

# THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY.

---

VOL. VI.

SEPTEMBER, 1926.

No. 9.

---

## The Sesquicentennial of Our Independence.

W. ARNDT, St. Louis, Mo.

The readers of this article, I have no doubt, are agreed that our nation has abundant reason to thank God for the freedom which was achieved through the struggle inaugurated by the famous Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. While the history which began on that day is partly written in blood, some of it the blood of brothers who fought each other in the Civil War; while it is marred here and there by accounts of injustice and corruption; while party strife has dominated our political life frequently instead of true patriotism; while our judiciary at times has failed to function for the protection of the citizens, for instance, at the time of the World War, when innocent men were set upon by fanatical, bloodthirsty mobs; while the American Indian, once the owner of the land we now call ours, has a tale of woe to tell with respect to the treatment he received all too generally; nevertheless, viewed as a whole, that venture undertaken 150 years ago has been markedly successful and has brought in its wake a constitution and a government for which we cannot be too thankful. Dean Inge, a number of years ago, remarked that we cannot escape human limitations and imperfections when setting up a government. If we establish an autocracy, we shall, *ceteris paribus*, have a government that will be honest, just, and efficient, but it will be at the expense of personal and political liberty. (Witness Italy these days under Mussolini.) If we choose a democracy, we shall have freedom, but it will be at the expense of efficiency; there will be corruption, bad, ill-advised legislation, and party rancor. You have to choose between two evils, such was the conclusion the reader had to draw from the remarks of the prominent Anglican scholar, and can you be sure which will be the lesser one? The pessimism of the "gloomy Dean" is shared by few, if any, of my readers, I am sure, even if there is some justification for it. On the contrary, to us the liberty which we enjoy here is a priceless boon, and we

would not exchange our position as free American citizens for that of counts and earls and dukes in other countries. But when we consider that democracy has its peculiar dangers, human nature being what it is, we must say we cannot be grateful enough that our government, standing for freedom, has functioned as well as has been the case, and that there has not been more of fratricidal war, of chaos, and of lack of protection and mutual forbearance.

Whatever imperfections have made themselves more or less painfully felt in our system of government and in the political life of the nation during the last century and a half, they are all out-balanced by one glorious possession of ours, religious liberty, which was established when the War of Independence had been won and the colonies proceeded to set their house in order. That great blessing, it is well for a light-hearted posterity to remember, did not fall from heaven some fine night to be found and enjoyed by delighted human beings the next morning. It required much discussion and debate to make our early citizens see the reasonableness and the justice of such an arrangement. In Massachusetts about the time when the Revolution began, the principle of "no taxation without representation" was borrowed from the domain of politics to be used with reference to church affairs by people who did not belong to the churches of the Puritan establishment, but who were compelled to pay for the support of this system. But in spite of the tremendous blow which they undoubtedly dealt, standing on this principle at that particular time, the best they could obtain in 1780 when the State of Massachusetts adopted a constitution, was the permission to divert the church taxes which the State imposed, to the treasuries of their own churches instead of seeing them turned over to the coffers of the established Congregational Church. It is interesting to note that this state of affairs lasted till 1833. In the majority of the colonies progress was more rapid. Some of them, especially Pennsylvania, had always been noted for their tolerance. The battle for religious freedom in the new nation was won when the Legislature of Virginia in 1785 passed a bill, drafted by Thomas Jefferson, which made religion the private affair of every citizen. A few sentences from the Preamble are worth quoting. The document states "that to suffer the civil magistrate to intrude his powers into the field of opinion and to restrain the profession or propagation of principles on a supposition of their ill tendency is a dangerous fallacy which at once destroys all religious liberty. It is time enough for the rightful purpose of civil government for its officers to interfere

when principles break out into overt acts against peace and good order." This is admirably stated. The passage of this statute had a powerful influence on the other colonies and paved the way for the adoption of the First Amendment to the Constitution at the first session of the First Congress, reading in its opening words: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." With the adoption of that Amendment religious liberty became a reality in the United States, and we hope will endure as long as our union will last. This blessing of religious freedom is the brightest star in that magnificent constellation of advantages and privileges guaranteed us in our Constitution. To know and to be assured that in my relation to the Creator I shall be absolutely free to follow the course which my heart and conscience prescribe, irrespective of the opinions of my neighbors, of the convictions of the majority of my fellow-citizens, and of the views of political or ecclesiastical magistrates — what other liberty within the power of human beings to bestow is comparable to this one?

