



Drawing by Bertrand Zadig

"The essence of the liberal outlook is a belief that men should be free to question anything if they can support their questioning by solid arguments."

The Best Answer to Fanaticism—Liberalism

THE more I see of other countries the more persuaded I become that the English are a very odd people. Their virtues are due to their vices, and their vices to their virtues. They are tolerant—more so I think than any other large nation—because they consider ideas unimportant. In other countries ideas are thought important and therefore dangerous; in England ideas are thought negligible and therefore not worth persecuting.

This was not always the case. In the seventeenth century, England had a spate of ideologies leading to civil wars and executions and thumbscrews, but in 1688 the country decided that it had had enough of earnestness and that anybody who believed anything at all fervently was no gentleman. This decision was made all the easier by the fact that the most fanatical fanatics had gone to America. Ever since, Englishmen who have beliefs are treated as licensed buffoons or court jesters. There are no civil wars and nobody's head is cut off. This is convenient, but one sometimes feels that a little

BERTRAND RUSSELL, British philosopher, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950.

Its calm search for truth, viewed as dangerous in many places, remains the hope of humanity.

By **BERTRAND RUSSELL**

persecution would be a more sincere compliment.

There is, in the present day, a very general decay of liberalism, even in countries where there has been an increase of democracy. Liberalism is not so much a creed as a disposition. It is, indeed, opposed to creeds. It began in the late seventeenth century as a reaction from the futile wars of religion which, though they killed immense numbers of people, left the balance of power unchanged. I suppose that if America and Russia were to fight each other for a hundred and thirty years without either of them gaining any advantage, there might, at the end of that time, be a few people who would wonder whether the fighting was serving any purpose. This is what happened in the second half of the seventeenth century.

The great apostle of liberalism was Locke, who disliked both Roundheads

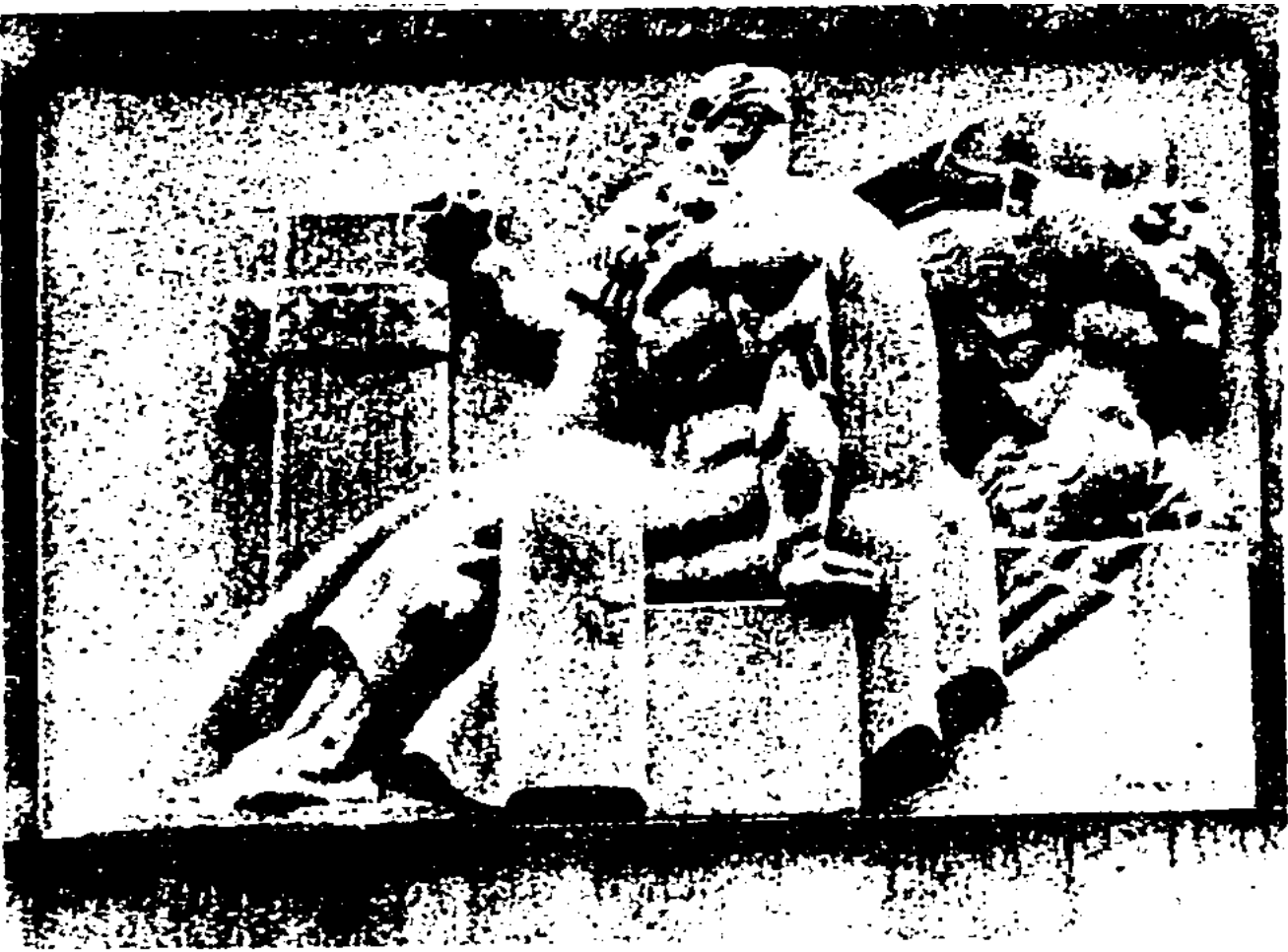
and Cavaliers and thought the important thing was to learn to live at peace with one's neighbor, even if there were matters about which one did not agree with him. Locke based this attitude of live-and-let-live on the fallibility of all human opinion. He thought nothing indubitable. He held that everything is open to question. He maintained that there is only probable opinion, and that the person who feels no doubt is stupid. Such an outlook, we are now assured, is a great drawback in battle, and is, therefore, to be decried. But the English, while they held this attitude, acquired their empire, defeated the French and the Spaniards and were only defeated by the Americans, who had the same attitude in an even more marked degree.

