



Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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✠ **June 16, 2013** ✠

Postfeast of the Ascension

Holy Fathers of the

First Ecumenical Council

St. Tikhon of Amalthus in Cyprus (425) St. Tikhon of Kaluga (1492)

St. Moses, Co-founder of Optina (1862) St. Germogen of Tobolsk (1918)

ASCENSION TROPARION - Tone 4

THOU HAST ASCENDED IN GLORY,
O CHRIST OUR GOD!
GRANTING JOY TO THY DISCIPLES
BY THE PROMISE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT,
THROUGH THE BLESSING
THEY WERE ASSURED,
THAT THOU ART THE SON OF GOD,
THE REDEEMER OF THE WORLD!

⇒ **Happy Father's Day! ~ Many Years!** To all the fathers of this community
& to all our fathers everywhere! *Memory Eternal!*...to all our departed fathers.

⇒ **Inquirer's Class – Tuesday, June 18, 6:30pm**

✠ **Feast of Pentecost – Next Sunday, June 23 ~ Liturgy & Kneeling Vespers**

✠ **New Temple Groundbreaking Prayer Service to follow Kneeling Vespers!**

Also - Potluck Supper and Baby Shower for Tanya Colvin !

HOMILY ~ About the Children of God

"The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God" (*Romans 8:16*).

He who has the Spirit of God in himself - only he has the witness that he is the child of God. Without the Spirit of God there is no such witness. Not even the entire universe can give this witness. The universe, alone, without the Spirit of God - what else does it witness to us other than that we are its slaves, its victims, which it unmercifully swallows? In essence, the pagans thought that also. The opponents of God today, do they not think likewise? They do think so. For indeed, it is difficult to take that thought away from man who did not recognize the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of God, the Witness of Heaven. The same apostle says: "For you have not received the spirit of bondage" (*Romans 8:15*). What is this spirit of bondage? It is every other spirit except the Spirit of God, Who Christ the Lord sends to those who love Him. The spirit of bondage is the spirit of materialism, the spirit of fortune-telling, the spirit of naturalism, the spirit of pessimism, the spirit of despair, the spirit of vice. Only the Spirit of God is the All Holy Spirit of adoption and freedom.

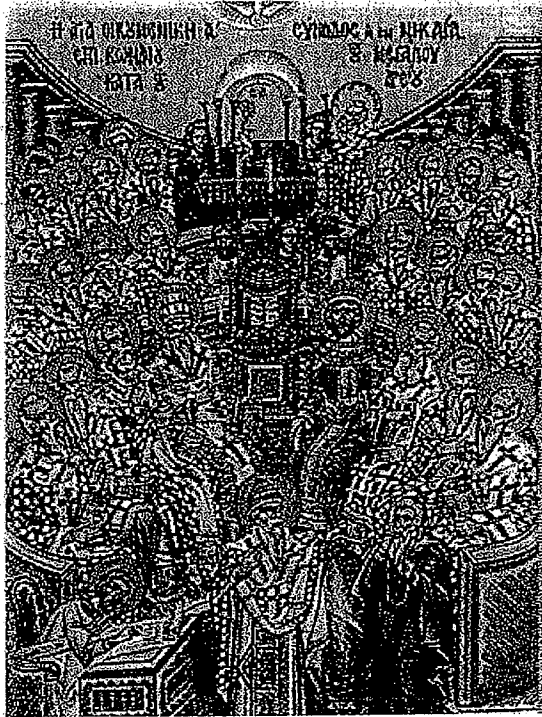
O what happiness, O what peace, O what joy when the Spirit of God cuddles in the cleansed heart of man as a sparrow does in its nest! Then our hope opens hundreds of doors in the prison of the universe and our embrace, wider than the universe, stretches out to the One Who is greater and more merciful than the universe. To Whom? To the Father! And then we cry out: "Abba, Father!" (*Romans 8:15*).

The witness of God, which comes through the eyes, can even lead us to doubt that we are the children of God. But, the witness which comes to us from the heart, from the Spirit of God, does not leave even the slightest doubt. God witnesses about God. What kind of doubt can there be? God the Holy Spirit caresses us in the heart of our very being. Can there be any kind of doubt there? No; for then we know and feel completely confident that God is the Father and we, the children of God. No one's servants, no one's slaves, rather the children of God.

