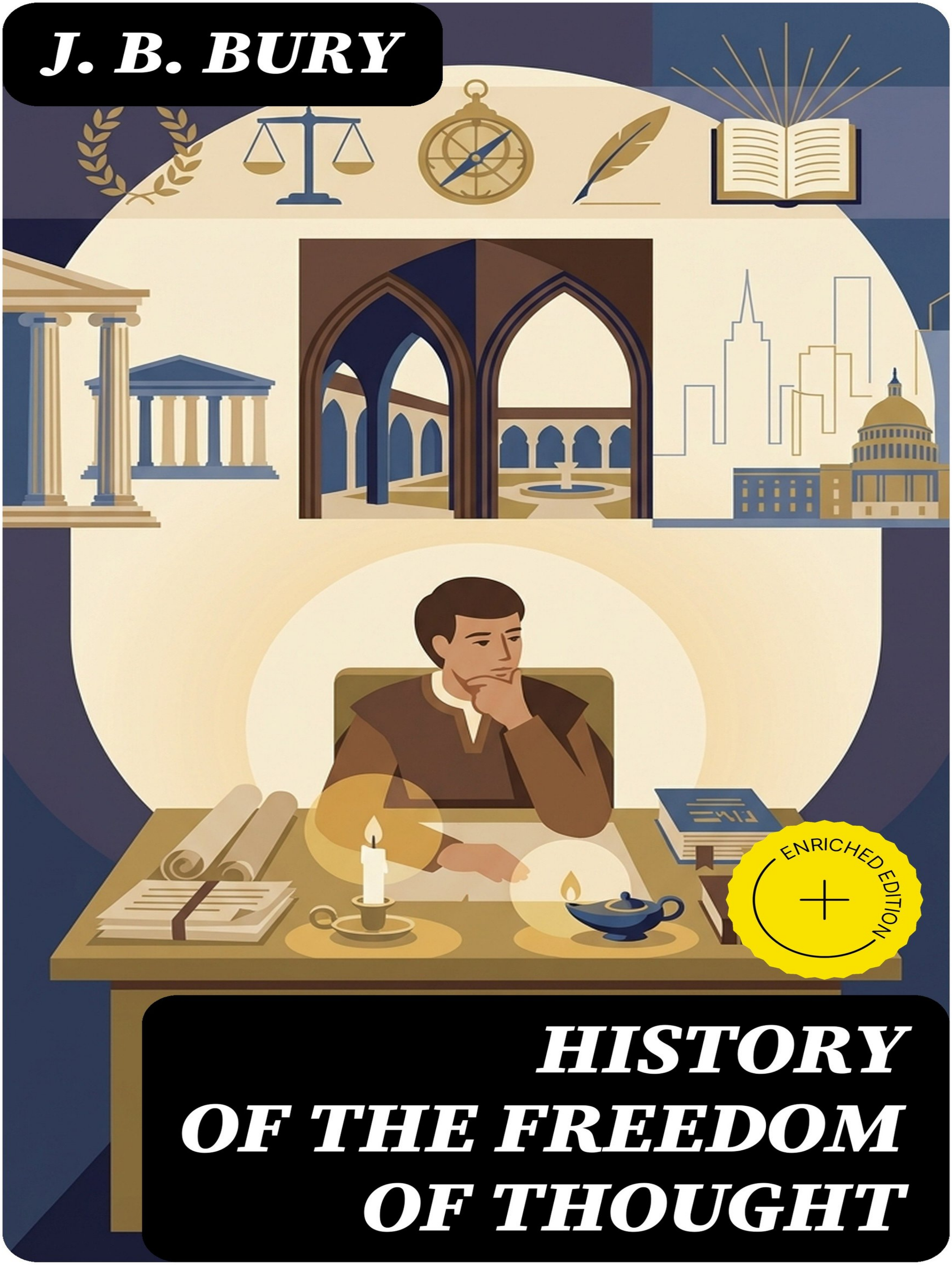
J. B. BURY


ENRICHED EDITION

HISTORY OF THE FREEDOM OF THOUGHT

J. B. Bury

History of the Freedom of Thought

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Clara Easton

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Introduction

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Across centuries of belief, inquiry, and power, J. B. Bury's History of the Freedom of Thought follows the enduring contest between institutions that claim authority over minds and the individuals who insist on thinking for themselves, tracing how prohibitions, customs, and laws have alternately constrained and released the energies of reason, how dissent has been punished or protected, and how the very meaning of freedom of thought has shifted with changes in religion, learning, and society while never losing its unsettling capacity to challenge settled doctrines and reorder the relations between knowledge, conscience, and public life.

