

Free Thought of Action

Manuel González Prada

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(This speech should have been read the 28th of August of 1898 in the third Conference organized for the League of Freethinkers of Peru. The lecture could not take place because the Government prevented it.)

Gentlemen:

I give the most sincere thanks to the members of the League for having honored me at their assembly, especially so, since I am not a member of this body destined to have such a great impact in our social life.

I will say something of free thought, in its silent, and spoken varieties, but especially in its most far reaching sense, free thought of action, the one that produces the greatest fruits.

I

Freedom of thought in silence is not discussed, it is a given. Since no one can get into our brains to scrutinize our thought process, we speak with ourselves without our inner voices resonating in the eardrums of others, nor engraving itself in phonographic cylinders. Free from inquisitors and tyrants, we have a place where we can worship whatever gods please us, where we can build a throne for good, or a gallows for evil.

This kind of free thinking does not serve too much in life's battles and the man that practices it is nothing more than a selfish philosopher, a barren brain, in a word, he is nothing. Why condemn superstitions in internal law, if in the world we approved of them tacitly? What is the benefit of making believe we strangle criminals, if really we are extending a hand of friendship? What good is it to Humanity, if wise men get lost in themselves, without communicating their knowledge to anybody? Shuttered lanterns are only lit on the inside.

When a conviction is cherished, it is not guarded religiously like a family's jewel, nor is it packaged hermetically like a very subtle perfume: it is exposed to the air and to the sun, it is left within free reach of all intelligent beings. Humanity does not consist in secretly possessing its mental riches, but in freeing them from the mind, dressing them with the wings of language so that they fly around the world to penetrate the minds of others. If all the philosophers had philosophized in silence, humanity would not have left its childhood and societies would continue crawling in the limb of superstitions.

Acquired truths for individuals do not constitute their personal patrimony: they form part of human wealth. Nothing belongs to us, because of nothing we are the creators. The ideas that are most our own, come to us from the intellectual world in which we breathe or from the artificial atmosphere formed from reading. That which we give to one, we have taken from others: that which seems like an offering is nothing more than a restitution to its rightful heirs. But, even if it were not so, is there any more valuable gift than thought? When giving our heart to those who love us, we pay them a debt; when offering thought to someone we don't know, to an adversary, to those who hate us, we follow the inexhaustible freedom of nature that lavishes its goods on the saint and on the sinner, to the dove and to the hawk, to the lamb and to the wolf.

It has been more than two thousand years since Chinese philosophers have said: *Give much, receive little*. This brave counsel involves a lesson of inexpressible generosity, of immense char-

ity. But silent free thinkers don't want to enjoy the supreme delight¹ of authorizing themselves without reserve, preferring to live in peace, and happy, never bothered because of their impieties or meditations. Favoring them substantially, we should compare them with underground rivers that flow to the sea, without calming a thirst nor fertilizing a seed.

II

If mute free thought functions without disturbing the philosopher's tranquility, the same is not true with free thought that is spoken and written. A person who speaks and writes with valiant independence in retrograde societies, provokes recriminations and storms, taking a gamble in the face of the anathemas of the priest, the violent acts of the boss, and the impulsive fits of the popular beast.

No one attacks a privilege nor ridicules a superstition without arousing thousands of protesting voices nor thousands of threatening gestures. All condemn an error, all hurt from an injustice; but Humanity hides so many despicable acts and so much cowardice, that in the din of the fight it is customary to unite oneself with tormentors in order to fight the defenders. At times, there is no crime so unforgivable as to speak what we think or to shout what we murmur in a low voice. In the realm of iniquity and falsehood, a verb is called for which severely censors the criminals; but, when the verb roars without hypocrisy nor adulation, only then the most fervent friends of the truth make the greatest ruckus, thundering out the noisiest protests.

In order to deserve the title of good citizen and to figure in the classic list of wise men, it is necessary to be satisfied with the uses and prejudices of one's time, venerating the absurdities of the religion into which one is born, justifying the iniquities of the native country in which one has lived, never breaking the antediluvian mold nor wanting to flap outside of the prehistoric cage. Forget about opposing someone or something, or of being intransigent: morality resolves itself by compromising with the immortalities of one's medium, virtue is reduced to a hypocritical and malleable opportunity. When it is said, then, of a man: He respects the law, translate: Servile nature. The moral perfection of almost all good gentlemen on the list is condensed in two words: Lackey Spirits.

For that reason, expressing oneself with extreme independence reveals boldness and gives the appearance of sincerity. Nevertheless, the free thought of speakers and publicists suffers very cruel falsifications: Perhaps the hypocrites of incredulity are more plentiful than the hypocrites of faith. Perhaps Tartuffe left less progeny than Homais. Sometimes there is more boldness in being called a believer than in saying one is a freethinker.