~ St Nikolai Velimirovich

THE FIRST ECUMENICAL COUNCIL

Today's feast, the Commemoration and eulogy of the holy Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council, which was held in Nicaea in 325 in the reign of Constantine the Great — is celebrated every year during the week before Pentecost, or the seventh week after Easter. The First Ecumenical Council or Synod was summoned to remove the confusion which Arius, an Alexandrian priest, had created by his false teaching. He had



been spreading the teaching that Christ was created from God in time, and that He is not the pre-eternal Son of God, equal in being with God the Father. Three hundred and eighteen holy Fathers took part in this Council. It condemned the Arian teaching, and anathematized Arius when he would not repent. This Council also definitively confirmed the Symbol of Faith (the Creed) which was later amplified at the Second Ecumenical Council. Many bishops were present at the First Ecumenical Council, among whom the following stood out: Saint Nicholas of Myra in Lycia, Saint Spyridon, Saint Athanasius the Great, Saint Achillius, Saint Paphnutius, Saint James of Nisibis, Macarius of Jerusalem, Alexander of Alexandria, Eustathius of Antioch, Eusebius of Caesarea, Mitrophanes of Constantinople, John of Persia, Aristarchus of

Armenia and many others from the East. And from the West: Hosius of Cordova, Theophilus the Goth, Cecilianus of Carthage, and others. The most important work of this Council was the confirmation of the Symbol of Faith. The Council also confirmed the time of the celebration of Easter, and prescribed twenty Canons.

In its Canon XX, this holy Ecumenical Council states: "Since there are some persons who kneel in church on Sunday and on the days of Pentecost, with a view to preserving uniformity in all parishes, it has seemed best to the holy Council for prayers to be offered to God while standing."

"...AND HE ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN"

Each time the Nicene Creed is recited, Orthodox Christians proclaim their belief that the Risen Lord has returned to His heavenly home, reunited with the Father. The writers of the Gospels tell us that this blessed event took place 40 days after our Lord's Resurrection. In the presence of His faithful followers, Christ ascended from the Mount of Olives, disappearing from their sight as He rose into the clouds above them.



It is interesting to note that many of the early Christians firmly believed that the Lord's Second Coming would occur during their own lifetime! Some theorize that this was one reason they were so willing to give up their lives in THIS world, for, in their own minds, they strongly felt that the WORLD TO COME was definitely at hand!

Of course, we know that the Lord Himself tells us that "even the angels in heaven do not know when the Son of Man will return in all His glory." Certain Orthodox icons of the Feast of the Ascension are written in such a manner that it is impossible to determine whether Christ is ascending into heaven, or coming to earth again! This captures the profound truth that we are ALREADY living under His reign while awaiting His actual return to establish His Kingdom in its fullness. Just as the Apostles were chided and chastised by the two angels who appeared to them on the Mount of Olives after Christ's departure from their midst, we, too, should not be found "gazing idly up into heaven." It is our task to PREPARE ourselves diligently for His Coming, FILLED with the Spirit as we live lives of RIGHTEOUS in anticipation of His Return.

In Search of Happiness

+ Archbishop Alexander of Buenos Aires

Every one of us wants to be happy. The Lord gave us the earth so we can live happily on it, sort of participating in the glory of God. Yet we constantly hear that our life brings us no joy. Every day we get up, work, get tired; we are bored with our monotonous life. Indeed, if we pay attention, we see that we spend our days taking care of business, being nervous, frustrated, irritated, quarreling over unimportant things and feeling ourselves unhappy, worthless and lonely. We are, indeed, unhappy, for we are slaves of material things; we live like machines and submit to the flow of circumstances. All of our energy is spent on things insignificant that we have today, but may not have tomorrow.

We fail to distinguish between our real life and our temporary life, full of offences, judgment of others and envy. Irritated and despondent, we lose the peace of heart and are immersed into darkness. We don't like anything, friends appear to be enemies, even the light of the sun does not seem to shine for us, and the birds are singing for someone else. When we are in a state like this, the source of our well-being and joy is hidden from us. We don't see anything good in ourselves or in others.

