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## The Aims and Operations of The National Reform Association.

BY THE REV. GEORGE HILL, D.D. 1883

THE popular idea in reference to the National Reform Association, in the minds of those who know little about it except what they have learned from its enemies, is that it is composed of a few fanatical and comparatively obscure individuals who think that the introduction of a form of words into the Constitution of the United States, acknowledging God and Christ and the Bible, would cure all the ills to which the body politic is subject.

There are two fallacies in this popular belief: (1.) That those who adhere to the principles of the Association are few and their influence insignificant. If this were true, it would prove nothing as to the importance of the principles which they advocate or as to its ultimate success. All great movements, especially all great moral movements, have had small beginnings. But this belief is not true. This movement numbers its adherents by thousands, many of them, among the most conspicuous and influential names in the country, both in Church and State.

(2.) A second fallacy in this popular estimate is that those who embrace these principles are silly enough to suppose that there is any magical power in mere words, wherever written, to bless and save the nation. They do seek to secure a religious amendment to the Constitution; but they seek it only as an expression of the mind and conscience and heart of the people of the nation; and to this end they earnestly employ such means as they judge suitable to enlighten the public mind, and arouse the public conscience, and move the public will to suitable action in the premises. They seek the

amendment moreover, not as an ultimate end, but as a means to a higher end, *i. e.*, the permanent establishment and security of the life of the nation as a Christian nation.

They feel that the great question before us as a people, paramount to all others, is this: Shall our nation continue to be Christian, or shall it become Atheistic? They feel that this is a question of life or death to the nation, and that it is one therefore to which no lover of his country ought to be indifferent. They are firmly persuaded that if the secular or atheistic theory of government prevails, and our laws and institutions are made to conform to it, the nation will perish. It is for *this* reason they seek such an amendment of the Constitution as will place this catastrophe beyond the region of possibility, and plant all the Christian features of our Government on a firm and permanent foundation.

The aim of the Association is clearly set forth in the second Article of its Constitution: "The object of this Society shall be to maintain existing Christian features in the American Government, and to secure such an amendment to the Constitution of the United States as will indicate that this is a Christian nation, and place all the Christian laws, institutions and usages of our government on an undeniable legal basis in the fundamental law of the land.

For the purpose of bringing about such a change of public sentiment as will demand and make operative the proposed amendment, the means chiefly depended upon by the Society are the holding of conventions for the discussion of the questions involved, the circulation of tracts and other documents, and the use of the newspaper press, especially the CHRISTIAN STATESMAN, a paper devoted to the advocacy of the principles of the Association.

I have been thus brief in the statement of the aims and methods of the Association because, I suppose it is expected of me that I will chiefly devote the time allotted to me to such defence of these aims as I may be able to present.

As to the *general* end aimed at, I presume we are all agreed. Certainly none of the members of this Presbytery are opposed to the preservation of those characteristics of our Government which are distinctively Christian; those laws, institutions and usages which are derived from the Word of God, and which recognize the fact that we are a Christian people. Such are the laws in reference to the Sabbath, to marriage, incest and divorce, to blasphemy, the civil oath, the rights of property, &c. Such usages as the appointment of chaplains in the army, navy, and legislative bodies the ap-

pointment of days of thanksgiving and fasting, and the reading of the Bible in the common schools.

We are all agreed that these should be retained and perpetuated. We are agreed that those who seek the repeal of these laws and the discontinuance of these usages, be they atheists, infidels, Romanists, secularists, communists, or what not, ought to be resisted by all proper means. The only question probably in reference to which there is likely to be any difference of opinion among us is the specific question as to the proposed amendment of the Constitution.

There are many excellent Christian people who do not as yet see either the duty or utility—either the obligation or the desirableness—of such an amendment. Herein those who are identified with the National Reform Association differ from them. They are moved by the deep conviction that it is both the duty and the interest of this nation to make some recognition and acknowledgement, in its written Constitution, of God as the Author of Civil Government, of Jesus Christ as the Ruler of nations, and of the Bible as of Supreme Authority over nations as well as individuals. Personally I have no more clear and profound conviction on any subject connected with national life and obligation, than I have on this. I can only indicate briefly a few of the reasons for this conviction. In order to save words, I shall speak only of acknowledging God in the Constitution. Such an acknowledgement, to be what it ought to be, must bring with it both the other points in the proposed amendment. "He that honoreth not the Son, honoreth not the Father." He that reverences God must respect the will of God, as made known in his Word.

(I.) I argue the duty of a suitable recognition of God in the Constitution from the fact that such a recognition is *right* in itself. That is abstractly considered, apart from other considerations which complicate the question as a practical one, it is right that God should be so acknowledged.

