

LampeterCorpus

REASONSAGAINSTRESTRAINING THEPRESS.

[...]

Reasonsagainstrestrainingthe Press.

IfAnyRestraintistobeputonthePress,itmustbeeitheronaReligiousorCivilAccount.

AllthatcanbepleadedforitonthescoreofReligion,is,that'tisnecessarytopreventmenas beingledintoerror;andasaconsequenceofthat,nothingsi stobeprintedthatmaytempt'em toquestiontheTruthofanyPartofPointoftheEstablish'dReligion.

Inordertoanswerthis,I mustbegleavetoobserve,thatnothingismorecertainthanthatGod doesnotrequireofmenImpossibilities,asameans toobtaintheirfuturehappiness;and consequentlyallhedesiresofthem,istousetheirrationalFacultiesafterthebestmannerthey can,forthediscoveryofhisWill. Hethereforethatdoesthis,thoneversomuchmistaken,is asacceptabletoGod, *whoisnoRespecterofPersons* ,ashethat'snotmistaken,sincehehas doneallGodrequiresofhim,andtheothercoulddonomore.

ToaffirmhisMistakesaresinful,istomakeGodtheAuthorofSin,insoframinghis Understanding,thatafterhehadd oneallhecouldtoavoidError,henecessarilyfellintoit. AndifitbetheheightofImpietytocondemnoneofSinorobeyingGod'sCommandsin impartiallyexamining,itcanbenolessimpiousstoaffirmtheOpinionunavoidablycausedby sodoingtobe aSin.

Howhappywouldmenbe,if,notwithstandingtheirdifferenceofOpinion,theywouldallow onallsides,thatImpartialityandSincerityweresufficienttorecommend'emtoGod,andby consequencetooneanother? Goingastepfurtherthanthis,just ifiestheseverestmethodof theInquisition:forifMencanbeguiltyofImpiety,Blasphemy,andotherdamnable Opinions,thoonthestrictestexaminationtheyjudgthemagreeabletotheWillofGod;andif itbetheDutyofthosethatareinPowerinev eryNationtopreventthis,theyareboundto restrainnotonlythelibertyofPrinting,butofPreaching;andtousetheseverestmethodsthey can,tohinderthespreadingofwhatevertheyapprehendtobesuchOpinions. But

IfGodwilljudgMenastheya reaccountable,thatis,rationalCreatures;theirReward, whethertheyhitormisofTruth,willbeinanexactproportiontotheusesthey makeoftheir Reason:andconsequentlynoOpinioncanbeaSin,butforwantofanimpartialExamination; andaccordingasthat hasbeenmoreorlessomitted,sooneismoreorlessaccountable.

Ifthis,howparadoxicalsoeveratfirstsightitmayappeartosome,isuponexamination demonstrativelytrue;Whatcanbemoreunreasonable,thanonpretenceofpreventing he growthofdangerousErrors,torestrainthePress,andtherebyhinderMenfromseeing,and consequentlyfromexaminingtheReasonsthatmakeagainsttheEstablish'dReligion?when withoutanimpartial examination,letourReligionbeneversotrue,we holditguiltily,and withit,thoneversofalse,innocently. But,

What can be more inconsistent with this grand Duty of Examination, than a Restraint on the Press, since there can be no other Cause assigned why 'tis unlawful to publish Arguments against the State Religion, but because 'tis unlawful to read them, that being the sole reason of forbidding the publishing of them? And if it be once supposed unlawful to read, it must be as unlawful to hear or think on anything, that inclines one to question the Truth of any Part of Point of the National Religion: and consequently it makes it every ones Duty in all Countries whatever, to profess that without the least Examination. But

If one has no reason to expect a Heaven, who will not beat the pain to examine what 'tis God requires of him, in order to his coming there; what a condition must he be in, who not only neglects to himself, but labours to obtain a Law to make all others do the same?

