

# Excerpts from Two Sermons by Friedrich August Tholuck, “What is Human Reason Worth?” (c. 1840) and “When is Greater Civic Freedom Fortunate for a People?” (1848)

## Abstract

---

An active preacher and prolific writer, the Awakened theology professor [Friedrich August Tholuck](#) (1799–1877) was an influential opponent of religious rationalism and biblical criticism in Germany. The following excerpts from two of his sermons, one given during the Revolution of 1848, exemplify the movement’s passionate appeals to parishioners to keep their faith and—and typical of most devout Protestants’ political conservatism at the time—its sharp criticism of calls for freedom, democracy, and civic rights.

## Source

---

### [Chapter] XVI. What is Human Reason Worth?

My beloved! I have spoken to you on orders from the Lord Himself about the struggles and groupings of the times—I say: on orders from the Lord Himself, for it is the Lord who has commanded His followers to pay heed to the signs of the times. We have looked at the currents of the time, now we shall also look at the themes of the day, at the themes that have become slogans on the right and the left, which we now hear discussed again in the alleys and the taverns, in the trains and mail coaches. How we would thank God that religion has finally stepped down again from the pulpit into the life of the people, if only we could perceive—if only occasionally—a secret searching and praying behind the outward chatter, perceive that people were not merely asking: What must I do to be more clever?, but also: What must I do to be saved? Still, we prefer even this worldly zeal to none at all, though all the zeal were not about but against religion! How much benefit we would at least derive—we who know in whom we believe—if that false zeal awakened our proper zeal, if the louder the No! sounded from that side, the more joyfully our Yes! rang out into the land! Behold, is it not already a good thing that you who do not wish to abandon your faith, must now also learn what to answer if they ask you about the reason behind your hope? I shall now play a part in this; that is why I shall preach to you about the questions of the times, so that you may have something to respond with, that you may become aware again that we are standing on a good, an eternal foundation!

The theme, then, that tops the slogans of these times is the question: What is human reason worth? But from which of the many teachers and wise men of the world shall we get our answer? We who have in Christ a king of truth and no longer need to go around to beg for an answer to our questions from the nobles and princes in the land of truth, we approach Him and none other also with this question. Him of whom it is written: “That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world”—from Him and none other we shall hear the answer; of Him we know: He knows whereof He speaks, for He says what He was told by the Father. Let Him tell us, then, what human reason is worth. Listen to His answer (Matt. 6.20-24), where He speaks thus:

“But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do no break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness! No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one and love the other;

---

or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.”

Did you understand, my brothers, what He is telling you with these words about the worth of human reason? This is what He is telling you: it is a light for the entire inner man, if it is sound; it is a will-o-the-wisp for the entire inner man if it is unsound, and it becomes sound only when it is guided by the right pull of the heart. This our Lord has said, and now we know whom we should support in the struggles of today. We do not hold with those who say that man is supposedly born without a spiritual eye; we do not hold with those who say that man can make his spiritual eye whole by his own reason and power; but we hold with those who profess that man’s spiritual eye will be made sound by the correct pull of the heart. O You by whose light alone we can see light, we preachers and you, the listeners, enlighten our spirit! You called those under age and the children to come before you, behold, we come as those under age to take our wisdom from You!

The first thing, then, that Christ teaches about human reason is that it is a light for the entire inner man if it is sound. Man needs a light for his emotions, for what he wants and does every day. Of course, we are a far cry from man wanting what is right because he knows what is right.

To be sure, many fancy that he does so; for there are many who believe that all will be well with humanity as soon as it shall become progressively smarter and more educated, and makes progress in all arts, sciences, and skills. And that is also what they pursue themselves, learning from all books and from all masters—except that among all the things they think about, religion, their relationship to God, is last. They are ashamed if there is anything among the things on the earth and under the earth that they do not know much about; but if they don’t know much about their religion, about Holy Scripture, they are not ashamed. Do you know that our ancestors said of those who thought only about becoming smarter, not better? “If the people get smarter, the Devil makes hell larger.” [...]

