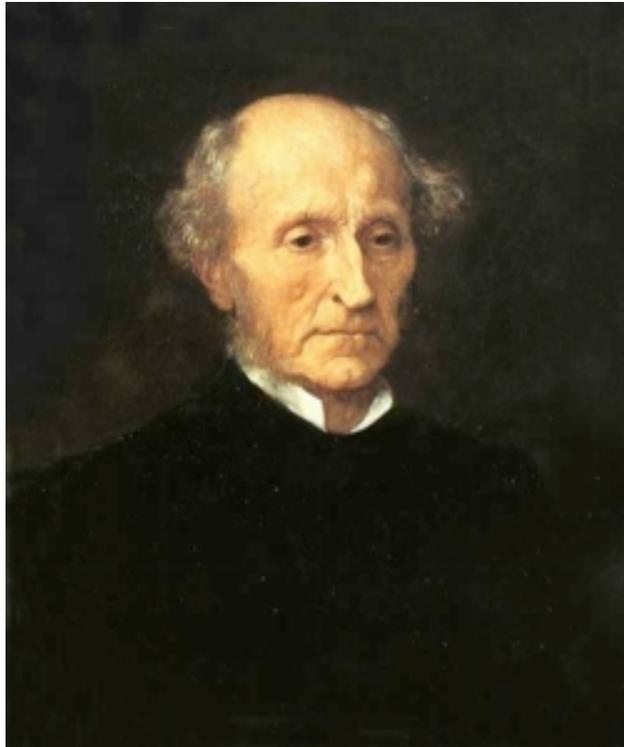


THE BEST OF THE OLL #57

John Stuart Mill, “The Spirit of the Age” (1831)
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“The nineteenth century will be known to posterity as the era of one of the greatest revolutions of which history has preserved the remembrance, in the human mind, and in the whole constitution of human society.”



John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

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[September, 2013]

Editor's Introduction

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) was the precocious child of the Philosophical Radical and Benthamite James Mill. He was taught Greek, Latin, and political economy at an early age and spent his youth in the company of the Philosophic Radicals, Benthamites and utilitarians who gathered around his father James. J.S. Mill went on to become a journalist, Member of Parliament, political economist, and philosopher and is regarded as one of the most significant English classical liberals of the 19th century. His important books include *A System of Logic* (1843), *The Principles of Political Economy: with some of their applications to social philosophy* (1848), *On Liberty* (1859), *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), *Utilitarianism* (1863), and *The Subjection of Women* (1869).

Mill was only 25 when he wrote this essay (he refers to himself in passing in the essay as “a man of six and twenty years”) and he was still very much under the influence of the Benthamites led by his father James Mill. The latter had led the push for the democratic reform of the British political system and they were on the verge of achieving the first major step towards that goal with the passage of the First Reform Act of June 1832 which expanded the English electorate to include middle class voters. This ushered in a period of liberal reform which was crowned by the repeal of the protectionist Corn Laws in 1846. When Mill wrote “The Spirit of the Age” he could sense that British society was about to enter a period of reform which would be dominated by the politically active middle class guided by classical liberal ideas.

This extract includes the first and fifth parts of a long essay which appeared in *The Examiner* between January and May 1831. Mill believed that English society had entered an “age of transition” in which the ideas and the ruling elites of the old society were no longer able to provide the direction the country needed. New ideas and new men were about to step forward and introduce “one of the greatest revolutions of which history has preserved remembrance, in the human mind, and the whole constitution of human society.” Of course, Mill thought that he would be one of those who would assist in the creation of that new society with his writings and his political activity in the British parliament.

“A change has taken place in the human mind; a change which, being effected by insensible gradations, and without noise, had already proceeded far before it was generally perceived. When the fact disclosed itself, thousands awoke as from a dream. They knew not what processes had been going on in the minds of others, or even in their own, until the change began to invade outward objects; and it became clear that those were indeed new men, who insisted upon being governed in a new way. But mankind are now conscious of their new position. The conviction is already not far from being universal, that the times are pregnant with change; and that the nineteenth century will be known to posterity as the era of one of the greatest revolutions of which history has preserved the remembrance, in the human mind, and in the whole constitution of human society.”

The Spirit of the Age (1831)¹

PART I [EXAMINER, 9 JAN., 1831]

The “spirit of the age” is in some measure a novel expression. I do not believe that it is to be met with in any work exceeding fifty years in antiquity. The idea of comparing one’s own age with former ages, or with our notion of those which are yet to come, had occurred to philosophers; but it never before was itself the dominant idea of any age.

“Mankind are then divided, into those who are still what they were, and those who have changed: into the men of the present age, and the men of the past. To the former, the spirit of the age is a subject of exultation; to the latter, of terror; to both, of eager and anxious interest.”