Composed in the early twentieth century by a historian of wide classical and modern learning, this work belongs to the tradition of intellectual history and was issued as a compact survey for general readers rather than a specialist monograph, presenting a panoramic account of European developments from antiquity to the modern age. Its purpose is explanatory rather than polemical, arranging episodes and ideas to show continuity and change rather than to rehearse a partisan program. The book's historical range, compressed into short chapters, places controversies in their institutional settings while carefully distinguishing opinion from evidence.

Bury proceeds chronologically while pausing to clarify terms, trace legal and ecclesiastical mechanisms, and assess social conditions that shape what thinkers can say or print. His voice is patient, urbane, and precise; the style favors concise argument over flourish, balancing narrative momentum with analytic pause. Readers encounter a guided tour rather than an exhaustive archive, with transitions that keep the argument accessible and a tone that invites reflection without demanding agreement. The experience is cumulative, each section illuminating how frames of authority, from sacred canons to civic regulations, mediate the space available for independent judgment.

At its center stands the theme of authority: theological orthodoxy, imperial and royal power, ecclesiastical courts, and later the modern state. Bury examines tolerance, censorship, heresy, and the institutionalization of learning, tracking how printing, universities, and scientific methods alter the conditions of debate. He shows that freedom of thought is not a single decree but a fabric woven from jurisprudence, custom, and cultural confidence. Throughout, the book weighs the moral claims of conscience against social cohesion, and it measures the costs of repression alongside the risks of unbounded license, insisting on history's evidence to locate a workable space for criticism.

The narrative attends to the ambiguous status of dissent: sometimes heroic, sometimes reckless, always situated within pressures that make prudence as consequential as bravery. Bury links advances in learning to changing legal protections, public opinion, and economic conditions, while warning that gains are reversible when fear or dogma mobilizes institutions. The idea of progress appears as a fragile hypothesis rather than a guarantee; the author's modern outlook embraces reason without ignoring its dependence on civic frameworks. Across periods, the book treats liberty as practice more than slogan, defined by habits sustained through conflict.

For contemporary readers, the book's significance lies in its demonstration that free thought is a civic ecology, not a mere personal virtue. By mapping how censorship, media, education, and law interact, it provides analytic tools for evaluating present controversies over speech, belief, and expertise without collapsing into slogans. It also models historical thinking as an antidote to panic, reminding readers that disputes over what may be taught or published have precedents and patterns that can inform prudent reform. Its measured tone encourages constructive disagreement, suggesting that durable freedom grows from institutions that expect and manage dissent.

Approached today, Bury’s survey rewards patient, reflective reading: it is compact yet capacious, asking readers to supply their own comparisons while it supplies structure. Because it was written from an early twentieth-century vantage point, some emphases reflect that moment, but the argument’s clarity and sobriety transcend fashion. Taken as a map rather than a manifesto, the book equips readers to locate debates in time, evaluate claims of novelty, and distinguish defense of conscience from mere provocation. It welcomes a thoughtful companionable reading, inviting you to test its conclusions against evidence and to cultivate freedom as a disciplined habit.

Synopsis

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J. B. Bury’s study of freedom of thought is an early twentieth-century historical essay that follows the fortunes of intellectual liberty from antiquity to modernity. Bury treats freedom of thought as the practical ability to form, hold, and express opinions without penalty, distinguishing it from private belief and emphasizing the roles of law, custom, and authority. He proposes a descriptive inquiry rather than a manifesto, tracing how institutions, doctrines, and political arrangements alternately constrained and enlarged the sphere of permissible opinion. The narrative’s central question is how societies created the conditions under which dissent could move from tolerated exception to recognized civic right.

Beginning with the classical world, Bury highlights the paradox of Greek culture: a fertile marketplace of ideas accompanied by civic mechanisms to punish impiety. The trial of Socrates illustrates how communal religion could set hard boundaries, even as philosophy explored naturalistic and ethical speculation. Hellenistic schools modeled inward independence, but they did not inoculate public life against prosecution for heterodoxy. In Rome, a broad practical tolerance toward local cults coexisted with insistence on political loyalty and ritual conformity. Imperial authority could tolerate diverse opinions until they appeared to threaten public order, revealing how freedom of thought depended less on brilliance than on institutional latitude.