But precisely because we are given a savior like Christ, we must not and cannot hold with those who would give man a healthy eye through his own reason and power. In the end, everyone must admit, no matter what party they follow, that no mortal is born with a healthy inner eye, with healthy reason. O, we only have to picture the inner eye, what it is supposed to be: a star in the night of lie, without rising or setting, with no change from light to dark; and who would not admit that this reason, in which all whims, weaknesses, and frailties of a sick heart are mirrored and reflected, cannot, after all, be a healthy eye of the soul. Would this reason, which can be toppled from its throne by every strong breeze of passion, be an absolute queen? Just try then, you foolish children of the times, as many of you have begun to do, to preach to the people that this reason is sound and [that it is] an absolute queen who needs no further word from God to govern, and you shall soon discover how this queen will serve the basest passions. The people will confuse the voice of their passion with the voice of their reason, their carnal desires will adorn themselves with noble names, if it even gets that far, brutishness will be called boldness, carnal lust the enjoyment of human rights, apostasy from God independence, and lack of restraint freedom. I have already heard an outwardly honorable citizen of Halle preach in the middle of the street these days: God is finished, we are standing on our own feet! Our blood still curdles when we recall the days when such blasphemy was preached from the rooftops of the French capital. O that the German people should ever reach that point! But no, no, you afterborn generation, you young men standing here with your loins girded and your lamps burning, you young men who recognize that your nobility and human dignity lie in bending your knee to the living God, you are the ones called by God, you will help to deflect that disgrace from the heads of our nation! We who shall depart place in you our hopes for the grave days that lie ahead, and which our eyes shall no longer see.—But all, at least those who are prudent, agree that human reason must first be educated, that the inner eye must first be purified. But who, then, shall enlighten and purify it? Who is so bold as to dare stand before his brothers to become their physician and savior purely and solely by the power of his own reason? Who is so bold as to dare proclaim: my inner eye is the star in the night of life, with no rising or setting, no change of light and darkness? No, Christians, when we preachers speak to you here from the pulpit, it is not us, us you demand to hear, but someone

---

higher than us; Him you want to hear speaking from our mouth who must brighten our eyes also with His eternal word, so that we shall see light by his light! And if even His word were false, then we would descend from this place, where we stood above the community—after all, it was only His word that placed us on this high place!—and come down among you, no better and no worse than all mortals who, with Christ having become a liar, wander through life in the uncertain twilight of their own reason. Man's eye of the soul can be made healthy only by Him who himself had a perfectly healthy eye of the soul. And why is He the only one among all who had a perfectly sound eye of the soul? Because He was the only one who could ask: Who shall accuse me of a sin? Do you remember how He made this the touchstone of his truth, when he asked: "But you, because I speak the truth, you do not believe me; who among you can accuse me of a sin?" Yes, and this is precisely what the children of these times cannot bear in the Gospel, that it connects the truth in things divine so closely with sanctification that such healthy reason is supposed to exist only where there is the proper pull of the heart to God. They only want to study, not pray; they only want the education of reason, not the sanctification of the heart. But just as in Christ the sacred heart is the eye with which He beholds God, the entire New Testament attests with our text: only through a godly life does man become aware of God, only through the purification of the heart does the eye of our soul become pure and clear!

[...]

### **[Chapter] IXX. When is Greater Civic Freedom Fortunate for a People?**

Beloved in the Lord! At the end of the half-year that has just passed we experienced a sudden change of things, after which everyone saw everyone else and every relationship with different eyes. We, too, have not seen each other again in this place since those fateful days; and we, too, see each other again with different eyes in more than one respect. First we theologians. The slogan of freedom has invaded the church from the popular assemblies, with a sound that reminds us in many people far too much of this: "He shall not rule over us!" In view of what the church will be facing shortly, we see each other again in a more elevated mood, I should say—the way friends feel who meet before a day of intense battle. You academic citizens, especially, have also entered upon a new career. The small word "freedom," which already sends a shudder through young academic hearts with such magical power, resounds with a redoubled echo from bourgeois circles over into academic ones. Your entire academic life is seeking to move with freer vibrations. But let us all remember now where we stand. We stand here at the sacred site where all human slogans must be measured on a scale that never errs. It thus behooves us above all else to weigh and measure the ambiguous word "freedom." If I do not commend you, praise you as happy today, it is intentional, even though hopes may awaken at least with a view to the distant future. But in these days too much honey is handed out everywhere—should not the pulpit, of all places, add divine salt to the honey? Remember, then, that this is the place to put ourselves and our slogan of liberty today under God's word as our judge.

When the German flag was planted on the town hall of our city and the song "Now let us all give thanks to God" resounded, there stood among the other citizens in the market square one who was heard to say to his neighbor: "Now they sing: Let us all praise God, who knows if they don't end up singing before the year is out: 'Lord, help us in our deep misery.'" Truly, you need not be a blind admirer of the old to make room for such fears after what we have been through. It may be that justified powers have been unleashed, but where they are unleashed through a revolution, so many powers of hell are awakened with them that no human hand can restrain them again. He who sails on the water does not command the wind. If there is no good thing on earth that is not subject to misuse, not excepting even religion, how much more likely is misuse with greater civic freedom! We must therefore seriously put this question to you: When is greater civic freedom fortunate for a people?—We shall let Christ answer; he says in John 8. 31-36:

"Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on Him, If ye continue in my word, *then* are ye my

---

disciples indeed; And ye shall know truth, and the truth shall make you free. They answered him, We be Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man: how sayest thou, Ye shall be made free? Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. And the servant abideth not in the house for ever: *but* the Son abideth ever. If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed."

