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CONSERVATION OF NATIONAL IDEALS

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VI

CHRISTIAN CONSERVATION

Rev. Charles L. Thompson, D. D

The Christian church serves the best and highest interests of the American Republic. First, because it protects and fosters those institutions which have proved a blessing to the Republic. Second, because it keeps before the people the true idea with regard to national greatness and national strength.—DAVID GREGG, D. D.

VI

CHRISTIAN CONSERVATION

THE preceding chapters have dealt with the conservation of various American ideals. It is the aim of this closing chapter to trace the development of those ideals in our national life and to show how far our history has made for their conservation. To be true to one's ideals, that, for a man or a people, is the condition of progress. The well-worn aphorism of hitching one's wagon to a star suggests the value of trying to realize one's best visions. If they lose their hold upon us, if they cease to have power to command us, we become the easy prey of whatever adverse influences may beset us. This, so true of the individual, is equally true of the nation.

What, now, have been our national stars? What principles, or ideals, may we discover in the beginnings of our history which it is worth our while, as a people, to guard and transmit? We shall best learn by glancing for a moment at the nerve ideas which we have as a national heritage. Whence did we come, and what freighted our ships besides the pioneer men and women?

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Unless principles enter into a nation's life it remains a wilderness. And these principles are easily discerned. The one great reason for a nation on these shores—expressed in most general terms—is civil and religious liberty. That is a foundation granite enough for any superstructure. Since the Hebrew Commonwealth no other people has had so distinct an origin. The underlying principles came to us from European battle-fields for intellectual and religious freedom. They came from Holland, France and Great Britain. They are traceable farther back to Geneva—the fertile source of modern ideas of popular education and democratic government. Those principles became the groundwork of our national life and they are mighty enough to shape to noble ends every phase and reach of that life. The seeds brought in the *Mayflower* have germinal power enough to produce a harvest of noble conduct to the end of time.

Ideals imply personality. We shall understand them better if we glance at the type of manhood in which our early history was expressed. The colonial stock was the winnowing of the best life of Europe—men not unworthy to claim Calvin and Knox and their compeers as their intellectual and spiritual fathers. It is much the fashion in these broad days to sneer at men of the Calvin type. In our liberal mental

latitudes we conceive of the Puritan as narrow and intolerant. But as the Genevese reformer, in that vigour of manhood which our easy-going days can scarcely comprehend, made new channels for a world's thinking, so the Puritans by a fine severity smote rocks in the wilderness, that life-giving streams might fertilize the land.

But we shall mistake if, in our appreciation of Puritan character, we fail to recognize the other elements which entered into our composite nationality. The Dutch, the Huguenots, the Germans, the Scotch and the Irish gave us leaders worthy of their sires who on Holland flats, on French fields, on German hills and Scottish moors fought for those eternal principles we cherish to-day. We speak of the strain that is put on our country now by the diversity of our population. But diversity has characterized us ever—has made us what we are—and may be trusted to make us what we should be.

What, now, are some of the ideals brought hither and cherished here by the strong characters to which we look back as our most precious heritage?

1. The ideal of a theocratic government—a government which should recognize God only as the supreme head of the nation. The sovereign personality of God was stamped on our beginnings. Though sometimes denied, the records of it are abundant and explicit. We read it not

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only in the prayers of the *Mayflower* and the religion of the Jamestown colonists, but emphatically in public documents and addresses in early colonial history. John Adams, when the fate of the Declaration of Independence hung in the balance of debate, declared: "It is the will of heaven that Britain and America should be sundered forever." Jefferson writing the Declaration traced American destiny to "the laws of Nature and Nature's God," and the "pledge of life, fortune and sacred honour" is made sacred by "firm reliance on Divine Providence." More distinctly still, the Constitution of the thirteen states made the idea of God the corner-stone, some of them declaring essential "a belief in God, the Creator and Governor of the universe." If ever shall come the time when the idea of God shall be dim in the popular thought, when the tonic of it shall be less in our theology, and the reason for it fade from our philosophy, we shall need only to uncover colonial history to see it shine again—the one supreme conception in our early national thinking.

