutta. We cannot go behind the authority and verify or prove it. If we accept it, we do so because we have such implicit faith in the authority that we credit its assertions though incapable of proof.

The distinction may seem so obvious as to be hardly worth making. But it is important to be quite clear about it. The primitive man who had learned from his elders that there were bears in the hills and likewise evil spirits, soon verified the former statement by seeing a bear, but if he did not happen to meet an evil spirit, it did not occur to him, unless he was a prodigy, that there was a distinction between the two statements; he would rather have argued, if he argued at all, that as his tribesmen were right about the bears they were sure to be right also about the spirits. In the Middle Ages a man who believed on authority that there is a city called Constantinople and that comets are portents signifying divine wrath, would not distinguish

the nature of the evidence in the two cases. You may still sometimes hear arguments amounting to this : since I believe in Calcutta on authority, am I not entitled to believe in the Devil on authority ?

Now people at all times have been commanded or expected or invited to accept on authority alone—the authority, for instance, of public opinion, or a Church, or a sacred book—doctrines which are not proved or are not capable of proof. Most beliefs about nature and man, which were not founded on scientific observation, have served directly or indirectly religious and social interests, and hence they have been protected by force against the criticisms of persons who have the inconvenient habit of using their reason. Nobody minds if his neighbour disbelieves a demonstrable fact. If a sceptic denies that Napoleon existed, or that water is composed of oxygen and hydrogen, he causes amusement or ridicule. But if he denies doctrines which cannot be demonstrated, such as the existence of a personal God or the immortality of the soul, he incurs serious disapprobation and at one time he might have been put to death. Our mediæval friend would have only been called a fool if he doubted the existence of Constantinople, but if he had questioned the significance of comets he might have got

into trouble. It is possible that if he had been so mad as to deny the existence of Jerusalem he would not have escaped with ridicule, for Jerusalem is mentioned in the Bible.

In the Middle Ages a large field was covered by beliefs which authority claimed to impose as true, and reason was warned off the ground. But reason cannot recognize arbitrary prohibitions or barriers, without being untrue to herself. The universe of experience is her province, and as its parts are all linked together and interdependent, it is impossible for her to recognize any territory on which she may not tread, or to surrender any of her rights to an authority whose credentials she has not examined and approved.

The uncompromising assertion by reason of her absolute rights throughout the whole domain of thought is termed *rationalism*, and the slight stigma which is still attached to the word reflects the bitterness of the struggle between reason and the forces arrayed against her. The term is limited to the field of theology, because it was in that field that the self-assertion of reason was most violently and pertinaciously opposed. In the same way *free thought*, the refusal of thought to be controlled by any authority but its own, has a definitely theological reference. Throughout

the conflict, authority has had great advantages. At any time the people who really care about reason have been a small minority, and probably will be so for a long time to come. Reason's only weapon has been argument. Authority has employed physical and moral violence, legal coercion and social displeasure. Sometimes she has attempted to use the sword of her adversary, thereby wounding herself. Indeed the weakest point in the strategical position of authority was that her champions, being human, could not help making use of reasoning processes and the result was that they were divided among themselves. This gave reason her chance. Operating, as it were, in the enemy's camp and professedly in the enemy's cause, she was preparing her own victory.

It may be objected that there is a legitimate domain for authority, consisting of doctrines which lie outside human experience and therefore cannot be proved or verified, but at the same time cannot be disproved. Of course, any number of propositions can be invented which cannot be disproved, and it is open to any one who possesses exuberant faith to believe them; but no one will maintain that they all deserve credence so long as their falsehood is not demonstrated. And if only some deserve credence, who, except reason,

is to decide which? If the reply is, Authority, we are confronted by the difficulty that many beliefs backed by authority have been finally disproved and are universally abandoned. Yet some people speak as if we were not justified in rejecting a theological doctrine unless we can prove it false. But the burden of proof does not lie upon the rejecter. I remember a conversation in which, when some disrespectful remark was made about hell, a loyal friend of that establishment said triumphantly, "But, absurd as it may seem, you cannot disprove it." If you were told that in a certain planet revolving round Sirius there is a race of donkeys who talk the English language and spend their time in discussing eugenics, you could not disprove the statement, but would it, on that account, have any claim to be believed? Some minds would be prepared to accept it, if it were reiterated often enough, through the potent force of suggestion. This force, exercised largely by emphatic repetition (the theoretical basis, as has been observed, of the modern practice of advertising), has played a great part in establishing authoritative opinions and propagating religious creeds. Reason fortunately is able to avail herself of the same help.

The following sketch is confined to Western

civilization. It begins with Greece and attempts to indicate the chief phases. It is the merest introduction to a vast and intricate subject, which, treated adequately, would involve not only the history of religion, of the Churches, of heresies, of persecution, but also the history of philosophy, of the natural sciences and of political theories. From the sixteenth century to the French Revolution nearly all important historical events bore in some way on the struggle for freedom of thought. It would require a lifetime to calculate, and many books to describe, all the directions and interactions of the intellectual and social forces which, since the fall of ancient civilization, have hindered and helped the emancipation of reason. All one can do, all one could do even in a much bigger volume than this, is to indicate the general course of the struggle and dwell on some particular aspects which the writer may happen to have specially studied.

CHAPTER II

REASON FREE

(GREECE AND ROME)

WHEN we are asked to specify the debt which civilization owes to the Greeks, their

achievements in literature and art naturally occur to us first of all. But a truer answer may be that our deepest gratitude is due to them as the originators of liberty of thought and discussion. For this freedom of spirit was not only the condition of their speculations in philosophy, their progress in science, their experiments in political institutions; it was also a condition of their literary and artistic excellence. Their literature, for instance, could not have been what it is if they had been debarred from free criticism of life. But apart from what they actually accomplished, even if they had not achieved the wonderful things they did in most of the realms of human activity, their assertion of the principle of liberty would place them in the highest rank among the benefactors of the race; for it was one of the greatest steps in human progress.

We do not know enough about the earliest history of the Greeks to explain how it was that they attained their free outlook upon the world and came to possess the will and courage to set no bounds to the range of their criticism and curiosity. We have to take this character as a fact. But it must be remembered that the Greeks consisted of a large number of separate peoples, who varied largely in temper, customs and traditions, though they had

important features common to all. Some were conservative, or backward, or unintellectual compared with others. In this chapter "the Greeks" does not mean all the Greeks, but only those who count most in the history of civilization, especially the Ionians and Athenians.