It is an idea essentially belonging to an age of change. Before men begin to think much and long on the peculiarities of their own times, they must have begun to think that those times are, or are destined to be, distinguished in a very remarkable manner from the times which preceded them. Mankind are then divided, into those who are still what they were, and those who have changed: into the men of the present age, and the men of the past. To the former, the spirit of the age is a subject of exultation; to the latter, of terror; to both, of eager and anxious interest. The wisdom of ancestors, and the march of intellect, are bandied from mouth to mouth; each phrase originally an expression of respect and homage, each ultimately usurped by the partisans of the opposite catch-word, and in the bitterness of their spirit, turned into the sarcastic jibe of hatred and insult.

The present times possess this character. A change has taken place in the human mind; a change which, being effected by insensible gradations, and without noise, had already proceeded far before it was generally perceived. When the fact disclosed itself, thousands awoke as from a dream. They knew not what processes had been going on in the minds of others, or even in their own, until the change began to invade outward objects; and it became clear that those were indeed new men, who insisted upon being governed in a new way.

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¹ “The Spirit of the Age” (*The Examiner*, 1831) in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume XXII - Newspaper Writings December 1822 - July 1831 Part I*, ed. Ann P. Robson and John M. Robson, Introduction by Ann P. Robson and John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986). Part I (9 Jan. 1831) <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/256/50800>>, Part V (1) (15 May, 1831) <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/256/50860>>, Part V (2) (29 May, 1831) <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/256/50868>>.

interpretations of the Prophecies, foreboding mighty changes near at hand.[1] It is felt that men are henceforth to be held together by new ties, and separated by new barriers; for the ancient bonds will now no longer unite, nor the ancient boundaries confine. Those men who carry their eyes in the back of their heads and can see no other portion of the destined track of humanity than that which it has already travelled, imagine that because the old ties are severed mankind henceforth are not to be connected by any ties at all; and hence their affliction, and their awful warnings. For proof of this assertion, I may refer to the gloomiest book ever written by a cheerful man—Southey's *Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society*; a very curious and not uninteresting exhibition of one of the points of view from which the spirit of the age may be contemplated.[2] They who prefer the ravings of a party politician to the musings of a recluse, may consult a late article in *Blackwood's Magazine*, under the same title which I have prefixed to this paper.[3] For the reverse of the picture, we have only to look into any popular newspaper or review.

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Amidst all this indiscriminate eulogy and abuse, these undistinguishing hopes and fears, it seems to be a very fit subject for philosophical inquiry, what the spirit of the age really is; and how or wherein it differs from the spirit of any other age. The subject is deeply important: for, whatever we may think or affect to think of the present age, we cannot get out of it; we must suffer with its sufferings, and enjoy with its enjoyments; we must share in its lot, and, to be either useful or at ease, we must even partake its character. No man whose good qualities were mainly those of another age, ever had much influence on his own. And since every age contains in itself the germ of all future ages as surely as the acorn contains the future forest, a knowledge of our own age is the fountain of prophecy

—the only key to the history of posterity. It is only in the present that we can know the future; it is only through the present that it is in our power to influence that which is to come.

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Yet, because our own age is *familiar* to us, we are presumed, if I may judge from appearances, to know it by nature. A statesman, for example, if it be required of him to have studied any thing at all (which, however, is more than I would venture to affirm) is supposed to have studied history—which is at best the spirit of ages long past, and more often the mere inanimate carcass without the spirit: but is it ever asked (or to whom does the question ever occur?) whether he understands his own age? Yet that also is history, and the most important part of history, and the only part which a man may know and understand, with absolute certainty, by using the proper means. He may learn in a morning's walk through London more of the history of England during the nineteenth century, than all the professed English histories in existence will tell him concerning the other eighteen: for, the obvious and universal facts, which every one sees and no one is astonished at, it seldom occurs to any one to place upon record; and posterity, if it learn the rule, learns it, generally, from the notice bestowed by contemporaries on some accidental exception. Yet are politicians and philosophers perpetually exhorted to judge of the present by the past, when the present alone affords a fund of materials for judging, richer than the whole stores of the past, and far more accessible.

But it is unadvisable to dwell longer on this topic, lest we should be deemed studiously to exaggerate that want, which we desire that the reader should think ourselves qualified to supply. It were better, without further preamble, to enter upon the subject, and be tried by our ideas themselves, rather than by the need of them.

The first of the leading peculiarities of the present age is, that it is an age of transition. Mankind have outgrown old institutions and old doctrines, and have not yet acquired new ones. When we say outgrown, we intend to prejudge nothing. A man may not be either better or happier at six-and-twenty, than he was at six years of age: but the same jacket which fitted him then, will not fit him now.