Perhaps we are coming on times when this ideal of the government of God in human affairs needs to be conserved. We are in these days writing man so large—his capacity and his achievements—that we are in danger of losing the nerve thought of a divine presence, which alone gives highest potency to man's thinking or



THE PILGRIMS GOING TO CHURCH

"The sovereign personality of God . . . the one supreme conception in our early national thinking"



doing. We can afford, as a people, to be wholly tolerant of philosophic and theological vagaries that do not touch this nerve. Indeed, we cannot afford not to be thus tolerant. But if we would keep the stream of our national life clear for highest thinking and noblest action, there must be no shading of the idea of God as the source of our life, and our only sufficient guide in all that concerns national well-being. We shall lose our wisdom if we leave God out of our counsels. We shall lose our victories of every sort if we dethrone Him from His place in our affairs. What God was to Israel when He flamed before their armies—what He has been in every great march of human progress—that must He be to us, if we are to keep any leadership in the movements of the world. Let us hold the vigour of that theocratic ideal. A system of philosophy, a cult, must never be allowed to take the place of the august conception of a personal God living, ruling, inspiring, in the whole range of a nation's life.

2. Another original ideal which we must conserve is that of a pure democracy. Any reading of colonial history makes plain the fact that the people coming hither from whatever monarchical and aristocratic phase of European life, came hither to establish government on the basis of human brotherhood. This broad republicanism was indeed truer in some parts of

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the country than others, but at least it was everywhere theoretically recognized. In New England it was absolutely acknowledged. Rank was "but the guinea's stamp," and that stamp counted for little. The Puritans, the Quakers, and the Scotch pretty nearly justified Tennyson's lines :

" Kind hearts are more than coronets,
And simple faith than Norman blood."

For a hundred years the early simplicity of life remained ; masters and servants sat at the same table. Now we have great corporations and masses, and the personal element is lost in the organization. Common dangers and hopes bound the early settlers in bonds which nothing could break ; differences of character, not of position, were the separating factors of life. And that fact was the corner-stone of free government ; that made possible the Declaration of Independence and all that it implied.

That sense of a common brotherhood, independent of position or outward circumstances, was the lesson the early colonists learned, not from their life in the lands whence they came, but from the gospel which was their most precious heritage. Sociology is the hackneyed word of to-day. But it is no new science. It is as old as the New Testament, as old as the teachings of Jesus, as old as the Ten Commandments.

The social ideal, founded on a pure democracy, was held not indeed as a science, but as a working basis of life by the early settlers.

In the stratifications of modern life we have gone away from that ideal. It is this fact forced upon us by our social and economic conditions that makes the call for socialism. The times are out of joint. The people are not having their full chance. Greed and social ambition are opening chasms between classes, and something must be done to fill them or bridge them. This is the cry that fills the air. It is idle to ignore or to minimize it. Nor, on the other hand, is it necessary to maintain that only a social and economic revolution can cure these ills. It is possible to recover and conserve the idea we have partly lost. And we may do it by going back to the same democratic Book which was the guide of our fathers and furnished for them the true philosophy of life.

The church—even when most democratic—has not realized her sociological mission. For several reasons her ear has not been acute to the call of the humanities. In the early centuries asceticism shut men away from each other. Ceremonialism in the Middle Ages smothered the higher ethical sentiments. Later, dogmatism that laid supreme stress on technical definitions of doctrine was hostile to a fair view of society and its claims. Biblical sciences were not far

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enough advanced to give us a true view of the Bible as largely a sociological book, meant to teach us our duty to our brother. And because the church has not rightly conceived that broad mission, other cults have risen to hear the call of humanity and to do for mankind what the church was ordained to do. Socialism is the blind giant feeling around for temple pillars whereby to pull down society and bring in a new day of brotherhood. But it will not come that way. It will come on the old road that has been opened for all reforms.

Along that path the Christian church in these days is making rapid progress. An intense and unbiblical individualism came in with the Middle Ages and the rise of monasticism. Then the most serious endeavour of pious souls was to get away from the world. The world was bad. Individual salvation must come by renouncing it. And the reformation theology did not wholly free itself from this false conception. Individualism still reigned even after Luther and Calvin had set the world free from the trammels of monastic doctrine. But in these latter days we are witnessing a marked return to Christ's ideal of a kingdom on earth and to such inter-relations of people as will bring that kingdom. We are beginning to realize that individual salvation can come completely only through social regeneration, that there is no true keeping of the first

table of the law, love of God, without keeping also the second table, which is love to our brother—and that not merely from the altruistic motive of helping our brother, but from a conception of the profound truth that our own progress towards heaven is somewhat conditioned on our taking another with us. Into the higher ranges of life, here or elsewhere, there is no such thing as going alone. This democratic ideal of the social mission of the church is now seriously challenging the attention of all thoughtful people. This is evidenced by the number of books bearing on the social message and the social program of Christianity, that are coming from the presses of all Christian lands, and by the organizations, inside and outside the Christian church, whose stress is on this fundamental obligation of brotherhood. The World Congress of Races, held in London to consider in its world-wide bearing this democratic principle, is one of the largest and most philosophic movements, and the most significant of the trend of the times.

