Rome and Civil Liberty – by James Aitkin Wylie

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Rome and Civil Liberty

The Papal Aggression in its Relation to The Sovereignty of the Queen and the Independence of the Nation

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Preface.

IT IS A COMMON ERROR to suppose, because Rome is unchangeable in her dogmas, that she is unchangeable also in the forms of her logic. Society is continually advancing to a higher stage; truth is perpetually receiving clearer manifestations; and this imposes upon that Church which seeks to stereotype the one and to extinguish the other, the necessity of continually devising new modes of assault. The creed of the Church of Rome is immutable: her logic is in perpetual flux: her policy is ever old as regards its ends; it is ever new as regards its phases. In substance, that Church abides unalterably the same throughout the ages; and yet every century sees, as it were, a new Church.

This makes it necessary that every century or so we should readjust the argument against Rome. The immortal works of Barrow, Chillingworth, and Stillingfleet, are an exhaustive refutation of the Church which *changes not*, but they are not an exhaustive refutation of the Church which *does change*. They do not, and could not; meet the Papal aggression, – the special phase assumed by the Church of Rome in our century. The following pages are an attempt at a readjustment of the argument, so far as that aggression is concerned.

The Papal aggression is here viewed as a whole, from its rise to what may be regarded as well-nigh its completion. The author has been solicitous to

extricate the fundamental principle of that aggression, and clearly to explain its implied logic. He has shown the successive stages by which it has been advanced, and the goal to which it inevitably tends. He has, moreover, supported and illustrated his argument by the great facts which form the past dozen years' history of Europe.

The author does not conceal his opinion that the civil liberty of the country is at this hour in very great peril, — in more immediate peril, perhaps, than its religious liberty; for it is the policy of Rome to strike at the latter through the sides of the former. The Papal aggression, in the author's judgment, was a violation of the Constitution of the kingdom as settled at the Revolution; and to the extent to which that aggression has been carried, to the same extent has the throne been betrayed, and the rights of the subject invaded. His charge is not that our statesmen have tolerated the *religion* of the Pope, but that they have sanctioned the *authority* of the Pope: not that they have permitted the spread of another faith, but that they have permitted the erection of another Government.

Of all earthly possessions, liberty is the most precious: it is bought at a greater price, and preserved with greater watchfulness, than any other. Tyranny comes with muffled foot: it steals upon us like the night: it deposits, while a nation sleeps, the seeds of arbitrary rule; and, under pretense of redressing wrong or of advancing liberty, it strikes a fatal blow at justice and freedom. A somewhat jealous mood is at all times one of the best bulwarks of a nation's liberties; but at the present hour, when the causes of alarm are so imminent, we can scarce be too watchful against apathy in regard to the public interests, or too alert to repel the inroads of a tyranny of all others the stealthiest and the basest. The Protestantism of Britain, we are told, is sound, and will bestir itself when the crisis comes. The crisis is now: what will come is the catastrophe.

The author earnestly solicits from every lover of liberty, and especially from every lover of the gospel, a careful consideration of the facts and reasonings presented in the present volume. The cause is preeminently the cause of our country at this hour; and, if the cause of Great Britain, the cause of the world. Edinburgh, 1st July 1865.

Part I. The Reformation.

THE ACCOMPLISHMENT of the Reformation in Britain occupied the better part of two centuries. The first dawning of the light was in 1380. In that year Wycliffe published his translation of the Bible; and England entered, the first of the nations in modern times, upon the glorious path of circulating the Scriptures throughout her realm. Confessors were never wanting to the Gospel from that day in Britain. But the era proper of the Reformation extends from 1516, when Erasmus published his New Testament in England, to 1688, when the ecclesiastical and political constitution of our country was settled on a Protestant basis under William of Orange.

The period embraced by these two dates is the most glorious in our annals. It was fruitful throughout in men of great character, and in events of world-wide influence. More especially was it adorned towards the middle by a

constellation of elegant scholars and accomplished theologians, of great statesmen and holy martyrs, who have never perhaps been surpassed in any age, whether of our own or of any other nation. Nor did the Reformation develop itself as a purely spiritual existence. It made society the companion of its progress and the partner of its triumphs. The divine principle at its center sent the pulses of a new life through the body corporate, and thus it gave us a new State as well as a new Church. Fostering every liberal study, and encouraging every generous art, it built up around itself a bulwark of social enlightenment and political freedom. A work like this was dearly purchased: it cost the toil and the blood of two centuries.