The conversion of the empire altered the matrix of opinion by uniting religious authority with state power. Bury emphasizes how the consolidation of Christian orthodoxy reframed dissent as heresy, a category that justified coercive measures on the ground that doctrinal unity served social peace and salvation. Theological controversy invigorated intellectual effort but also delimited it, as councils determined authoritative belief and penalties attached to deviation. Appeals to revealed truth and ecclesiastical jurisdiction reoriented the relation between private conviction and public expression. In this setting, freedom of thought narrowed, not because inquiry ceased, but because the legitimate ends of inquiry were more tightly defined.

In the medieval Latin West, Bury presents a complex picture in which custodianship of learning and restrictions on dissent grew together. Universities organized rigorous disputation, yet within a framework that placed theological conclusions beyond ultimate challenge. Ecclesiastical courts and inquisitorial procedures developed to police heresy, while lists of prohibited propositions and books indicated the permissible scope of teaching. Episodes of originality—from speculative theology to natural philosophy—occurred under watchful oversight and were sometimes censured. The period’s significance in the argument lies not in simple repression or liberty, but in how durable institutions harmonized reason with authority, thereby stabilizing boundaries that would later be contested.

With the Renaissance and the printing press, Bury identifies forces that multiplied access to texts and revived critical engagement with classical sources. Humanists promoted philology and historical scrutiny, tools that could unsettle entrenched readings. The Reformation shattered confessional unity and broadened debate, yet it did not automatically advance toleration; competing churches often enforced uniformity where they prevailed. New publics formed around pamphlets, sermons, and vernacular Bibles, generating both pluralism and polemic. The tension between conscience and coercion sharpened, producing arguments for limited toleration and instances of refuge, while also confirming that liberty of belief without liberty of expression left the central problem unresolved.

In the seventeenth century, natural philosophy expanded the demand for methodological independence, and emblematic conflicts demonstrated the risks of challenging received authority. Bury links this scientific turn with a philosophical case for toleration articulated by thinkers who defended freedom of conscience, the rights of discussion, and the separation of theological questions from civil peace. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment widened the critique of censorship and superstition, as print networks and encyclopedic projects normalized open controversy. While legal reforms were uneven and often reversible, the cumulative effect was to shift the presumption: opinion came to be restrained for specific, publicly reasoned causes rather than by inherited prohibitions.

Moving into the nineteenth century and his own present, Bury surveys expanding civil guarantees in some states, alongside persistent constraints in law and custom. He treats freedom of the press, the secularization of education, and the growth of scientific authority as pillars of a more spacious intellectual climate, yet he warns that new forces—mass opinion, party discipline, patriotic passions—can inhibit candor as effectively as formal censorship. The work closes by weighing practical conditions for safeguarding inquiry, including plural institutions and a culture of discussion. Its enduring resonance lies in showing freedom of thought as a hard-won social achievement that must be continuously justified and maintained.

Historical Context

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John Bagnell Bury (1861–1927), an Irish-born historian and classicist, wrote A History of Freedom of Thought while serving as Regius Professor of Modern History at the University of Cambridge. First published in 1913 by Williams & Norgate in the Home University Library series, the book emerged from late Edwardian Britain’s expanding adult education and professionalized historical scholarship. Cambridge and other British universities, increasingly open to non-Anglicans after the University Tests Act of 1871, fostered secular inquiry. The series’ aim—to provide concise, authoritative introductions—situated Bury’s study between academic research and civic instruction, addressing readers amid vibrant debates about science, religion, and public liberty.

In the decades shaping Bury’s outlook, nineteenth-century liberalism and scientific naturalism pressed hard against religious authority. John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty (1859) articulated the harm principle; Charles Darwin’s Origin of Species (1859) and Descent of Man (1871) challenged traditional doctrines. Thomas Huxley popularized agnosticism, while John Tyndall’s Belfast Address (1874) defended scientific materialism. Historical-critical study of scripture, from David Strauss’s Life of Jesus (1835) to Julius Wellhausen’s Prolegomena (1878), and Ernest Renan’s Vie de Jésus (1863), unsettled orthodoxy. In Britain, Charles Bradlaugh’s oath controversy (1880–1886), the Oaths Act (1888), and G. W. Foote’s blasphemy conviction (1883) dramatized conflicts over conscience and speech.

Across Europe, church–state struggles intensified the theme. In France, the Dreyfus Affair (1894–1906) exposed clerical and nationalist pressures, preceding the 1905 law separating churches and state. Germany's Kulturkampf (1871–1878) pitted the Prussian-led state against Catholic institutions. The papacy condemned liberalism and modern theology in the Syllabus of Errors (1864), then targeted "Modernism" with Pascendi Dominici Gregis (1907) and an anti-modernist oath (1910). The Index Librorum Prohibitorum continued to list prohibited books. Such measures, alongside republican secularization and civil reforms, supplied stark, contemporary examples of how institutional power could either restrain or protect inquiry—issues Bury cataloged across earlier epochs.