In the same direction, and with programs for definite results, are the missionary plans of many denominations to abolish class distinctions in the church, and to bring classes of people now widely separated by social or economic barriers, into the fellowship of a common brotherhood. More depends on the success of these movements than we readily recognize. The democratic ideal of

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the Bible, more or less reflected in our early national history, must come back and become the guiding star of the Christian church. The Gospel has the only branch that sweetens the waters of a bitter popular discontent. If the church fails in her mission here, she fails at the most critical point in her history.

3. Another ideal of colonial history is that of a broad base for the national life. It is expressed not in any science, or philosophy, but in the composition of the early population. It is often said that our colonial life was single, that a pure Anglo-Saxon stock first settled the country, and in confirmation we are pointed to New England. Those who deplore, or antagonize, the immigration of to-day lay stress on what is supposed to have been the purity of our original stock. But nothing could be farther from the truth. Our first experiment of republican government was an experiment of a mixture of people. Our earliest settlements, made indeed for conquest more than for permanence, beginning in Florida and extending westward to the Pacific, were of Spanish origin. The first attempt at permanent settlement was that of the French Huguenots, in Florida. Then came French colonists along the St. Lawrence, and pushing west to the Great Lakes and the Mississippi Valley.

At the same time the English came in at the mouth of the James River and established the first

permanent Protestant mission in America. Immediately after, the Pilgrims—another strain of English stock—made Plymouth Bay immortal. Later in the seventeenth century, the Irish came into the Chesapeake and settled Maryland. The Swedes made homes in Delaware. The Germans came up the Delaware. The Dutch came up the Hudson.

It is said that as early as 1664 eighteen languages were represented among the few colonists on Manhattan Island. Indeed, the multiplying of languages on that island has not kept pace with the growth of the population. There were more languages spoken in 1664, in proportion to the number of people, than now in 1911. Those, then, who oppose immigration cannot base their argument on colonial times. The history of the country is a history of immigrations. In the whole story of the world there has been nothing like it. Immigration varies in the passing of time only in its volume and breadth. And, in either, in itself considered, there is no occasion for great alarm.

More nations have gone to pieces on the rock of their homogeneity than on any other. Herbert Spencer long ago said, "It may be reasonably held that both because of its size and the heterogeneity of its components, the American nation will be a long time in evolving its ultimate form, but that its ultimate form will be high."

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He adds that the mixture of populations will produce a more powerful type of man than has hitherto existed. His conclusion rests on "biological truth." The great European nations have grown out of varieties.

But biological truth must not be trusted for too much. The mere mingling of races has not always been salutary. The incursions of Asiatic hordes into Eastern Europe had little educational and no moral effect. The people of China, with their immense eastward immigration far back in the twilight of history, remained stationary for ages. The barbarians who invaded Rome were not saved by its culture, but, later, by the missionary activity of the church; and even Great Britain, so far as one can see, had to this day been a battle-field of mutually destructive clans if St. Augustine and his followers had not crossed the Channel. In the light of history the regeneration of America cannot be trusted to social evolution.

Nor is it wise to ignore the peril which comes with the fine possibility. It is that of which not the politician, but the Christian, should take note. The church is the great harmonizer because it supplants the superstitions and negations of people with the religion which alone has divine authority and power fitted to all human conditions. In this view, the Home Missionary problems become intensely interesting alike to the

Christian and the patriot. Most of these people coming to us bring with them either a religion, or a denial of religion, which must be modified or overcome by the Gospel. How various are the forms and how wise must be the teachings and plans by which they are met!

And here comes the question raised by the important difference between earlier and present immigration. The early was mainly Protestant, almost wholly Christian, at least in name. To found a pure faith and to enjoy freedom of conscience in devotion to it, this was the reason for nearly all colonial immigration. The reasons now are different and various. In some measure our incoming aliens are fleeing from persecution. But as a broad statement, the people who come to us come for political or economic reasons. There is, as a rule, an economic push on the other side of the sea and an economic pull on this side. When there are hard times in Europe the people are loosened and ready to move. When there are good times here, the pull becomes determinative. The amount of immigration is thus determined by conditions abroad and at home. A study of immigration charts for past decades reveals the fact that good times here have swelled the stream, while hard times here have at once checked its flow.

And as such hard times have recently been felt not so much in Great Britain and Germany as in

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Eastern and Southern Europe, the character of our immigration has radically changed.