Let us run our eye along, and briefly survey the struggles and the lessons of this most eventful period of our history. In the retrospect of the past there are two reigns that stand out with extraordinary prominence. Let us fix our eye mainly on these. If we can profit by the experience of our fathers, we may be saved the peril of making the experiment over again in our own times. MARY and ELIZABETH are the types of the two principles of Popery and Protestantism, as embodied in the government of our country. These two reigns are, in fact, the EBAL (curses) and GERIZIM (blessings) or our history.

Deuteronomy 11:29 And it shall come to pass, when the LORD thy God hath brought thee in unto the land whither thou goest to possess it, that **thou shalt put the blessing upon mount Gerizim, and the curse upon mount Ebal.**

In them Life and Death, the Blessing and the Curse, have been set as palpably before the people of Great Britain as they were set before the Jews of old. Read in the light of these reigns, the ascendancy of the one principle means the promotion of all that ennobles and strengthens a country; the ascendancy of the other means, necessarily and inevitably, the extinction of private virtue and the overthrow of public liberty.

Some there are among us who seem to think there can be no great difference betwixt a Popish and a Protestant rule; or, at least, that no harm can come of putting the matter once more to the test, and making a second trial of a yoke which our fathers were not able to bear. Well, let us compare Popery and Protestantism, as exhibited in the reigns of Mary and Elizabeth, and see whether the experiment was not fairly made, and whether the result was in the least doubtful. This may minister guidance in our present circumstances. We have again, as a nation, come to a crisis, and must once more make a choice.

When the eighth Henry went to his grave, the Reformation had advanced but a little way. The supremacy of the Pope had been cast off; the monastic establishments had been abolished; and a *limited* permission given to the people to read the Scriptures in the vulgar tongue. These, however, were important points; and the fabric of Rome, wanting these props, yielded the easier to the more systematic and persevering efforts of the Reformers in the next reign. Under Edward VI. the Reformation ceased to be a work of policy, and became a work of principle; and by the end of that short reign all its main objects had been attained. The churches had been cleansed from images; transubstantiation was repudiated, the sacrifice of the mass forbidden; and the Scriptures were freely allowed to the laity of every rank and degree. Tradition ceased to be put in the place of the Bible, and the saints and the

Virgin no longer usurped the honor that is due to God. Men no longer prayed in an unknown tongue. The clergy were allowed to marry. Purgatory, indulgences, and all the gainful traffic of Rome, were no longer encouraged. Her wares became unsaleable. But the great point, and that which comprehended all the rest, was, that the doctrine of salvation by *grace*, in opposition to salvation by *works*, was now preached to the people.

Not that the work was finished. The great body of the people in the rural parts remained grossly ignorant; and a full half of the clergy, though conforming outwardly, remained Papists at heart. They had been monks and friars; and, to save a small annual charge to the new possessors of the abbey lands, they were preferred to livings in the Reformed Church. Accustomed to nothing but singing the litany and saying mass, they were wretched instructors of the people; and the atrocities to which they afterwards lent themselves fearfully avenged the avariciousness which had preferred them to livings. So stood matters when the young Edward, — a prince of rare virtue, and beloved by the whole nation, — "in the prime and blooming of his age," went to his grave.

Mary opened her way to the throne by a promise which she violated the moment she was seated upon it. She gave a solemn pledge to her Protestant subjects that religion should remain as in the days of Edward VI.; but, alas! her first act after her accession significantly told that she meant to undo all that had been done during the reign of her predecessor, and to restore the Church to the state in which it had existed prior to the days of Henry VIII.