Everything appears bad to us. So, what's the matter? What is it that makes our life miserable? We live with a darkened heart. We mistake this temporary possession of us by the dark forces, this sinful state of our soul, for reality, for our true self. We walk in darkness, but he who walks in darkness stumbles. The evil that infects our soul—irritation, judging of others, anger—makes us contentious. When we interact with others and do not have peace inside, we separate ourselves from them. When we feel separation, we sense that something is wrong; we are unhappy and indeed suffer.

So where is joy in everyday life? How can we enlighten our life? How do we find a path to light? The Lord is the source of light and joy, but the evil one brings darkness upon us. Yet we are slaves of the evil one. The enemy darkens our hearts, and in the dark we have a wrong

perception of life. The darkness of our hearts distorts our lives. We make wrong moves, speak wrong words; we no longer see the true face of another person and make an incorrect judgment about him, taking his temporary condition for his true personality. Mistaking an illusion for reality, we are in a state that leads us to mutual unhappiness and separation. Our ancestors were created sinless. But since the time of the fall, sin has stuck to our nature and keeps us captive. Everything is diluted with sin, and because of sin we lose the joy of life.

So, what do we do? We need to open our eyes. It is possible to achieve well-being. We just need to exert effort to obtain this treasure, which is hidden in ourselves and around us.

We want to live well and happily. But what are we doing for it? Even the morning and evening prayers do not reveal to us our perilous condition. It is imperative that we look into the meaning of prayers, and then we will come to the realization of our sinfulness and of the mercy of God. These prayers determine all our life and activity, they point out to us what we should do and what we ought to avoid.

In our evening and morning prayers we stand before the face of God and examine ourselves. These prayers reveal us to ourselves. It is important that we look in the light of God's wisdom at those few things that we do during the day.

Our souls were created for eternity, yet we do not care for them at all. We are after all kinds of treasure, except for treasure eternal. We are bad business people and undersell our souls. Yet there is nothing more valuable than a soul. We only buy things that are worthless in eternity, but we do not acquire what is going into eternity. This is because we are so confused; all of our priorities are messed up: sin has darkened our understanding of reality. When we genuinely understand all the falsehood and wrongness of our life, then we will acquire what is really needed. Then a human being, enlightened by God, will begin to sort out the confusion of his or her life and strive toward things good and eternal.

The heart is the source of life. The heart is the field of battle between the evil one and God, and this fight is going on constantly. We must always watchfully guard our hearts, understand the attacks of the devil and fight back. Then we will be creative about every moment of our life. We are constantly balancing on the thin line between good and evil. It is up to our will to either force ourselves toward good or do nothing and submit to evil. The devil wants to possess us, but we must resist him. The evil one pushes us toward sin by an appearance of good and encourages us to do what is not good for us. He is offering us sin in the form of happiness.

In every human being there is more good than evil, but this good is mixed with evil. You might ask, "How come? Why is it that we see so much evil in others, a sea of evil?" Yes there is a sea of evil and an ocean of good. Evil easily comes out of us and strikes the eye, but good is hidden, scattered, diluted. Good is modest and humble, evil is not. Evil is darkness, sin, our powerlessness, decay, unhappiness and death. Good is light, unity, power, joy and spiritual life.

Every boring and uneventful day and hour can be illuminated and made joyful, if we take goodness, light and warmth from life. I must have a right view of the life around me. If I direct my inner eye toward light, I will see it. Attention is the greatest act of spiritual life. Struggle, force yourself to find light, and you will see it. It is written, "*Seek and you shall find*" (Matt. 7:7). Our being is two thirds filled with light, but we do not manifest this inner light. Overcoming darkness, we let the light, or the Lord, into our hearts. And this is not passive, but creative. We must be creative. Creating a new life, we can touch the Source of light that illuminates everything.