Ionia in Asia Minor was the cradle of free speculation. The history of European science and European philosophy begins in Ionia. Here (in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.) the early philosophers by using their reason sought to penetrate into the origin and structure of the world. They could not of course free their minds entirely from received notions, but they began the work of destroying orthodox views and religious faiths. Xenophanes may specially be named among these pioneers of thought (though he was not the most important or the ablest), because the toleration of his teaching illustrates the freedom of the atmosphere in which these men lived. He went about from city to city, calling in question on moral grounds the popular beliefs about the gods and goddesses, and ridiculing the anthropomorphic conceptions which the Greeks had formed of their divinities. "If oxen had hands and the capacities of men, they would make gods in the shape of oxen." This attack on received

theology was an attack on the veracity of the old poets, especially Homer, who was considered the highest authority on mythology. Xenophanes criticized him severely for ascribing to the gods acts which, committed by men, would be considered highly disgraceful. We do not hear that any attempt was made to restrain him from thus assailing traditional beliefs and branding Homer as immoral. We must remember that the Homeric poems were never supposed to be the word of God. It has been said that Homer was the Bible of the Greeks. The remark exactly misses the truth. The Greeks fortunately had no Bible, and this fact was both an expression and an important condition of their freedom. Homer's poems were secular, not religious, and it may be noted that they are freer from immorality and savagery than sacred books that one could mention. Their authority was immense; but it was not binding like the authority of a sacred book, and so Homeric criticism was never hampered like Biblical criticism.

In this connexion, notice may be taken of another expression and condition of freedom, the absence of sacerdotalism. The priests of the temples never became powerful castes, tyrannizing over the community in their own interests and able to silence voices raised

against religious beliefs. The civil authorities kept the general control of public worship in their own hands, and, if some priestly families might have considerable influence, yet as a rule the priests were virtually State servants whose voice carried no weight except concerning the technical details of ritual.

To return to the early philosophers, who were mostly materialists, the record of their speculations is an interesting chapter in the history of rationalism. Two great names may be selected, Heraclitus and Democritus, because they did more perhaps than any of the others, by sheer hard thinking, to train reason to look upon the universe in new ways and to shock the unreasoned conceptions of common sense. It was startling to be taught, for the first time, by Heraclitus, that the appearance of stability and permanence which material things present to our senses is a false appearance, and that the world and everything in it are changing every instant. Democritus performed the amazing feat of working out an atomic theory of the universe, which was revived in the seventeenth century and is connected, in the history of speculation, with the most modern physical and chemical theories of matter. No fantastic tales of creation, imposed by sacred authority, hampered these powerful brains.

All this philosophical speculation prepared the way for the educationalists who were known as the Sophists. They begin to appear after the middle of the fifth century. They worked here and there throughout Greece, constantly travelling, training young men for public life, and teaching them to use their reason. As educators they had practical ends in view. They turned away from the problems of the physical universe to the problems of human life—morality and politics. Here they were confronted with the difficulty of distinguishing between truth and error, and the ablest of them investigated the nature of knowledge, the method of reason—logic—and the instrument of reason—speech. Whatever their particular theories might be, their general spirit was that of free inquiry and discussion. They sought to test everything by reason. The second half of the fifth century might be called the age of Illumination.

It may be remarked that the knowledge of foreign countries which the Greeks had acquired had a considerable effect in promoting a sceptical attitude towards authority. When a man is acquainted only with the habits of his own country, they seem so much a matter of course that he ascribes them to nature, but when he travels abroad and finds

totally different habits and standards of conduct prevailing, he begins to understand the power of custom; and learns that morality and religion are matters of latitude. This discovery tends to weaken authority, and to raise disquieting reflections, as in the case of one who, brought up as a Christian, comes to realize that, if he had been born on the Ganges or the Euphrates, he would have firmly believed in entirely different dogmas.

Of course these movements of intellectual freedom were, as in all ages, confined to the minority. Everywhere the masses were exceedingly superstitious. They believed that the safety of their cities depended on the good-will of their gods. If this superstitious spirit were alarmed, there was always a danger that philosophical speculations might be persecuted. And this occurred in Athens. About the middle of the fifth century Athens had not only become the most powerful State in Greece, but was also taking the highest place in literature and art. She was a full-fledged democracy. Political discussion was perfectly free. At this time she was guided by the statesman Pericles, who was personally a freethinker, or at least was in touch with all the subversive speculations of the day. He was especially intimate with the philosopher Anaxagoras who had come from

Ionia to teach at Athens. In regard to the popular gods Anaxagoras was a thorough-going unbeliever. The political enemies of Pericles struck at him by attacking his friend. They introduced and carried a blasphemy law, to the effect that unbelievers and those who taught theories about the celestial world might be impeached. It was easy to prove that Anaxagoras was a blasphemmer who taught that the gods were abstractions and that the sun, to which the ordinary Athenian said prayers morning and evening, was a mass of flaming matter. The influence of Pericles saved him from death; he was heavily fined and left Athens for Lampsacus, where he was treated with consideration and honour.

Other cases are recorded which show that anti-religious thought was liable to be persecuted. Protagoras, one of the greatest of the Sophists, published a book *On the Gods*, the object of which seems to have been to prove that one cannot know the gods by reason. The first words ran: "Concerning the gods, I cannot say that they exist nor yet that they do not exist. There are more reasons than one why we cannot know. There is the obscurity of the subject and there is the brevity of human life." A charge of blasphemy was lodged against him and he fled from Athens. But there was no systematic

policy of suppressing free thought. Copies of the work of Protagoras were collected and burned, but the book of Anaxagoras setting forth the views for which he had been condemned was for sale on the Athenian book-stalls at a popular price. Rationalistic ideas moreover were venturing to appear on the stage, though the dramatic performances, at the feasts of the god Dionysus, were religious solemnities. The poet Euripides was saturated with modern speculation, and, while different opinions may be held as to the tendencies of some of his tragedies, he often allows his characters to express highly unorthodox views. He was prosecuted for impiety by a popular politician. We may suspect that during the last thirty years of the fifth century unorthodoxy spread considerably among the educated classes. There was a large enough section of influential rationalists to render impossible any organized repression of liberty, and the chief evil of the blasphemy law was that it could be used for personal or party reasons. Some of the prosecutions, about which we know, were certainly due to such motives, others may have been prompted by genuine bigotry and by the fear lest sceptical thought should extend beyond the highly educated and leisured class. It was a generally accepted principle among the Greeks,

and afterwards among the Romans, that religion was a good and necessary thing for the common people. Men who did not believe in its truth believed in its usefulness as a political institution, and as a rule philosophers did not seek to diffuse disturbing "truth" among the masses. It was the custom, much more than at the present day, for those who did not believe in the established cults to conform to them externally. Popular higher education was not an article in the programme of Greek statesmen or thinkers. And perhaps it may be argued that in the circumstances of the ancient world it would have been hardly practicable.