Several distinct thoughts bear on the establishment of this point.

(1.) Men, as individuals, are bound to recognise God in *all* their relations and duties. The Scriptural command is, "In *all* thy ways acknowledge Him." This is a *universal* obligation; binding not only on Christians, but on all. It is an obligation growing out of men's relation to God as his creatures, and in no respect relaxed as to its binding force by their refusal to recognise it. It is an obligation which does not cease to be binding when men associate together for the purpose of establishing a Government. "It is absurd

to conceive of a man being *personally* a servant of God, and yet whenever he comes to act as a voter, as a legislator, or as a magistrate, being indifferent to all the obligations growing out of his relations to God."

What is he bound to do in *this matter* individually as a person, he is equally bound to do collectively as a citizen. A nation is but an aggregation of "the people acting in their organic capacity through the machinery of law," and if all the people composing the nation are bound to acknowledge God *in all their ways* they are bound to do it in their organic capacity, as well as in their individual.

(2.) The right and duty of the nation to acknowledge God may be argued from the fact that nations are as much creatures of God as individuals. It is His prerogative to build and to plant, to pluck up and to break down. "There is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God." Shall the thing formed contemptuously ignore, or proudly refuse to recognise him who formed it? Was not this the sin of Belshazzar and Babylon? "The God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways thou hast not glorified." And was it not for this sin that the hand came forth and "this writing was written: *Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin?*"

Nations *as such* have not only a *life* of their own which they have derived from God, they have also a *separate personality*, and are *morally responsible*. They are subjects of God's moral government, and as such are objects of the Divine approbation or disapprobation. He deals with them as moral agents; prospering them or punishing them according to their character and acts. The whole history of the world illustrates and proves this. Egypt and Chaldaea, Media and Persia, Greece and Rome, as well as Judah and Israel are witnesses for God, to this great truth. The great crime of all these nations, and of every other nation that has ever lived and perished, was that they would not acknowledge and serve Jehovah. By an unchangeable decree God has set his Son upon the throne of the universe, and by an inexorable law it comes to pass that "The nation and kingdom that will not serve Him shall perish; yea all those kingdoms shall be utterly wasted."

(3.) If a nation is to acknowledge God *at all*, the most reasonable and proper place to do it is in the fundamental law, which is, so to speak, the very charter of its existence, the public declaration of what manner of person or thing it is, and whence it derives its right to be. I think that most Christian men, even those who do not favor the present movement for an amendment of the Constitu-

tion, regard the omission of any acknowledgement of God in that instrument as a serious defect. Many of them sincerely wish it had been there from the first. It is on other grounds than opposition to the inherent right and desirableness of such an acknowledgement that they oppose it. I feel sure that the Christian instinct of the nation, a nation which is pre-eminently the child of God, will sooner or later, feel ashamed of the omission of even His name from the instrument which is the organic law of our being; and I feel sure also that the Christian conscience of the nation will, when fully aroused, deeply repent of it. God grant that this repentance may not be delayed until it shall be enforced by the Divine judgments, as was our repentance for the sin of slavery.

Especially is the duty of acknowledging God in our Constitution urgent, inasmuch as men have taken occasion from the absence of any such acknowledgement in it, to proclaim to the world that we are not a Christian nation; that our Government is no more Christian than Mohammedan or Pagan. This is done not only by infidels and secularists; it has been done also by official representatives of the nation, by men on the judicial bench, by eminent editors, and even by distinguished clergymen. It is high time the nation should cast off this reproach. Let its Christian character be written and emblazoned where it may be known and read of all men.

11. This naturally suggests a second argument in favor of the proposed change. Such a change in our Constitution is necessary to bring it into harmony with our national character and life.

This nation was in its origin, has been all along, and is still, in an important sense, a Christian nation. This does not mean, of course that all the people are Christians, in the evangelical sense of the word. It refers only to the general character of the principles, laws, institutions, and usages of the nation as such, and to the predominating, formative and controlling influence of a majority of the people. These have been from the first, and are still Christian. This is a point which I have not time here to prove and illustrate.

The principles, character and usages to which I have referred constitute, so speak, the *unwritten* constitution of the Government. They form the basis of the laws and institutions which have grown up among us. They have given character and shape to our social, business, and civil life. These all have marked Christian characteristics.

