

# Intellectual Freedom

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THE meaning currently attached to the words "intellectual freedom" is very clearly exemplified in the demand that state schools and state-aided schools should be neutral in their approach to religion, that religious education should be restricted to the giving of factual information about religion, and that no regular school assembly should be religious in character or content. It is argued that no "prejudice" in favor of religion as such, or of any particular religion, should be instilled into children, who must be free to decide for themselves as individuals whether to accept the truth and the authority of religion or not, or, more generally, free to decide what source of truth and what authority, if any, they should accept. This represents the extension to children of an individualistic "freedom of thought" which has long been widely commended as a sign of intellectual maturity in their elders, and scarcely less widely accepted by them and put into practice in the form of "permissiveness" in behavior.

A fairly common cognate expression is "intellectual honesty". People who adopt any particular point of view may not like being told that they are enslaved by prejudice, but they resent even more deeply an accusation of dishonesty. Dishonesty is deliberate; it implies deceit practiced for one's own advantage, even though that deceit be only self-deceit. A factor of morality as well as of intelligence is thereby introduced; animosity is aroused and any discussion drops to a lower level. It is of course a fact that any two people can be as honest to God and to themselves as it is possible for fallible humanity to be, and can still fail to arrive at the same conclusions. That is what people who use this phrase do not seem to accept; if one were to adopt their attitude one would say "do not choose to accept", thereby labeling them as hypocrites, as they so often label people who do not see eye to eye with themselves.

The basic idea is the same, however it may be expressed. It is derived from the principles of scientific research, with their insistence that no conclusion is fully valid until it has been shown to be in conformity with everything that observation can disclose. That, precisely, is what constitutes and characterizes the scientific approach. The great changes resulting from the applications of science to industry have led to the growth of the idea that no approach to truth other than the scientific is valid, and therefore that no conception can be said to represent the truth until it has been checked by observation and deduction from observation. This in turn has led to the calling in question of every assumption, every system, every tradition and every belief that has ever constituted the background of a civilization, and their submission to an investigation which claims to be scientific whether it be really so or not; and when the arrival of that better world which science was to have made possible is disappointingly delayed, the relative stability of the ancient traditions leads to their being regarded as obstacles to progress, and being blamed for the delay. Their elimination or supersession can then be claimed as a liberation of the human spirit.

The assumptions, systems and traditions of the past were based on religion. It constituted

their background even when they were not specifically religious in character. Religion, at least when it is true to itself, postulates that there are truths—and those the most important truths of all—which are neither discoverable nor provable by the faculties of observation and deduction alone, but are accessible only to something that can be called vision or intuition or faith. To assimilate the content of religious faith, which is by definition unquestioning, to purely secular preconceptions and prejudices on the grounds that it is unscientific is therefore to deny the very foundations of religion. The opponents of religion lose no opportunity to do just this, and therewith to class religious faith as servile and unworthy of the newly won independence of mankind. They apply similar derogatory epithets to the more or less unquestioning personal loyalties which have until recently been the basis of the unity of all social groupings, from the family upwards, in every civilization. Those loyalties are derived from the hierarchical aspects of religion and its accompanying traditions; any picture of the situation that takes no account of them is therefore incomplete.

Thus the idea has grown up that the scientific approach can alone properly be said to be intellectual, whereas the approach of religion cannot, and that therefore the tendency of religion is to impede intellectuality. This is not to be wondered at in people for whom the word "intellectuality" implies no more than conformity to the scientific approach; but if the goal of intellectuality is not a better understanding of the origin, nature and end of man and of the universe, what is it? It is just such an understanding that religion claims to offer, and in so far as that claim is justified, religion, very far from impeding intellectuality, is an essential part of it. That is the crux of the whole question, yet how seldom do those who seek to defend religion put the question in that form! One can hardly expect its opponents to do so.