According to these words, Christ's answer to our question is this: greater civic freedom is only truly fortunate if the love of God reigns supreme in the conscience of those who are free. More specifically, there are three things in this saying: 1) civic freedom is not yet true freedom, i.e. freedom in the highest sense; 2) only the free in whom the love of God reigns supreme are truly free; 3) this freedom is given only by the Son, the one who is truly free.

Civic freedom, speaking with the Son of God, is not yet true freedom, freedom in the highest sense. [...] Where the mind of a people is focused on nothing but emancipation from [the rule of] other people, there is born a kind of haughtiness that no longer wishes to tolerate any bond of dependency that binds us to human beings: not that of reverence, not that of gratitude, not that of piety; there even all differences of rank and hierarchy among people are to vanish. The state is a body, a body has various parts, unequal in honor and dignity, though all are necessary for the existence of the body, ruling and serving parts, ear and eye, feet and hand; but where haughtiness has awakened in the wake of an enthusiastic urge for freedom, the parts no longer wish to accept the place that God has assigned them in the body, every member wants to be eye and ear. Such dizziness of freedom gives birth to arrogance toward people, for it is itself born of arrogance toward God. The Epistle of Juda speaks of godless people, dreamers they are called, and it is said that because they despise God, they also despise authority and blaspheme against majesties. Among all feelings of reverence, the reverence for God is the oldest and most venerable. But he who has ceased to genuflect to divine majesty, how will he still accept among humans a scepter that was received by God in fief, and which no hand of flesh and blood may touch? And whosoever refuses to accept that there are brows that birth and nature herself has shaped into a diadem wreath, how reluctant he will be to still bow to those whom God has installed as the nobler parts of the body of humanity! Behold the horror of a revolution where, against law and justice, the hand from below reaches for the scepter to break it, how at the same time all bonds of reverence, piety, and obedience are cast off by the unleashed haughtiness. O this one, first breach of the law, which an entire people sanctifies, what an army of broken laws and oaths, of haughty acts of violence, and blasphemous desires it brings in its wake! The German saying goes: Once the bread is cut, all wanton children will cut a slice from it. This spirit of haughtiness has now gone out among old and young. Young men of this university, your name has been preserved unsullied in this pervasive defilement; in those fateful days, right and law meant more to you than intoxicating praise in the newspapers; with the prudence that adorns men, you kept to the narrow but firm and straight road of progress in accordance with the law. You know that the weeds of arrogance and haughtiness grow more rampant in youth than in any other age, therefore be alert, alert, and if you wish to learn, in these seductive times, to bend your knee before lawful, human authorities, learn to bend it before God! Behold further the terrible fruit of such enthusiasm for freedom in the blindness of the Jews: "We were never in bondage to any man," they dare to say, and forget their long captivity and do not wish to acknowledge that the Roman scepter now rules over them. It is impossible to speak of the blindness that goes hand in hand with such an intoxication of freedom, which blindly aspires only to political rights. How the first concepts of right and duty have been turned upside down in human judgment following these days of revolution! The troops who refused to violate sacred oaths were branded criminals. By contrast, the label of freedom fighters was given to those who, after the freedoms that had already been granted, raised the weapons of revolution, if not out of a voluntary desire, then from a sad mistake. And how numerous the errors and crudest blindness which to this hour are rampant among young and old and are being carried eagerly by blasphemous lips even into the huts of simple, honorable workers or of the simple farmer. There is to be no more ruler and no more servant, though it is evident to all that nature herself has made the one hand fit to hold the scepter, the other to

---

hold the plow and the spade. The only goal is to unbind, to set free, everything and in all relationships, even though it is obvious to the simplest eye that becoming free does not constitute human happiness, but the ability to use freedom does. If you give freedom to a ten-year-old child and you put it there and say to it: "My child, you are free," is that fortunate for it? Yet it is said over and over that education is supposedly the magic remedy that will teach the use of freedom, even though history has preached a thousand times what a wide abyss is firmly established in man between head and heart, and that the enlightened and educated mind in the service of an evil, godless heart is good for nothing other than showing it the devious ways to gloss over the desires of its heart. Yet the only sufficient means of reshaping the heart of man, religion, is to be expelled from school. While history teaches how in the childhood of humanity religion was the sacred seed from which all education of man grew, while the experience of millennia teaches that the hearts of children are receptive to religion more so than are any others, while Christ, the Savior, proclaims: "Suffer the little children to come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of God," and with this inscription consecrates all schools to be nurseries of the Church, religion is now to be thrown out of the schools like a useless piece of furniture. But free! Free!—Well, that is now the slogan, and with eyes blindfolded people unbind and separate what no one, once the intoxication is over, is perhaps able to bind together again with eyes open. In the beginning there is a good feeling, but the burden must be borne by the end. Believe me when I say that by virtue of this arrogance and blindness alone, a people that strives for no other freedom than civic freedom throws away its true happiness.