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The prominent trait just indicated in the character of the present age, was obvious a few years ago only to the more discerning; at present it forces itself upon the most inobservant. Much might be said, and shall be said on a fitting occasion, of the mode in which the old order of things has become unsuited to the state of society and of the human mind. But when almost every nation on the continent of Europe has achieved, or is in the course of rapidly achieving, a change in its form of government; when our own country, at all former times the most attached in Europe to its old institutions, proclaims almost with one voice that they are vicious both in the outline and in the details, and that they *shall* be renovated, and purified, and made fit for civilized man, we may assume that a part of the effects of the cause just now pointed out, speak sufficiently loudly for themselves. To him who can

reflect, even these are but indications which tell of a more vital and radical change. Not only, in the conviction of almost all men, things as they are, are wrong [4] —but, according to that same conviction, it is not by remaining in the old ways that they can be set right. Society demands, and anticipates, not merely a new machine, but a machine constructed in another manner. Mankind will not be led by their old maxims, nor by their old guides; and they will not choose either their opinions or their guides as they have done heretofore. The ancient constitutional texts were formerly spells which would call forth or allay the spirit of the English people at pleasure: what has become of the charm? Who can hope to sway the minds of the public by the old maxims of law, or commerce, or foreign policy, or ecclesiastical policy? Whose feelings are now roused by the mottoes and watch-words of Whig and Tory? And what Whig or Tory could command ten followers in the warfare of politics by the weight of his own personal authority? Nay, what landlord could call forth his tenants, or what manufacturer his men? Do the poor respect the rich, or adopt their sentiments? Do the young respect the old, or adopt their sentiments? Of the feelings of our ancestors it may almost be said that we retain only such as are the natural and necessary growth of a state of human society, however constituted; and I only adopt the energetic expression of a member of the House of Commons, less than two years ago, in saying of the young men, even of that rank in society, that they are ready to advertise for opinions.

Since the facts are so manifest, there is the more chance that a few reflections on their causes, and on their probable consequences, will receive whatever portion of the reader’s attention they may happen to deserve.

With respect, then, to the discredit into which old institutions and old doctrines have fallen, I may premise, that this discredit is, in my opinion, perfectly deserved. Having said this, I may perhaps hope, that no perverse interpretation will be put upon the remainder of my observations, in case some of them should not be quite so conformable to the sentiments of the day as my commencement might give reason to expect. The best guide is not he who, when people are in the right path, merely praises it, but he who shows them the pitfalls and the precipices by which it is endangered; and of which, as long as they were in the wrong road, it was not so necessary that they should be warned.

There is one very easy, and very pleasant way of accounting for this general departure from the modes of thinking of our ancestors: so easy, indeed, and so pleasant, especially to the hearer, as to be very convenient to such writers for hire or for applause, as address themselves not to the men of the age that is gone by, but to the men of the age which has commenced. This explanation is that which ascribes the altered state of opinion and feeling to the growth of the human understanding. According to this doctrine, we reject the sophisms and prejudices which misled the uncultivated minds of our ancestors, because we have learnt too much, and have become too wise, to be imposed upon by such sophisms and such prejudices. It is our knowledge and our sagacity which keep us free from these gross errors. We have now risen to the capacity of perceiving our true interests; and it is no longer in the power of impostors and charlatans to deceive us.

I am unable to adopt this theory. Though a firm believer in the improvement of the age, I do not believe that its improvement has been of this kind. The grand achievement of the present age is the *diffusion* of *superficial* knowledge; and that surely is no trifle, to have been accomplished by a single generation. The persons who are in possession of knowledge adequate to the formation of sound opinions by their own lights, form also a constantly increasing number, but hitherto at all times a small one. It would be carrying the notion of the march of intellect too far, to suppose that an average man of the present day is superior to the greatest men of the beginning of the eighteenth century; yet they *held* many opinions which we are fast renouncing. The intellect of the age, therefore, is not the cause which we are in search of. I do not perceive that, in the mental training which has been received by the immense majority of the reading and thinking part of my countrymen, or in the kind of knowledge and other intellectual aliment which has been supplied to them, there is any thing likely to render them much less accessible to the influence of imposture and charlatanerie than there ever was. The Dr. Eadys still dupe the lower classes, the St. John Longs the higher. [5] and it would not be difficult to produce the political and literary antitypes of both. Neither do I see, in such observations as I am able to make upon my contemporaries, evidence that they have any principle within them which renders them much less liable now than at any former period to be misled by sophisms

and prejudices. All I see is, that the opinions which have been transmitted to them from their ancestors, are not the kind of sophisms and prejudices which are fitted to possess any considerable ascendancy in their altered frame of mind. And I am rather inclined to account for this fact in a manner not reflecting such extraordinarily great honour upon the times we live in, as would result from the theory by which all is ascribed to the superior expansion of our understandings.

The intellectual tendencies of the age, considered both on the favourable and on the unfavourable side, it will be necessary, in the prosecution of the present design, to review and analyse in some detail. For the present it may be enough to remark, that it is seldom safe to ground a positive estimate of a character upon mere negatives: and that the faults or the prejudices, which a person, or an age, or a nation *has not*, go but a very little way with a wise man towards forming a high opinion of them. A person may be without a single prejudice, and yet utterly unfit for every purpose in nature. To have erroneous convictions is one evil; but to have no strong or deep-rooted convictions at all, is an enormous one. Before I compliment either a man or a generation upon having got rid of their prejudices, I require to know what they have substituted in lieu of them.

“Now, it is self-evident that no fixed opinions have yet generally established themselves in the place of those which we have abandoned; that no new doctrines, philosophical or social, as yet command, or appear likely soon to command, an assent at all comparable in unanimity to that which the ancient doctrines could boast of while they continued in vogue.”