Let Protestants learn from this what the oath of a Popish sovereign is worth, and after what fashion promises made before their accession to power are likely to be kept after it. The great men of the former reign, who had guided the destinies of the Reformation, and who were illustrious for their learning and their virtues, for their probity (uprightness) and their wisdom, were hurried off to prison. A Gardiner, a Bonner, and a Tonstal now filled the sees, and wore the dignities, which a Cranmer, a Ridley, and a Latimer had held. All the preachers throughout the kingdom were silenced. Of the sixteen thousand ministers in England, twelve thousand were ejected from their livings, and thrown penniless upon the world. A crowd of needy creatures, whose humble accomplishments extended only to the power "of making holy water, and repeating a lady psalter," rushed in to seize the vacant places. The whole laws respecting religion enacted under Edward VI. were swept away at a single sitting; and this disastrous course was fittingly concluded by the formal submission of the Court and Parliament to the Pope, one member of the House only having courage to oppose this step. The rest crowned their infamy by solemnly giving God thanks that they had been enabled so far to complete the work of their country's ruin and their own disgrace. This was not the end, it was but the beginning, of sorrows, — of dire sorrows to England.

Mary knew that she must go deeper: she knew that she must root out the seeds of religion and liberty which had been sown in England during the days of her predecessors; and her true instincts as a Papist guided her to the only weapon that could effect their extirpation. Argument would never root them out. They must be burned out; and Mary resolved not to spare the fire. She

planted a stake in almost every county and county town of England; and she propounded to every professor of the reformed faith, high and low, – to every one, in short, who would not swallow, at her bidding, the doctrine of transubstantiation, – the terrible alternative which came to be expressed in the compendious formula of "*turn or burn*." She married Philip of Spain; and surely well mated was the "bloody Mary" with the yet bloodier Philip. Sending the sagacious Cranmer and the venerable Latimer to the dungeon, she took into her councils Gardiner and Bonner. With these worthy assistants, the "blessed daughter," as [Pope] Paul IV. called her, set to work to purge her kingdom of such heresy as Christ and his apostles had preached, and to plant once more the "holy Roman Catholic religion," as a Hildebrand had taught it and a Borgia had exemplified it. The work went on prosperously. The vast zeal of Gardiner and Bonner lagged behind the yet vaster desires of the Queen. She seemed to have a presentiment that her days would be few, and dreaded lest death should overtake her before her work was finished.

England became a wide Smithfield. There was no room in the prisons for felons: these were turned loose, to make room for the God-fearing citizens. The "coal-cellar" of "bloody Bonner" has passed into a proverb. If one wished to hear good, he went, not to the church, where nothing was to be seen but contemptible mummeries (pretentious ceremonies): he crept stealthily to the grated window of the martyr's dungeon, and listened to his prayers and praises. The Council met oft. The very unvaryingness of their decisions is terrible: burn – burn – burn. Not a week passed during the last four years of Mary's reign in which some one was not burned, more commonly two or three; and latterly they were brought to the stake in four, six, aye, a dozen, at a time. Over all England blazed these baleful fires, the persecutor, judging of others by herself, hoping to strike terror into the nation. Every rank, from the primate of all England downwards; every age, from the old man of ninety who had to be carried to the fire, to the youth of eighteen, and even the newborn babe; both sexes; all conditions, – the halt, the blind, – all were dragged to the stake, and passed through the fire.

Their enemies, in their haste and zeal, did not think it necessary to veil the causes of their death under any disguise. They condemned them avowedly because they could not believe the doctrine of "the real presence." They were simply asked by the Bishop, before whose tribunal they were brought, "Do you acknowledge that the very flesh, and blood, and bones of Christ, as born of the Virgin, are present in the Sacrament?" and when the martyr answered "No," sentence of condemnation was immediately passed, and he was carried out next morning to some square, or common, or wayside, and burned. The roll is a long one, from Rogers, Vicar of St Sepulchre's, who assisted in the early edition of the English Bible, and who was burned in Smithfield on the 4th of February 1555, to the five persons who were burned together at Canterbury on the 15th of November 1558, just two days before the death of Mary. The number of persons burned alive during these four dismal years, as stated by Lord Burleigh, the Prime Minister of Queen Elizabeth, was Two Hundred and Eighty-eight. Besides these, large numbers perished by imprisonment, torture, or famine.