Bury's long view began in classical antiquity, where philosophy flourished under civic constraints. Athens tried Socrates for impiety in 399 BCE, while Hellenistic schools cultivated skeptical and materialist traditions. Under Rome, imperial policy oscillated between toleration and repression; Christianity, once persecuted, gained legal status via the Edict of Milan (313). With Theodosius I, the Edict of Thessalonica (380) established Nicene Christianity as official, and later laws curtailed pagan cults. Medieval Christendom consolidated intellectual life in universities and ecclesiastical courts; the papal inquisition developed in the thirteenth century, and condemnations such as those of 1277 at Paris marked boundaries of permissible speculation.

The early modern era reconfigured authority through technology, schism, and war. Printing spread from mid-fifteenth-century Mainz, transforming the circulation of ideas. The Reformation, commonly dated from 1517, fractured Western Christendom; the Peace of Augsburg (1555) and the Peace of Westphalia (1648) formalized confessional pluralism without full liberty. Trials of Giordano Bruno (executed 1600) and Galileo (condemned 1633) signaled doctrinal limits. Yet Milton's Areopagitica (1644) championed unlicensed printing. The Dutch Republic's relative tolerance attracted exiles and presses; Spinoza's Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (1670) argued for freedoms of philosophy and religion. England’s Toleration Act (1689) and Locke’s writings framed pragmatic, circumscribed toleration.

Enlightenment writers expanded arguments for toleration and critique. Pierre Bayle’s Dictionnaire (1697) amassed skeptical erudition; Voltaire’s campaigns, including his intervention in the Calas case (1762), attacked fanaticism; Diderot and d’Alembert’s Encyclopédie (1751–1772) systematized knowledge. Legal milestones established new norms: Sweden’s Freedom of the Press Act (1766) pioneered press liberty and openness; the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789) proclaimed free expression; the United States First Amendment (1791) forbade congressional abridgment of speech and press. These gains remained uneven and reversible, but they provided institutional models that later reformers and scholars—including Bury—treated as benchmarks.

Nineteenth-century reforms broadened participation while revealing new controls. Britain repealed the Stamp Duty on newspapers (1855), the Advertisement Duty (1853), and the Paper Duty (1861), fostering a mass press. University College London (founded 1826) embodied non-sectarian higher education; the British Association for the Advancement of Science (1831) promoted public science. Civil disabilities eased with repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts (1828) and Catholic Emancipation (1829), yet prosecutions persisted: G. W. Foote’s blasphemy sentence (1883) and the Bradlaugh–Besant trial over birth-control literature (1877) displayed moral and religious censorship. German research universities and professional societies institutionalized specialized, secular scholarship that shaped Bury’s craft.

Published on the eve of the First World War, during H. H. Asquith’s Liberal government and amid debates on Irish Home Rule and constitutional reform, Bury’s book synthesized a liberal, secular narrative of inquiry’s ascent. It emphasized legal safeguards, critical scholarship, and scientific norms as bulwarks against coercion by church or state. Within a year, wartime measures such as Britain’s Defence of the Realm Act (1914) would impose censorship, underscoring the fragility Bury documented historically. The work reflects Edwardian confidence in progress tempered by awareness of recurring repression, offering a concise, erudite critique of dogmatism and a case for institutional protections of thought.

History of the Freedom of Thought

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Chapter I.
Freedom of Thought and the Forces Against It

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Introductory

It is a common saying that thought is free. A man can never be hindered from thinking whatever he chooses so long as he conceals what he thinks. The working of his mind is limited only by the bounds of his experience and the power of his imagination. But this natural liberty of private thinking is of little value. It is unsatisfactory and even painful to the thinker himself, if he is not permitted to communicate his thoughts to others, and it is obviously of no value to his neighbours. Moreover it is extremely difficult to hide thoughts that have any power over the mind. If a man's thinking leads him to call in question ideas and customs which regulate the behaviour of those about him, to reject beliefs which they hold, to see better ways of life than those they follow, it is almost impossible for him, if he is convinced of the truth of his own reasoning, not to betray by silence, chance words, or general attitude that he is different from them and does not share their opinions. Some have preferred, like Socrates, some would prefer to-day, to face death rather than conceal their thoughts. Thus freedom of thought, in any valuable sense, includes freedom of speech**[1q]**.