THOSE happy days are past. Nowadays, the man who has any doubt whatever is despised; in many coun-

tries he is put in prison, and in America he is thought unfit to perform any public function. What you are to be sure of depends, of course, upon your longitude. East of the Elbe, it is absolutely certain that capitalism is tottering; west of the Elbe, it is absolutely certain that capitalism is the salvation of mankind. The good citizen is not the man who attempts to be guided by the evidence but the man who never resists longitudinal inspiration.

AMERICA, which imagines itself the land of free enterprise, will not permit free enterprise in the world of ideas. In America, almost as much as in Russia, you must think what your neighbor thinks, or rather what your neighbor thinks that it pays to think. Free enterprise is confined to the material sphere. This is what Americans mean when they say that they are opposed to materialism.

Those for whom free use of the intelligence has made intellectual submission difficult find themselves, wherever the government is persecuting, led into opposition to authority. But the liberal attitude does (Continued on Page 40)



"Law," a panel in granite by Donald De Lue.

The Best Answer to Fanaticism

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not say that you should oppose authority. It says only that you should be free to oppose authority, which is quite a different thing. The essence of the liberal outlook in the intellectual sphere is a belief that unbiased discussion is a useful thing and that men should be free to question anything if they can support their questioning by solid arguments. The opposite view, which is maintained by those who cannot be called liberals, is that the truth is already known, and that to question it is necessarily subversive.

THE purpose of mental activity, according to these men, is not to discover truth but to strengthen belief in truths already known. In a word, its purpose in this view is edification, not knowledge.

The liberal objection to this view is that throughout past history received opinions have been such as everyone now admits to have been both false and harmful, and that it is scarcely likely that the world has completely changed in this respect. It is not necessary to the liberal outlook to maintain that discussion will always lead to the prevalence of the better opinion. What is necessary is to maintain that absence of discussion will usually lead to the prevalence of the worse opinion. For this, I think, there is abundant evidence in the past. At the present time, persecution of opinion is practiced in all parts of the world except Western Europe, and the consequence is that the world is divided into two halves, which cannot understand each other and which find only hostile relations possible.

THERE is, of course, a case to be made for edification as opposed to truth. Edification, that is to say the bolstering up by specious arguments of the opinions held by the police, tends to preserve a stable society. It militates against anarchy and gives security to the incomes of the rich. When successful, it prevents revolution, and insures that kings

and presidents will be welcomed by cheering crowds whenever they show themselves to their subjects. When on the other hand, pure reason is allowed to intrude into political speculation, the result may be to let loose such a flood of anarchic passion that all orderly government becomes impossible. It is this fear which inspires conservatives and authoritarians. No one can deny that philosophers in eighteenth-century France prepared the way for the guillotine. No one can deny that philosophers in nineteenth-century Russia undermined the traditional reverence for the Czar. No one can deny that under Western influence Chinese philosophers weakened the authority of Confucius.