The examining the Reason on all sides (for prevention of which the Press is to be restrain'd) not only makes the Mistake acceptable to God, but is the only Method that can be taken to prevent Mistakes; for which end God has commanded every one to *judge of himself, to try the Spirits, to prove all things, &c.* And therefore those Divines that are for Men trying nothing, or knowing nothing, but what pleases the Licens'd Guides in every Country, give God himself the Lie, after the worst manner that can be. And

The more People are subject to mistake, the less Reason there is to rely on any ones side, but with Care and Diligence to examine the Reasons of all, and consequently the Press ought to be open to all. And when a Discourse is printed, Men by viewing and reviewing it, may form a better Judgment, than when 'tis only spoken.

In answer to this, 'tis said, and alikesaid everywhere, that Men may have an impartial Information from the Clergy of the Establish'd Church. But

Are not they under a greater Restraint than others, being oblig'd to profess those Opinions to which their Preferments are annex'd, or else to starve? so that in this case, 'tis not the Man, but the Bishoprick, the Deanery, the Prebend, the Rectory that preaches and prints *nemine contradicente*, Popery in one place, Lutheranism in another, Calvinism in a third; and they possibly may think it but fair to Maintain such Opinions as Maintain them; tho' to speak the Truth, the Opinions generally Maintain the Priests, better than the Priests Maintain the Opinions. Are men, so bound and shackl'd, likely to give a fair Representation of what can be said against 'em, when the only Cause they can alledge for restraining the Press, is to hinder People from knowing it? Do not the Blind lead the Blind, when the Guides on which others are wholly to depend, are not trust ed to guide themselves?

In a word, all other Methods but this of examining, will equally serve to promote any Religion, tho' never so false, and consequently cannot be the way to distinguish the true from the many false ones; but are the pious Frauds and Holy Cheats, of not very pious and very holy Men, to keep the People in a blind Obedience.

As this method is the only way to discover Truth, so 'tis this that makes it most effectual: where Men without Examination entertain a Religion, it will have but little Influence on their Practice. That does not convince the Understanding, can have but a small effect on the Will: And as far as the Reasonableness of an Opinion is seen, so far only can it operate on a rational Creature; and the more Examination renders it so, the more force it will have on the Affections, which are not mov'd without some sensible Connexion between the Cause and the Effect. For this reason thinking Men, Truth being endear'd to them as the discovery of their own Industry, are for the most part very conscientious; while those that owe their Religion to

the chance of Education, have generally no more regard to it, than if they ow'ditto the Chance of a Die. If then the Freedom of the Press contributes not only to endear Truth when discovered, but to the discovery of it; and if that fails, to make even Error itself innocent, all the Arguments on the account of Religion do most religiously contend for its entire Liberty. To which let me add, that

The Noble Art of Printing, that by Divine Providence was discovered to free men from the Tyranny of the Clergy they then groan'd under, and without which the Protestant Religion must have prov'd abortive, ought not to be made a mean to reduce us again under Sacerdotal Slavery. And

If our Ancestors could not secure themselves from more than *Egyptian* Bondage, which the Pulpits brought on them, without the assistance of the Press: What hopes have we to defend ourselves against both, when by the means of the latter, the Clergy have much greater opportunities, as well as Abilities, to accomplish their Designs?

The Restraint of the Press is consistent enough with Popery; but for Protestants to attempt it, is striking at the Foundation of their Religion, which is built on the natural Right every one has of judging for himself in matters of Religion. But what can save us more of a blind Popish Compliance, than so entirely to give up the Conduct of Religion to a few Licensing Preists, as that nothing shall be published but what they think fit? The Learned Dr. *Clagget* saith, (and after the same manner do all our Clergy write when they have to do with the Papists)" ¹
'They that have a good Cause, will not fright Men from considering what their Adversaries say by their Books, but rather encourage them so to do, that they may see the difference between Truth and Error, Reason and Falshood, with their own Eyes. This is the effect of a well-grounded confidence in Truth, and there's the sign of a good Cause apparently discernable, in the Application of the Clergy of the Church of *England*, both to their Friends and Enemies. They desire the one and 't'other to consider impartially what is said for us, as well as against us; and whensoever Guid'es of a party do otherwise, they give just Cause to examine their Doctrines more carefully, by how much they are unwilling to have them examined. 'Tis a bad sign, when Men are loth to have their Opinions seen in the day, but love Darkness more than Light.'

