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SCIENCE, founded in 1880, is published each Friday by the American Association for the Advancement of Science at Business Press, Lancaster, Pa. Entered at the Lancaster, Pa., Post Office as second class matter under the Act of 3 March 1879.

SCIENCE is indexed in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* and in the *Industrial Arts Index*.

Editorial and personnel-placement correspondence should be addressed to SCIENCE, 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5, D.C. Manuscripts should be typed with double spacing and submitted in duplicate. The AAAS assumes no responsibility for the safety of manuscripts or for the opinions expressed by contributors. For detailed suggestions on the preparation of manuscripts, book reviews, and illustrations, see *Science* 125, 16 (4 Jan. 1957).

Display-advertising correspondence should be addressed to SCIENCE, Room 740, 11 West 42 St., New York 36, N.Y.

Change of address notification should be sent to 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5, D.C., 4 weeks in advance. If possible, furnish an address stencil label from a recent issue. Be sure to give both old and new addresses, including zone numbers, if any.

Annual subscriptions: \$7.50; foreign postage, \$1; Canadian postage, 50¢. Single copies, 25¢. Special rates to members of the AAAS. Cable address: Advancesci, Washington.

Rates effective 1 January 1958: \$8.50; foreign postage, \$1.50; Canadian postage, 75¢. Single copies, 35¢.



Science and Freedom

In the 325 years since the ordeal of Galileo the physical sciences have been emancipated from political and ecclesiastical domination and, as the globe-encircling sputniks testify, can thrive even in the shadow of the State's adoption of dialectical materialism as its official philosophy. The life sciences, a century since Darwin, still stand embroiled, still struggle for the necessary freedom to grow untrammelled by common prejudice and official disfavor. Yet in the end all science must stand free or become the slave of the State, the prostitute of material desires. For scientists there can, therefore, be no greater dedication than to the defense of their freedom of thought and of choice of investigation.

The Congress for Cultural Freedom in a conference in Hamburg in 1953 undertook to arouse men to the defense of scientific freedom. That effort has been continued since 1953 through the untiring work of the International Committee on Science and Freedom, of which Michael Polanyi is chairman. This committee has published to date nine bulletins, of which the last three deal respectively with "Self-government in Modern British Universities," "Hungary, October, 1956," and "Apartheid, the Threat to South Africa's Universities." Each of these is engrossing reading.

The academic freedom of the universities of the Western World and the freedom of science are inextricably interwoven. In fact, the latter may be considered a very branch of the former. No scientist can really afford to be unconcerned with threats to the academic freedom of any university, whether in his own land or abroad.

The Nazi doctrines of racial superiority are not dead. In one semblance or another they rear themselves wherever men of one dominant social group fear themselves threatened by the numbers and growing enlightenment of a racially different element. Apartheid preaches very plausibly the theory of the equal but separate development of white and nonwhite people in residence, in labor, in education. Yet it is plain to see that actually it is a barefaced effort of the whites to keep the black and colored people of South Africa in servitude and educational inequality. Education will not be entrusted to the natives themselves to develop in independence, but will be gently governed for them by a (white) Minister of Native Affairs, whose viewpoint is sufficiently expressed in his own words: "What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice? That is quite absurd. . . . Education must train and teach people in accordance with their opportunities in life, according to the sphere in which they live. . . . Good racial relations cannot exist when the education is given under the control of people who create wrong expectations on the part of the Native himself, expectations which clash with the possibilities in this country."

The immediate threat is the exclusion, from the five "open universities" which now admit them, of all nonwhite students, under a Separate University Education Bill which will probably be passed early in 1958. Can there be any question that in the long run the freedom of mankind—and the freedom of science along with it—is more imperiled by the defeats of Little Rock and Pretoria than by the success of sputnik?—BENTLEY GLASS.