

HOW LIBERAL IS LIBERALISM?

JOHN COURTNEY MURRAY, S.J.

EVERY NOW AND AGAIN some enterprising journalist digs up a Spanish catechism and finds that "Liberalism" is listed in it as one of the social errors condemned by the Catholic Church. Thereupon ensues some little to-do in the press. For instance, in 1938 there appeared a pamphlet, *The Spanish Church and Politics*, in which great use was made of the condemnation of Liberalism contained in the catechism written by Father Angel María de Arcos, S.J. AMERICA (Feb. 5, 1938) commented on it at the time, in a doubtless vain endeavor to calm the horror with which the American Friends of Spanish Democracy, who released the pamphlet, had greeted this proof of the Church's reactionary opposition to modern ideas. Several weeks ago, another Spanish catechism turned up—this time, a re-edition of Ripalda, done by another Jesuit. In it Liberalism is put down, with socialism and communism, as a social evil; whereas no mention is made of nazism and fascism. This discovery was publicized in the press as an example of the awful things that are being said in Spain—and to little children, too.

DOCTRINAIRE LIBERALISM

The discovery was calculated to impress the American public. Few Americans have any very clear idea of what the Liberalism which the Church condemned actually meant. Insofar as the word stands for anything to the average American, it stands for the sum total of all the things that enlightened modern men consider worth while. The fact, however, is that nineteenth-century Liberalism stood for one chief thing which modern men, further enlightened by the experience of the last thirty years, consider particularly disastrous—a militant secularism, a systematic denial of the relevance of religion to social life.

Actually, the Church was rarely more splendidly liberal than when she condemned Liberalism. In her century-long battle with the Liberal theory and spirit, many complex issues were raised. Not all of them were of equal importance; and the tactics of the battle were not always happily devised. Nevertheless, the Church was luminously clear about one central thing—that those who deny the sovereignty of God over human society are the most dangerous enemies of human liberty. Today, even those who do not accept the full position of the Church must recognize that the cause for which the Church fought against Liberalism is, in one central aspect, the cause of all men of good will.

It is curious that publicists should make so much of the Church's condemnation of Liberalism, as found in Spanish catechisms. Actually, it can be found in any ordinary textbook of ethics, current in any country. However, these latter might not serve the publicists' purpose; for normally (I looked in several to verify the fact) they are careful to speak of "Continental," or "European," or "philosophical" Liberalism as the object of the Church's reprobation. For instance, Cathrein's classic manual prefaces its description and refutation of Liberalism with this remark: "What is here said is not to be understood of every individual who calls himself a 'liberal,' or of the 'liberal' parties in all countries, but of the system itself, as it is commonly held in most of the states of Europe." In other words, the Liberalism condemned by the Church is rightly written with a capital L.

It was not (as in most American minds) just a sentimental mood, an inherited persuasion of very vague content,

but a highly doctrinaire social theory, resting on premises as dogmatic as any ecclesiastical belief. It was elaborated largely in France; that fact explains its character. It has been well said that the English (and the Americans) retreat before an absolute, but the French advance. For this reason Liberalism, in England and America, remained a way of life, large and loose and unpreoccupied with first principles, and therefore has been able somehow to survive because its very lack of logic left it open to vitalizing influences. But in France, Liberalism became a body of doctrine, tightly organized, and consciously related to clearly defined first principles. The first principles were false, and therefore French Liberalism was condemned to death, not only by the anathema of the Church but by the empirical verdict of history.

The Church's condemnation is, of course, contained in substance in the *Syllabus of Errors*. That strange, rough document, unique among ecclesiastical utterances, contains the Church's indictment of the intellectual foundations and the political and social applications of Continental Liberalism. The indictment is drawn up without eloquence or argument. This is the Church's custom, as when Pius XI, in a few curt propositions, condemned nazi racist theory. However, the *Syllabus* is phrased in such a way as to leave it peculiarly open to misconstruction, if read by itself; for in it Pius IX merely summed up the errors with which he had dealt at length in thirty-two pronouncements over a period of twenty years. Put in its context in these documents, each proposition of the *Syllabus* is quite clear.