It would be a piece of ingratitude if we, joining in the eulogies of religious liberty, failed to mention that the beginnings of it in modern times are to be sought in the Reformation. When Luther broke the fetters of the papacy, he enunciated the principles which lie at the basis of the freedom in religious matters which we enjoy, namely, the supremacy of the Scriptures over against all decrees and decisions of churches and synods and Popes, the right of private judgment, and the separation of Church and State. The opening scene of the Reformation at once gave evidence of this spirit. The vigorous protest of the 95 Theses against the abuses of the indulgence traffic implied that here was a man who meant to testify to the truth as his conscience directed him, whether it pleased the hierarchy or not. In the posting of those theses, — an event so unpretentious and apparently so insignificant, — there appeared the dawn of religious freedom. At first seen imperfectly, as through a mist, this concept gradually was fully comprehended by the great Reformer. Never since the days of the apostles was it given more noble and striking utterance than in the scene at Worms, when Luther told the emperor and the Diet that he would not recant unless he were furnished convincing proof of being in error. Through the influence and teachings of Luther it was brought about that the Augsburg Confession, in its 28th Article, espoused the cause of religious liberty by insisting on the separation of Church and State. The words have been often quoted, but

we transcribe them once more. "Therefore, since the power of the Church grants eternal things and is exercised only by the ministry of the Word, it does not interfere with civil government; no more than the art of singing interferes with civil government. For civil government deals with other things than does the Gospel. The civil rulers defend not minds, but bodies and bodily things against manifest injuries, and restrain men with the sword and bodily punishments in order to preserve civil justice and peace. Therefore the power of the Church and the civil power must not be confounded." *Trigl.*, p. 85. It is true that succeeding generations of Lutherans were unable to climb to these lofty heights and disregarded or misinterpreted the teaching of the Augsburg Confession in this point. But this does not rob Luther and his coworkers of the glory of having placed the ideal of religious liberty prominently before the world. Let us gratefully acknowledge that America was the first country where this ideal was fully realized.

Historians that are just and honest and have a keen perception of causes have pointed out that to Luther we owe not only our religious, but our political liberty as well. In the admirable little tract by Dr. W. Dallmann, entitled *Luther and the Fourth of July*, the following words of James Bryce are pointed to: "The Reformation erected the standard of civil as well as religious liberty." And these words are ascribed to George W. Curtis: "It was the spiritual freedom which Luther asserted that produced political freedom and the freedom of the press." These writers did not exaggerate. If the conviction becomes general that the enslaving of men's souls is immoral, then it will not be long before sentiment will turn against the thralldom exercised over people's bodies, too. To put it differently, political liberty is always a by-product when religious liberty is established. Luther did not directly contend for political freedom; being an ardent patriot, he nevertheless did not wish to use his influence as a theological teacher in the domain of secular politics. One word from him, and there would have been a political explosion such as the world had never before witnessed. But he had been sent to preach the Gospel and to proclaim the peace of God which passeth all understanding. To bring men to the cross of Christ, where a far greater blessing than political liberty can be found, namely, the forgiveness of sins, that was his great aim. In this he showed himself a consistent pupil of the great apostle Paul, who never indulges in tirades against the despotic and cruel government which he and his fellow-Christians had to live under, but who says: "The kingdom of God is

not meat and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost." Rom. 14, 17. But just as in the early days of Christianity men who owned slaves began to treat them kindly and ultimately, as a rule, gave them their freedom when they themselves had embraced the Christian religion, so a person who has been made free by the truth which is in Christ Jesus will not find it right to put an unjust yoke of political bondage on the necks of his fellow-men. Having freedom in the heart, he will be eager to dispense freedom about himself. Besides, the heroic act of Luther when he declared the independence of the Christian with respect to the authority of the Pope and church councils made everybody feel that a new era was at hand, an era in which the watchword would be "freedom." And even in lands where the teachings of Luther were not generally accepted, the fire of liberty began to burn. The age of tyrants, it is true, did not at once cease, nevertheless the flame remained alive till several centuries later it burst forth in full grandeur in our beloved country.

The Reformation gave us our liberties. They will be secure as long as the principles of the Reformation are being taught and reach men's hearts. Modernism, which is trying to dig the grave of the old Gospel that brought spiritual freedom to the world in the sixteenth century, is unwittingly undermining the foundations of our free institutions. The attempts of Calvinism to make all citizens follow its regulations in certain outward observances, deemed to be prescribed by the Christian religion, regardless of what the conviction of the individual touching such observances may be, are turning back the hand of time, and will, if fully successful, resuscitate Puritanic New England and give us performances akin to the burning of witches and the pilloring of Sabbath offenders. The sesquicentennial of our independence then sounds the solemn call that we dedicate ourselves anew to the great truths for which Luther contended and which, due to the merciful guidance of God, have erected for us here a free Church in a free State.

---