There was, however, one illustrious Athenian, who thought differently—Socrates, the philosopher. Socrates was the greatest of the educationalists, but unlike the others he taught gratuitously, though he was a poor man. His teaching always took the form of discussion; the discussion often ended in no positive result, but had the effect of showing that some received opinion was untenable and that truth is difficult to ascertain. He had indeed certain definite views about knowledge and virtue, which are of the highest importance in the history of philosophy, but for our present purpose his significance lies in his enthusiasm for discus-

sion and criticism. He taught those with whom he conversed—and he conversed indiscriminately with all who would listen to him—to bring all popular beliefs before the bar of reason, to approach every inquiry with an open mind, and not to judge by the opinion of majorities or the dictate of authority; in short to seek for other tests of the truth of an opinion than the fact that it is held by a great many people. Among his disciples were all the young men who were to become the leading philosophers of the next generation and some who played prominent parts in Athenian history.

If the Athenians had had a daily press, Socrates would have been denounced by the journalists as a dangerous person. They had a comic drama, which constantly held up to ridicule philosophers and sophists and their vain doctrines. We possess one play (the *Clouds* of Aristophanes) in which Socrates is pilloried as a typical representative of impious and destructive speculations. Apart from annoyances of this kind, Socrates reached old age, pursuing the task of instructing his fellow-citizens, without any evil befalling him. Then, at the age of seventy, he was prosecuted as an atheist and corrupter of youth and was put to death (399 B.C.). It is strange that if the Athenians really

N. thought him dangerous they should have suffered him so long. There can, I think, be little doubt that the motives of the accusation were political.¹ Socrates, looking at things as he did, could not be sympathetic with unlimited democracy, or approve of the principle that the will of the ignorant majority was a good guide. He was probably known to sympathize with those who wished to limit the franchise. When, after a struggle in which the constitution had been more than once overthrown, democracy emerged triumphant (403 B.C.), there was a bitter feeling against those who had not been its friends, and of these disloyal persons Socrates was chosen as a victim. If he had wished, he could easily have escaped. If he had given an undertaking to teach no more, he would almost certainly have been acquitted. As it was, of the 501 ordinary Athenians who were his judges, a very large minority voted for his acquittal. Even then, if he had adopted a different tone, he would not have been condemned to death.

He rose to the great occasion and vindicated freedom of discussion in a wonderful unconventional speech. The *Apology of*

¹ This has been shown very clearly by Professor Jackson in the article on "Socrates" in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, last edition.

Socrates, which was composed by his most brilliant pupil, Plato the philosopher, reproduces the general tenor of his defence. It is clear that he was not able to meet satisfactorily the charge that he did not acknowledge the gods worshipped by the city, and his explanations on this point are the weak part of his speech. But he met the accusation that he corrupted the minds of the young by a splendid plea for free discussion. This is the most valuable section of the *Apology*; it is as impressive to-day as ever. I think the two principal points which he makes are these—

(1) He maintains that the individual should at any cost refuse to be coerced by any human authority or tribunal into a course which his own mind condemns as wrong. That is, he asserts *the supremacy of the individual conscience*, as we should say, over human law. He represents his own life-work as a sort of religious quest; he feels convinced that in devoting himself to philosophical discussion he has done the bidding of a super-human guide; and he goes to death rather than be untrue to this personal conviction. "If you propose to acquit me," he says, "on condition that I abandon my search for truth, I will say: I thank you, O Athenians, but I will obey God, who, as I believe, set me

this task, rather than you, and so long as I have breath and strength I will never cease from my occupation with philosophy. I will continue the practice of accosting whomever I meet and saying to him, 'Are you not ashamed of setting your heart on wealth and honours while you have no care for wisdom and truth and making your soul better?' I know not what death is—it may be a good thing, and I am not afraid of it. But I do know that it is a bad thing to desert one's post and I prefer what may be good to what I know to be bad."

(2) He insists on *the public value of free discussion*. "In me you have a stimulating critic, persistently urging you with persuasion and reproaches, persistently testing your opinions and trying to show you that you are really ignorant of what you suppose you know. Daily discussion of the matters about which you hear me conversing is the highest good for man. Life that is not tested by such discussion is not worth living."

Thus in what we may call the earliest justification of liberty of thought we have two significant claims affirmed: the indefeasible right of the conscience of the individual—a claim on which later struggles for liberty were to turn; and the social importance of discussion and criticism. The

former claim is not based on argument but on intuition; it rests in fact on the assumption of some sort of superhuman moral principle, and to those who, not having the same personal experience as Socrates, reject this assumption, his pleading does not carry weight. The second claim, after the experience of more than 2,000 years, can be formulated more comprehensively now with bearings of which he did not dream.

The circumstances of the trial of Socrates illustrate both the tolerance and the intolerance which prevailed at Athens. His long immunity, the fact that he was at last indicted from political motives and perhaps personal also, the large minority in his favour, all show that thought was normally free, and that the mass of intolerance which existed was only fitfully invoked, and perhaps most often to serve other purposes. I may mention the case of the philosopher Aristotle, who some seventy years later left Athens because he was menaced by a prosecution for blasphemy, the charge being a pretext for attacking one who belonged to a certain political party. The persecution of opinion was never organized.