This fact constitutes the new challenge to the Christian church. The immigration from Italy was practically nothing a half century ago. Last year it reached the total of 223,453. The immigration from Hungary, begun fifty years ago, was a negligible quantity for decades. Last year it reached the total of 123,519. The incoming from Russia was practically nothing fifty years ago. Last year it amounted to 189,377. These figures preach their own loud sermon. These three countries alone sent us last year 536,349. It would be both un-American and un-Christian to prohibit these people from coming to us : un-American because against the whole trend of our history and against our fundamental national principles ; un-Christian because God is thus giving us a great chance to do foreign missionary work on our own soil. The " open door " and the " adversaries " (or difficulties) were alike alluring to Paul when he went to Ephesus. They should be to us.

The state here has a great and grave problem. It is to distribute (so far as the state can do it) this vast mass, that assimilation shall be swifter and more complete. It is to provide adequate school facilities that illiteracy may disappear. It is to provide employment that abject and depressing poverty may disappear. It is to guard our gates against the entrance of people who, in

spite of all the country could do, would be a menace to our peace and prosperity.

And here comes the opportunity of the Christian church. It is true that vast numbers of our aliens are not from the lands which made our greatness. They are a wholly different stock. They are loaded down with inheritances that are strangers to the best things among us. But the church has been mightiest when she has taken account, not of her fears, but of the Gospel that is the power of God.

Nor is the field a wholly discouraging one. The labours of the last decade in this difficult field have yielded often surprising harvests. Many of those who come to us are as glad to be freed from ecclesiastical as from political tyranny. They are not the "offscouring of the earth." Many of them cherish noble aspirations for themselves and their children. They will respond to the hand of help and to the voice of Christian love. Let us have a dignified confidence in the power of the Gospel and in the force of American institutions. Neither has failed in the past, nor will in the future. A great financier has made us familiar with the phrase, "undigested securities." These foreigners are our "undigested securities." On our ability to digest them depend the health and moral action of a large part of the body politic. What we need is not more bars to keep foreigners out of

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our land, but more labourers to work with them and teach them how to gather the harvest of American and Christian liberty.

4. Another ideal that pleads for conservation is the ideal of country life and the country church. Centres of population are the nation's second thought. The original is the country community, and in many ways it is the nation's best estate. How beautiful, notwithstanding the perils that often beset it, was the rural life of New England or Virginia communities! The stories based on that life constitute some of our most alluring romances. The simplicity, sincerity, neighbourliness and friendliness of it furnish continual themes for novelist and poet. Of that life the church was the centre. It was the vivific force that gave meaning and beauty to all the transactions of the community. It supplied the standard of civic as well as personal virtue, of corporate as well as individual enterprise.

But that ideal has lost some of its power. The measure and meaning of life are now taken from the city. There are erected the standards that govern men. There is the race, and there are the awards. As a result, the country community is decimated. The vigour of it has gone away. The church is left desolate, or depleted and dispirited. Though it is still true that most of the successful men in business, or in the professions, were country boys, they cannot now

have the kind of a start they had in the country during the last century. Lacking the start, they may not make their race on so high a level.

But one of the good signs of the times is the return to country ideals. True, the last census discloses the fact that the trend is still city-ward. But there is a reaction, though at present it shows but as a small eddy on the margin of the river's current. At last the attention of the church is drawn to the importance of the little church among the hills. Modern science has invested the country with a new charm. It has taken away its loneliness. It has brought it into the neighbourhood of the world. The trolley and the automobile, the telephone and the free delivery go everywhere; and the village and the town are side by side.

To fit the country for this new day which is surely coming, certain agencies that the church can furnish, or stimulate, are the immediate demand. Rural life must be made rich and strong, and the country church, more than any other force, can achieve this result. The church should be the community's best intellectual stimulus. She has not always been so. But she has the character of intellectual freedom. Free to seek truth in every realm, she touches the loftiest themes and represents the highest intellectual progress of the world. Let her take her place in

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this kind of leadership. It is her privilege to open the library, establish reading circles, and organize clubs for periodical literature that the best of current thinking may be in every home. In the quaint little town of Wimbourne, in the south of England, there is a venerable abbey, one of whose treasures is a chained library. Every book is chain-bound to its case, mute witness of the time when learning was not free. There are no chained libraries now. No community should be bookless that has a Christian church. The city need no longer have a great advantage in this regard.

So, also, in the matter of schools. With all our pedagogical advantages, country schools have not advanced in proportion. In many regions they have so lamentably declined that illiteracy is on the increase. Little money and few pupils in "the little red schoolhouse" result in underpaid and incompetent teachers, short terms and poor schooling. These things have brought the ignorance and demoralization that exist in some of our mountain regions. It is for the church to help us to get back to the ideals of that day when men fit to be university professors taught the country, or village, schools.