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comparable in unanimity to that which the ancient doctrines could boast of while they continued in vogue. So long as this intellectual anarchy shall endure, we may be warranted in believing that we are in a fair way to become wiser than our forefathers; but it would be premature to affirm that we are already wiser. We have not yet advanced beyond the unsettled state, in which the mind is, when it has recently found itself out in a grievous error, and has not yet satisfied itself of the truth. The men of the present day rather incline to an opinion than embrace it; few, except the very penetrating, or the very presumptuous, have full confidence in their own convictions. This is not a state of health, but, at the best, of convalescence. It is a necessary stage in the progress of civilization, but it is attended with numerous evils; as one part of a road may be rougher or more dangerous than another, although every step brings the traveller nearer to his desired end.

Not increase of wisdom, but a cause of the reality of which we are better assured, may serve to account for the decay of prejudices; and this is, increase of discussion. Men may not reason, better, concerning the great questions in which human nature is interested, but they reason more. Large subjects are discussed more, and longer, and by more minds. Discussion has penetrated deeper into society; and if no greater numbers than before have attained the higher degrees of intelligence, fewer grovel in that state of abject stupidity, which can only co-exist with utter apathy and sluggishness.

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The progress which we have made, is precisely that sort of progress which increase of discussion suffices to produce, whether it be attended with increase of

wisdom or no. To discuss, and to question established opinions, are merely two phrases for the same thing. When all opinions are questioned, it is in time found out what are those which will not bear a close examination. Ancient doctrines are then put upon their proofs; and those which were originally errors, or have become so by change of circumstances, are thrown aside. Discussion does this. It is by discussion, also, that true opinions are discovered and diffused. But this is not so certain a consequence of it as the weakening of error. To be rationally assured that a given doctrine is *true*, it is often necessary to examine and weigh an immense variety of facts. One single well-established fact, clearly irreconcilable with a doctrine, is sufficient to prove that it is *false*. Nay, opinions often upset themselves by their own incoherence; and the impossibility of their being well-founded may admit of being brought home to a mind not possessed of so much as one positive truth. All the inconsistencies of an opinion with itself, with obvious facts, or even with other prejudices, discussion evolves and makes manifest: and indeed this mode of refutation, requiring less study and less real knowledge than any other, is better suited to the inclination of most disputants. But the moment, and the mood of mind, in which men break loose from an error, is not, except in natures very happily constituted, the most favourable to those mental processes which are necessary to the investigation of truth. What led them wrong at first, was generally nothing else but the incapacity of seeing more than one thing at a time; and that incapacity is apt to stick to them when they have turned their eyes in an altered direction. They usually resolve that the new light which has broken in upon them shall be the sole light; and they wilfully and passionately blow out the ancient lamp, which, though it did not show them what they now see, served very well to enlighten the objects in its immediate neighbourhood. Whether men adhere to old opinions or adopt new ones, they have in general an invincible propensity to split the truth, and take half, or less than half of it; and a habit of erecting their quills and bristling up like a porcupine against any one who brings them the other half, as if he were attempting to deprive them of the portion which they have.

I am far from denying, that, besides getting rid of error, we are also continually enlarging the stock of positive truth. In physical science and art, this is too manifest to be called in question; and in the moral and

social sciences, I believe it to be as undeniably true. The wisest men in every age generally surpass in wisdom the wisest of any preceding age, because the wisest men possess and profit by the constantly increasing accumulation of the ideas of all ages: but the multitude (by which I mean the majority of all ranks) have the ideas of their own age, and no others: and if the multitude of one age are nearer to the truth than the multitude of another, it is only in so far as they are guided and influenced by the authority of the wisest among them.

This is connected with certain points which, as it appears to me, have not been sufficiently adverted to by many of those who hold, in common with me, the doctrine of the indefinite progressiveness of the human mind; but which must be understood, in order correctly to appreciate the character of the present age, as an age of moral and political transition. These, therefore, I shall attempt to enforce and illustrate in the next paper. [6]

A.B.

Notes

[1] For example, *Babylon and Infidelity Foredoomed of God: A Discourse on the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse, Which Relate to These Latter Times, and Until the Second Advent* (Glasgow: Collins, 1828), by Edward Irving (1792-1834), the popular preacher, early friend of Thomas Carlyle; *Dialogues on Prophecy*, 3 vols. (London: Nisbet, 1827-29), comp. Henry Drummond (1786-1860), banker and M.P. (1810-13, 1847-60), who endowed the chair of Political Economy at Oxford (see Nos. 69 and 110), and was a founder of the Irvingite church; and *The Abominations of Babylon* (London: Hatchard, 1826), and *Popular Lectures on the Prophecies Relative to the Jewish Nation* (London: Hatchard, 1830), both by Hugh MacNeile (1795-1879), Rector of Albury, at this time an Irvingite.

[2] *Sir Thomas More; or, Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society*, 2 vols. (London: Murray, 1829), by Robert Southey (1774-1843), prolific poet and author, whom Mill met during this period at breakfast parties.