It may seem curious that to find the persecuting spirit in Greece we have to turn to the philosophers. Plato, the most brilliant

disciple of Socrates, constructed in his later years an ideal State. In this State he instituted a religion considerably different from the current religion, and proposed to compel all the citizens to believe in his gods on pain of death or imprisonment. All freedom of discussion was excluded under the cast-iron system which he conceived. But the point of interest in his attitude is that he did not care much whether a religion was true, but only whether it was morally useful; he was prepared to promote morality by edifying fables; and he condemned the popular mythology not because it was false, but because it did not make for righteousness.

The outcome of the large freedom permitted at Athens was a series of philosophies which had a common source in the conversations of Socrates. Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, the Epicureans, the Sceptics—it may be maintained that the efforts of thought represented by these names have had a deeper influence on the progress of man than any other continuous intellectual movement, at least until the rise of modern science in a new epoch of liberty.

The doctrines of the Epicureans, Stoics, and Sceptics all aimed at securing peace and guidance for the individual soul. They were widely propagated throughout the Greek

world from the third century B.C., and we may say that from this time onward most well-educated Greeks were more or less rationalists. The teaching of Epicurus had a distinct anti-religious tendency. He considered fear to be the fundamental motive of religion, and to free men's minds from this fear was a principal object of his teaching. He was a Materialist, explaining the world by the atomic theory of Democritus and denying any divine government of the universe.¹ He did indeed hold the existence of gods, but, so far as men are concerned, his gods are as if they were not—living in some remote abode and enjoying a "sacred and everlasting calm." They just served as an example of the realization of the ideal Epicurean life.

There was something in this philosophy which had the power to inspire a poet of singular genius to expound it in verse. The Roman Lucretius (first century B.C.) regarded Epicurus as the great deliverer of the human race and determined to proclaim the glad tidings of his philosophy in a poem *On the*

¹ He stated the theological difficulty as to the origin of evil in this form : God either wishes to abolish evil and cannot, or can and will not, or neither can nor will, or both can and will. The first three are unthinkable, if he is a God worthy of the name ; therefore the last alternative must be true. Why then does evil exist ? The inference is that there is no God, in the sense of a governor of the world.

*Nature of the World.*¹ With all the fervour of a religious enthusiast he denounces religion, sounding every note of defiance, loathing, and contempt, and branding in burning words the crimes to which it had urged man on. He rides forth as a leader of the hosts of atheism against the walls of heaven. He explains the scientific arguments as if they were the radiant revelation of a new world; and the rapture of his enthusiasm is a strange accompaniment of a doctrine which aimed at perfect calm. Although the Greek thinkers had done all the work and the Latin poem is a hymn of triumph over prostrate deities, yet in the literature of free thought it must always hold an eminent place by the sincerity of its audacious, defiant spirit. In the history of rationalism its interest would be greater if it had exploded in the midst of an orthodox community. But the educated Romans in the days of Lucretius were sceptical in religious matters, some of them were Epicureans, and we may suspect that not many of those who read it were shocked or influenced by the audacities of the champion of irreligion.

The Stoic philosophy made notable contributions to the cause of liberty and could

¹ An admirable appreciation of the poem will be found in R. Y. Tyrrell's *Lectures on Latin Poetry*.

hardly have flourished in an atmosphere where discussion was not free. It asserted the rights of individuals against public authority. Socrates had seen that laws may be unjust and that peoples may go wrong, but he had found no principle for the guidance of society. The Stoics discovered it in the law of nature, prior and superior to all the customs and written laws of peoples, and this doctrine, spreading outside Stoic circles, caught hold of the Roman world and affected Roman legislation.

These philosophies have carried us from Greece to Rome. In the later Roman Republic and the early Empire, no restrictions were imposed on opinion, and these philosophies, which made the individual the first consideration, spread widely. Most of the leading men were unbelievers in the official religion of the State, but they considered it valuable for the purpose of keeping the uneducated populace in order. A Greek historian expresses high approval of the Roman policy of cultivating superstition for the benefit of the masses. This was the attitude of Cicero, and the view that a false religion is indispensable as a social machine was general among ancient unbelievers. It is common, in one form or another, to-day; at least, religions are constantly defended on the ground not of truth

but of utility. This defence belongs to the statecraft of Machiavelli, who taught that religion is necessary for government, and that it may be the duty of a ruler to support a religion which he believes to be false.

A word must be said of Lucian (second century A.D.), the last Greek man of letters whose writings appeal to everybody. He attacked the popular mythology with open ridicule. It is impossible to say whether his satires had any effect at the time beyond affording enjoyment to educated infidels who read them. *Zeus in a Tragedy Part* is one of the most effective. The situation which Lucian imagined here would be paralleled if a modern writer were blasphemously to represent the Persons of the Trinity with some eminent angels and saints discussing in a celestial smoke-room the alarming growth of unbelief in England and then by means of a telephonic apparatus overhearing a dispute between a freethinker and a parson on a public platform in London. The absurdities of anthropomorphism have never been the subject of more brilliant jesting than in Lucian's satires.

The general rule of Roman policy was to tolerate throughout the Empire all religions and all opinions. Blasphemy was not punished. The principle was expressed in the

maxim of the Emperor Tiberius: "If the gods are insulted, let them see to it themselves." An exception to the rule of tolerance was made in the case of the Christian sect, and the treatment of this Oriental religion may be said to have inaugurated religious persecution in Europe. It is a matter of interest to understand why Emperors who were able, humane, and not in the least fanatical, adopted this exceptional policy.

For a long time the Christians were only known to those Romans who happened to hear of them, as a sect of the Jews. The Jewish was the one religion which, on account of its exclusiveness and intolerance, was regarded by the tolerant pagans with disfavour and suspicion. But though it sometimes came into collision with the Roman authorities and some ill-advised attacks upon it were made, it was the constant policy of the Emperors to let it alone and to protect the Jews against the hatred which their own fanaticism aroused. But while the Jewish religion was endured so long as it was confined to those who were born into it, the prospect of its dissemination raised a new question. Grave misgivings might arise in the mind of a ruler at seeing a creed spreading which was aggressively hostile to all the other creeds of the world—creeds which lived together in

amity—and had earned for its adherents the reputation of being the enemies of the human race. Might not its expansion beyond the Israelites involve ultimately a danger to the Empire? For its spirit was incompatible with the traditions and basis of Roman society. The Emperor Domitian seems to have seen the question in this light, and he took severe measures to hinder the proselytizing of Roman citizens. Some of those whom he struck may have been Christians, but if he was aware of the distinction, there was from his point of view no difference. Christianity resembled Judaism, from which it sprang, in intolerance and in hostility towards Roman society, but it differed by the fact that it made many proselytes while Judaism made few.

