

Fall 2007

Freedom and Independence

Christy Burke C.S.Sp.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons>

 Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Burke, C. (2007). Freedom and Independence. *Spiritan Horizons*, 2 (2). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol2/iss2/7>

This Wellsprings is brought to you for free and open access by Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spiritan Horizons by an authorized editor of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.

The Vision of Francis Libermann

Christy Burke, CSSp.

C. Burke is an Irish Spiritan who worked for many years as a missionary in Kenya. A graduate of University College, Dublin, and the Angelicum, Rome, he obtained his STD in 1977 at the Alfonsianum, Rome, with a thesis on the *Mission Methodology of Francis Libermann*. He taught at both junior and senior seminary level in Kenya and served as chaplain and lecturer at the University of Nairobi. Author of *Morality and Mission: Francis Libermann and Slavery* (1998), Christy is a founder member of WAJIBU, a Kenyan religious and social concerns magazine. He is currently chaplain at the National Rehabilitation Hospital in Dublin, Ireland.

Freedom was not something that was given but something that had to be constantly striven for.

During my first couple of months in Kenya in 1966 I became fascinated by the President and Father of the Nation, as he was called, Jomo Kenyatta. His presence at public rallies was magnificent. He would wave the fly whisk shout ‘HARAMBEE’ and hold the audience spellbound. “*What is the HARAMBEE?*” I asked. “*It is the call that goes out to a group of people when they are trying to move a load to get them to pull together,*” I was told. So this magic word was meant to get the forty or more tribes pulling or shoving together in order to get the country moving.

Another phrase that constantly came from Kenyatta and seemed to evoke a great response was “*Sisi hatukupewa uhuru, tulijinakulia uhuru.*” I knew this phrase before I knew what it meant - “*we were not given freedom, we had to snatch it for ourselves.*” Freedom was not something that was given by Britain, it was something that was won as a result of struggle. “*The struggle has to continue,*” the President would say, “*We have to struggle against the three major obstacles, poverty, illness, and ignorance.*”

Kenya had won its independence less than three years before and faced many problems. I had gone there to teach and to bring Good News. I found that there was a lot to learn. African traditional wisdom had much to offer. Freedom was not something that was given but something that had to be constantly striven for. Independence had to be seen as interdependence.

Recently, reading *The Evangelization of Slaves and Catholic Origins in Eastern Africa* by Paul V. Kollman,¹ the issue of freedom was raised again for me. I thought of that cry of Kenyatta about freedom not being given but fought for. The slaves were not really given freedom, they too had to struggle for it. Kollman, in a number of instances, showed how those who were bought out of slavery by the French Spiritans and settled in “Christian Communities” had to assert their independence, which led to the breakdown of the system. Of particular interest was Kollman’s assertion that the Spiritans who set up and supervised the communities of former slaves between 1860 and 1890 were not true to the missionary thinking of Libermann. I noted with some satisfaction that for Libermann’s ideas Kollman depended largely on Burke 1998!²

EXPERIENCE OF CONSTRAINTS AND FREEDOM

It is interesting to find in the first letter we have from Libermann (to his brother Samson in 1826) that freedom is emphasized. Libermann at this time had moved from his home in Saverne to Metz where he experienced a sense of rejection and loneliness, on the one hand, but a sense of freedom also. *“God has given us the power to think. This should not be left idle but should be put to use.”*³ He has moved from the ghetto of Saverne and the constricted atmosphere of rabbinical studies, he has begun to learn French and read French literature. He has broken a number of taboos and finds satisfaction in the new-found freedom. But he is still searching. He is about to break with his tradition but has not found a place where he can be at home. Freedom to think, he had discovered as something given by God.

*There can be no
'Harambee,' no pulling
together, if the individual
does not belong
somewhere.*

This kind of freedom and free thinking did not last for long. He was alone and lonely. He no longer had family. He was free from the restrictions of the ghetto but not free to be what he wanted to be. There can be no 'Harambee,' no pulling together, if the individual does not belong somewhere. Soon he found a place where he did belong - in the College of St Stanislas. From there he went to the Seminary of St Sulpice, then to Issy, and from there to the Eudist novitiate in Rennes. These changes were dictated more by events than by personal decision. In a sense he was travelling in the dark. His freedom was curtailed by his physical condition as an epileptic and his social condition as a seminarian and cleric in Minor Orders. He was in another ghetto-like environment.