Good is eternal and, having its origin in God, it strives to return to God. This flow of good toward God is the building of the Kingdom of God on earth. We must make an effort to move toward good, and then good will come to us. I am coming to the Father, and the Father is coming to meet me (Parable of the Prodigal Son). **When we drive the evil one out of our heart, we make there a place for the Lord. The Lord comes in and reigns in the heart, thus**

building up the Kingdom of God. This kingdom is a real good on earth; it is the joy of the Holy Spirit. Then the heavenly life opens up in us, and the ideal becomes real. We pray, "Thy Kingdom come."—this is a real thing. To fight against sin is to be in the light, in holiness that comes from the Holy Spirit, which in turn comes from God, Who is the Source of Light. Therefore Apostle Paul states that "*the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit*" (Rom. 14:17). In such a state a person is united with God and feels joy of the Holy Spirit with all his or her being. This is because a person returns to God, his Father, to the Father's house.

Happiness cannot be achieved by breaking the law of existence, by sin. So, how do we start fighting against sin? It is necessary to find a force that breaks sin and makes it powerless. We need to connect with the source of the power of good, with God, by praying Him to help us, because the forces of evil that possess us render our efforts weak, and without God's help we cannot change our sinful nature.

The Lord is near and He immediately helps those who call upon Him. When in a time of a demonic attack against us we utter a short prayer to God saying, "Lord, help," we call our life from non-existence into existence. Calling to God is an act of will directed to the Source of light. The very thought of turning to God in time of darkness of the heart (annoyance, anger, envy or some other passion) by saying "Lord, help" goes straight from earth to heaven. In response to this prayer we receive help from heaven directly coming into our heart. A beam of light illuminates the darkness and dispels it. **The thought about God is an act of the Holy Spirit inside us.** Our will transitions into a different realm of existence when we call upon God. By directing our word to God the Word we receive Divine light, which serves as a bright star guiding us through our life. This light calls the energy of good to action, and the enlightened person brings life to this dead, indifferent, frozen earth.

The moment of calling upon the name of God is a conduit of light into our soul. It seems to be so insignificant to say, "Lord, help." Yet this short phrase opens to us the heaven with the habitation of God. The heaven radiates light and comes to us, and we become as if immersed into eternity. Eternity itself comes into our life bringing us closer to the source of light. This light gathers inside of us small particles of goodness out of the chaos of good and evil so characteristic of human life. The Lord comes to reign in our hearts building the Kingdom of God, which is joy and peace.

Fighting against sin, we become different: instead of being irritable, we become humble; instead of being stingy, we become generous; instead of being evil, we become good; instead of being cruel in heart, we become merciful; instead of being restless, we become peaceful and focused. We develop new feelings. Our eyes open up. The Holy Spirit begins to act in us, and the fruit of the Spirit is "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance" (Gal. 5:22). Then every person becomes sort of a miracle worker,

because by defeating sin he performs a miracle, revealing God through himself. Then we begin to see that our life is like a mirage.

Without calling upon God and following Him we cannot break out of slavery to material things and circumstances, we are their slaves. We need as frequently as possible to enlighten our everyday life with a beam of Divine light, open up a small window to heaven, so the heavenly light can pour into our hearts. The more enlightened moments we have in our life, the more our life will be enlightened by Divine light. We will see the world in its real beauty; we will see our true being and have the joy of life.

Christianity is not a religion of sadness, but one of joy and bliss. Apostle Paul says, "*Rejoice evermore*" (I Thes. 5:16). This is the beginning of bliss of which it is written, "*Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man: the things which God hath prepared for them that love him*" (I Cor. 2:9).

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The Differences are Important

Fr. John Wallace, St. Nectarios Greek Orthodox Church, Charlotte, NC

When it comes to matters of religion and faith today, many are reluctant to make a clear distinction between one approach and another. They might even shrug and say something like "they're all the same." They seem to believe that the differences between the various faiths do not matter and are unimportant. This is dangerous. All religions are not the same and their differences are important. All religions are not going to the same mountain top. Not all religions even want to go to the mountain top.

For Orthodox Christians, our mountain top, our salvation, is to be with God the Holy Trinity. We believe that the more we are like God, by His grace, the closer we will be to Him. We want to be with God, not just "not in hell." We seek the blessings of His presence, not the avoidance of His absence. We believe that to be like God is to be united to Jesus Christ who came to show us the way to God. We believe that Christ taught the Apostles who founded the Church. We believe the

Church, as the group of faithful believers, received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as guide. We believe the Holy Spirit continues to reside in the Church and leads us today.