Nevertheless, despite all propaganda for a so-called intellectual freedom, the collectivity, the mass of the people, will always have faith in something and will always follow someone. What philosopher, they ask, what scientist, what President, what demagogue, what quack, what mushroom Messiah will bring them the comfort and the freedom they seek? This is no new phenomenon. The Psalmist says, "There be many that say: who will show us any good?" (Ps. 4. 6); but now, in the virtual absence of an established source of authority, the phenomenon has entered into a new dimension, and the cry "who will show us any good?" has become almost universal. The average mentality, in its search for an authority it need not question, seems instinctively to know itself better than many who seek to guide it seem to know it. The average mentality is by definition mediocre. That is not to its discredit, since mental capacity is and always will be variable, and while that is so the average mentality will be in the middle range of capacity. It is also a mathematical certainty that it will always be represented by a large majority. It is not reasonable to expect it to be able to formulate the great critical decisions on which everything depends, least of all when those decisions involve a discernment between truth and error, as, for instance, when the issue is between religion and anti-religion in all its many forms and disguises. Most really critical decisions are of that order; they demand a wisdom that is profound and not commonplace and is therefore rare. Most people are in fact more or less conscious of their limitations and of their dependence on guidance "from above", whatever the sense in which the word "above" may be understood, so that, although they have been told that authority is now in their hands and that they can and must exercise it through the medium of their votes, they are still always looking for an authority which they can accept without having to think everything out for themselves.

That such an authority existed when it was vested in religion is undeniable. People then

looked for guidance, at least in matters of principle, to the religious hierarchy which was guardian and expositor of the spirit and of the teaching of the founder of their religion. Even kings did so, kings whose temporal power was exercised by divine right; but that right conferred on them their temporal functions only which, in principle if not always in practice, did not impinge on the functions of the spiritual authority; it was indeed the main duty of kings to support and defend that authority. This system did not always work perfectly; no system, however admirable, is proof against the imperfections inherent in human individuals and societies. These imperfections are variable in kind and are seldom seen for what they are by those who manifest them at any particular time. Every age seems to have its own characteristic failings and to be much less aware of them than of the failings of its predecessors. The obvious imperfections which marred the operation of the hierarchical system make it easy to attribute them to the people's acceptance of the authority of religion, and to make insufficient allowances for the variety and extent of human perversity and weakness, especially if one is encouraged to do so by an unquestioning faith in the conception of progressive evolution, with its corollary of the superiority of the present age in every domain, spiritual as well as material.

However, that may be, it is apparent that current problems are too complex, too remote, too specialized, too subtle or too profound to be within the competence of the average mentality, with its enormous numerical preponderance. The best opinions can only be those of an intellectual *élite* composed of people who can see the human situation most penetratingly, most synthetically, most realistically and most dispassionately, and such people are necessarily few. Whoever they may be, they alone can put things in their proper place and can escape from being confused or overwhelmed by the weight of the indefinite multiplicity of facts, and of the opinions derived from them, under which our scientific civilization is laboring. It is obvious that such people's opinions ought to prevail; and perhaps they would, if other people's opinions as to who they are did not differ so widely and change so frequently as they do.

These things are seen, clearly or dimly, by most people; but the necessity of rule by majority vote is an article of faith. The only solution seems to be that the constituent members of society should be educated up to their responsibilities, so that they may vote intelligently. It would seem however that people must on no account be taught *what* to think; that would be to deny them intellectual freedom and would open the way to a tendentious advocacy in the field of religion; they must therefore presumably only be made familiar with as many facts as possible, and then if possible be taught *how* to think; how to assess the relevance of facts, how to relate one to another, and then how to discriminate between the indefinity of ideas and opinions that can be based on them. The practicality of this conception on general grounds is, to say the least of it, questionable; all that need be said here is that it ignores two facts: one is that though the average of intelligence be raised, it is still an average and not an optimum; the other is that the opinions of the most highly (or should one say "expensively"?) educated people differ at least as widely as do the opinions of those less favored. One suspects that what the advocates of education as a panacea are really thinking in most cases, though they may not realize it, is that other people, if they were properly educated, would then think as they themselves do, and then all would be well. This is very natural, we probably all do it to some extent, but it is too simple to be true.

