Was the Protestant Reformation a Failure?

(This article by Dr. George Bartoli, a former Roman Catholic scholar, was given to the Knox Club in 1910, but despite the time which has elapsed since it was given it brings before us the picture of a Church and system which does not and indeed cannot change without becoming something entirely different. Some dated material has been deleted. - Ed.)

We are told that the Reformation of the sixteenth century attained none of the objects for which our forefathers rose in revolt against the tyranny of Rome. We, on the contrary, affirm that to the Protestant Reformation we owe:

I. Our present political liberties.
II. Our religious liberties.
III. Our world progress of the present day.

I affirm, and with reason, that we owe our political liberties to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. Of course, political liberty did not follow the Reformation at once. It was a fruit, which in different parts of Europe took a longer or shorter time to ripen, but the connection between the Reformation and the political liberties of Europe is undeniable. To prove this I am not going to quote dates and bring forth facts from European history. They are so well known to most of you that that is quite unnecessary. I shall merely make an observation. In the Vatican Archives a vast number of letters are preserved, which were written by the Popes to the various emperors, kings, and princes of Europe, between the years 1500 and 1700; i.e. during the whole period of the Reformation. Now, the Popes of Rome never tired of warning those rulers not to make any religious concessions to their people, because religious liberty necessarily brings with it political liberty; and the people, who today clamour for self-government in religious matters, will tomorrow demand self-government in politics. Today they rise against the Church; tomorrow they will rebel against the State. That those Popes were not in error in thus thinking, subsequent events eloquently demonstrated.

The Protestant Reformation made parliaments more general all over Europe; and the liberties of Protestant England became in course of time the liberties of nearly all the States of Europe. There were some exceptions, however. The religious movement, headed by Luther, was crushed in Spain, in Portugal, and in the States of the Church of Rome; those kingdoms and states had to wait for the French Revolution to set them free. What the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ could not do - because prevented by the low depravity of man - was done by the sword, the fire, and slaughter, at the hands of an infuriated mob. The princes and nobles of Europe would not listen to the gently voice of the Gospel. They heard the roar of the cannon, the din of battle, and had to yield to the bloody axe of the executioner. Peaceful, quiet, prosperous England, sheltering the French refugees at the time of Robespierre and Danton, is an object lesson of what we owe to Protestantism. In a Protestant country a French Revolution is impossible.

The Protestant Reformation did away with the "divine right of kings". What was that? It was a political and religious theory whereby kings and princes believed themselves to be seated on their thrones solely by Divine appointment and authority. Their people had nothing to do with it. Hence they were responsible for their conduct and deeds to none, save God alone, and to his supposed
Vicar on earth, the Pope. The horrors, tragedies, and the carnival of blood which this infamous "Divine rights of Kings" has brought upon England, Scotland, Germany, France, Spain, Russia, Italy and generally throughout Europe, are beyond description, and will shame for ever the corrupt Christianity of the Middle Ages. For this fanciful divine right of kings was a distinct feature of Mediæval Catholicism.

According to the conception of Roman theologians, Catholicism is a huge empire, a gigantic trust, a monopoly of divine things held by one man on earth - the Pope; and possessed by one Church only - the Roman Catholic Church. The Pope is the supreme ruler of Christendom. Emperors, kings, and princes receive, by him and through him alone, their authority. They govern their respective peoples in his stead. They recognise their authority to be derived from him, who, in his capacity of Vice-God on earth, can confer states and kingdoms, crowns and sceptres, on any man whom he is pleased with, and can dispossess at will the oldest dynasty in the world. It maintains that God has given to the Pope two swords; the spiritual and the temporal. The former he wields himself, the latter is handed by him to emperors and kings that they may use it on his behalf and at his command. In this system emperors, kings and princes are the Pope's executioners. So the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, in the imperialistic conception of the Church of Rome, was but her principal sword-bearer, her chief executioner, her first servant, her humble tool.

The Popes of Rome have had a fair chance of turning the world into a paradise, by following up their system of pontifical government; but they have miserably failed. What the Popes could not achieve during at least ten long centuries, when they ruled supreme over emperors, kings, princes, bishops and Christians throughout Europe, they will not be able to do today. Let not the Protestants of Europe be beguiled into thinking that the Church of Rome has changed. Her rulers are certainly better; but her system is anti-Christian, corrupt, offending, damnable and ruinous as ever.

The second benefit which the Protestant Reformation bestowed upon the Christian people was religious liberty, or freedom of conscience. We are apt now to make little of this great gift of Almighty God; and this for two reasons: first, because we have long been enjoying it; secondly, because, unfortunately, we have grown indifferent to religious doctrines and divine things. Rationalism and false science have thrown a sad doubt over almost all the Christian truths that were dear to our forefathers; and our hearts, no longer glowing with an ardent love for the inspired Word of God, do not feel indignant at a priestly caste's endeavours to rob the Christian people of its most cherished treasure - the liberty of worshipping God according to the directions of the Gospel. Not so with our forefathers. They believed that Christianity rested on the Word of God and on it alone, and they asked for liberty to follow the teaching of the Gospel, and to mould their worship and creed on it.