When speaking of the free thought, how can we not remember our national freethinkers? If the millenarian history of Christianity is reduced to a monotonous and tedious enumeration of heresies, the brief annals of our free thought will be condensed to a series of getting caught in the act and public retractions. Compared to the firmness of a Vigil or of a Mariátegui, how much corruption can we expect in old age at the time of death! Where are the persevering and firm here? Those who have lived for some time and look back in search for those who one day had accompanied them in the fight for right and freedom, will only be able to make out a scattered legion of apostates and renegades.

¹ Gonzalez Prada coins a neologism *delección* which we approximate as "delight" based on its proximity to *delectar*, *delectamiento*, *delectación*.

From eighteen to thirty years of age, ardent and fierce free thought germinates in many heads; but from thirty on, goodbye struggles! Goodbye passion! And the infallible rule: the more one is a lunatic, the more beautiful one becomes; backwards comes in proportion to the gap. From the peaceful, we expect firmness, from the violent, we fear their capitulation.

Here reigns that which we would call Celphalism, which is to say, the incredulity of youth, the prudery of the old. Plato talks of a Cephalicus who, having begun laughing at vulgar superstitions, ends up taking them seriously when he saw for the first time his gray hairs and wrinkles. Even if Cervantes' language still didn't exist, the good Cephalicus practiced a popular Castilian saying: *A young man to the palace, an old one to the church*. This Greek man was born some centuries before the Christian era. Does not he serve as a model for many nineteenth century free thinkers? Here we have proof that senility is possible in all nations and in all epochs. It is not so strange that today's old faithfully imitate the old of yesterday: when getting along in years, we begin to fear death; when we think about heaven, we remember very little about the dignity of existence. The old man is a sad child, old age is to infancy like the afternoon is to dawn.

Some of our free thinkers do not need gray hairs nor wrinkles in order to revert towards the mentality of grandmothers and wet nurses: a reverse of fortune is enough for them, the death of a loved one or the coming on of a serious illness. Fortunate beings! Efficient grace introduces itself with spores of the air and worms of the large sausage. Other free thinkers change sides, not evolving if illnesses or deaths do not overcome them. All they need is a good marriage. Such fortunate beings! They find Catholicism in the dossier of a dowry. They discover God in the false crest of a wealthy older woman.

All of this does not shame them nor does it not interrupt any organic functions. There are inferior animals that calmly follow their life even if we turn them inside out as we would with a glove or with the cover of an umbrella. If we did the same with some Creole freethinkers, they would continue living with a single difference – They would transform themselves into priests. The same would happen with Peruvian masons; wherever one finds a great master of the Bible and a Great Architect, there lives a Jesuit or a Dominican. Let us say it again: both Creole freethinkers and biblical or deistic masons, are inside-out priests.

In summary, almost all the national free thinkers lived preaching the excellencies of reason and died receiving Catholic superstitions:² there were two types of these men – the one of phrases and the one of acts. Dumb or deaf lanterns did not cause good nor bad; but boisterous or histrionic characters of the pen and word have discredited the idea, producing enormous damage, causing men of good faith to become discouraged and quiet for fear of keeping such ridiculous and abominable company.

III

It is worthwhile to extend a hand to indicate the path where upon which we should march; but it is worth more to go ahead marking with your footprint the route to follow: a good guide is better than one hundred signs hanging on one hundred posts. To those who rise with propagandist and regenerative smoke, we do not ask them how they write and speak, but how they live: let us consider the number of carats of unfailling actions not the number of kilometers of verbal heresies. Do non-Catholics have a marriage law? Then use it in spite of all its deficiencies. Are there

² Last Rites

secular schools? Then do not educate your children in establishments founded by congregations. Do secular cemeteries exist? Then bury your dead without holy water or a funeral prayer. Do not try to reconcile Diderot with the parish priest, nor join Biblical fables with the laws of nature; and think that the vitality of religions is based on the indolence of the non believers, just as the force of wicked governments is based on the apathy of the masses.

Although free thinkers remain faithful to their doctrine and harmonize words with acts, they deserve to be censored when they avoid social questions in order to live in fortified castles of aggressive irreligiousness and even in what would be called an uncompromising phobia of the clergy. How can we not laugh at the red Torquemadas, of the Domingo de Guzmán on the other extreme, of the lay inquisitors, reading to ignite the bonfires and to imitate the *autos de fe*? "Man does not live on bread alone", the Gospel says to us; it is our turn to say: the free thinker does not thrive on priests alone.