But the *written* Constitution has not a distinctively Christian feature it. It has not even a *theistic* feature. It is as silent as the

grave concerning the existence of any being better or greater than man. It recognizes no obligation to, or dependence on, any power above "We, the people" who "ordain and establish this Constitution." Its silent yet mighty influence, as an educating power, is therefore directly in the face of the historic character and traditional training of the great mass of the people. And I need not stop to say how rapid, in recent years, the drift has been away from this historic character and early training. Nor need I insist on the importance of conforming the written to the unwritten Constitution. Its desirableness, nay, its necessity, must be obvious to every reflecting mind. A very high legal authority has said, "If the people would insure peace with progress, they *must* by amendments cause the former to conform substantially to the latter."

To effect this, and thus to turn the current of the written Constitution into the same channel with that of the unwritten, is one of the aims of the National Reform Association. They desire to make it a power for the conservation of our national Christian life, instead of a power for its destruction.

III. This leads me to name a third argument in favor of the proposed amendment. It is necessary as a bulwark or breakwater to save all that we hold most dear and sacred in our national institutions and habits from being swept away and destroyed by the floods of atheism, infidelity, and irreligion which are coming in upon us.

The most potent argument in the mouths of the enemies of all the Christian features of our Government is that the laws and usages which recognize the Christian religion, or are in any way derived from the Christian Scriptures, are *unconstitutional*. On this ground they demand the repeal of these laws and the discontinuance of these usages.

It must be admitted that so far as the written Constitution is concerned they are logically right. And the influence of this argument is being more and more felt and yielded to every day, by our politicians, and even by our Courts. Already some of the courts (notably the Supreme Court of California and the Supreme Court of Ohio) have declared laws against the desecration of the Sabbath, and those in favor of reading the Bible in the public schools, unconstitutional.

The tendency of the times, is, more and more, to bring every law and usage to the test of the written Constitution. This tendency will necessarily increase, as the nation grows older, and when this principle is universally adopted and carried out, there can be no

doubt at all as to what will become of all the Christian features of our Government. They will be swept away with the besom of destruction. Nothing can save them but so altering the Constitution as to give those features a plain and sure legal basis in that instrument.

The enemies of Christianity mean to make a clean sweep. They make no concealment of their purpose. They have openly proclaimed and published to the world their "demands." These include the *removal* of all chaplains from all positions over which any department of the Government has control, the *prohibition* of the use of the Bible in all public schools, the *cessation* of public thanksgivings and fasts by the recommendation of any one in authority, the *abolition* of the judicial oath in courts and in all other departments of the Government, the *repeal* of all laws enforcing the observance of the Sabbath, and the *abrogation* of all laws looking to the enforcement of Christian morality, including those in reference to marriage and divorce, and those against profanity, blasphemy, obscenity, and licentiousness.

Such are the "Demands of Liberalism," and such is the logical outcome of the purely secular theory of government. The only possible safeguard against this wholesale destruction of every thing sacred in our national life is some such amendment of the national Constitution as that proposed by the Reform Association. This would "place all the Christian laws, institutions and usages of our Government on an undeniable legal basis in the fundamental law of the land," and so preserve them for the enjoyment of generations yet to come.

It is said by those who are indifferent to the proposed change, that we have gotten along for a hundred years without any of these disastrous results following this defect in the Constitution; and why not for a hundred years more? Such a query implies a total ignoring of the changed conditions of society in our country, and a fatal ignorance or disregard of the determined energy and combined efforts of the secular or atheistic theory of Government. As has been shown, their purpose is to uproot and destroy every thing that is distinctively Christian in our national life, and they are laboring to accomplish this purpose with an energy worthy of a better cause.

The century to come is not to be a simple repetition of the century past. It cannot be; and if it could be, it is not desirable. The drift has been away from the foundations of the fathers, and (as has already been said) nothing has promoted this drift more

than the influence of this conspicuous absence of any thing distinctively Christian in our Constitution. We want the drift of the hundred years to come in the other direction, and we want the aid of the Constitution in effecting this change.

There is no avoiding this issue if we would. It is vain to cry, "Peace, peace." The conflict is upon us, and is every day thickening. The enemies of religion are growing more bold and defiant. Nothing will satisfy them but such a thorough change in all the laws, institutions, and usages of the nation as shall conform all these to their Godless theory of Civil Government. This they claim to be their right under the Constitution as it now is.

Are we prepared for such a change as this in our laws and usages, so as to conform them to our Constitution? If not, the only alternative is a change in our Constitution, so as to conform it to our laws and usages. There must be a change either in the *written* or in the *unwritten* Constitution of the country, and all men must sooner or later choose between these alternatives. Things *cannot* rest where they are. "There is an irrepressible conflict" between the Christian and Secular theory of Government, just as much as there was between freedom and slavery. There can be no harmony between them. One or the other must be dominant. On which side are *you*?