[3] David Robinson (d. 1849), "Letter to Christopher North, Esquire, on the Spirit of the Age," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, XXVIII (Dec. 1830), 900-20.

[4] "Things as they are" became a catch-phrase for the Radicals, who probably took it from *Things As They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams*, 3 vols. (London: Crosby, 1794), by William Godwin (1756-1836), philosopher and political writer.

[5] Eady, a notorious quack doctor and "wall-chalker," formerly bankrupted when a linen-draper at St. Ives, had been subject to a successful action for recovery of £115/11/6 in 1824 (*Examiner*, 29 Feb., 1824, p. 142). John St. John Long (1798-1834) was a popular but untrained medical practitioner, with an office in Harley Street, whose treatments by "friction and corrosion" sometimes had unfortunate effects, leading to trials after the deaths of patients.

[6] No. 77.

PART V [PART 1] [EXAMINER, 15 MAY, 1831]

In commencing this series of papers, I intended, and attempted, that the divisions of my discourse should correspond with those of my subject, and that each number should comprehend within its own limits all which was necessary to the expansion and illustration of one single idea. The nature of the publication, which, as being read by more persons capable of understanding the drift of such speculations (and by fewer, in proportion, who are unfit for them) than any other single work, I considered myself fortunate in being enabled to adopt as a vehicle for my ideas, compels me to limit the length of each article more than is compatible with my original plan. I can no longer always hope that every paper should be complete within itself; and the present number, had it appeared in its proper place, would have formed the continuation of the last.

In endeavouring to give an intelligible notion of what I have termed the *natural* state of society, in respect of moral influence—namely, that state in which the opinions and feelings of the people are, with their voluntary acquiescence, formed *for* them, by the most cultivated minds which the intelligence and morality of the times call into existence; and in drawing attention to the striking differences between this *natural* state and our present *transitional* condition, in which there are no persons to whom the mass of the uninstructed habitually defer, and in whom they trust for finding the

right, and for pointing it out; I have hitherto illustrated the former state only by the example of those commonwealths, in which the most qualified men are studiously picked out because of their qualifications, and invested with that worldly power, which, if it were in any other hands, would divide or eclipse their moral influence: but which, placed in theirs, and acting partly as a *certificate* of authority, and partly as a *cause*, tends naturally to render their power over the minds of their fellow-citizens paramount and irresistible.

“... our present transitional condition, in which there are no persons to whom the mass of the uninstructed habitually defer, and in whom they trust for finding the right, and for pointing it out;”

But it is not solely in such societies that there is found a united body of moral authority, sufficient to extort acquiescence from the uninquiring, or uninformed majority. It is found, likewise, in all societies where religion possesses a sufficient ascendancy, to subdue the minds of the possessors of worldly power, and where the spirit of the prevailing religion is such as excludes the possibility of material conflict of opinion among its teachers.

These conditions exist among two great stationary communities—the Hindoos and the Turks; and are doubtless the chief cause which keeps those communities stationary. The same union of circumstances has been hitherto found only in one *progressive* society—but that, the greatest which had ever existed: Christendom in the middle ages.

For many centuries, undivided moral influence over the nations of Europe, the unquestioned privilege of forming the opinions and feelings of the Christian world, was enjoyed, and most efficiently exercised by the Catholic clergy. Their word inspired in the rest of mankind the most fervent faith. It not only absolutely excluded doubt, but caused the doubter to be regarded with sentiments of profound abhorrence, which moralists had never succeeded in inspiring for the most revolting of crimes. It is certainly possible to feel perfectly sure of an opinion, without believing that

whosoever doubts it will be damned, and should be burnt: and this last is by no means one of those peculiarities of a natural state of society which I am at all anxious to see restored. But the deep earnest feeling of firm and unwavering conviction, which it presupposes, we may, without being unreasonable, lament that it was impossible, and could not *but* be impossible, in the intellectual anarchy of a general revolution in opinion, to transfer unimpaired to the truth.

The priesthood did not claim a right to dictate to mankind, either in belief or practice, beyond the province of religion and morals, but the political interests of mankind came not the less within their pale because they seldom assumed the authority to regulate those concerns by specific precepts. They gave the sanction of their irresistible authority to one comprehensive rule, that which enjoined unlimited obedience to the temporal sovereign: an obligation from which they absolved the conscience of the believer, only when the sovereign disputed their authority within their peculiar province: and in that case they were invariably triumphant, like all those to whom it is given to call forth the moral sentiments of mankind in all their energy, against the inducements of mere physical hopes and fears.

The Catholic clergy, at the time when they possessed this undisputed authority in matters of conscience and belief, were, in point of fact, the fittest persons who *could* have possessed it—the then state of society, in respect of moral influence, answers to the description of a *natural* state.