To expect the impossible of the average adult mentality is foolish; it merely leads to the replacement of intelligence by prejudices that are largely emotional in origin, and thence to the passing of authority into the hands of any individual or group that is able to seize it. To expect the impossible of children is even more foolish, and it is at the same time cruel. Children are not

yet equipped to decide what is best for them even in the simple affairs of daily life; how much less so when fundamental assumptions are in question! Let them be encouraged to think by all means, but only on the simplest issues; they can only be happy then the really adult issues do not arise at all for them, but are covered by an established and unquestioned code of behavior. Moreover it is nothing less than the truth that most adults are in a comparable position. Everyone, child or man, needs a framework, an "establishment", to limit the range of his responsibilities to matters that are within his competence. Children need it even more than do their elders, and it is the first duty of their elders to provide it for them—first of their parents, then of their teachers. The rigidity of such a framework can be, and perhaps often has been, carried to excess; but that error is probably less damaging in the end than its opposite. Rigidity or otherwise is a question of degree; much more crucial is the question of the foundation on which the framework is built up. For there will always be a framework, there will always be authority, there will always be an "establishment", good or bad, simply because people cannot get on without it and are always seeking it, whatever the theoretical anarchists may say.

In the past the foundation of the social framework was religion. The authority of religion, firstly in matters of fundamental truth concerning the origin and destiny of man and the direction in which the ultimate good is to be sought, and secondly and consequentially in the field of morality and ethics, used to be regarded as final because it was regarded as of divine origin. If indeed an eternal and all-wise God has revealed Himself to man, it is anything but intelligent to accept as final any authority other than that of this revelation, embodied, as it necessarily is if it is to be handed down from generation to generation, in forms doctrinal, ritual and moral; and the guardianship of these forms is no less necessarily the function of a specially trained and qualified hierarchy. It certainly seems that this conception must either be substantially true or not true at all. If it is true, the fear of the Lord is in truth "the beginning of wisdom" (Ps. 111. 10); it is a first condition without which there can be no real wisdom, and so no well-founded authority, no stable framework within which the inherently limited abilities of humanity can each find its proper place.

Science offers no alternative framework. The best it can offer is wealth in a wide sense of the term, that is to say, the satisfaction of a wide variety of desires. It cannot conceive of any means of achieving that escape from desires we call "contentment" otherwise than through the satisfaction of those desires; it has not yet learnt that there is no limit to the multiplication of desires, nor that, since different people's desires are often mutually incompatible, an indefinite multiplication of desires increases conflict as well as discontent. In addition, the scientific outlook on the origin, nature and destiny of man, varied though it be within certain limits, leads only to two alternative attitudes. The first, which is the more scientific, is one of an ultimate despair arising from the inevitability of terrestrial, solar and cosmic cataclysms. The second appears to take no account of the first, and is less scientific both for that reason and because it is based on nothing more than a rather vague hypothesis; it is a utopianism based on the notion of progressive evolution. The latter has so strong an emotional appeal that it has in practice attained the status of a dogma, unexamined and unquestioned. The first attitude is an ultimate hopelessness, the second is a consolation eagerly grasped at in the prevailing intellectual and social confusion.

The point at issue here is one of truth and not of consolation. The consolations of religion are often spoken of, as if its purpose were to make this life easy. The only real consolation religion offers is however that of making sense of the world, even when the world seems to be

unbearable, and it is no small one. Promises of celestial bliss are always conditional, and they are balanced by promises of hell (to reduce a situation covering a very wide range of possibilities to very simple but nevertheless adequate terms). The notion of a life of pleasure ending in total annihilation can be more "consolatory" than the truth, the rigorous aspects of which are so commonly glossed over.

How then, it will be asked, has it come about that the authority of religion has become so weakened? There are two possible answers. The first is that it is because the principles of religion, which are founded on the conception of divinity and revelation, and on the precedence of the eternal over the temporal, are in themselves false or inadequate. If this answer is right, the matter ends here. The second answer is that it is because human failings have allowed the principles of religion to become overlaid and obscured by conceptions or preoccupations which are confined to the universe of phenomena and thereby tend to exclude the divine and the eternal. If the second answer is right, the decline of the authority of religion must be attributed to a substitution of mutable opinion for immutable principles, or of hypothesis for faith, as the foundation of authority. The substitution has been gradual, but by it the conception and the content of revealed religion has by imperceptible degrees been changed, so that eventually religion has ceased to be a foundation and becomes more and more an optional extra, *mère* and more subjected to the uncertainties of opinion, less and less the accepted background and corrective of opinion. At the heart of this change lies an enfeeblement of the conception of Divinity, whereby Divinity loses the quality of absoluteness from which the uniqueness of the authority of religion is derived, and becomes relativised.