The church must take a hand in Christianizing the social life of the country. Its moral level is often of the worst. The social conditions often minister to the things that are debasing. In the

smaller communities the church has a special chance to recover some of the lost ideals. There life is less artificial and more democratic. Neighbourliness is not abolished, as it is in the city. The church can become the centre of the social life, as once she was. She can hold out a social appeal for all ages and conditions.

A country church properly equipped and inspired with a genuine spirit of Christian democracy will be the mightiest enemy to the saloon and the lounging place, and to that emptiness and stupidity of life which is almost as bad. By all the pull of our material life the country community tends to be heavy, inert, and content with low, or commonplace, ideas. Multitudes never get much above the question, "What shall we eat and drink?" There is no fine living on that level. What shall give the community a push towards better things, towards charity and kindness and purity and sacrifice? Not business; that pulls only on its own level. Not society; that often pulls down. The church is the best agency to draw men away from trifling and unworthy pursuits into the realm of high moral endeavour and enjoyment. Is life in many rural communities commonplace and heavy and uninspiring? There is no sufficient reason for it in any neighbourhood—no matter how remote—where God has a company of His people who have in their keeping the secret of high ideals

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and fine aspirations, who have the standards and hopes and joys of the kingdom of God.

5. Another of the ideals that were the glory of our colonial history was that of the free school system. Without it, the Republic could not long exist, since intelligence lies at the basis of self-government. Its origin was significant. The historian says :

“The common school system was derived from Geneva, the work of John Calvin; was carried by John Knox into Scotland, and so became the property of the English-speaking nations.” The historian might have added that it was taken from Geneva to Holland and Sweden. In Sweden, in 1637, it is said that not a single peasant child was unable to read and write. At the outbreak of its war with Spain, the peasants of Holland could read and write well, and in the first Synod of Dort, 1574, it was directed that “the servants of the church obtain from trustees in every locality permission for the appointment of schoolmasters, and an order for their compensation as in the past.”

Holland probably held preëminence for schools supported by the government. “A land,” says Motley, “where every child went to school, where almost every individual inhabitant could read and write; where even the middle classes were proficient in mathematics and the classics, and could speak two or more modern languages.”

From this it would follow, almost as a matter of course, that among the first free schools supported by the government in this country were those established by the Dutch settlers of New York.

In 1642 it was the law of Puritan New England that "none of the brethren shall suffer so much barbarism in their families as not to teach their children and apprentices so much learning as may enable them to perfectly read the English tongue." And in 1647 it was ordered in all Puritan colonies "to the end that learning may not be buried in the graves of our forefathers, that every township, after the Lord has increased them to the number of fifty householders, shall appoint one to teach all children to read and write, and when they shall have increased to the number of one hundred families, they shall set up a grammar school, the master thereof being able to instruct the youths so far as they may be fitted for the university."

The eminence of New England lies originally, not in her great colleges (though her liberality to higher education has always been conspicuous), but in her common schools. Connecticut, under the lead of Hooker, has the honour of first securing free schools supported by government.

We cannot be said to have failed in this ideal. And yet, it has not been fully realized. The common school system is everywhere recognized.

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Finely equipped schools, academies, colleges and universities abound, yet in certain parts of the country the percentage of illiteracy is large, and all over the land it is far above that of some European countries. Thus the illiteracy of Germany, as of Sweden, is only one one-hundredth per cent. That of the United States, in the census of 1900, was ten and seven-tenths per cent. The largest percentage of illiteracy is in the Southern states, accounted for in part by the large Negro population; the smallest is in the Central West—Nebraska, Iowa and Kansas, in the order named, having the least. That the New England states and New York and Pennsylvania, after their centuries of education, should still show large illiteracy, is due, in large measure—perhaps entirely—to the large immigration into those states.

But the general fact remains that our educational ideals need to be extended. In certain Southern and Western states the percentage of illiteracy is large among the native white population, in North Carolina nearly twenty per cent., in Tennessee and South Carolina, nearly fifteen per cent. With the Negro population it ranges from thirty-nine to sixty per cent. Until our illiteracy approaches somewhat the percentage of the best European countries we cannot count ourselves free from the dangers which in a republic, even more than in a monarchy, are invited

by popular ignorance. Important, therefore, among the American ideals to be conserved is that of a universal education, sufficient to enable all the people to have an intelligent share in the affairs of government.

6. One more ideal, and the most important, can only be touched. It is that without which all others will fail of their best effect—the higher moral and spiritual life.

Christian principles and ideals come to their potency only when they are incarnate in Christian service. The church, at last, will conserve her ideals only by living them. There is no “cold storage” for ideals. Their place is in the markets of the world. So shall they be conserved.