When we consider for how long a period the Catholic clergy were the only members of the European community who could even read; that they were the sole depositaries of all the treasures of thought, and reservoirs of intellectual delight, handed down to us from the ancients; that the sanctity of their persons permitted to them alone, among nations of semi-barbarians, the tranquil pursuit of peaceful occupations and studies; that, howsoever defective the morality which they taught, they had at least a mission for curbing the unruly passions of mankind, and teaching them to set a value upon a distant end, paramount to immediate temptations, and to prize gratifications consisting of mental feelings above bodily sensation; that (situate in the position of rivals to the temporal sovereign, drafted chiefly from the inferior classes of society, from men who otherwise would have been serfs, and the most lowly among them all having

the road open before him even to the papal chair,) they had the strongest motives to avail themselves of the means afforded by Christianity, for inculcating the natural equality of mankind, and the superiority of love and sacrifice above mere courage and bodily prowess, for menacing the great with the only terrors to which they were accessible, and speaking to their consciences in the name of the only superior whom they acknowledged, in behalf of the low;—Reflecting on these things, I cannot persuade myself to doubt that the ascendancy of the Catholic clergy was to be desired, for that day, even by the philosopher; and that it has been a potent cause, if even it was not an indispensable condition, of the present civilization of Europe. Nor is this an apology for the vices of the Catholic religion: those vices were great and flagrant, and there was no natural connection between them and the more civilizing and humanizing features in which all that there was of good in it resided. We may regret that the influence of the priesthood was not superseded by a better influence: but where in those days did any such influence exist?

“But the age of transition arrived. A time came when that which had overmatched and borne down the strongest obstacles to improvement, became itself incompatible with improvement. Mankind outgrew their religion, and that, too, at a period when they had not yet outgrown their government, because the texture of the latter was more yielding, and could be stretched.”

I conclude, therefore, that, during a part of the middle ages, not only worldly power, as already shown, but moral influence also, was undisputedly exercised by the most competent persons; and that the conditions of a natural state of society were then fully realized.

But the age of transition arrived. A time came when that which had overmatched and borne down

the strongest obstacles to improvement, became itself incompatible with improvement. Mankind outgrew their religion, and that, too, at a period when they had not yet outgrown their government, because the texture of the latter was more yielding, and could be stretched. We all know how lamentably effectual an instrument the influence of the Catholic priesthood then became, for restraining that expansion of the human intellect, which could not any longer consist with their ascendancy, or with the belief of the doctrines which they taught.

The more advanced communities of Europe succeeded, after a terrific struggle, in effecting their total or partial emancipation: in some, the Reformation achieved a victory—in others, a toleration; while, by a fate unhappily too common, the flame which had been kindled where the pile awaited the spark, spread into countries where the materials were not yet sufficiently prepared; and instead of burning down the hateful edifice, it consumed all that existed capable of nourishing itself, and was extinguished. The germs of civilization to come were scorched up and destroyed; the hierarchy reigned stronger than ever, amidst the intellectual solitude which it had made: and the countries which were thus denuded of the means of further advancement, fell back into barbarism irretrievable except by foreign conquest. Such is the inevitable end, when, unhappily, changes to which the spirit of the age is favourable, can be successfully resisted. Civilization becomes the terror of the ruling powers, and that they may retain their seat, it must be their deliberate endeavour to barbarize mankind. There has been, since that day, one such attempt, and only one, which has had a momentary success: it was that of a man in whom all the evil influences of his age were centered with an intensity and energy truly terrific, less tempered by any of its good influences than could appear possible in the times in which he lived—I need scarcely say that I refer to Napoleon. May his abortive effort to uncivilize human nature, to uncultivate the mind of man, and turn it into a desolate waste, be the last!

It remains to trace the history of moral influence in the nations of Europe, subsequently to the Reformation.

PART V [PART 2] [EXAMINER, 29 MAY, 1831]

In the countries which remained Catholic, but where the Catholic hierarchy did not retain sufficient moral ascendancy to succeed in stopping the progress of civilization, the church was compelled, by the decline of its separate influence, to link itself more and more closely with the temporal sovereignty. And thus did it retard its own downfall, until the spirit of the age became too strong for the two united, and both fell together to the ground.

I have said that the three sources of moral influence are, supposed wisdom and virtue, the sacerdotal office, and the possession of worldly power. But in Protestant countries, the authority of the ministers of religion, considered as an independent source of moral influence, must be blotted out from the catalogue. None of the churches which were the successors of the Catholic church in the nations in which the Reformation prevailed, succeeded, as churches, to any portion of the moral influence of their predecessor. The reason is, that no Protestant church ever claimed a special mission from the Deity to itself; or ever numbered among the obligations of religion, that of receiving its doctrines from teachers accredited by that particular church. The Catholics received the priest from God, and their religion from the priest. But in the Protestant sects, you resorted to the teacher, because you had already decided, or because it had been decided for you, that you would adopt his religion. In the popular religions you chose your own creed, and having so done, you naturally had recourse to its ministers;—in the state religions, your creed was chosen for you by your worldly superiors, and you were instigated by conscience, or, it may be, urged by motives of a more worldly nature, to resort for religious instruction to the minister of their appointment.