The form of the questions that often arise concerning the nature of Divinity is revealing in this connection. It is usually something like "is there a God?" or "does God exist?" or "is God a reality?" or "what is God like?"; in any such form they are really "leading questions", since they imply that God can properly be considered as one factor in our situation among others; that God "as He is in Himself"— to use an admittedly but inevitably equivocal phrase—can be objectivised distinctively, like the objects of our perceptions and imaginations; that He is not even as real as those objects unless He can be brought into comparison with them; in short, that God is a relativity like everything else we can perceive or know.

It is true that God as Creator can be considered as "relativising Himself" in His creation, in so far as His creation is a manifestation of His qualities and attributes; but that manifestation is not God "as He is in Himself". To suppose that it is so is the error of pantheism. It is no less true that every relativity is a Divine manifestation; the conception of God as "Creator" of all things implies nothing less than that. But God is not a reality; He does not "exist" distinctively as do His manifestations; as Creator He is the origin of all existence and of all distinctive realities; as such He alone is absolute reality, He is Reality Itself. The reality of all things, from the universe in its entirety to the most evanescent of dreams, is relative and more or less fugitive and illusory; God is the one and only absolute reality and absolute certitude; He alone is That which cannot not be. By Him alone the universe is sustained; from Him all things come and to Him all things must return. Woe betide those beings who have any choice in the matter if they fail to prepare themselves for that return. Allowing for the inadequacy of words in this connection, such is the foundation of religion, and nothing less will serve. It is not compatible with compromise of any kind.

Of this order, though not necessarily in this form, is the vision that has inspired and guided mankind since the dawn of time. It is a vision and not a deduction; like physical vision it is

direct, immediate, "concrete" and convincing; it is "supra-rational" in the sense that, as with physical vision, it is not preceded but followed by reasoning. In comparison, how dismally trivial are the basic conceptions of humanism, scientism and secularism, and how unworthy are they of a humanity to which, alone of all creatures, the possibility of a celestial vision has been granted! Uncountable millions have seen things in the light of this celestial vision, always more or less imperfectly because the full blaze of the truth is too strong for the creature, always from within the framework of their religion, guided by the symbol, the spoken word and the radiance of the saints, and in endless different ways, each according to the light that is in him, whether it be bright or dim, white or colored. It is written: "and if that light be darkness, how great is that darkness!" (Matt. 6.23).

If every relativity is a Divine manifestation, anything can in principle be seen as a "symbol" of Divinity, since it is as it were a reflection on the terrestrial plane of some aspect of the Divine nature. Not least among those symbols is man, "made in God's image and likeness". It is this that justifies, and even necessitates, the use of anthropomorphic symbolisms, whether in the form of sculptures or pictures or fables or parables, for the communication of religious truths that are in their essence ineffable. The spiritual potentiality of the symbol may however always become obscured or lost when the outward or literal or "human" significance of the symbol is taken to be its principal or its only significance. The symbol then becomes an "idol". Thus, in the case of anthropomorphic symbols, the conception of Divinity can come to be increasingly assimilated to the outward form of the symbol. In other words, man may tend increasingly to make God in his own image, to "measure" God by his own capacities and characteristics, so that God becomes, not God, but a more or less magnified and particularized image of man. This is an "idolization", not of a graven image, but of the image that man himself is; and it is the ultimate idolatry. Since however this idolatry is not recognized as such by its perpetrators, they will tend to attribute an idolatrous intention to anyone who uses symbols, anthropomorphic or otherwise, with a right intention, especially if the symbols in question are those of a religion which they have been taught to hold in contempt or to dismiss as "primitive". The conception of Divinity—or the celestial vision—would not however be what it is if only one particular symbolical formulation could be used to suggest it. When the Absolute is in question, the creature tied to relativity must be content with whatever point of view is his by nature or by upbringing; what is important is, firstly, that this point of view should be compatible with the truth, and secondly, that it should not be taken to be more than it is.

At the heart of the decadence of religion lies this kind of relativisation of the conception of Divinity, inevitably accompanied by a loss of the celestial vision. The repercussions of this vision, where it exists and whatever form it may assume, are limitless, they cannot but reach into every department of life; its consequences may take a lot of working out, and much may be gained or lost in the process, but the vision itself is of a total simplicity and directness. That is why it is often more accessible to those whose minds are simple and direct than to those whose minds are complex and analytical, and that is why it is accessible to children, and to those who are able to receive it "as a child". It is precisely the opportunity of a glimpse of this vision that so many people are seeking to deny to our children by limiting their contact with religion to mere information concerning the forms it assumes. The final decision however does not rest with man, it rests with God, since vision is a grace, and is therefore neither procurable nor disposable at will. Those who would seek to impede its operation do themselves more harm even than they do to the children.

