

“How glorious, then, is the prospect ...”

Joseph Priestley

The American and French Revolutions evoked in Priestley a millenarian vision of social and intellectual progress culminating in utopian perfection. This paradise “foretold in many prophesies” is outlined in the concluding chapter—titled “Of the Prospect of the General Enlargement of Liberty, Civil and Religious, opened by the Revolution in France”—of his 1781 Letters to the Right Honorable Edmund Burke, who, of course, profoundly disagreed with Priestley.

I cannot conclude these Letters, without congratulating, not you, Sir [Burke], or the many admirers of your performance who have no feeling of joy on the occasion, but the French nation, and the world—I mean the liberal, the rational, and the virtuous part of the world—on the great revolution that has taken place in France, as well as on that which some time ago took place in America. Such events as these teach the doctrine of liberty, civil and religious, with infinitely greater clearness and force than a thousand treatises on the subject. They speak a language intelligible to all the world, and preach a doctrine congenial to every human heart.

These great events, in many respects unparalleled in all history, make a totally new, a most wonderful and important, era in the history of mankind. It is, to adopt your own rhetorical style, a change from darkness to light, from superstition to sound knowledge and from a most debasing servitude to a state of the most exalted freedom. It is a liberating of all the powers of man from that variety of fetters by which they have hitherto been held. So that, in comparison with what has been, now only can we expect to see what men really are, and what they can do.

The generality of governments have hitherto been little else than a combination of the few against the many; and to the mean passions and low cunning of these few, have the great interests of mankind been too long sacrificed. Whole nations have been deluged with blood, and every source of future prosperity has been drained, to gratify the caprices of some of the most despicable, or the most execrable, of the human species. For what else have been the generality of kings, their ministers of state, or their mistresses, to whose wills whole kingdoms have been subject? What can we say of those who have hitherto taken the lead in conducting the affairs of nations, but that they have commonly been either weak or wicked and sometimes both? Hence the common reproach of all histories that they exhibit little more than a view of the vices and miseries of mankind.

From this time, therefore, we may expect that it will wear a different and more pleasing aspect.

Hitherto, also, infinite have been the mischiefs in which all nations have been involved on account of religion, with which, as it concerns only God and men's own consciences, civil government, as such, has nothing to do. Statesmen, misled by ignorant or interested priests, have taken upon them to prescribe what men should believe and practice in order to get to heaven, when they themselves have often neither believed, nor practiced, anything under that description. They have set up idols to which all men, under the severest penalties, have been compelled to bow; and the wealth and power of populous nations, which might have been employed in great and useful undertakings, have been diverted from their proper channels to enforce their unrighteous decrees. By this means have mankind been kept for ages in a state of bondage worse than Egyptian, the bondage of the mind.

How glorious, then, is the prospect, the reverse of all the past, which is now opening upon us, and upon the world. Government, we may now expect to see, not only in theory and in books but in actual practice, calculated for the general good, and taking no more upon it than the general good requires, leaving all men the enjoyment of as many of their natural rights as possible, and no more interfering with matters of religion, with men's notions concerning God, and a future state, than with philosophy, or medicine.

After the noble example of America, we may expect in due time to see the governing powers of all nations confining their attention to the civil concerns of them, and consulting their welfare in the present state only, in consequence of which they may all be flourishing and happy. Truth of all kinds and especially religious truth, meeting with no obstruction and standing in no need of heterogeneous supports, will then establish itself by its own evidence; and whatever is false and delusive, all the forms of superstition, every corruption of true religion, and all usurpation over the rights of conscience, which have been supported by power or prejudice, will be universally exploded, as they ought to be.

Together with the general prevalence of the true principles of civil government, we may expect to see the extinction of all national prejudice and enmity, and the establishment of universal peace and goodwill among all nations. When the affairs of the various societies of mankind shall be conducted by those who shall truly represent them, who shall feel as they feel and think as they think, who shall really understand and consult their interests, they will no more engage in those mutually offensive wars which the experience of many centuries has shown to be constantly expensive and ruinous. They will no longer covet what belongs to others, and which they have found to be of no real service to them, but will content themselves with making the most of their own....