To follow another leader or way is to take a different path and risk getting lost. There are many alternate religious paths out there in the world. They are usually based on one person who claims or claimed a special insight or heavenly revelation.

Jesus Christ is unique among major religious figures in that He did not claim to have received divine revelation. He claimed He *is* Divine revelation. He claimed Divinity, to be the Son of God the Father. No other important religious person did this; not Abraham, not Buddha, and not Muhammad. As C.S. Lewis observed the assertion by Christ that He was divine meant that Jesus was either crazy, a liar, or telling the truth. There is no other option. And yet many are unwilling to accept His words, usually blaming the Apostles or the Church for the mistakes of their humanity. Instead, many prefer to go their own way choosing a path they find more desirable.

The Mormon path teaches that man can become divine, a god; perhaps not the God, but a god nonetheless. For them, salvation is not being like God and near Him, it is being a god. It is the difference between "being like" and "being." Orthodoxy believes that through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can in faith and repentance return to the image and likeness of God in which we were created and furthermore, grow from there in holiness and sanctification as we become more and more like God. Even though we may grow very much like Him for all eternity, we will never be God. We believe that trying to be god is self-centered and draws us away from God and each other. This is going in the exact opposite direction from where we want to go.

The path of the Jehovah's Witnesses teaches that only a small select group of true believers will be saved when the world ends. They use this as a tool for recruiting new members essentially saying "Join us or be left out of heaven."

Orthodoxy, on the other hand, says that "God so loved the world," not that He so loved the "few." Salvation is open to all who seek it in truth and love. Spiritual elitism, though perhaps useful as a marketing tool, is self-centered and draws one away from God. Again, they are going in the opposite direction from Orthodoxy which seeks union with God and neighbor.

Religions, like roads, matter because they do not all go in the same direction or lead to the same place. Some are going in the opposite direction from Orthodox Christianity. The differences are important. We thank our good God for giving us His Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ: the Way, the Truth, and the Life!

The Failings of Protestant Evangelism - Fr. Stephen Freeman

The drive for evangelism in its modern form was always somewhat heretical. The Gospel was mutated into a Churchless Christianity, devoid of sacrament and structure. This minimized gospel was easily and quickly adaptable to various cultural needs, but for the same reason, completely vulnerable to cultural forces. Evangelism is a gospel imperative, but the "making of disciples" entails their full enculturation into the Christian faith and not a single experience. Walking the aisle does not make you a Christian – it requires walking the way of the Cross. Mission is equally a gospel imperative, one that the Church has slowly and steadily fulfilled. Some areas where the Church was once planted now require the Church to be replanted. Some places, such as America, where a gospel has been preached, is almost entirely ignorant of the gospel – this will be proclaimed in time by the Church. There is no need for an ecumenical anxiety. Christ's prayer for His disciples to be One has nothing to do with ecumenism and has no reference to present ecclesiology. The Eucharistic community of Christ, the ecclesia, is One and cannot be otherwise. We do not have a failure of ecumenism. We have long had a failure of ecclesiology.

A Christianity that is largely without doctrine and sacrament is a Christianity of slogan and extravaganza. A "Churchless" Christianity is simply, a heresy. It is a strange reading of the New Testament with conclusions as novel as they are effective. It is also destructive of the long term health of the Christian faith. Many who grow tired of its slogans and extravaganza do not turn elsewhere – they turn nowhere. The fastest growing religious group in America is the unchurched.

The truth and richness of the Christian faith is only found in the deep-woven fibers of the historic Church. The life of sacrament, rooted in a thoroughly Christianized network of families, parishes and monasteries, is the normative existence of the Christian faith. This is the faith that converted the Roman Empire and the barbarian ancestors of people like myself. From it grew a great civilization, one that has been challenged and dismantled at many points, but which has yet to disappear.

It is probably the case that only a vibrant fullness of the Christian Church, that is itself sufficiently mature to be the bearer of a Christian ethos, is capable of surviving the onslaught of modern secularism. A Christianity of slogan and style will find itself swept away by more attractive slogans and styles. The promise of God regarding the gates of hell is given only to the Church – not a para-church movement.