Let us weigh the names, as well as count them. They are the brightest of the

period. It was the rank, the learning, the virtue, the worth of her kingdom that Mary and her minions dragged to the stake. Nor did she burn them only: she horribly tortured them at the stake. We beg to give a specimen. It is Bishop Hooper that now stands at the stake; and that stake is planted at the end of his own cathedral in Gloucester. What the reader, mayhap (perhaps), has not nerve to peruse, the martyr had courage to endure: —

> "The hoop prepared for his middle was then put round him with some difficulty, for it was too small. The fire was kindled; and 'in every corner there was nothing to be seen but weeping and sorrowful people.' His sufferings were very severe. Two horse-loads of green faggots had been piled round the stake: these would not burn freely; and the morning being lowering, with a high wind, the flame of the reeds was blown from him. A few dry faggots were then brought; but the quantity being small, and the wind boisterous, the fire only reached his legs and the lower part of his body. During this time Hooper stood praying, 'O Jesus, Son of David, have mercy upon me, and receive my soul!' When this fire was spent, he wiped his eyes with his hands, and mildly but earnestly entreated that more fire might be brought. At length a third and fiercer fire was kindled; some gunpowder which had been fastened to him exploded, though with little effect; but after some time the flame gained strength. He continued praying, 'Lord Jesus, have mercy upon me! Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!' till, as a bystander relates with painful minuteness, 'he was black in the mouth, and his tongue was swoln, so that he could not speak; yet his lips moved till they shrunk from the gums; and he smote his breast with his hands till one of his arms fell off; he continued knocking still with the other, while the fat, water, and blood dropped out at his fingers' ends, until, by renewing of the fire, his strength was gone, and his hand did cleave fast to the iron upon his breast. Then, bowing forwards, he yielded up the spirit,' after suffering inexpressible torments for nearly three quarters of an hour, yet 'dying as quietly as a child in his bed.'"

Mary did all this with the full sanction and approval of her conscience. Not a doubt had she that, in burning her Protestant subjects, she was doing God an acceptable service. Her conscience did reproach her before her death, but for what? For the blood she had shed? No: it reproached her for not having done her work more thoroughly, and, in particular, for not having made full restitution of the abbey lands and other property of the Church in possession of the Crown. The nearer she drew to her end she but hasted the more to multiply victims; and her last days were cheered by watching the lurid glare of the fires of martyrdom which blazed all over her realm. Is there no lesson here? Does it not teach us that a warped conscience is a much more dangerous thing than any want of conscience whatever?

Mary died in the morning of the 17th November 1558; and by afternoon of the same day all the bells of London were set a-ringing. At night bonfires were lighted, tables were set in the streets, and "the people did eat, and drink, and make merry," illustrating the saying of the old king, — "when it goeth well with the righteous the city rejoiceth, but when the wicked perish there is shouting." The accession of Elizabeth was one of the grand crises of the

world. The principle with which she was identified, — Protestantism, to wit, — rose with her, and ascended into the region of influence and government. Instantly the eclipse passed from the realm of Britain; and England was started on a career of commercial prosperity and political freedom in which, with a few exceptional periods, there has been no pause from that day to this. The innumerable social blessings flowing from the Reformation, which now began to be shed upon our isle, we shall more particularly illustrate in the following chapter. Meanwhile it becomes us to acknowledge, with devout and fervent gratitude, the finger of God in an event which called our country from the dust, broke the yoke of tyrants and bigots from off our neck, rekindled the lamp of truth in our land, raised us from bondmen of the priests of Rome to the dignity of freemen, and enriched our country with the lesser but still mighty blessings of justice, of science, of commerce, of renown.

Wherever we turn our eyes in Europe, witnesses rise up to confirm and illustrate our observations. We select two, — Italy and Scotland.

Of all the countries of Europe, Scotland is the country which owes most to the Reformation, seeing it has received most from it. The Reformation found Scotland a country of inhospitable bogs and moors, and it has made it a country of gardens and richly cultivated fields. The Reformation found Scotland a country of wretched hovels and paltry towns, and it has made it a country of noble cities, which rival in architectural magnificence and beauty the finest creations of Italy, — not the poor Italy of the present day, but the proud Italy of three centuries ago. The Reformation found Scotland a land without letters, and it “gave it a literature destined to endure while the language lasts, rivaling in terseness and elegance of diction the purest models of the Augustan era, and far excelling them in dignity of matter and grandeur of sentiment. The Reformation found Scotland a land without arts, and it made it the inventress of the steam-engine, which has revolutionized the labor of the world, and is destined, after covering its own soil with the marvels of industry and of trade, to extend the blessings of commerce to the remotest shores and the rudest tribes. In a word, the Reformation found Scotland the least of the European nations, with scarce a name among civilized countries, and it has placed it, in conjunction with its sister of England, at the head of the nations of the earth. It was the birthday of the laud: on that day a free State was born into the world; and if there was wailing among the powers and principalities of darkness, the”morning stars” of liberty sang together, and all the “sons” of freedom shouted for joy.