The causes of civil wars, the most distressing of all others, will likewise cease, as well as those of foreign ones. They are chiefly contentions for offices, on account of the power and emoluments annexed to them. But when the nature and uses of

all civil offices shall be well understood, the power and emoluments annexed to them will not be an object sufficient to produce a war. Is it at all probable that there will ever be a civil war in America about the presidency of the United States? And when the chief magistracies in other countries shall be reduced to their proper standard, they will be no more worth contending for than they are in America. If the actual business of a nation be done as well for the small emolument of that presidency as the similar business of other nations, there will be no apparent reason why more should be given for doing it.

If there be a superfluity of public money it will not be employed to augment the profusion and increase the undue influence of individuals, but in works of great public utility—which are always wanted and which nothing but the enormous expenses of government and of wars, chiefly occasioned by the ambition of kings and courts, have prevented from being carried into execution. The expense of the late American war, only, would have converted all the waste grounds of this country into gardens. What canals, bridges, and noble roads, what public buildings, public libraries, and public laboratories, etc. etc. would it not have made for us? If the pride of nations must be gratified, let it be in such things as these, and not in the idle pageantry of a court, calculated only to corrupt and enslave a nation.

Another cause of civil wars has been an attachment to certain persons and families, as possessed of some inherent right to kingly power. Such were the bloody wars between the houses of York and Lancaster in this country. But when, besides the reduction of the power of crowns within their proper bounds (when it will be no greater than the public good requires) that kind of respect for princes which is founded on mere superstition (exactly similar to that which has been attached to priests in all countries) shall vanish, as all superstition certainly will before real knowledge, wise nations will not involve themselves in war for the sake of any particular persons, or families, who have never shown an equal regard for them. They will consider their own interest more and that of their magistrates, that is, their servants, less.

Other remaining causes of civil war are different opinions about modes of government, and differences of interests between provinces. But when mankind shall be a little more accustomed to reflection and consider the miseries of civil war, they will have recourse to any other method of deciding their differences in preference to that of the sword. It was taken for granted that the moment America had thrown off the yoke of Great Britain, the different states would go to war among themselves, on some of these accounts. But the event has not verified the prediction, nor is it at all probable that it ever will. The people of that country are wiser than such prophets in this.

If time be allowed for the discussion of differences, so great a majority will form one opinion, that the minority will see the necessity of giving way. Thus will reason be the umpire in all disputes and extinguish civil wars as well as foreign ones. The empire of reason will ever be the reign of peace.

This, Sir, will be the happy state of things, distinctly and repeatedly foretold in many prophecies, delivered more than two thousand years ago, when the common parent of mankind will cause wars to cease to the ends of the earth, when men shall beat their swords into plough shares, and their spears into pruning hooks, when nation shall no more rise up against nation, and when they shall learn war no more. This is a state of things which good sense, and the prevailing spirit of commerce, aided by christianity and true philosophy cannot fail to effect in time. But it can never take place while mankind are governed in the wretched manner in which they now are. For peace can never be established but upon the extinction of the causes of war which exist in all the present forms of government, and in the political maxims which will always be encouraged by them. I mention this topic in a letter to you, on the idea that you are a real believer in revelation, though your defense of all church establishments, as such, is no argument in favor of this opinion; the most zealous abettors of them, and the most determined enemies of all reformation having been unbelievers in all religion, which they have made use of merely as an engine of state.

In this new condition of the world, there may still be kings, but they will be no longer sovereigns or supreme lords, no human beings to whom will be ascribed such titles as those of most sacred or most excellent majesty. There will be no more such a profanation of epithets, belonging to God only by the application of them to mortals like ourselves. There will be magistrates appointed and paid for the conservation of order, but they will only be considered as the first servants of the people, and accountable to them. Standing armies, those instruments of tyranny, will be unknown, though the people may be trained to the use of arms for the purpose of repelling the invasion of Barbarians. For no other description of men will have recourse to war, or think of disturbing the repose of others; and till they become civilized, as in the natural progress of things they necessarily must, they will be sufficiently overawed by the superior power of nations that are so.

There will still be religion, and of course ministers of it, as there will be teachers of philosophy and practitioners in medicine; but it will no longer be the concern of the state. There will be no more Lord Bishops or Archbishops, with the titles and powers of temporal princes. Every man will provide religion for himself, and therefore it will be such as, after due enquiry, and examination, he shall think to be founded on truth and best calculated to make men good citizens, good friends, and good neighbors in this world, as well as to fit them for another.

Government being thus simple in its objects, will be unspeakably less expensive than it is at present as well as far more effectual in answering its proper purpose. There will then be little to provide for besides the administration of justice or the preservation of the peace, which it will be the interest of every man to attend to in aid of government.