Under Trajan we find that the principle has been laid down that to be a Christian is an offence punishable by death. Henceforward Christianity remained an illegal religion. But in practice the law was not applied rigorously or logically. The Emperors desired, if possible, to extirpate Christianity without shedding blood. Trajan laid down that Christians were not to be sought out, that no anonymous charges were to be noticed, and that an informer who failed to make good his charge should be liable to be punished under the laws against calumny.

Christians themselves recognized that this edict practically protected them. There were some executions in the second century—not many that are well attested—and Christians courted the pain and glory of martyrdom. There is evidence to show that when they were arrested their escape was often connived at. In general, the persecution of the Christians was rather provoked by the populace than desired by the authorities. The populace felt a horror of this mysterious Oriental sect which openly hated all the gods and prayed for the destruction of the world. When floods, famines, and especially fires occurred they were apt to be attributed to the black magic of the Christians.

When any one was accused of Christianity, he was required, as a means of testing the truth of the charge, to offer incense to the gods or to the statues of deified Emperors. His compliance at once exonerated him. The objection of the Christians—they and the Jews were the only objectors—to the worship of the Emperors was, in the eyes of the Romans, one of the most sinister signs that their religion was dangerous. The purpose of this worship was to symbolize the unity and solidarity of an Empire which embraced so many peoples of different beliefs and different gods; its intention was political,

to promote union and loyalty; and it is not surprising that those who denounced it should be suspected of a disloyal spirit. But it must be noted that there was no necessity for any citizen to take part in this worship. No conformity was required from any inhabitants of the Empire who were not serving the State as soldiers or civil functionaries. Thus the effect was to debar Christians from military and official careers.

The Apologies for Christianity which appeared at this period (second century) might have helped, if the Emperors (to whom some of them were addressed) had read them, to confirm the view that it was a political danger. It would have been easy to read between the lines that, if the Christians ever got the upper hand, they would not spare the cults of the State. The contemporary work of Tatian (*A Discourse to the Greeks*) reveals what the Apologists more or less sought to disguise, invincible hatred towards the civilization in which they lived. Any reader of the Christian literature of the time could not fail to see that in a State where Christians had the power there would be no tolerance of other religious practices.¹ If the Emperors

¹ For the evidence of the Apologists see A. Bouché-Leclercq, *Religious Intolerance and Politics* (French, 1911) —a valuable review of the whole subject.

made an exception to their tolerant policy in the case of Christianity, their purpose was to safeguard tolerance.

In the third century the religion, though still forbidden, was quite openly tolerated; the Church organized itself without concealment; ecclesiastical councils assembled without interference. There were some brief and local attempts at repression, there was only one grave persecution (begun by Decius, A.D. 250, and continued by Valerian). In fact, throughout this century, there were not many victims, though afterwards the Christians invented a whole mythology of martyrdoms. Many cruelties were imputed to Emperors under whom we know that the Church enjoyed perfect peace.

A long period of civil confusion, in which The Empire seemed to be tottering to its fall, had been terminated by the Emperor Diocletian, who, by his radical administrative reforms, helped to preserve the Roman power in its integrity for another century. He desired to support his work of political consolidation by reviving the Roman spirit, and he attempted to infuse new life into the official religion. To this end he determined to suppress the growing influence of the Christians, who, though a minority, were very numerous, and he organized a persecution.

It was long, cruel and bloody; it was the most whole-hearted, general and systematic effort to crush the forbidden faith. It was a failure, the Christians were now too numerous to be crushed. After the abdication of Diocletian, the Emperors who reigned in different parts of the realm did not agree as to the expediency of his policy, and the persecution ended by edicts of toleration (A.D. 311 and 313). These documents have an interest for the history of religious liberty.

The first, issued in the eastern provinces, ran as follows:—

“ We were particularly desirous of reclaiming into the way of reason and nature the deluded Christians, who had renounced the religion and ceremonies instituted by their fathers and, presumptuously despising the practice of antiquity, had invented extravagant laws and opinions according to the dictates of their fancy, and had collected a various society from the different provinces of our Empire. The edicts which we have published to enforce the worship of the gods, having exposed many of the Christians to danger and distress, many having suffered death and many more, who still persist in their impious folly, being left destitute of *any* public exercise of religion, we are disposed to extend to those unhappy men the effects of our wonted clem-

ency. We permit them, therefore, freely to profess their private opinions, and to assemble in their conventicles without fear or molestation, provided always that they preserve a due respect to the established laws and government.”¹

The second, of which Constantine was the author, known as the Edict of Milan, was to a similar effect, and based toleration on the Emperor's care for the peace and happiness of his subjects and on the hope of appeasing the Deity whose seat is in heaven.

The relations between the Roman government and the Christians raised the general question of persecution and freedom of conscience. A State, with an official religion, but perfectly tolerant of all creeds and cults, finds that a society had arisen in its midst which is uncompromisingly hostile to all creeds but its own and which, if it had the power, would suppress all but its own. The government, in self-defence, decides to check the dissemination of these subversive ideas and makes the profession of that creed a crime, not on account of its particular tenets, but on account of the social consequences of those tenets. The members of the society cannot without violating their consciences and incurring damnation abandon their exclu-

¹ This is Gibbon's translation.

sive doctrine. The principle of freedom of conscience is asserted as superior to all obligations to the State, and the State, confronted by this new claim, is unable to admit it. Persecution is the result.