It was once the fashion to view the *Syllabus* as the last dying curse spoken by an outworn ecclesiastical system against the new world which had no place for it. It was regarded as the definitive proof that the Catholic Church would no longer be a factor in world civilization, since it had broken with all the forces that were to make the civilization of the future. Today there is a disposition to revise judgment. Thoughtful people are coming to discover that the *Syllabus of Errors* contained a few truths. Acknowledgment of the fact is sometimes made half-apologetically, as when William Aylott Orton, in his valuable book, *The Liberal Tradition*, remarks in the course of his rather sympathetic discussion of the *Syllabus*: "If it seem paradoxical to discover a few truths in the *Syllabus of Errors*, the remedy is to read it in the light of the full sequel."

FRUITS OF DOCTRINAIRE LIBERALISM

The full sequel to nineteenth-century Continental Liberalism is, of course, the twentieth century, with its two World Wars, that have left humanity shivering in the vestibule of the atomic age and, perhaps, of the hell of the Last World War. In the light of this full sequel, as Orton sees it,

the underlying thesis [of the *Syllabus*] had substance; and when Pius hurls his final anathema at any who suggest that "the Roman Pontiff can and should reconcile himself to, and come to terms with, progress, Liberalism and modern civilization," we can hardly avoid the reflection that modern civilization, 1944 style, is indeed pretty difficult for Christian men to come to terms with.

My point is that the two essential things with which the Roman Pontiff refused to come to terms in 1864 are the same two things with which no Christian man can come to terms in 1946. The first is the philosophical principle of the absolute autonomy of the individual reason; the second is the political principle of the juridical omnipotence of the state. Both principles were of the essence of Liberalism, and they were the basic reasons for its condemnation.

Proposition 3 of the *Syllabus* reads: "Human reason, having no regard of God, is the sole arbiter of truth and falsity, right and wrong; it is a law unto itself, and of its own natural resources it is adequate to secure the good of men and peoples." This proposition is condemned as it stands; for this is absolute rationalism, the theory of man's complete emancipation, in the intellectual order, from all manner of authority external to himself—whether it be God, the natural law, the Bible, the Church, or even antiquity with its hereditary lessons. Moreover, since there is no such thing as abstract reason, but only reason as it exists in men, this rationalism leads to the destruction of the distinction between right and wrong, truth and falsity. It becomes the prerogative of every man to think what he likes, and to be himself the judge of its truth. Above all, as the famous Frenchwoman said: "Everyone makes his own little religion."

It was on this premise that the men of the Revolution proclaimed freedom of religion as the first of the great modern liberties—the right of the individual to worship God as he pleases, if he pleases. And it was this freedom of religion, based on this premise, that Gregory XVI had in mind when he called it a *deliramentum*—an absurdity, a piece of nonsense (how often that famous word has been mistranslated through a series of Protestant books). That is precisely what it is. It is an absurdity because it contradicts the first principle of ethical reason—the sovereignty of God over the human conscience. Be it noted that Liberalism, in defining freedom of religion, went much farther than the assertion of the right of every man, *as against the state*, to worship God according to his conscience. This, I take it, is the first of the Four Freedoms proclaimed by the late President Roosevelt. And this is no nonsense, but sound ethical doctrine, which the Catholic Church has always taught.