*It would be far better
to have a small united
group than to have a
large assorted mixture.*

In 1839, when giving advice to Le Vasseur and Tisserant who had consulted him about their missionary project to help the slaves, he is adamant that the mission they are considering should be the work of a community:

*No matter how this affair is carried out, you must live in community and have among you a stable manner of life. If there is a spirit of intolerance and pride among you this could destroy the whole project. It would be far better to have a small united group than to have a large assorted mixture.*⁴

Libermann here is supporting the initiative of the two seminarians. They have something worthwhile in view. They are allowed the freedom to follow through with their project. But this must not be a kind of ego-trip. It has to be tested and that requires some social structure. What sociology would recognize later was foreseen by Libermann:

*To have a conversion experience is nothing much. The real thing is to continue taking it seriously, to retain its sense of plausibility; this is where the religious community comes in.*⁵

I suspect that Libermann in the seminary, and especially in the novitiate in Rennes, was quite strict with the seminarians and the novices, and may not have always favored the freedom that he would approve of later. A confidant, Fr Galais, wrote to him in 1841:

*What impeded the success of your ministry in Rennes was that you pushed people beyond the grace they were getting at that time and were too much troubled by their imperfections.*⁶

The novices had to be socialized into a religious community but their freedom had to be respected also.

He probably realized that he had made mistakes and he had learned from having tried to put undue pressure on the novices in leading them in the spiritual life. The novices had to be socialized into a religious community but their freedom had to be respected also. When he took on the missionary apostolate his views changed quite radically. This 'conversion' to mission took place during the last three months of 1839.

A letter that is not typical of Libermann's gentleness and diplomacy, written shortly after he left Rennes, seems to point to recognition of his mistakes – mistakes quite common among spiritual directors. He writes to a director of a seminary, Fr. Feret, a priest of considerable standing in his diocese and who had sought his advice in the past, stressing that the freedom of seminarians has to be respected. The spiritual director ought not to take on the role of the Holy Spirit:

*I am not at all pleased with your methods of directing vocations. It seems you want to set yourself up as the one to decide on vocations. This is not a matter for the director at all. His job is to obey the will of God as this is revealed in the person. The director ought not to try to guide people. That is God's work. Rather he should try to provide the conditions so that God's will is not being opposed. A director with his own ideas, his own particular point of view, his own principles about what should be done, usually resists the working of the Holy Spirit. It is not for you to impose laws or mark out boundaries for Our Lord.*⁷

This letter, I would suspect, shows a definite development in Libermann's thinking. He has moved away from the quasi-ghetto of the seminary and has taken on a catholic and missionary outlook. His horizons have been greatly extended.

SOCIAL FREEDOM AND CONSTRAINTS

Six years later Libermann had come to a certain philosophy regarding superiors and spiritual directors when he writes to a confrere:

...nobody can force another's conscience, mind or will ...

*If consciences could be forced to be pure, wills to be good, minds to accept the truth, then force might be used. Charity towards the neighbor would make this a duty. But nobody can force another's conscience, mind or will in these matters. God did not want to do so, so why should we? God has given people the freedom to know Him and the freedom to oppose Him. We should not want to compel people, nor should we be angry with them when we see that they are bad. We should be concerned, of course, we should show them that we love them and be free and open with them. We should seek to win their friendship and be well disposed to them.*⁸

Fifteen years before this was written, Pope Gregory XVI in his encyclical Mirari Vos had condemned “*the poisonous spring of indifferentism that has flowed from that absurd and erroneous doctrine, or rather delirium, that freedom of conscience is to be claimed and defended for all men.*”⁹ Libermann's thinking was very much more in line with that of Lamennais and Montalambert, whose views were condemned by Pope Gregory. However, in order to get approval for his missionary project Libermann went to this Pope for approval. He was not to be a lone ranger. He belonged to the Church and would not act independently of the authorities. He might disagree with the Pope in what concerns freedom of conscience, but he had to accept the authority of the Pope while not changing his own stance.

Libermann was aware of the difference between the role of government and the Church.