Even from the standpoint of an orthodox and loyal pagan the persecution of the Christians is indefensible, because blood was shed uselessly. In other words, it was a great mistake because it was unsuccessful. For persecution is a choice between two evils. The alternatives are violence (which no reasonable defender of persecution would deny to be an evil in itself) and the spread of dangerous opinions. The first is chosen simply to avoid the second, on the ground that the second is the greater evil. But if the persecution is not so devised and carried out as to accomplish its end, then you have two evils instead of one, and nothing can justify this. From their point of view, the Emperors had good reasons for regarding Christianity as dangerous and anti-social, but they should either have let it alone or taken systematic measures to destroy it. If at an early stage they had established a drastic and systematic inquisition, they might possibly have exterminated it. This at least would have been statesmanlike. But they had no conception of extreme measures, and they did not understand—they had no

experience to guide them—the sort of problem they had to deal with. They hoped to succeed by intimidation. Their attempts at suppression were vacillating, fitful, and ridiculously ineffectual. The later persecutions (of A.D. 250 and 303) had no prospect of success. It is particularly to be observed that no effort was made to suppress Christian literature.

The higher problem whether persecution, even if it attains the desired end, is justifiable, was not considered. The struggle hinged on antagonism between the conscience of the individual and the authority and supposed interests of the State. It was the question which had been raised by Socrates, raised now on a wider platform in a more pressing and formidable shape: what is to happen when obedience to the law is inconsistent with obedience to an invisible master? Is it incumbent on the State to respect the conscience of the individual at all costs, or within what limits? The Christians did not attempt a solution, the general problem did not interest them. They claimed the right of freedom exclusively for themselves from a non-Christian government; and it is hardly going too far to suspect that they would have applauded the government if it had suppressed the Gnostic sects whom they hated and calumniated. In any case, when a Christian

State was established, they would completely forget the principle which they had invoked. The martyrs died for conscience, but not for liberty. To-day the greatest of the Churches demands freedom of conscience in the modern States which she does not control, but refuses to admit that, where she had the power, it would be incumbent on her to concede it.

If we review the history of classical antiquity as a whole, we may almost say that freedom of thought was like the air men breathed. It was taken for granted and nobody thought about it. If seven or eight thinkers at Athens were penalized for heterodoxy, in some and perhaps in most of these cases heterodoxy was only a pretext. They do not invalidate the general facts that the advance of knowledge was not impeded by prejudice, or science retarded by the weight of unscientific authority. The educated Greeks were tolerant because they were friends of reason and did not set up any authority to overrule reason. Opinions were not imposed except by argument; you were not expected to receive some "kingdom of heaven" like a little child, or to prostrate your intellect before an authority claiming to be infallible.

But this liberty was not the result of a conscious policy or deliberate conviction, and

therefore it was precarious. The problems of freedom of thought, religious liberty, toleration, had not been forced upon society and were never seriously considered. When Christianity confronted the Roman government, no one saw that in the treatment of a small, obscure, and, to pagan thinkers, uninteresting or repugnant sect, a principle of the deepest social importance was involved. A long experience of the theory and practice of persecution was required to base securely the theory of freedom of thought. The lurid policy of coercion which the Christian Church adopted, and its consequences, would at last compel reason to wrestle with the problem and discover the justification of intellectual liberty. The spirit of the Greeks and Romans, alive in their works, would, after a long period of obsuration, again enlighten the world and aid in re-establishing the reign of reason, which they had carelessly enjoyed without assuring its foundations.

CHAPTER III

REASON IN PRISON

(THE MIDDLE AGES)

ABOUT ten years after the Edict of Toleration, Constantine the Great adopted Christi-

anity. This momentous decision inaugurated a millennium in which reason was enchained, thought was enslaved, and knowledge made no progress.

During the two centuries in which they had been a forbidden sect the Christians had claimed toleration on the ground that religious belief is voluntary and not a thing which can be enforced. When their faith became the predominant creed and had the power of the State behind it, they abandoned this view. They embarked on the hopeful enterprise of bringing about a complete uniformity in men's opinions on the mysteries of the universe, and began a more or less definite policy of coercing thought. This policy was adopted by Emperors and Governments partly on political grounds; religious divisions, bitter as they were, seemed dangerous to the unity of the State. But the fundamental principle lay in the doctrine that salvation is to be found exclusively in the Christian Church. The profound conviction that those who did not believe in its doctrines would be damned eternally, and that God punishes theological error as if it were the most heinous of crimes, led naturally to persecution. It was a duty to impose on men the only true doctrine, seeing that their own eternal interests were at stake, and to hinder errors from spreading.

Heretics were more than ordinary criminals and the pains that man could inflict on them were as nothing to the tortures awaiting them in hell. To rid the earth of men who, however virtuous, were, through their religious errors, enemies of the Almighty, was a plain duty. Their virtues were no excuse. We must remember that, according to the humane doctrine of the Christians, pagan, that is, merely human, virtues were vices, and infants who died unbaptized passed the rest of time in creeping on the floor of hell. The intolerance arising from such views could not but differ in kind and intensity from anything that the world had yet witnessed.

Besides the logic of its doctrines, the character of its Sacred Book must also be held partly accountable for the intolerant principles of the Christian Church. It was unfortunate that the early Christians had included in their Scripture the Jewish writings which reflect the ideas of a low stage of civilization and are full of savagery. It would be difficult to say how much harm has been done, in corrupting the morals of men, by the precepts and examples of inhumanity, violence, and bigotry which the reverent reader of the Old Testament, implicitly believing in its inspiration, is bound to approve. It furnished an armoury for the theory of

persecution. The truth is that Sacred Books are an obstacle to moral and intellectual progress, because they consecrate the ideas of a given epoch, and its customs, as divinely appointed. Christianity, by adopting books of a long past age, placed in the path of human development a particularly nasty stumbling-block. It may occur to one to wonder how history might have been altered—altered it surely would have been—if the Christians had cut Jehovah out of their programme and, content with the New Testament, had rejected the inspiration of the Old.

Under Constantine the Great and his successors, edict after edict fulminated against the worship of the old pagan gods and against heretical Christian sects. Julian the Apostate, who in his brief reign (A.D. 361–3) sought to revive the old order of things, proclaimed universal toleration, but he placed Christians at a disadvantage by forbidding them to teach in schools. This was only a momentary check. Paganism was finally shattered by the severe laws of Theodosius I (end of fourth century). It lingered on here and there for more than another century, especially at Rome and Athens, but had little importance. The Christians were more concerned in striving among themselves than in

crushing the prostrate spirit of antiquity. The execution of the heretic Priscillian in Spain (fourth century) inaugurated the punishment of heresy by death. It is interesting to see a non-Christian of this age teaching the Christian sects that they should suffer one another. Themistius in an address to the Emperor Valens urged him to repeal his edicts against the Christians with whom he did not agree, and expounded a theory of toleration. "The religious beliefs of individuals are a field in which the authority of a government cannot be effective; compliance can only lead to hypocritical professions. Every faith should be allowed; the civil government should govern orthodox and heterodox to the common good. God himself plainly shows that he wishes various forms of worship; there are many roads by which one can reach him."