From the point of view of the militant atheist or agnostic it is good policy to deny participation in religion to children, since, as they know well, religion can only be communicated by participation (always excepting the possibility of a special grace). Information alone, especially if treated as purely historical and conveyed by an agnostic, can be a very good medium for anti-religious propaganda; for no teacher—or parent—can help communicating his own point of view to those he is teaching, whatever the subject of the lesson. Humanism, through at least some of its avowed representatives, has adopted other tactics, and is now claiming equality of status with revealed religion, and has been admitted in that guise by representatives of the ancient religions to some of their discussions. Apparently those representatives cannot see that the ideals of humanism are fundamentally the same as those of atheism, secularism and agnosticism in all their forms, in so far as they idolize man by putting him in the place of God as the first object of all service and all devotion. Alas! how many people who profess to be religious do just that, although to do so is to deny—or to distort beyond recognition—the very vision on which their religion is founded. Religion is infinitely more than a mere system of ideas, philosophical, ethical or otherwise, and its primary function is not one of making this life more agreeable, but of the salvation of souls; its concern with the intemporal takes precedence of, and alone justifies, any concern it may show for the temporal.

What we are in fact witnessing is a dissolution of the sacred traditions. They can properly be called "sacred" because they are derived from revealed religion and are its normal support. It is they that hold a civilization together and give it its distinctive quality. There has never been a stable and coherent civilization constituted on any other foundation—remembering that coherence and stability are necessarily always relative—and there never will be, for the simple reason that humanity is not independent of God, to whom it is linked by revelation and tradition. Without them there is no framework within which freedom, intellectual or otherwise (and itself also necessarily always relative) can be realized without its turning into license and leading to chaos. Tradition however is by no means merely a negative or protective force. In its more important positive and constructive aspect it canalizes thought and activity into ways that are truly profitable, because they lead away from attachment to the world and the *ego* and towards attachment to a spiritual center.

The sacred traditions in all their diversity manifest the unity of the Absolute; they do so most evidently in what may be called their common celestial orientation; the message is always essentially the same though the symbolical "language" that conveys it be diverse. It is the diversity of that language that strikes most forcibly the modern literalistic mentality, thereby clouding or even discrediting the universal message. If however there is that which transcends and comprehends all human experience, that message can evidently not be reduced to any single formulation, although paradoxically the diverse traditional formulations can each suggest it adequately, provided only that those who live within their influence are so attuned to them that they can recognize them as reflecting on the terrestrial plane realities subsisting on a higher plane. Any such recognition is truly intellectual, since it implies a grasp of fundamental truths at least in some degree; and that is precisely what the human intellect is for.

Everything that had a beginning must have an end, and the sacred traditions are no exception. This applies however exclusively to their outward forms, their content being universal and imperishable; it is therefore only from a temporal point of view that they must seem to die. As they split up and dissolve there is less and less to hold society together; in the end nothing remains but secular ideologies, pseudo-traditions of purely human invention, looking earthwards

and not heavenwards, having no principle of unity more stable than collective opinion, and therefore always in opposition one to another as well as to sacred tradition itself.

Is all this mere prejudice? If it is true, no; if it is untrue, yes. Prejudice implies the assertion of an opinion based on an unsure foundation, and the only sure foundation for opinion is truth—the whole truth, and not a partial truth. Supporters of the doctrine of intellectual freedom would limit the conception of truth to truth that can be supported by evidence, and it is an article of faith with them that the only valid evidence in the last analysis is the evidence of the senses. The evidence of the senses, however highly developed it may be, reveals the characteristics of the visible universe and nothing more, and so, unless the visible universe contains its own cause within itself—that is to say, unless it "created itself"—scientific investigation can never elucidate the ultimate reason for anything whatever, and least of all for existence as such. Is it not prejudice or presumption or both to deny that any man can see, or ever has seen, more than the human eye can see, or heard more than the human ear can hear, or known more than can be categorically stated in words; in short, that no man's understanding can be more penetrating or profound than one's own? Or to claim that the scientific approach is the only of science may be true while still representing no more than a partial truth? Admittedly no dialectical proof of the validity of the religious approach is possible; it seems to be forgotten however that this is equally true of the scientific approach. The only "proof" in either case resides in the quality of the vision on which the approach is founded, that is to say, on the "light that is in you", whether that light be bright or dim or even darkness itself.