Orthodox Christianity, the oldest form of Christianity, is not so anxious. We believe that God is good and that He loves us – He has no desire whatsoever to destroy or punish us. Our "salvation" is our healing from the damage done within us by sin. We understand sin to be our alienation from God – a life-path towards death. God desires life for us – and He alone is the Lord and Giver of life. But because God cares more for us than we do for ourselves – we should not be so anxious – as if He were waiting for us to pass a test.

– Fr. Stephen Freeman

Warm and Cold

Sometimes in nature a warm, healthful wind blows, pleasantly and lightly, permeating and coming in contact with the body, and the sky is serene; whilst at other times a cold wind blows, one feels, somehow, distressed and feverish, the wind pierces to the very bones and affects the body unpleasantly, the earth and sky are darkened; or else sometimes the state of the atmosphere is warm and warmth-giving, and at other times cold, benumbing.

It is likewise in the spiritual life: sometimes our soul is surrounded and penetrated by a light, pleasant, warmth-giving, vivifying breath, we feel ourselves happy and tranquil; whilst at others our heart is touched by a heavy, deathly breath, accompanied by complete spiritual darkness. The first state proceeds from the Spirit of God, the second from the Devil. It is necessary to accustom ourselves to everything: as in the first case, not to grow self-conceited, so in the last, not to fall into despondency, into despair, but to fervently have recourse to God. ~ **St. John of Kronstadt**

Scientists and the Fathers of the Church

By Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos

The Fathers of the Church studied the creation of the cosmos with a theological purpose. They renounced both materialism and metaphysics. Thus, the two philosophical orientations “in the beginning was matter” and “in the beginning was the idea” was contrasted with “in the beginning was the Logos”. God is a person, He is love, because love is an uncreated energy of God. Therefore God is neither an idea nor matter. Later they say that God created the cosmos “out of nothing”, “without the existence of matter” but with His word which is His uncreated energy, which creates created beings.

Contemporary scientists are divided into two categories in interpreting new discoveries. In the first category are those who accept that some power outside of space and time created the cosmos. In the second category are the agnostics and atheists who interpret the creation of the cosmos without believing in the existence of God....

According to the Fathers, scientists can study the cosmos, examine what it is, how it happened, but they cannot enter into other areas, such as the existence or non-existence of God. Besides, the work of science is one thing and the work of Orthodox theologians is another and there should be no conflict or confusion between them. Science investigates the created world, matter, atoms, molecules, protons, particles, cells, genes, etc., while theology, which is empirical, deals with how man can know the person of God with His uncreated energies. Science progresses in various discoveries which should benefit and not harm people, and Orthodox theology gives answers to the spiritual matters of man and how he can acquire unconditional love towards God and his fellow man, at a time not only when the “death of God” is preached, but also the “death of one’s neighbor”.

Finally, no matter how many discoveries science makes, man hungers and thirsts for a personal God, for unconditional love, inner peace and freedom, for spiritual completeness. He wants to know what exists beyond creation, what happens after death, what is eternal life, etc.

Man is not an unreasonable being, but develops culture, nurtures spiritual principles, searches for God and seeks to experience His love. Hence, science is trying to give an explanation for creation and the establishment of the cosmos, but that which has great significance is who created the cosmos and man. God is not an irrational force, nor a blissful being, but a person. He is the Logos who created the cosmos and within all of creation there are “logoi of being”, the energy of God.

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G.K. Chesterton (early 20th century):

We have of course seen just lately the most dramatic exit of great material scientists from the camp of Materialism. It was Eddington I think, who used the phrase that **the universe seems to be more like a great thought than a great machine**: and Dr. Whitney as reported, has declared **that there is no rational description of the ultimate cosmic motion except the Will of God**. But it is the perishing of the other things, at least as much as the persistence of the one thing, that has left us at last face to face with the ancient religion of our fathers. The thing once called free thought has come finally to threaten everything that is free. It denies personal freedom in denying free will and the human power of choice. It threatens civic freedom with a plague of hygienic and psychological quackeries; spreading over the land such a network of pseudo-scientific nonsense as free citizens have never yet endured in history.