The relation of Italy and Scotland throughout, ever since the Reformation, has been one of marked contrast. As the night of barbarism and ignorance began to break up in the one country, the day of civilization and knowledge began to wane in the other. As the liberties of the one began to be enlarged, despotism tightened her chains round the other. As the one reverted into a country of morasses and inhospitable deserts, the other put on the cultivation and luxuriance of a garden. The palaces and monuments of the one moldered into dust; the hovels of the other grew into noble and wealthy cities. Commerce, forsaking the shore she had been wont to frequent, discharged her rich argosies on a foreign, and till then unvisited, strand.

Learning quenched her lamp in the halls where it had burned from immemorial time; and art, forsaking the sunny clime where she had loved to dwell, traversed the Alps, crossed the sea, and sought out new abodes in a clime less hospitable, and amid tribes less civilized. Thus have the two countries gone on for three hundred years, pursuing a course the reverse in all respects, the one of the other. The path of Italy has been downwards, ever downwards, maugre the rich gifts with which nature has endowed it, and the prestige with which power has encompassed it. That of Scotland has been ever upwards, though she has had to fight her way against a hundred foes. The one has been steadily sinking into poverty, social disorganization, foreign dependence, and domestic slavery: the other has been steadily rising in wealth, civilization, liberty, and political influence.

Does any man doubt that the principle which pulled down the one country was Popery, and that the principle which elevated the other was Protestantism? Since the Reformation, have not these two principles been the only ones really operative in the political and religious world of Europe? They have been its two poles; and around one or other have all its governments and nations ranged themselves. These two principles have parted Europe into two worlds: and how dissimilar! Upon the one the sun of liberty has shone, and all that is noble and true has sprung up and flourished in its rays. Upon the other despotism has cast its shadow, as if to wrap up in darkness the melancholy wrecks with which it had filled it, — the ghastly corpses of nations once great, and of men once free.

These mementoes and monitors, so tragic, and yet so instructive, meet us at every step. One other contrast let us cite, — Spain and Britain. Spain, — fallen from the height of power, her noble sierras converted into deserts, her once opulent towns covered with the mold of decay, and her once polished and lettered population debased by ignorance, and delighting only in barbarous and savage sports, — proclaims, far more emphatically than words could proclaim it, the supreme folly of which she was guilty when she chose to rest her greatness and prosperity upon a conscience governed by the Inquisition.

To make the lesson the more manifest and striking, here is Great Britain running precisely the opposite course, — attracting commerce to her shores, constructing magnificent cities, and filling them with the wealth and the treasures of all the regions of the earth; spreading over her land, among the millions of her people, a purer science and a higher knowledge than Spain ever knew in the days of her glory; and by this career proclaiming, as emphatically as words could proclaim it, the wisdom of her choice when she determined to make freedom of conscience her cornerstone.

Thus does Providence send its instructors into the world to teach by contrasts. Spain and Britain differ, in that each is representative of a different principle. Nevertheless, they agree in teaching — the one negatively, the other positively — the self-same lesson to mankind. They are a “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” to the nations, as really as was the tree in the midst of the garden of old. On the one there has descended a secret dew; on the other there lies a silent malediction. EBAL, with the curse upon its top, stands over against GERIZIM, with the blessing, like a

star, beaming forth from its summit.

We hold, then, that the point at issue betwixt Protestantism and Popery is conclusively decided. The Bible has decided it on the one hand, and the condition of Europe has decided it on the other. The testimony of these two is one, – even that Protestantism is true, and that Popery is false; that the former is the benefactor of nations, and that the latter is their worst foe. Why, then, are we longer in doubt? Why does our Government halt betwixt the two systems? For what do we wait? For a clearer Bible? or for facts that shall more awfully confirm it? If we hear not these witnesses, neither will we be persuaded though others rose from the dead.

Continued in The Fundamental Principle Of The Reformation, And What It Gave Us

All sections of Rome and Civil Liberty – by James Aitkin Wylie