I WILL not attempt to maintain that thinking has never had any bad effects, but where it has had such effects it has been because its lessons have been only half learned. The teacher who urges doctrines subversive of existing authority does not, if he is a liberal, advocate the establishment of a new authority even more tyrannical than the old. He advocates certain limits to the exercise of authority, and he wishes these limits to be observed not only when the authority would support a creed with which he disagrees but also when it would support one with which he is in complete agreement. I am, for my part, a believer in democracy, but I do not like a regime which makes belief in democracy compulsory.

In favor of freedom of discussion, there are several arguments. There is first the argument that it tends to promote true belief, and that true belief as a rule is more socially useful than false belief. There is next the argument that where freedom of discussion is curbed, it is curbed by those who hold power and is practically certain to be curbed in their interest. The result almost inevitably is to promote injustice and oppression. There is lastly the argument that in-

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justice and order are maintained by a dominant caste lead sooner or later to violent revolution, and that violent revolution is apt to issue either in anarchy or in a new tyranny worse than that which has been overthrown.

THERE have been ages and nations in which an urbane orthodoxy has succeeded, without ostensible persecution, in establishing an almost unquestioned intellectual authority. The supreme example of this is traditional China. All wisdom was contained in the Confucian books. A considerable amount of education was required in order to understand these books. The men who had this education controlled the government and the result was a system which was civilized, in a sense enlightened, and fairly stable for about 2,000 years.

There was, however, nothing in the Confucian books about warships or artillery or high explosives, and, therefore, as soon as China came into conflict with the West, the whole Confucian synthesis was seen to be inadequate. A similar fate must overtake any static culture, however excellent in itself. Some fifty years ago (the matter is quite different now) there was a thoroughly Chinese synthesis which was inculcated by those who did "Greats" at Oxford. One learned the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle and Kant and Hegel. Other philosophies were ignored as being "crude."

The result had considerable esthetic merit but happened not to be adapted to the modern world. There are those in America who hope to spread a cultured atmosphere through American universities by selecting a hundred great books and confining education to them. This again is a static ideal. The best books of the past, at any rate where science is concerned, contain less useful knowledge than very inferior textbooks of the present time. And those who have read only the best hundred books will be ignorant of many things that they ought to know. Moreover, vested interests will rapidly cumulate about the best hundred books. Professors will know how to lecture about them, but not about books outside the sacred hundred. They will, therefore, use all their intellectual authority to prevent the recognition of new merit. And it will presently happen, as happened in nineteenth century England, that almost all intellectual merit is to be found only outside the universities.

THOSE who oppose freedom, whether in the political or the intellectual sphere, are men dominated by apprehension of the evil consequences that may result from unbridled human passion. I will not deny that there are such dangers. But I would ask timorous people to remember that safe-

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ty is impossible to achieve and is ignoble as an aim. Risks must be run and those who refuse to run risks incur a certainty of much greater disaster sooner or later.

It is all very fine to wish to curb human passions, but you cannot curb the passions of those who do the curbing. In imagination, of course, you see yourself in this position, and you know yourself to be a person of exemplary virtue. This, dear reader, I shall not dispute. But you are not immortal. Others will succeed you in the censor's office and they may be less humane and less enlightened than you are. They may build the dikes higher and higher against the flood of new ideas, but, however feverishly they may build, their dikes will ultimately prove inadequate and the higher they have been built the more terrible will be the flood when the waters overtop them. It is not by such methods that subversive violence is to be prevented. The dangers that frighten authoritarians are real, but no other method of combating them is so effective as freedom.

PERHAPS the essence of the liberal outlook could be summed up in a new decalogue, not intended to replace the old one but only to supplement it. The Ten Commandments that, as a teacher, I should wish to promulgate, might be set forth as follows:

(1) Do not feel absolutely certain of anything.

(2) Do not think it worthwhile to produce belief by concealing evidence, for the evidence is sure to come to light.

(3) Never try to discourage thinking, for you are sure to succeed.

(4) When you meet with opposition, even if it should be from your husband or your children, endeavor to overcome it by argument and not by authority, for a victory dependent upon authority is unreal and illusory.

(5) Have no respect for the authority of others, for there are always contrary authorities to be found.

(6) Do not use power to suppress opinions you think pernicious, for if you do the opinions will suppress you.

(7) Do not fear to be eccentric in opinion, for every opinion now accepted was once eccentric.

(8) Find more pleasure in intelligent dissent than in passive agreement, for, if you value intelligence as you should, the former implies a deeper agreement than the latter.

(9) Be scrupulously truthful, even when truth is inconvenient, for it is more inconvenient when you try to conceal it.

(10) Do not feel envious of the happiness of those who live in a fool's paradise, for only a fool will think that it is happiness.

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