Men argue that because we are already a Christian nation, therefore no change in the Constitution is necessary to perpetuate that character. Sensible men did not so reason, after the war, in reference to freedom. They did not say, Slavery is abolished; we are already a free nation, there is therefore no need of an amendment of the Constitution, declaring that "neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall ever exist in the United States." On the contrary the people fastened this mighty change wrought in the sentiment and life of the nation in the Constitution, like a nail in a sure place; and subsequently they clinched in with two other amendments, that it might remain there forever.

If the nation is wise, it will do the same thing in reference to the Christian features of our Government.

Before closing, I would like to refer to some of the objections to this movement. I can only name two. They are however the principal ones.

1. Such an amendment would be a virtual union of Church and State, or would lead to it.

This objection overlooks the distinction between the *Church* as an ecclesiastical organization, and *religion* as an animating prin-



iple. No one in all this broad land, so far as I know, and least of all the advocates of this amendment, is in favor of a union of the State with any ecclesiastical organization. The friends of this movement would resist it unto blood. They are found in every denomination of professing Christians in the country, and their very jealousy of each other, as members of different organizations, if no higher motive, will forever render any such union utterly impossible. It is only a scare-crow held up by the enemies of the National Reform movement.

The possession however of a national *religion* is quite a different affair. Indeed, while the union of Church and State is to be deprecated, as among the greatest evils to both, there are strong grounds or the belief that a nation without a religion is an impossibility. Some of the profoundest thinkers of the world have affirmed this substantially. That no *free* government can be permanent without religion seems self-evident. "Let it be simply asked," says General Washington in his Farewell Address, "where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation deserts the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principles." And if national morality perish, the foundations are destroyed, and the whole structure hastens to destruction. The world has had one example of the attempt to establish an Atheistic nation, a government without religion; and that one example is enough for all time.

2. It is objected that an acknowledgement of God in the Constitution is inconsistent with the rights of conscience. I answer

(1.) It would be no more inconsistent with these rights in the national Constitution than similar acknowledgements in State Constitutions. The tender consciences of atheists and infidels have experienced no great uneasiness by reason of the fact that our State Constitutions express dependence on God and thankfulness to Him. They might perhaps survive the change if our National Constitution was made to do the same.

(2.) The same objection lies against many of the laws now on our statute books; the laws, for instance, in reference to the Sabbath, marriage, and Christian morality generally. The same reason which demands the exclusion of the name of God from the Constitution, demands with equal force the abrogation of these laws. Are Christian and moral men prepared to give these up? If Infidels, Atheists, Jews

and Pagans have managed to live under these laws, they also, perhaps, may be able to get on under an amended Constitution, conformed to these laws.

(3.) Where is to be the limit of this cry of the rights of conscience?

Many of the people of the South conscientiously believe that it is their God-given right to hold the black man in bondage, for their own and the black man's good; especially their own. They are therefore conscientiously opposed to the Thirteenth Amendment. Did the nation heed the cry of their consciences? I trow not.

Many Mormons religiously believe (at least they profess to) that polygamy is a divine institution, and they feel their consciences greatly aggrieved by the laws forbidding a man to have more than one wife. What then? Must these laws be repealed or be allowed to become a "dead letter?" So the argument from the rights of conscience would require. The fact is, the argument proves too much, and, by so doing, proves nothing. "The liberty of individuals can never be asserted against the rights of the whole people or the nation."

(4.) After all, this is only a question of whose conscience shall suffer, the Atheist's or the Christian's, the conscience of the *few*, or the conscience of the *many*.

A change in our laws to conform them to our Constitution as it now is, would trample on and crush the conscientious convictions of a large majority of the people of this land. Government is impossible; society is impossible, if no law or usage must be adopted, against which some individual may think his conscience rebels. Is this to be a Government of the minority?

(5.) Finally if any cannot conscientiously live under a Christian government, they can conscientiously go elsewhere, and live where things suit them better.

The great majority of those who are opposed to the Christian features of our Government are foreigners. Not one in a hundred of them, before they came here knew anything about our *written* Constitution, but nearly all of them knew that we were pre-eminently a Christian people; that our laws and usages, many of them, were even of the strictest Puritanical type. Knowing this they came; and, as honorable men, they are bound to accept the situation. We did not invite them here to change our laws, but to accept our hospitality, and to enjoy with us the blessings of Christian freedom. Shall they, while yet they are scarcely warm in our house, begin to pull down the pillars of the edifice which shelters them? And shall we timidly look on, and say, "Dear men, they are conscientious?"