The campaign of Lamennais and his publication *L'Avenir* was for ‘a Free Church in a Free State’ and this was roundly condemned by Mirari Vos. Libermann was aware of the difference between the role of government and the Church. It was not for the Church to dictate to government officials. These had their job to do and they worked with a different mindset. When a missionary in Senegal reported back to Libermann on how he had defended the dignity of the Church by preventing a Commissioner accompanied by Muslim and pagan soldiers from entering a church, Libermann was not impressed:

It would be a great pity if government officials were given the impression that you were opposed to the government. Don't ever get involved in politics. If you have to disagree with something let this be known that it is a matter for your conscience. Avoid acting and speaking with authority, I mean an affected authority, and on no account humiliate

*others. Soldiers normally act on impulse. It is normal for a soldier to use his authority with some degree of arrogance, violence and pride. They have not been trained to acquire evangelical perfection.*¹⁰

Freedom of conscience had to be defended at all times. But the conscience of others had to be respected also. Freedom was not just a matter for the individual; the social situation had to be considered too. If others seemed to be in error one must try and see their point of view. Libermann himself came up against much opposition in Rome, but he did not yield in his determination. While he found support from the Pope and from Cardinal Fransoni, Prefect of Propaganda Fide, he confided in a friend that

*...the most pious and the wisest among the (Roman officials) had a very bad opinion of me. They thought that my project was inspired by ambition and had many other suspicions.*¹¹

Conflict situations arise and intransigence is not the way to deal with them.

The government officials, the military, Roman officials, all had their ways of judging. This had to be taken into account in dealings with them. Conflict situations arise and intransigence is not the way to deal with them.

When the Revolution broke out in Paris in February 1848, the King abdicated and a provisional regime took over power. Slavery was abolished in the French territories and universal suffrage introduced. A very close confidant of Libermann, Gamon, asked what he thought of the new situation. Libermann replied:

*I consider it an act of justice that God has brought about against a decadent dynasty that sought its own good rather than the good of the people entrusted to it. The regime demoralized the people to consolidate its power and moved more and more towards absolute authority. The autocrat of Russia will have his day too. Another category that will be caught up in the storm is that of the bourgeois aristocrats that arrogantly attacked the Church and deprived it of its just rights, who walked over the poor and sold their souls and their country with despicable egoism and for their own interests... You asked if the clergy ought to take part in the elections. They certainly should for the good of the Church and France. Tomorrow morning I am going to register with those who have a right to do so... I know that the elections are not an ecclesiastical affair, but we are no longer in the conditions of the past. The problem with the clergy is that they have remained in the past. The world has gone on ahead."*¹²

The problem with the clergy is that they have remained in the past.

The Revolution of 1848 brought about the abolition of slavery. But freedom could not just be handed out, it had to be won. The colonists would not just lie down under the decree. The black population may not act responsibly:

*The unfortunate white people will feel bitter and many of them won't understand what is happening. Let's hope that the black people will be prudent. They are not accustomed to freedom and they might go to extremes. I hope the white population does not provoke them. If they are provoked try to control them. Their reputation must be protected. They must not be thought of as unworthy of being liberated. Try to get them to preserve peace and dignity, to forgive those who have ill-treated them in the past... teach them to profit from their freedom and to use it with the dignity and nobility of those who are free.*¹³

To be truly free demands a long process.

To be truly free demands a long process. The missionary has to get involved in the process and gradually, by kindness and understanding, help the people to achieve true freedom. What is to be avoided is a situation that might seem to show that the people are not ready for freedom, when, in fact, this freedom is a God-given right to be exercised responsibly.

...education...is a vital element in promoting true liberty and freedom.

The education of the people is a vital element in promoting true liberty and freedom. Writing to a missionary involved in education in 1847, Libermann gives some interesting instructions on how to treat the first batch of students to be brought into a school system:

*It seems to me absolutely essential to help them overcome their weakness of character. Inspire them to have self-respect and help them to understand and appreciate that they are free. Help them to realize the beauty of the freedom and equality which they share with all the children of God. We must try to erase from their minds any idea of inferiority. This leads to weakness of character and debases them in their own estimation.*¹⁴

Libermann's successor as Superior General, Ignatius Schwindenhammer, seems to have taken a totally different approach to the exercise of authority. Koren points out that "he governed by issuing decrees. They came from his office by hundreds, sometimes in solemn form."¹⁵ He obviously did not take to heart what Libermann had written to him in 1849:

The spirit of centralization introduced into ecclesiastical administration I regard as unfortunate. It is a tendency that is damaging the work of God and the general welfare of the

Libermann's philosophy... developed from his experience and from a very deep respect for people.