Even apart from all this, is it practical or realistic or scientific or even common-sensical to suppose that, provided that the average mentality is "intellectually free" in the sense of having no preconceptions—and thus operating as it were *in vacuo*—it will absorb from its environment whatever is good for it and reject whatever is bad, or even that a sufficient majority will do so? This indeed would postulate a faith in human nature that is not supported by the available evidence. The advocates of intellectual freedom are too intelligent to have any such faith; what they really want is that the average intelligence should be "free" to absorb what may be called the "scientific prejudice" that now predominates in their environment.

Must we then admit something that most of our contemporaries are reluctant or unable to admit, namely, that in the past, and in so far as religion was the final authority, a vision more penetrating than ours provided the foundation for authority? If so, it will be said, the people of those times ought to have behaved more wisely than we do, and ought therefore to have been more harmonious and more contented. The common assumption is, not only that they knew less than we do, but also that they endured so much discomfort and hardship that they cannot possibly have been more contented than we are. Contentment is a difficult thing to prove or disprove at a distance; but one who has passed the Psalmist's three-score years and ten can at least assert that people, even poor people, were in general more contented before the 1914-18 war than they are now, although not nearly so well provided with comforts and luxuries. Incidentally they were also more often people of strong individuality, "characters" or "personalities" as we might say; not of course always either virtuous or agreeable, but qualitatively distinctive, not mere drops in an ocean of mediocrity. And they were more content with their lot than we are. What then is the true criterion of contentment? Can it be anything but the acceptance of one's lot, whatever it may be? Or in other words, knowing one's place and fulfilling faithfully whatever function may be associated with it, with a pride in the quality of the product as the principal incentive rather than any tangible reward; knowing, perhaps, that not to



want is better than to have; and above all being intelligent enough not to place one's best hopes in nothing but the satisfactions which a short sojourn in this world can bring. All these things are criteria of contentment, and at the same time they are universal ethical constituents of every religion and tradition.

There are those who think that such criteria of contentment represent something despicable, that they imply a servile submission, a sterile social and intellectual slavery, unworthy of the representatives of an advanced civilization. Let them then propose something better able to bring contentment to a world that is necessarily imperfect because it is other than God, who alone is Perfection; and let it be something more practical than an intellectual vacuum masquerading as freedom. The more remote from God the world becomes the more imperfect it becomes. If the confusion, fear and discontent of our times seem to be reaching towards an extreme, despite a technological development bringing a wealth and a luxury unparalleled in history, why is an exactly coincident decay of religion scarcely ever suggested as a causal factor? To attribute any part of this increase of discontent to an allegedly servile and unintelligent clinging to religion by a diminishing sector of society is a *non-sequitur* of which any normal school-child would be rightly ashamed.

No: anyone who clings to religion is clinging, not to an arbitrary framework of man's devising, but to the only framework that can serve as a starting-point for the realization of an inward freedom that is independent of terrestrial contingencies. Moreover this inward freedom is a truly intellectual freedom in so far as it is founded on an integral vision of truth, on a vision which is unified at its source because it comes from within and is not derived exclusively from the observation of the dispersed and fugitive relativities of this world. An outlook which limits itself in principle or in practice to the things of this world is nothing less than an intellectual bondage, since it denies to men the possibility of an inward freedom which is not only the only real freedom, but is also, whether they know it or not, the very freedom they are always seeking.

Let the Psalmist have the last word. He says, "The Lord is King, be the people never so impatient: He sitteth between the Cherubim, be the earth never so unquiet". (Ps. 99.1).

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

*What is life but the flower or the fruit which falls when ripe, yet ever fears the untimely frost? Once born, there is naught but sorrow; for who is there can escape death? From the first moment of life, the result of passionate love and desire, there is naught but the bodily form transitional as the lightning flash.*

The Dhammapada.