Only the free in whose conscience the love of God reigns supreme are truly free. That is what the saying means: he who sins is the servant of sin. Freedom that makes men truly free and happy exists only to the degree that sin dies, and sin can truly die off only where God's love gains power. To serve God is the highest freedom, in the words of the church father Augustine you have uncovered the secret of true freedom. For when is a person free? Must you not say: if nothing hinders him from reaching his true destiny? And if that is freedom in the highest sense—regardless of what political freedom can grant humanity, the deepest reason why we remain servants is not found in this. It is true and obvious that there are also barriers of civic life, wrong institutions and laws of society that bind the powers granted by God instead of unshackling them, that oppress humanity instead of lifting it up. That is why we call it fortunate to win freedom from such civic fetters. If those who are reviled as Pietists—simply because they are Christians—have a correct understanding of the Gospel, truly they are not despisers of freedom; don't you know what Paul told the Corinthians: "Ye are bought with a price; be not ye the servants of men." For a civic community has the task of promoting the fulfillment of human destiny in every way. To that end humans have established states; states are bodies, and in a body each part serves every other part for its existence, its effectiveness, its well-being. Thus a civic sense of community shall help—I say only 'help,' for the good will of each individual is part of it—to provide a livelihood for every person who wants to work, for where the body must suffer privations and languish, the spirit cannot flourish. And the body shall be provided with its necessities, so that the spirit may develop the impulses and powers that God has placed in it, and this too the civic institutions shall promote as best they can. And, finally, since the highest of all impulses planted in us by God is the urge toward God, and all human destiny attains its height in being a man of God, a state can recognize no higher task and no higher goal for itself than to cultivate and plant religion among its citizens. Of course the slogans of freedom of these times which are passed on from mouth to mouth include that about the separation of church and state, and we know that some of the hearts that beat most warmly for Christ ask for it. Now, if it means nothing other than the independence of the church from secular government, we should certainly welcome such a separation, especially the more a church is already strong enough to build itself in the spirit of God. But where it means the indifference of the state toward the expression of the noblest of human instinct, toward religion, it is a betrayal of its noblest tasks. Good citizens should literally fight for this, that the state, which cultivates agriculture and shipping, the arts and sciences, does not forget to cultivate the good that is higher than all of them—religion. And so—let me simply say—the attainment of civic freedom is in fact a good thing where civic institutions are such that they limit and constrain man from

---

achieving his true freedom. But if the height of all human destiny lies in becoming a man of God, O tell me, how shall our true freedom be attained simply by eliminating all external barriers and impediments? What we especially fear is this: that precisely because the gaze is now fixed at no other freedom than that from civic constraints, we lose sight all the more of the freedom that the Son of God wishes to give us in the word of His truth. For a great many people, the speaker's rostrum has already taken the place of the pulpit, popular assemblies have become their religious services, and the state the idol to which they bend their knee. Away with the God above us and the afterlife before us! The people in this state on earth are to be made so comfortable that they no longer need a heaven for salvation. You fools! You sow thistles and seek to harvest figs, you hatch the eggs of basilisks and are surprised when snakes hiss at you? Go on and build your godless state! What is not built by God will come to ruin, though it be built on unshakable foundations. Such a state without the fear of God cannot exist in a healthy way. It lacks humility, and without humility no subordination, and without subordination no order. Where there is no love of God, there is no pure love of humanity, and where there is no love of humanity, there is selfishness. Arrogance and selfishness, wind they have sown, storm they will harvest. Where God's love does not hold sway in man, there sin holds sway, and he who serves sin is the servant of sin. Kings they have chastised with rods, dictators, and despots—driven by arrogance and their own advantage—will take their place and will scourge them with scorpions. Fools, you believe that if only the civic institutions improve, earth will become paradise? This is the foolishness of the person sick with fever who hopes to rid himself of the fire inside by simply being moved to a cooler place. But even if you were to build yourself here on earth a house completely in accordance with your desires, all earthly states and orders are transitory houses; but the human heart cannot be satisfied and filled in a paradise that is transitory. [...]

Source: *A. Tholuck's Ausgewählte Predigten*, edited by Leopold Witte. Gotha: Friedrich Andreas Perthes, 1881, pp. 230–33, 240–43, 273–75, 276–83.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: Excerpts from Two Sermons by Friedrich August Tholuck, “What is Human Reason Worth?” (c. 1840) and “When is Greater Civic Freedom Fortunate for a People?” (1848), published in: *German History in Documents and Images*, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-vormaerz-to-prussian-dominance-1815-1866/ghdi:document-456>> [December 01, 2023].