

God or freedom?

Mikhail Bakunin

1868

It has been alleged that we are enemies of free speech because we oppose all religious ideas, but this assertion is in every respect incorrect. We are consistent and principled enemies of every authority, of every ruling power; we also oppose the authoritarian idea of the state, and we will never recognize a social organization that is not based on the freedom of all mankind.

We love freedom so much that we respect the views and opinions of everyone, even if they are in direct opposition to our own. Has not one of the speakers from this platform claimed that Christianity is the foundation of all morality? We have listened to him in silence, and we demand the same tolerance for ourselves to declare our deep conviction that not only Christianity, but also all other religions, whatever name they may bear, are the direct contradiction of all human morality.

We do not oppose religion on a whim; no, we fight it in the name of morality, justice and humanity, and we are convinced that these principles will not be realized in society as long as humanity is influenced by religious utopias and religious superstition.

This profound and true thought, that religion in its entirety is an enemy of all human morality, dignity and justice, was not first proclaimed by us. The great thinkers of the past century had already developed it. This thought had already inspired the noblest spirits, the heroes and martyrs of the Renaissance, such men as Giordano Bruno, Vanini, Servetus, whom Calvin allowed to be burned alive in Geneva, and many others who saw in the Christian darkness the light of the ancient Greek spirit, and who hoisted the banner of freedom and humanity on every shattered fortress tower of the idea of God and despotism.

This morning I found on the table in our anteroom a prospectus inviting the delegates to subscribe to a book written against the popes. The motto of this book is the words of Ulrik von Hutten: "If humanity wishes to be free, it must first of all break the chains of papist tyranny and free itself from the heavy yoke which corrupt monks and priests have placed on its shoulders." Who then was Ulrik von Hutten, the hero of the Reformation? Did he break the chains of the Catholic Church in order to submit to the pious Protestant tyranny of a Luther, a Calvin, or a Melancthon? No, Hutten was an atheist, a friend and disciple of the atheists of Florence, where he became acquainted with the high teachings of the humanists.

This, the great hero of free thought, along with all the great liberators of humanity, who were persecuted, imprisoned, tortured, burned, or otherwise murdered by the executioners, all fell to the tyranny of kings and priests, church and state, but their ideas did not. They disguised

themselves in various forms under various names and prepared the mighty work of the humanists in the sixteenth century, and without doubt the learned and wise Erasmus of Rotterdam was their most prominent representative.

In the 17th century the spiritual trend was greatly strengthened by the development of natural science. Galileo, Kepler, Newton, Gassendi, Bacon, the grandfather of modern positivism – built science on the foundation of reality, which was the death knell for all metaphysical teachings, and consequently for religion as well. From the union of these two trends the great French philosophy of the eighteenth century developed.

This great eighteenth century, whose children we are all, and which still inspires us with its powerful ideas, was in reality the most humane and atheistic century. It recognized man and denied God. Its great spirits have understood that if there is a real desire to liberate humanity, to break its chains, and to bring it happiness, dignity, and freedom, it is necessary first of all to destroy every religious utopia, and all theological and metaphysical concepts, which from the dawn of human history have been a means and a justification of the efforts of all tyrants to enslave, demoralize, and exploit humanity. The philosophers of the eighteenth century were happier than the great thinkers of the Renaissance. The time was ripe, and their powerful and passionate propaganda became the mother of revolution.

Shall I here analyze the causes that prevented the great revolution from realizing all its hopes? That would take us too far. I will suffice to say that the religious doctrines of Jean Jacques Rousseau were an obstacle to the spiritual harmony of the eighteenth century, and were supported by the inconsistent, narrow-minded, and brutal theism of Voltaire, who held that religion was absolutely necessary for the people, for the “scoundrels.” I will only mention that during the Revolution this doctrine united the abstract worship of God with the abstract worship of the State. Both these metaphysical currents, embodied in the black figure of Robespierre, the Calvin of the Revolution, killed the Revolution.

Then began the dictatorship of the First Empire and the union with the Church on the basis of the principle of utility—utility, of course, for despotism. Then came the Restoration with its Catholic decadence and its representatives—the Chateaubriands, the Lamartines, and the Schlegels. And finally came the speculative philosophy of the Germans, which under the name of eclecticism became a state institution in France.

This is the deep cause of our present position, from which it is difficult to escape. But if we really want to save ourselves, we must openly and freely raise the banner of the Renaissance and the Revolution, on which was written: “Man’s Revolt Against the Yoke of God.”

Let us therefore have the courage to openly and freely declare that the existence of God does not permit the happiness, freedom, dignity and reason of mankind. If God exists, then my reason, however strong it may be, my will with all its power, is nothing compared to God’s will and God’s reason. My truth is a lie to him; my will becomes powerless; my freedom and my revolt are sins against him. It is either him or me. If God exists, then I must disappear, and if He is so good that He sends His prophets to make known to me the truth that my reason cannot comprehend, when He sends priests to guide my thoughts, who cannot of themselves distinguish between good and evil, when He sends crowned kings to rule me, then I must submit to His will with slavish submission. He who desires God also desires the enslavement of mankind; either God and the enslavement of mankind, or the freedom of mankind and the abolition of every concept of God. There is no third way. You must decide for yourselves.

The profound truth which many are afraid to proclaim openly, this truth that the existence of God does not permit the union of human freedom and reason with the individual and social morality of mankind, is acknowledged by many of the delegates to the Congress, who for various reasons voted with the majority to which we are in opposition. Has not a member of the moderate section clearly declared that the development of the positive sciences must necessarily entail the gradual destruction of all religious dogmas and that therefore education is the best means of the spiritual, political, moral and social emancipation of the masses?

We too are supporters of a good and general education. We too are of the opinion that all science and the highest phenomena must become the spiritual property of the people. But in order for the people to be able to learn, they must first of all have time and opportunity to study, they must be able to support their children while they study. But this is in itself a requirement for a radical transformation of the present economic organization of society.

And this is not all. The supporters of a peaceful revolution, all these freethinking associations, who have led themselves to believe that only by teaching, by written and oral propaganda, they can succeed in crushing the power of religious superstition, they are all making a great mistake. Religion is not only a spiritual darkening of the mind, it is at the same time a passionate and incessant protest against all human feelings and all the struggle against the poverty and narrowness of daily existence. The human imagination creates an artificial world in which the longings, hopes and ideals of all mankind are summed up. Men have made the heavens richer and thereby made the earth poorer. This is what religion has accomplished; and it will be all-powerful on earth as long as ignorance and injustice reign. Let us finally establish justice and give the earth what belongs to the earth, namely happiness and brotherhood. Let us destroy all the institutions of injustice and tyranny, and create a world of brotherly love, that is, a world where the equal rights of all are based on the mutual solidarity of all, where freedom shall be the result of equality, and religion shall no longer find any place in human society.

But to destroy religion and all the divine reflexes in the human imagination which keep us enslaved and bound in poverty, spiritual enlightenment alone is not sufficient—a social revolution is necessary.

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Speech at a congress of the League for Peace and Freedom held in Berne in 1868

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