LIBERAL TYRANNY

Paradoxically enough, freedom of religion in this sense was regarded as particularly pernicious nonsense by the French Republic, which, as any impartial historian will admit, was not "neutral," not simply anti-clerical, or even anti-Catholic, but downright anti-religious. Few who have written on the topic have ever advocated state coercion of conscience more strongly than Rousseau, the first great philosopher of the Liberal society. And where Continental Liberalism guided political policy and practice (as once in Italy, Spain, Mexico, and some of the early and present Latin-American republics), it was always the first of the Four Freedoms that suffered the greatest repression. The fact is that when individualistic Liberalism gave every man the "freedom" to make his own little religion, it also let the Leviathan State move in to make the real, big religion—social secularism. Every man could privately be as religious as he pleased, if indeed he pleased. But let him not attempt to make his religion a force in shaping the structure, the institutions, the spirit and tendency of society. Blocking such an attempt was the mighty power of the only divine majesty which Liberalism acknowledged—the state.

Proposition 39 of the *Syllabus* reads: "The republican state, as the origin and source of all rights, possesses a juridical competence that is circumscribed by no limits." The proposition has a familiar sound; we seem to have heard it recently enunciated in German, Italian and in Russian. And this fact may mitigate the scandal taken at Spanish catechisms which omit a condemnation of nazism and fascism, while condemning Liberalism. For part of the essence of the Liberalism which the Church condemned was its totalitarian concept of the state.

It would be easy, but too long, to show how the Liberal

theory of the atomic individual, with its rationalistic premises, logically led to state socialism, based on the theory that all rights are state-granted and state-controlled—the theory of the "general will," as cast up by the Liberal philosophers and perfected in practice by Liberal politicians. What is here important is the fact that the full fury of the Church's attack on Liberalism fell on the Liberal assertion that there is no sovereignty higher than that of the national state, and on the corresponding Liberal denial of the relevance of religion to society. The state, said the Liberals, is not subject to an order of justice, established by the law of God and containing certain imprescriptible human rights; on the contrary, the state itself establishes the order of justice, and is a law unto itself. On this assertion of absolute state sovereignty the Liberals based their drive for separation of Church and State. But this was only an intermediate objective; what they really wanted to achieve was a completely secularized society, in which religion would be denied any vital influence on the political, social, economic or educational life.

Pius IX saw this clearly. And there is a certain pathos felt now on reading what he wrote in *Quanta Cura*, the encyclical which accompanied the *Syllabus*: "When religion is separated from civil society, and the teaching and authority of Divine revelation are repudiated, even the very notion of justice and human rights is clouded in darkness, and lost; and in the place of true justice and right based on law is substituted material force." Seventy-five years after those words were written, the United Nations were waging a titanic war, supposedly for justice and human rights, against the threat of a new order that would be imposed by material force on a darkened world. And in the midst of the war, men of good will—Catholics, Protestants and Jews—united in writing a Pattern for Peace, whose first point asserted the sovereignty of God and of the moral law over nations and states and international society. This, in substance, was the assertion of the *Syllabus*. But in 1864 it went unheeded.

Pius IX further wrote in *Quanta Cura*:

Who can fail to see and intimately realize that when human society is loosed from the bonds of religion and true justice, it can have no other aim than the acquisition and accumulation of riches, and can follow no other law in its actions than an unconquerable inner lust to serve its own pleasures and interests?

At the time, men and nations did not see this, that when religious principles cease to govern society, society loses its moral purpose, nations pursue solely material aims, and the result is war. Seventy-five years later, another Pius had to issue a call to all men of good will to enlist in a crusade to "lead the nations back from the muddy cisterns of material and selfish interests to the living fountain of divine law, which alone is powerful to create that enduring moral grandeur of which the nations and humanity, to their own serious loss, have for too long a time felt the absence and the need."

Men of good will have begun to understand the crusade of Pius XII. They may now begin to understand that Pius IX first proclaimed it when he condemned Liberalism. It is a crusade to set a higher sovereignty over the reason of man and over the authority and action of the state. This is what the Church was fighting for, in fighting against Liberalism. To the Liberal concept of abstract liberty, she opposed the concrete Christian concept of responsibility—the idea that men and nations are sovereign indeed, and free, but subject in their thought and purpose and action to God, His thought, His purpose, His action. The cause for which the Church—alone and without allies—fought in the nineteenth century has become today the cause of all men of good will.