Every one thinks she has a natural Right in all matters of Learning and Knowledge, except what relates to Religion and Government, to see what can be said on all sides, in order to form his Judgment aright; and there can be no reasons why these should be excepted, since to have a right Understanding in them, is what is most worthy a rational Being.

The more useful any Science is to Mankind, the greater will its Abuses be: Divinity, Law, Physick, are sad Instances of this. But how can these Abuses be discovered, if the Press be in their Hands that gain by them? What can be more useful than history, especially of one's own Country? and can we expect true Information, when only one side is to print? And there are few Persons, especially at a distance from *London*, but would think it a hard ship to be deprived even of such Trifles as the common News Papers, which would not be allowed under a Restraint of the Press. Nay, we could not then hope for an impartial account even in natural things, since an evident Truth in Philosophy has been thought a monstrous Error in Divinity; and a rational Discourse on any subject may be hinder'd from being printed, lest, as the late Bishop of *W* ², it might be applied to other uses than what the Author designed.

Nothing can more discourage men of Abilities from writing, than to subject their Discourse to the mercy of an Ignorant, or at least an Unleisured Licensor: such a hardship on the Commonwealth of Learning, will be apt to make an *Imprimatur* signify no more, than that the Book is foolish enough to be printed.

As the People retain a right to offer their Advice to their Representatives, so there cannot but happen several things, wherein they may receive satisfaction from what is published by those without doors (as happened in the case of the Standing Army, and several other matters) which may in a great measure be hindered, by the Licensers of the press being influenced by those, who have an Interest to stifl the Truth.

In a word, as many things as are worth understanding aright, so many Arguments are there for the liberty of the Press; tho the only reason that is pleaded for its restraint upon a Civil Account, is to prevent false Representations of Peoples Designs and Actions, especially of such as are dignified with a publick Character. But

Tho this may be done by speaking, who ever thought it reasonable, that all but one Party of Men should have a Padlock on their Lips? And yet this is all that's meant by a restraint of the press, since what is to be printed, is left to the arbitrary Will of men of this or that Party. And there can be no manner of reason, why writing and talking should not be on the same foot, since what's contrary to Law is in both Cases equally punishable; and a restraint of the Press cannot hinder Books from coming out by stealth.

What can be more unconscionable, considering how the Nation is divided, than to have all but one Party restrain'd from writing in their own defence, whilst that is a liberty to use them as barbarously as they please? With what unchristian Temper and in humane Insolence will Partyment treat those they are comply'd to write against? and what Misrepresentations, Lies and Calumnies will they not then be guilty of? 'Tis the danger of being detected and expos'd, that makes Men write with more Temper, as well as more regard to Truth.

If the Honourable House of Commons have upon a solemn Debate, thought fit to publish their Proceedings to prevent being misrepresented, why should they deny those they Represent the same Liberty? And when both Houses have thought it necessary to print, (and onemay venture to add, that neither House, without this Liberty, would have thought their Reputations safe) it cannot be presumed that either House will be putting such a Hardship on the Nation.

As Honour and Reputation secure their Votaries from committing ill and base Actions, so they incite them to all good ones; but if the Press be in the Hands of designing People, it may have quite a different effect, and be wholly employed to traduce, as it was in former Reigns, the best Men both in Church and State. And

It will be a great encouragement for Men above the ordinary reach of the Law, to crush those beneath them, when the Press shall speak only in their favour, and the injur'd are depriv'd of the last satisfaction that oppressed Vertue has, of appealing to the People, and justifying their Innocence to the World. And therefore I cannot see how one, that has any value for his Reputation, will be content to run the hazard of having it put out of his power, to justify himself as publicly as he is injur'd. Whether what is said of Truth, that none is against Truth but where that is first against them, may be applied to the Press, I will not determine; but those whose Actions cannot beare examination, will, no doubt, be glad of its restraint, and possibly may add Iniquity to Iniquity, by pretending they desire it out of Affection to the Government, or Zeal to the Church.