Every head of a family, even of the lowest rank, in Scotland, is a theologian; he discusses points of doctrine with his neighbours, and expounds the scripture to his family. He defers, indeed, though with no slavish deference, to the opinion of his minister; but in what capacity? only as a man whom his understanding owns as being at least more versed in the particular subject—as being probably a wiser, and possibly, a better man than himself. This is not the influence of an interpreter of religion, as such; it is that

of a purer heart, and a more cultivated intelligence. It is not the ascendancy of a priest: it is the combined authority of a professor of religion, and an esteemed private friend.

What I have said of the Scottish church, may be said of all Protestant churches, except state churches (which the Scottish church, notwithstanding its national endowment, is not). It may be said of all dissenters from our own establishment; except, indeed, those who inherit their religion, and adhere to it (not an uncommon case) as they would to any other family connexion. To the followers of the Church of England, a similar observation is wholly inapplicable: those excepted, who would abide by that communion for its doctrine, were it a dissenting sect. The people in general have not, nor ever had, any reason or motive for adhering to the established religion, except that it was the religion of their political superiors: and in the same ratio as their attachment to those superiors has declined, so has their adherence to the established church. From the time when the Church of England became firmly seated in its temporalities; from the period when its title to the fee-simple of our consciences acquired the sanctity of prescription, and when it was enabled to dispense with any support but what it derived from the stable foundations of the social fabric of which it formed a part; it sunk from its independent rank, into an integral part, or a kind of appendage, of the aristocracy. It merged into the higher classes: and what moral influence it possessed, was merely a portion of the general moral influence of temporal superiors.

From the termination, therefore, of that period of intellectual excitement and hardy speculation which succeeded the crisis of the Reformation, and which was prolonged in our own country to the end of the seventeenth century;—that moral influence, that power over the minds of mankind, which had been for so many ages the unquestioned heritage of the Catholic clergy, passed into the hands of the wealthy classes, and became united with worldly power. The ascendancy of the aristocracy was not so dictatorial and enthralling as that of the Catholic priesthood; because it was backed in a far inferior degree by the terrors of religion: and because unity of doctrine was not maintained, by the same powerful means, among the dominant class itself. Nevertheless, the higher classes set the fashion, as in dress, so in opinion. The opinions generally received among them, were the prevalent ones throughout the

rest of the nation. A bookish man here and there might have his individual theories, but they made no converts. All who had no opinions of their own, assumed those of their superiors. Few men wrote and published doctrines which the higher classes did not approve; or if published, their books were successfully cried down, or at best, were little read or attended to. Such questions, and such only, as divided the aristocracy, were (modestly) debated by the people: whose various denominations or divisions were each headed by an aristocratic *coterie*. Even the Dissenters made amends for their preference of a vulgar religion, by evincing a full measure of pliability and acquiescence in all that concerned politics and social life; though the banner they in general followed, was that of a section of the aristocracy less wedded than the other section to the monopoly of the sect which possessed advowsons and archbishoprics.

The wealthy classes, then, from the revolution downwards, possessed all that existed both of moral authority and worldly power. Under their influence grew up the received doctrines of the British constitution; the opinions, respecting the proper limits of the powers of government, and the proper mode of constituting and administering it, which were long characteristic of Englishmen. Along with these arose a vast variety of current opinions respecting morality, education, and the structure of society. And feelings in unison with those opinions, spread far, and took a deep root in the English mind.

“The government of the wealthy classes was, after all, the government of an irresponsible few; it therefore swarmed with abuses.”

At no time, during this period, could the predominant class be said, with truth, to comprise among its members all the persons qualified to govern men’s minds, or to direct their temporal interests, whom the state of society afforded. As a whole, however, that class contained, for a long time, a larger share of civilization and mental culture, than all other classes taken together. The difficulties, to men of merit and energy, of lifting themselves into that class, were not insuperable; and the leading and active spirits

among the governing body, had capacity to comprehend intellectual superiority, and to value it. The conditions, therefore, of a natural state of society were for some time, upon the whole, tolerably well fulfilled.

“I believe it would be impossible to mention any portion whatever of the business of government (except some parts of the defence of the country against external enemies), of which the exact counterpart is not, in some instance or other, performed by a committee chosen by the people themselves: performed with less means, and under incomparably greater difficulties, but performed unexceptionably, and to the general satisfaction of the persons interested.”

But they have now ceased to be fulfilled. The government of the wealthy classes was, after all, the government of an irresponsible few; it therefore swarmed with abuses. Though the people, by the growth of their intelligence, became more and more sensible of whatever was vicious in their government, they might possibly have borne with it, had they themselves remained as they were formerly, unfit, and conscious of their unfitness, for the business of government. But the comparative freedom of the practical administration of our Constitution—the extensive latitude of action which it allowed to the energies of individuals—enabled the people to train themselves in every habit necessary for self-government; for the rational management of their own affairs. I believe it would be impossible to mention any portion whatever of the business of government (except some parts of the defence of the country against external enemies), of which the exact counterpart is not, in some instance or other, performed by a committee chosen by the people

themselves: performed with less means, and under incomparably greater difficulties, but performed unexceptionably, and to the general satisfaction of the persons interested. It is notorious that much of the most important part of what in most other countries composes the business of government, is here performed wholly by voluntary associations: and other portions are done by the government in so clumsy and slovenly a manner, that it is found necessary to have recourse to voluntary associations as a subsidiary resource.