No father of the Church has been more esteemed or enjoyed higher authority than St. Augustine (died A.D. 430). He formulated the principle of persecution for the guidance of future generations, basing it on the firm foundation of Scripture—on words used by Jesus Christ in one of his parables, "Compel them to come in." Till the end of the twelfth century the Church worked hard to suppress heterodoxies. There was much

persecution, but it was not systematic. There is reason to think that in the pursuit of heresy the Church was mainly guided by considerations of its temporal interest, and was roused to severe action only when the spread of false doctrine threatened to reduce its revenues or seemed a menace to society. At the end of the twelfth century Innocent III became Pope and under him the Church of Western Europe reached the height of its power. He and his immediate successors are responsible for imagining and beginning an organized movement to sweep heretics out of Christendom. Languedoc in South-western France was largely populated by heretics, whose opinions were considered particularly offensive, known as the Albigeois. They were the subjects of the Count of Toulouse, and were an industrious and respectable people. But the Church got far too little money out of this anti-clerical population, and Innocent called upon the Count to extirpate heresy from his dominion. As he would not obey, the Pope announced a Crusade against the Albigeois, and offered to all who would bear a hand the usual rewards granted to Crusaders, including absolution from all their sins. A series of sanguinary wars followed in which the Englishman, Simon de Montfort, took part. There were wholesale

burnings and hangings of men, women and children. The resistance of the people was broken down, though the heresy was not eradicated, and the struggle ended in 1229 with the complete humiliation of the Count of Toulouse. The important point of the episode is this: the Church introduced into the public law of Europe the new principle that a sovran held his crown on the condition that he should extirpate heresy. If he hesitated to persecute at the command of the Pope, he must be coerced; his lands were forfeited; and his dominions were thrown open to be seized by any one whom the Church could induce to attack him. The Popes thus established a theocratic system in which all other interests were to be subordinated to the grand duty of maintaining the purity of the Faith.

But in order to root out heresy it was necessary to discover it in its most secret retreats. The Albigeois had been crushed, but the poison of their doctrine was not yet destroyed. The organized system of searching out heretics known as the Inquisition was founded by Pope Gregory IX about A.D. 1233, and fully established by a Bull of Innocent IV (A.D. 1252) which regulated the machinery of persecution "as an integral part of the social edifice in every city and every State."

This powerful engine for the suppression of the freedom of men's religious opinions is unique in history.

The bishops were not equal to the new task undertaken by the Church, and in every ecclesiastical province suitable monks were selected and to them was delegated the authority of the Pope for discovering heretics. These inquisitors had unlimited authority, they were subject to no supervision and responsible to no man. It would not have been easy to establish this system but for the fact that contemporary secular rulers had inaugurated independently a merciless legislation against heresy. The Emperor Frederick II, who was himself undoubtedly a freethinker, made laws for his extensive dominions in Italy and Germany (between 1220 and 1235), enacting that all heretics should be outlawed, that those who did not recant should be burned, those who recanted should be imprisoned, but if they relapsed should be executed; that their property should be confiscated, their houses destroyed, and their children, to the second generation, ineligible to positions of emolument unless they had betrayed their father or some other heretic.

Frederick's legislation consecrated the stake as the proper punishment for heresy. This

cruel form of death for that crime seems to have been first inflicted on heretics by a French king (1017). We must remember that in the Middle Ages, and much later, crimes of all kinds were punished with the utmost cruelty. In England in the reign of Henry VIII there is a case of poisoners being boiled to death. Heresy was the foulest of all crimes; and to prevail against it was to prevail against the legions of hell. The cruel enactments against heretics were strongly supported by the public opinion of the masses.

When the Inquisition was fully developed it covered Western Christendom with a net from the meshes of which it was difficult for a heretic to escape. The inquisitors in the various kingdoms co-operated, and communicated information; there was "a chain of tribunals throughout continental Europe." England stood outside the system, but from the age of Henry IV and Henry V the government repressed heresy by the stake under a special statute (A.D. 1400; repealed 1533; revived under Mary; finally repealed in 1676).

In its task of imposing unity of belief the Inquisition was most successful in Spain. Here towards the end of the fifteenth century a system was instituted which had peculiarities of its own and was very jealous of Roman

interference. One of the achievements of the Spanish Inquisition (which was not abolished till the nineteenth century) was to expel the Moriscos or converted Moors, who retained many of their old Mohamadan opinions and customs. It is also said to have eradicated Judaism and to have preserved the country from the zeal of Protestant missionaries. But it cannot be proved that it deserves the credit of having protected Spain against Protestantism, for it is quite possible that if the seeds of Protestant opinion had been sown they would, in any case, have fallen dead on an uncongenial soil. Freedom of thought however was entirely suppressed.

One of the most efficacious means for hunting down heresy was the "Edict of Faith," which enlisted the people in the service of the Inquisition and required every man to be an informer. From time to time a certain district was visited and an edict issued commanding those who knew anything of any heresy to come forward and reveal it, under fearful penalties temporal and spiritual. In consequence, no one was free from the suspicion of his neighbours or even of his own family. "No more ingenious device has been invented to subjugate a whole population, to paralyse its intellect, and to reduce it to blind

obedience. It elevated delation to the rank of high religious duty."