At present, in the most civilized countries, freedom of speech is taken as a matter of course and seems a perfectly simple thing. We are so accustomed to it that we look on it as a natural right. But this right has been acquired only in quite recent times, and the way to its attainment has lain through lakes of blood. It has taken centuries to persuade the most enlightened peoples that liberty to publish one's opinions and to discuss all questions is a good and not a bad thing. Human societies (there are some brilliant exceptions) have been generally opposed to freedom of thought, or, in other words, to new ideas, and it is easy to see why.

The average brain is naturally lazy and tends to take the line of least resistance. The mental world of the ordinary man consists of beliefs which he has accepted without questioning and to which he is firmly attached; he is instinctively hostile to anything which would upset the established order of this familiar world. A new idea, inconsistent with some of the beliefs which he holds, means the necessity of rearranging his mind; and this process is laborious, requiring a painful expenditure of brain-energy. To him and his fellows, who form the vast majority, new ideas, and opinions which cast doubt on established beliefs and institutions, seem evil because they are disagreeable.

The repugnance due to mere mental laziness is increased by a positive feeling of fear. The conservative instinct hardens into the conservative doctrine that the foundations of society are endangered by any alterations in the structure. It is only recently that men have been abandoning the belief that the welfare of a state depends on rigid stability and on the preservation of its traditions and institutions unchanged. Wherever that belief prevails, novel opinions are felt to be dangerous as well as annoying, and any one who asks inconvenient questions about the why and the wherefore of accepted principles is considered a pestilent person.

The conservative instinct, and the conservative doctrine which is its consequence, are strengthened by superstition. If the social structure, including the whole body of customs and opinions, is associated intimately with religious belief and is supposed to be under divine patronage, criticism of the social order savours of impiety, while criticism of the religious belief is a direct challenge to the wrath of supernatural powers.

The psychological motives which produce a conservative spirit hostile to new ideas are reinforced by the active opposition of certain powerful sections of the community, such as a class, a caste, or a priesthood, whose interests are bound up with the maintenance of the established order and the ideas on which it rests.

Let us suppose, for instance, that a people believes that solar eclipses are signs employed by their Deity for the special purpose of communicating useful information to them, and that a clever man discovers the true cause of eclipses. His compatriots in the first place dislike his discovery because they find it very difficult to reconcile with their other ideas; in the second place, it disturbs them, because it upsets an arrangement which they consider highly advantageous to their community; finally, it frightens them, as an offence to their Divinity. The priests, one of whose functions is to interpret the divine signs, are alarmed and enraged at a doctrine which menaces their power.

In prehistoric days, these motives, operating strongly, must have made change slow in communities which progressed, and hindered some communities from progressing at all. But they have continued to operate more or less throughout history, obstructing knowledge and progress. We can observe them at work to-day even in the most advanced societies, where they have no longer the power to arrest development or repress the publication of revolutionary opinions. We still meet people who consider a new idea an annoyance and probably a danger. Of those to whom socialism is repugnant, how many are there who have never examined the arguments for and against it, but turn away in disgust simply because the notion disturbs their mental universe and implies a drastic criticism on the order of things to which they are accustomed? And how many are there who would refuse to consider any proposals for altering our imperfect matrimonial institutions, because such an idea offends a mass of prejudice associated with religious sanctions? They may be right or not, but if they are, it is not their fault. They are actuated by the same motives which were a bar to progress in primitive societies. The existence of people of this mentality, reared in an atmosphere of freedom, side by side with others who are always looking out for new ideas and regretting that there are not more about, enables us to realize how, when public opinion was formed by the views of such men, thought was fettered and the impediments to knowledge enormous.

Although the liberty to publish one's opinions on any subject without regard to authority or the prejudices of one's neighbours is now a well-established principle, I imagine that only the minority of those who would be ready to fight to the death rather than surrender it could defend it on rational grounds. We are apt to take for granted that freedom of speech is a natural and inalienable birthright of man, and perhaps to think that this is a sufficient answer to all that can be said on the other side. But it is difficult to see how such a right can be established.

If a man has any "natural rights," the right to preserve his life and the right to reproduce his kind are certainly such. Yet human societies impose upon their members restrictions in the exercise of both these rights. A starving man is prohibited from taking food which belongs to somebody else. Promiscuous reproduction is restricted by various laws or customs. It is admitted that society is justified in restricting these elementary rights, because without such restrictions an ordered society could not exist. If then we concede that the expression of opinion is a right of the same kind, it is impossible to contend that on this ground it can claim immunity from interference or that society acts unjustly in regulating it. But the concession is too large. For whereas in the other cases the limitations affect the conduct of every one, restrictions on freedom of