But some fanatics can't leave behind their anticlerical monomania. They live dedicated to persecuting cassocks in the cells of the nuns, or surprising petticoats in the alcoves of presbyters. Upon proving the inexistence of priests without mistress nor nephews, one imagines upon having demolished Catholicism. A new lineage Buddha, they are hypnotized by the contemplation of a solideo.³ For them, neither social crime nor political extortion are important; the serious, the clamorous, the insufferable thing is that a tonsured⁴ person finds happiness with a housekeeper. Arrogantly, they reject the moral imposition of the religious power, while they humbly endure the coercion of the civil power. They take pride in not kneeling down in a church, and they lick the carpets of a palace; they rise up before a bishop, and they yield in the presence of a constable; they feel capable of slapping Jesus Christ, and they lack the courage to scold a doorman.

We do not want to deny it, nor could we: the priest takes the role of a dismal and rough mountain, blocking the way toward light; consider the judge that sells justice, the parliamentarian that adheres to the whims of the political boss, the capitalist that takes control of merchandise produced by the sweat of others; the soldier that fires his rifle into a mass of unarmed workers; do not these cause as many evils and do they not merit as much scorn as the priest? It is necessary to persecute the foxes, without forgetting the lions. When myths are collapsed and the heavens disinfected, felines should be fought and the planet made sanitary. To achieve man's redemption, it is not enough to overthrow this impassible and egotistic God that eternally shakes his head in the Infinite; while the Universe twists in pain, desperation and death will persist.

The freethinker, called to political neutrality, who sees with indifference the inequities and the wastes of a tyrannical government, seems to us as censurable as the statesman who, alleging religious neutrality, observes with Olympic serenity the predominance of the clergy and the diffusion of ultramontane ideas. Free thought should never renounce politics: politicians do not forget about the freethinkers. All politicians of bad law sense an adversary in all irreligious thinkers, a rational premonition, so he who revolts today against the authorities who presume to descend from the heavens, tomorrow will rebel against the despots who rise up from the land. Moreover, he who lives on the banks of a river might not remember the waters; but the waters do not forget him when the river becomes a mother. Towers of ivory and mountains of inaccessible pinnacles serve no purpose. When social convulsions explode on the scene, the moment arrives

³ From Latin *solī deo* "only to God," silk skullcap worn by men of the church.

⁴ A tonsured person, a priest, tonsure, the right of admission into the clerical state symbolized by the dipping of hair. This rite was suppressed in 1972.

in which the most passive and indifferent sectors of society are shaken and crushed: having not wanted to act like persons of the drama, they appear as victims in a fall of a building.

Free thought that works with a similar amplitude of sights stops being a narrow field where religious beliefs are debated, converting themselves into a wide enclosure where all human questions are elucidated; where all rights and liberties are pleaded for. When defending the right to speak and write only, the interests of some privileged people are perhaps pleaded for. The crowd pays very little attention to the freedom of the pen because they do not write nor do they stay up reading; even less they are interested in freedom of speech because they do not give discourses nor do they enjoy listening to them; they favor freedom of action because it is a necessity in order to solve the most serious economic problems. That France of 1789 and of 1848, where demonstrators with a red flag are fired upon, where a crowd of strikers is dissolved with a gun, shows that freedom of the pen and the word without granting that of action, is to deny and grant what is primary. For that reason, all freethinkers, if they do not want to be illogical, must declare themselves

Let us repeat: this line of sight, free thought which (until today has not meant more than irreligion and anticlericalism) becomes a new type of thought involving the total emancipation of the individual. It is the trend that we glimpse in the League of Freethinkers, on institution founded and maintained by people who had acted or continue to act in associations as combative as the Literary Circle⁵ and the National Union.⁶

In conclusion, Gentlemen: since we have come together here for a few moments to expand our spirits in an atmosphere of truth and tolerance, we will not separate without the great proposition of our deeds coinciding with words. Sincerely and boldly, we form our convictions, without fear of consequences, without admitting division between that which should be said and that which must be kept quiet, without professing truths for the consumption of the individual and truths for the use of the multitudes. Let us eradicate from our hearts traditional prejudices, let us close our ears to the voice of atavistic fears, let us remake the imposition of all human or divine authority. In a small word, let us believe in a secular atmosphere unloaded by religious doctrine, where only splendors of reason and science reign. Thus proceeding, we will live tranquilly, proud, and respected; and when the hour sounds for our great trip, we will cross the dark portal of death, not with the timidity of the prisoner that advances in the tribunal of the Roman praetorians, but with the arrogance of the Roman victor when passing through an arc of triumph.

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⁵ González Prada's literary group.

⁶ The political party into which the literary circle was evolving.

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