He tried to harmonize personal charism and the call to unity and communion.

*Church. It is destructive of unity and of its very nature tends to divide into parties that which, according to the institution of Our Lord Jesus Christ, ought to form a united whole. It is clear that Our Lord never wished to have centralization to such a degree.*¹⁶

Libermann's philosophy, if it can be called such, developed from his experience and from a very deep respect for people. As we have seen, freedom, equality, and fraternity were highly prized by him, despite the ravages of the French Revolution of 1789. He campaigned vigorously for the establishment of local Churches with legitimate autonomy but integral parts of the Catholic Church. In a rather uncharacteristic philosophical tone he sets out his views on freedom and independence in a letter to a missionary in 1848:

*Freedom is given to the person by the Creator. Independence is contrary to nature and destructive of all principles of the Christian faith. The violent trend to independence, a product of Protestantism and modern philosophy, has led to violence and the terrible egoism of the last century and even to barbarity. Christianity has come to bring freedom to the world and at the same time to wage war on independence.*¹⁷

Now looking back over the forty years that have passed since the slogans of Kenyatta were laying the foundation of a new nation, I find much can be learned from those who were pioneers in affecting the destiny of many African countries. Missionaries played a significant role in these developments. Libermann spearheaded a movement. He was convinced that the Holy Spirit had called him to the missionary apostolate. With little by way of human resources he responded to the promptings of the Spirit. He tried to harmonize personal charism and the call to unity and communion. He still has a message for us.

Footnotes

¹ Orbis, New York, 2005.

² Burke, C., *Morality and Mission: Francis Libermann and Slavery (1840 – 1850)*, Pauline Publications, Nairobi, 1998.

³ N.D. I, p. 52 (author's translation).

⁴ L.S. IV, p. 8 (author's translation).

⁵ Berger, P. and Luckmann, T., *The Social Construction of Reality*, Anchor, 1967.

⁶ N.D. II, p. 396 (author's translation).

⁷ L.S. II, p. 307 – 318 (author's translation). This is a very long letter and a very important one. It is in response to a remark that Feret was said to have made about Libermann sending men of high caliber to be butchered in Africa.

There is a letter in similar vein to the Superior of the Sisters of Castres. Some members of the Congregation had volunteered for missions abroad and had entered with that understanding. Libermann clearly tells the Superior that she is wrong to prevent them from going. (cf. N.D. IV, pp. 358 – 367)

⁸ N.D. IX, p. 248–249 (author’s translation).

⁹ Quoted in Duffy, E., *Saints and Sinners*, Yale University Press, 1997, p.283.

¹⁰ N.D. IX, p. 239 (author’s translation)

¹¹ Cf. L.S. II, pp.455–460. A letter to a Carthusian monk, Salier, one of Libermann’s close confidants. (author’s translation).

¹² Cf. N.D. X, pp. 145–153 (author’s translation). A few weeks later, when socialism was very much in the air and was seen as a threat to many, he wrote to a confrere: “*Communism is not to be feared. It attacks the accumulation of riches and attempts to displace it. Religion will have to suffer but only for a time from the system itself or from the despotism of some of its leaders. The system is not opposed directly to Christianity.*” (Cf. ND. X, 182 -183, author’s translation).

¹³ N.D. X, pp. 125 – 126 (author’s translation).

¹⁴ Cf. N.D. IX, pp. 359 – 361 (author’s translation).

¹⁵ Koren, H. *To the Ends of the Earth*. Duquesne University Press, 1983, p.305

¹⁶ N.D. XI, p. 97 (author’s translation). The centralization in question mainly concerns the Roman tendency to try to exercise control over the whole Church and not recognize the legitimate autonomy of bishops. It refers to bishops likewise who do not allow freedom of action to others. This is a letter I have not seen quoted. It is not likely to help the cause of Libermann’s beatification!

¹⁷ N.D. X, p. 231 (author’s translation).