Picture to your imagination what your ancestors suffered from the Roman Catholic authorities on behalf of their faith. Think of your Scottish Martyrs, and of the vastly greater number who suffered in each of the following countries - England, France, Germany, The Netherlands, Spain, and even Italy. It is true that Protestants also persecuted and shed the blood of their Roman Catholic brethren. But between the persecutions of the Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches, there is a very marked difference. The Romish Church protests even to this day, that she had a right to persecute heretics, and to put them to death; whereas Protestant Churches all over the world have abjured this diabolical doctrine, and have condemned it in their authoritative books, and in the consciences of their followers. Liberty of conscience has become a sacred thing with Protestants; it is pretty common among Roman Catholic infidels; but it is an exception amongst devout Roman Catholics; it is considered an error and a perverse doctrine by the Romish Church, and a damnable heresy by the Bishops of Rome. The fact is, that intolerance, persecution and oppression of all Churches but her own, is such an essential part of the Romish system, that it will exist as long as the Romish Church continues to exist; and were the Romish Church to obtain once more her old influence in the Christian world, we would again see in the Christian world all the horrors of the Spanish and Roman Inquisitions.

Nor is the right of worshipping God according to conscience the only right of a Christian. There are other rights besides; sacred rights brought down from heaven to each one of us by our Lord Jesus
Christ - the right of studying the Scriptures, of reading the Gospel, and of preaching the Word of God. Rome has deprived her people of these rights. She has reserved the right of reading and preaching the Word of God to a caste of paid servants, who are slaves to her will, who are in spiritual bondage to her. The Church of Rome does not permit her children to read, study or comment on the Word of God; that is to say, they may do so, but only "ad mentem Ecclesiae" - according to the mind of the Church. What is the mind of the Church? No one really knows; because the Church does not exist as an abstract idea, but as a concrete body of men. In the Romish system, the Church does not comprise the Christian people at all. Properly so called, it is the ecclesiastical body and no one else. The clergy are the rulers, they form the Church. It is theirs to decide what is right or wrong; what false or true, what books may be safely read and what must be avoided. Thus again we come to the imperialistic conception of the Church of Rome. The Word of God is in bondage. The Word of God is not free. You cannot preach the Gospel without permission from man. In vain the Holy Ghost urges you to do so. In vain God has given you an enlightened mind and a warm heart for it. If you are not a priest, if you are not sent by the Church, you cannot preach. If you happen to be a woman you are commanded to hold your tongue. Women cannot evangelise, though Jesus bade Mary Magdalene go and proclaim her Risen Lord to her brethren. The Church of Rome forbids even the best Christian men to deliver the Message of Christ, unless authorised to do so by her. Is not this slavery? Is not this bondage? Is the Roman system Christianity? Is it not rather a pagan system of philosophy, studied by and divulged to a small secret circle, a chosen few, and hidden from the common people, lest the latter, becoming equally in knowledge with their teachers, should rebel against them?

Finally, the Protestant Reformation won for us the possibility of making progress towards civilisation, towards the goal of human perfection.

There is no growth and progress in science, in art, in literature, in politics, where there is no liberty of thought. Freedom from restraint is the first condition of growth. No plant, no animal, no created thing, nothing under the canopy of heaven can grow to perfection, can develop all its natural qualities and properties, without liberty. When powerful enough to do so, the Church of Rome, consistently with her own system, deprives man of liberty, and man sinks into degradation. Look at the countries which for centuries have been under the undisputed yoke of Rome: Spain, South Italy, Portugal, South America, and other parts of the world. They are the most backward, ignorant, and superstitious countries in the Christian world. Nor is this to be attributed to the want of talent or lack of genius in these people. Far from it! The reason is always the same. Those nations could not grow to a full manhood, because they were kept for centuries and centuries in political and spiritual bondage. They awake now to liberty; but in many cases, alas, not to liberty; but to disorder, anarchy, licentiousness. And thus it always is with man. The human pendulum swings continually from one extreme to the opposite, never resting for one moment in the golden mean.

If the Protestant Reformation did not transform the world, it was because in many nations it stopped short, and did not dare to introduce into the political life of those nations the teachings of the Gospel. It is easier to destroy than to build; to pull down than to raise up. The Reformation destroyed the power of the Church of Rome; so far, so good; but in some cases and in a few places, for one despotic Church another Church, equally despotic and tyrannical, was substituted; and above all, it neglected to put aside all human systems and inventions, and to embrace fully the glorious Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let Protestant nations take heed. The Reformation of the sixteenth century is not merely an historical fact: it is a principle. The principle of Christian liberty against pagan slavery and thought-bondage. The nations which disparage and condemn the Protestant Reformation are ripe for slavery and bondage. It is not the body only which grows old, weak and infirm; the mind and the soul also grow spiritually feeble and decay. Death will pray on them - the death of freedom - by the unnatural bondage of peoples to one man!

Source: 'The Bulwark'