“It is notorious that much of the most important part of what in most other countries composes the business of government, is here performed wholly by voluntary associations”

When the people were thus trained to self-government, and had learned by experience that they were fit for it, they could not continue to suppose that none but persons of rank and fortune were entitled to have a voice in the government, or were competent to criticise its proceedings. The superior capacity of the higher ranks for the exercise of worldly power is now a broken spell.

It *was* in the power of those classes, possessed as they were of leisure and boundless opportunities of mental culture, to have kept themselves on the level of the most advanced intellects of the age; not to have been overtopped by the growth around them of a mass of intelligence, superior, on the average, to their own. They might also have preserved the confidence of the people in the integrity of their purposes, by abating each abuse, in proportion as the public conscience rose against it. They might thus have retained, in right of their virtue and intellect, that moral ascendancy which an intelligent people never long continues to yield to mere power. But they have flung away their advantages.

I have already adverted to the decline of the higher classes in active talent, as they became enervated by lazy enjoyment. In the same ratio in which they have advanced in humanity and refinement, they have fallen off in energy of intellect and strength of will. Many of them were formerly

versed in business: and into the hands of such, the remainder committed the management of the nation's affairs. Now, the men of hereditary wealth are mostly inexperienced in business, and unfit for it. Many of them formerly knew life and the world: but their knowledge of life is now little more than the knowledge of two or three hundred families, with whom they are accustomed to associate; and it may be safely asserted, that not even a fellow of a college is more ignorant of the world, or more grossly mistakes the signs of the times, than an English nobleman. Their very opinions,—which, before they had passed into aphorisms, were the result of choice, and something like an act of the intelligence,—are now merely hereditary. Their minds were once active—they are now passive: they once generated impressions—they now merely take them. What are now their political maxims? Traditional texts, relating, directly or indirectly, to the privileges of their order, and to the exclusive fitness of men of their own sort for governing. What is their public virtue? Attachment to these texts, and to the prosperity and grandeur of England, on condition that she shall never swerve from them; idolatry of certain abstractions, called church, constitution, agriculture, trade, and others: by dint of which they have gradually contrived, in a manner, to exclude from their minds the very idea of their living and breathing fellow-citizens, as the subjects of moral obligation in their capacity of rulers. They love their country as Bonaparte loved his army—for whose glory he felt the most ardent zeal, at a time when all the men who composed it, one with another, were killed off every two or three years. They do not love England as one loves human beings, but as a man loves his house or his acres.

Being such persons as has now been described, and being at last completely found out by the more intelligent, they no longer retain sufficient moral influence to give, as heretofore, vogue and currency to their opinions. But they retain—and the possessors of worldly power must always retain—enough of that influence, to prevent any opinions, which they do not acknowledge, from passing into received doctrines. They must, therefore, be divested of the monopoly of worldly power, ere the most virtuous and best-instructed of the nation will acquire that ascendancy over the opinions and feelings of the rest, by which alone England can emerge from this crisis of transition, and enter once again into a natural state of society.

“They must, therefore, be divested of the monopoly of worldly power, ere the most virtuous and best-instructed of the nation will acquire that ascendancy over the opinions and feelings of the rest, by which alone England can emerge from this crisis of transition, and enter once again into a natural state of society.”

A few months before the first of these papers was written, it would have seemed a paradox to assert that the present aera is one of moral and social transition. The same proposition now seems almost the tritest of truisms. The revolution which had already taken place in the human mind, is rapidly shaping external things to its own form and proportions.

That we are in a state of transition, is a point which needs no further illustration. That the passage we are in the midst of, will conduct us to a healthier state, has perhaps been rendered probable in the preceding papers, to some few who might otherwise have questioned it.

“The revolution which had already taken place in the human mind, is rapidly shaping external things to its own form and proportions... the futurity ... awaits us.”

But it greatly imports us to obtain a far deeper insight into the futurity which awaits us, and into the means by which the blessings of that futurity may be best improved, and its dangers avoided.

How shall we attain this insight? By a careful survey of the properties which are characteristic of the English national mind, in the present age—for on these the future fate of our country must depend.

But “fit audience,” even “though few,” [1] cannot be found for such discussions, at a moment when the interests of the day and of the hour naturally and properly engross every mind. The sequel of these papers must therefore be postponed until the interval of repose, after the present bustle and tumult. I shall resume my subject as early as possible after the passing of the Reform Bill. [2]

Notes

[1] John Milton (1608-74), *Paradise Lost* (1667), Bk. VII, l. 31; in *The Poetical Works* (London: Tonsen, 1695), p. 180.

[2] The elections returned a substantial majority for Grey and the Reform Bill. After Parliament resumed on 14 June, the second version was brought in, “A Bill to Amend the Representation of the People in England and Wales,” 2 William IV (25 June, 1831), *PP*, 1831, III, 9-46.

Further Information

SOURCE

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Other works by John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) <oll.libertyfund.org/person/21>.

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[Ludwig von Mises, “Liberty and Property” (1958)]



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