

Libertas philosophandi, *English Style*

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The present essay offers a brief survey of the travails of philosophical liberty in England during the first few decades of the seventeenth century, culminating with the foundation of the Royal Society in 1660. Focusing on metaphors used by the proponents of the new science it seeks to flesh out the extent to which the invocation of a purported papal cultural tyranny – especially in the aftermath of the condemnations of heliocentrism in 1616, and of Galileo in 1633 – enabled English savants to promote, and to legitimate, their own enterprise.

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No sooner did John Rainolds commence lecturing in 1573 on Aristotle's *Rhetoric* at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, than he promised his auditors some fireworks. In the course of expounding on the treatise, "it will often be necessary for me to disagree with learned men. I wish to make it clear from the beginning that I have no desire for controversy, but only for the truth". As 'a publike Teacher', the young master of arts declared, he was enjoined "to deliver sound and true opinions, not errors in the expounding of Authors". Consequently, Rainolds reiterated in a subsequent lecture, he felt "bound to disagree with whomever [he] must for the sake of truth"; "Plato is a friend, Socrates is a friend, and Aristotle is a friend, but the dearest of all friends is the truth. For this reason, I shall freely speak what I truly think". And while mindful of the corrosive effects of controversy, Rainolds preferred to follow Chrysostom: "Never prefer concord to truth"¹.

What has such seeming commitment to a freedom of opinion to do with Spinoza's vaunted *Libertas philosophandi*? Very little, most historians and philosophers would shrug. The vision of the hero-

¹ J. Rainolds, *John Rainolds's Oxford Lectures on Aristotle's Rhetoric*, trans. Lawrence D. Green, Newark, NJ, University of Delaware Press, 1986, pp. 103, 125, 313. John Rainolds, *An Excellent Oration of That Late Famously Learned John Rainolds, D.D. And Lecturer of the Greek Tongue in Oxford Very Usefull for All Such as Affect the Studies of Logick and Philosophie, and Admire Profane Learning*, trans. John Leycester, London, Thomas Harper for Thomas Slater and William Aderton, 1638, p. 3.