The process employed in the trials of those accused of heresy in Spain rejected every reasonable means for the ascertainment of truth. The prisoner was assumed to be guilty, the burden of proving his innocence rested on him; his judge was virtually his prosecutor. All witnesses against him, however infamous, were admitted. The rules for allowing witnesses for the prosecution were lax; those for rejecting witnesses for the defence were rigid. Jews, Moriscos, and servants could give evidence against the prisoner but not for him, and the same rule applied to kinsmen to the fourth degree. The principle on which the Inquisition proceeded was that better a hundred innocent should suffer than one guilty person escape. Indulgences were granted to any one who contributed wood to the pile. But the tribunal of the Inquisition did not itself condemn to the stake, for the Church must not be guilty of the shedding of blood. The ecclesiastical judge pronounced the prisoner to be a heretic of whose conversion there was no hope, and handed him over ("relaxed" him was the official term) to the secular authority, asking and charging the magistrate "to treat him benignantlly and mercifully." But this

formal plea for mercy could not be entertained by the civil power; it had no choice but to inflict death; if it did otherwise, it was a promoter of heresy. All princes and officials, according to the Canon Law, must punish duly and promptly heretics handed over to them by the Inquisition, under pain of excommunication. It is to be noted that the number of deaths at the stake has been much over-estimated by popular imagination; but the sum of suffering caused by the methods of the system and the punishments that fell short of death can hardly be exaggerated.

The legal processes employed by the Church in these persecutions exercised a corrupting influence on the criminal jurisprudence of the Continent. Lea, the historian of the Inquisition, observes: "Of all the curses which the Inquisition brought in its train, this perhaps was the greatest—that, until the closing years of the eighteenth century, throughout the greater part of Europe, the inquisitorial process, as developed for the destruction of heresy, became the customary method of dealing with all who were under any accusation."

The Inquisitors who, as Gibbon says, "defended nonsense by cruelties," are often regarded as monsters. It may be said for them and for the kings who did their will that

they were not a bit worse than the priests and monarchs of primitive ages who sacrificed human beings to their deities. The Greek king, Agamemnon, who immolated his daughter Iphigenia to obtain favourable winds from the gods, was perhaps a most affectionate father, and the seer who advised him to do so may have been a man of high integrity. They acted according to their beliefs. And so in the Middle Ages and afterwards men of kindly temper and the purest zeal for morality were absolutely devoid of mercy where heresy was suspected. Hatred of heresy was a sort of infectious germ, generated by the doctrine of exclusive salvation.

It has been observed that this dogma also injured the sense of truth. As man's eternal fate was at stake, it seemed plainly legitimate or rather imperative to use any means to enforce the true belief—even falsehood and imposture. There was no scruple about the invention of miracles or any fictions that were edifying. A disinterested appreciation of truth will not begin to prevail till the seventeenth century.

While this principle, with the associated doctrines of sin, hell, and the last judgment, led to such consequences, there were other doctrines and implications in Christianity

which, forming a solid rampart against the advance of knowledge, blocked the paths of science in the Middle Ages, and obstructed its progress till the latter half of the nineteenth century. In every important field of scientific research, the ground was occupied by false views which the Church declared to be true on the infallible authority of the Bible. The Jewish account of Creation and the Fall of Man, inextricably bound up with the Christian theory of Redemption, excluded from free inquiry geology, zoology, and anthropology. The literal interpretation of the Bible involved the truth that the sun revolves round the earth. The Church condemned the theory of the antipodes. One of the charges against Servetus (who was burned in the sixteenth century; see below, p. 79) was that he believed the statement of a Greek geographer that Judea is a wretched barren country in spite of the fact that the Bible describes it as a land flowing with milk and honey. The Greek physician Hippocrates had based the study of medicine and disease on experience and methodical research. In the Middle Ages men relapsed to the primitive notions of a barbarous age. Bodily ailments were ascribed to occult agencies—the malice of the Devil or the wrath of God. St. Augustine said that the diseases of Christians

were caused by demons, and Luther in the same way attributed them to Satan. It was only logical that supernatural remedies should be sought to counteract the effects of supernatural causes. There was an immense traffic in relics with miraculous virtues, and this had the advantage of bringing in a large revenue to the Church. Physicians were often exposed to suspicions of sorcery and unbelief. Anatomy was forbidden, partly perhaps on account of the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. The opposition of ecclesiastics to inoculation in the eighteenth century was a survival of the mediæval view of disease. Chemistry (alchemy) was considered a diabolical art and in 1317 was condemned by the Pope. The long imprisonment of Roger Bacon (thirteenth century) who, while he professed zeal for orthodoxy, had an inconvenient instinct for scientific research, illustrates the mediæval distrust of science.

It is possible that the knowledge of nature would have progressed little, even if this distrust of science on theological grounds had not prevailed. For Greek science had ceased to advance five hundred years before Christianity became powerful. After about 200 B.C. no important discoveries were made. The explanation of this decay is not easy, but we may be sure that it is to be sought in the

social conditions of the Greek and Roman world. And we may suspect that the social conditions of the Middle Ages would have proved unfavourable to the scientific spirit—the disinterested quest of facts—even if the controlling beliefs had not been hostile. We may suspect that the rebirth of science would in any case have been postponed till new social conditions, which began to appear in the thirteenth century (see next chapter), had reached a certain maturity. Theological prejudice may have injured knowledge principally by its survival after the Middle Ages had passed away. In other words, the harm done by Christian doctrines, in this respect, may lie less in the obscurantism of the dark interval between ancient and modern civilization, than in the obstructions which they offered when science had revived in spite of them and could no longer be crushed.

The firm belief in witchcraft, magic, and demons was inherited by the Middle Ages from antiquity, but it became far more lurid and made the world terrible. Men believed that they were surrounded by fiends watching for every opportunity to harm them, that pestilences, storms, eclipses, and famines were the work of the Devil; but they believed as firmly that ecclesiastical rites were capable of coping with these enemies. Some of the

early Christian Emperors legislated against magic, but till the fourteenth century there was no systematic attempt to root out witchcraft. The fearful epidemic, known as the Black Death, which devastated Europe in that century, seems to have aggravated the haunting terror of the invisible world of demons. Trials for witchcraft multiplied, and for three hundred years the discovery of witchcraft and the destruction of those who were accused of practising it, chiefly women, was a standing feature of European civilization. Both the theory and the persecution were supported by Holy Scripture. "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" was the clear injunction of the highest authority. Pope Innocent VIII issued a Bull on the matter (1484) in which he asserted that plagues and storms are the work of witches, and the ablest minds believed in the reality of their devilish powers.

No story is more painful than the persecution of witches, and nowhere was it more atrocious than in England and Scotland. I mention it because it was the direct result of theological doctrines, and because, as we shall see, it was rationalism which brought the long chapter of horrors to an end.

In the period, then, in which the Church exercised its greatest influence, reason was