There restraining the Press may not be so much for the Interest of any Party, as some fondly imagine; because their being for it, will be apt to make men believe the very worst things their Enemies say to be true; and that 'tis the fear of having their pernicious Designs discovered, which makes them take a Method, that till now they themselves oppos'd, and which in former Reigns was made use of to advance Slavery and Popery. But

If this be of no weight, let it be consider'd, that the Press, Jack-anapes like (as a Scots Gentleman said of their King) may be made to bite whomsoever they, in whose Custody it chance to be, think fit; and are restraining Laws soon made, but the Scene of Affairs may so alter, that the Party which promoted it, may be scourg'd with Rods of their own providing, and be themselves barr'd of that Liberty they design'd to exclude others from. And possibly some may be glad of such a Bill, the better to deprive them of those advantages, which without it they would not think prudent to attempt. But to this might not be the consequence at present, who can be sure in what Hands the Press hereafter may be plac'd?

As the chief Happiness as well as Dignity of rational Creatures, consists in having the liberty of thinking on what Subject they please, and of as freely communicating their Thoughts: so all good Governments that have allow'd this Freedom, were so far from suffering by it, that it wonderfully endear'd them to their People. And no Ministry can be hurt by the liberty of the Press, since they have a number of Dependents, ready upon all occasions to write in justification of their Conduct; nay, to go down over the worst of their Actions, and give a fair Colour to their most pernicious Designs; and at the same time to misrepresent the true Patriots of their Country, that the People, their real Friends, being deprived of the liberty of publicly justifying themselves, may mistake them for their Enemies, and care less that are truly so.

The liberty of the Press must keep a Ministry within some tolerable Bounds, by exposing their ill Designs to the People, with whom if they once lose their Credit, they will be very unfit Tools for a Court to work with. But

The Arts of State in most Places being to enslave, or keep the People in Slavery, it became a Crime to talk much more to write about State-Matters. And the Press in most Countries of Europe speaking nothing but Court-Language; the People, who till the Invention of Printing had tolerably well preserved their Liberty, were by degrees gull'd and cheated out of those inestimable Blessings. And there's nothing, either with respect to Religion or Politicks, so destructive to Mankind, but may be made, where the Pulpit and Press conspire together, to pass for Divine Truths.

The slavish Condition the greatest part of Mankind in all Ages have been in, shew how much they have been wanting to themselves in not taking alarm soon enough at the Chains that were preparing for 'em. And as there are few, very few Instances of Peoples having perceived the intended Slavery, soon enough to prevent it; so there are fewer Instances of their having taken Arms, but upon very just Occasion.

In a word, as there's no Freedom either Civil or Ecclesiastical, but there the liberty of the Press is maintain'd; so where ever that is secur'd, all others are safe. That like a faithful Centinel prevents all surprize, and gives timely warning of any approaching Danger. And therefore 'tis to be hop'd, that the Trustees of the Peoples Liberties will preserve it as Freedom entire; for if it's sacred Liberty is but once affected, tho by never so gentle a Law, 'tis to be feared that this will be used as an Argument to restrain it as much as ever; for then 'twill be easy to engraft a

new Law, on pretence that the old did not answer the end, as we see 'twas urged in the Case of the Conformity Bill.

As to the obliging Authors to set their Names to their Works, that can only serve to hinder the publishing the most useful Books, viz. those designed to rectify Abuses. Besides, this prejudices Peoples for or against a Book, and serves as a Handle for fulsome Flatteries, or gross Abuses; and we have too frequent Instances of men thinking to atone; for not answering the Arguments, by railing at the Authors. And therefore those Writers, such as the Author of *the Whole Duty of Man, &c.* that design the utmost good, have industriously concealed their Names.

FINIS.

1. *Persuasivetoan ingenuous Trial* ,p.28.

2. *The Essay of Human Understanding.*