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# What Has the Episcopal Church Done for America?

**Nelson R. Burr**

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*I Joy, deare Mother, when I view  
Thy perfect lineaments, and hue . . .  
Beautie in thee takes up her place,  
And dates her letters from thy face, . . .  
A fine aspect in fit array,  
Neither too mean. nor yet too gay. . . .*

GEORGE HERBERT



# What Has the Episcopal Church Done for America?

## I.

### THE COLONIAL PERIOD

THE Church undoubtedly was represented by chaplains of the early expeditions from England to the New World, before 1600. Her clergy accompanied the English colony that flourished briefly on the coast of North Carolina from 1585 to 1587 and saw the birth of the first English child in this country and the pioneer English-speaking mission to the red men. She appeared again at the founding of Jamestown in 1607 and by her sacraments comforted the settlers in loneliness, disease and death. Before the Puritan tradition had struck root in New England, Episcopalians had laid the foundations of the Virginian culture that was at least equally potent in moulding the ideals and destinies of the nation. The New England town meetings

*Anglican Church - Am.*

were schools of republicanism, but not less so were the Virginia parish vestry and that nursery of statesmen, the House of Burgesses, which grew from the meeting of delegates at the church of old Jamestown in 1619. The tradition of self-government of Anglican Virginia was woven into the development of our constitution and so contributed to our American "middle way" of moderate democracy.

The Anglican Church, apparently unfitted for a new world by her traditions as an established national religion, adapted herself to evangelizing the western frontier of Europe, by founding the first great Christian missionary organization of the non-Roman churches. This was the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, generally called the S. P. G., established in 1701. The journey of its pioneer missionary, George Keith, from New Hampshire to North Carolina in 1702-4, is a neglected religious epic of America. It revived the faith of thousands who had almost forgotten the Lord's song in a strange land, and many echoed the surprise of a convert, that "the priests had such good doctrine." For seventy-five years the "Venerable Society" showed the

deep missionary zeal of the Anglican Church. From the forests of the Kennebec to the Carolina plantations the missionaries laboured to preserve religious dignity in frontier regions threatening to decline into barbarity. The charity schoolmasters gave to thousands of poor children, servants and slaves the blessing of elementary instruction in religion and letters. They helped to plant in America the growing European interest in mass education that led finally to the "public school crusade," and their admission of Indians and Negroes aided missions and social welfare among those neglected people.

The Church eagerly promoted higher education. Her parish grammar schools, especially in Virginia, were nurseries of the colleges and of the generous culture of many planters and professional men. Episcopalians founded in 1693 the first college south of New England, William and Mary, whose long succession of illustrious alumni, in the service of church and state, proved the foresight of its principal founder—James Blair, the Bishop of London's Commissary in Virginia—that the Old Dominion could do more than "make tobacco." To Bray, the

Maryland Commissary, was due the first library movement in America, which established many parish libraries. The educational enthusiasm of Episcopalians also established King's College (now Columbia University) in New York City in 1754, and contributed heavily to the undenominational College of Philadelphia, chartered in 1755, now the University of Pennsylvania. All these schools gave Episcopalian alumni to the band of statesmen who signed the Declaration of Independence and drafted the constitutions of the nation and the American Episcopal Church.

Episcopalians also took an important part in the zeal for good works that swept over the colonies from the religious "awakening" of the 1740's and finally inspired many later causes, such as the anti-slavery crusade, the temperance movement, and prison reform. In the larger towns the Church supported societies for relief of the poor, hospitals and homes for widows and orphans. Churchmen were interested in the first American orphanage, George Whitefield's "Bethesda," which still exists, in Georgia. Closely associated with this movement was a rebirth of

interest in the red man and the negro, which was promoted also by saintly leaders in other churches, like the Quakers Benezet and Woolman, the Presbyterian Brainerd brothers, and the Moravian Brethren. The S. P. G. mission to the Mohawks became a permanent influence among the tribes in Canada and our own West. The missionaries and schoolmasters in several colonies insisted upon conversion and education of the Negro, sometimes even against the opposition of jealous masters. One of the most notable early Negro schools flourished in Charleston, South Carolina, under the auspices of the Bishop of London's Commissary, the colonial legislature and the S. P. G.

A persistent misconception of the colonial Episcopal Church pictures it as an exclusive club of the "upper crust." While elegant churches of the seaboard were often crowded with "the rich and well born," there were many others "up country," as plain as the Puritan meeting-house, where the missionary, who might be the son of a Yankee farmer or minister, preached to a congregation of yeomen and tradesmen. In New York City, as today, the Church firmly

held the love of many labourers and servants, and in Virginia the majority of the people east of the mountains looked up to the Church as their mother. Masses of plain people, brought up by the sober and beautiful language and sound doctrines of the Prayer Book, carried their religion into other churches when their ancient mother, enfeebled and impoverished by revolution, could not tend them. The greatest of Protestant churches, the Methodist, owed not only its early leaders but also many of its members to Anglican training.

The Church was a powerful influence also in mingling and Americanizing the various nationalities poured into the mould of a new nation. Far from being an exclusively English sect, it embraced descendants of the Dutch pioneers in New York and New Jersey; Pennsylvania Swedes, Welsh and Germans; French Protestants in New York and South Carolina; and many Scotch and Irish in several colonies. This growing mixture foretold the present variety of national strains in many Episcopal churches in great cities and cultivated among our early leaders a friendliness towards church unity in prin-

cipals now beginning to bear fruit. Relations with the Lutherans were especially close and the Church even had friends among more extreme Protestants who still cherished the Prayer Book as

The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth.\*

## II.

### THE CHURCH IN THE NEW NATION

**I**N the revolutionary days that tried men's souls, by no means all Episcopalians were tempered as Tory political tools riveting the royalist yoke upon their country's neck. The fact that the majority of New England Puritans were Revolutionists naturally tended to drive the Episcopalian minority into the opposite camp, as was often the case also in New York and New Jersey. South of the Delaware, especially in Maryland, Virginia and the Carolinas, many clergy and most laymen were pronounced Patriots. The Virginia and South Carolina laymen were in the vanguard, although usually

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\* George Herbert.

lacking the intense bitterness of some other Revolutionists. Only one of our earliest bishops—Samuel Seabury of Connecticut—was an outstanding Loyalist or “Tory,” and he accepted independence with good grace and went to Scotland to be consecrated rather than dream of taking the oath of allegiance required of bishops in the English established church. Firm Patriots were most of the others, above all the venerable White, first Bishop of Pennsylvania and for many years presiding bishop of the American Church.

To him, more than to anyone else, the Episcopal Church owes its constitution and its adjustment to the new political order. As a highly respected chaplain of Congress and rector of Christ Church, Philadelphia, he advised Patriot leaders and by personal influence and character more than offset the opposing element in the Church. Later, as an intimate friend of constitution-makers, particularly the influential James Wilson, he took part in their efforts to harmonize jangling interests and in pointing the way to unity by encouraging the series of meetings that led to the adoption of constitutions for

church and state. Largely through his influence the American Church began to contribute to this country a new ideal: an episcopal church without a political connection, founded upon catholic doctrine and voluntary support, devoted to the ideal of a greater Church united in essentials and appealing to the people of a united republic. The strength of this conviction was shown after the War between the States, when at the General Convention of 1865 the Church invited the Southern bishops to “trust their brethren,” and so gave force to Lincoln’s appeal for unity and to the Church’s ancient ideal of the oneness of “the blessed company of all faithful people.”\*

While this ideal solidified the Church’s organization it also inspired her influence upon the nation’s social and spiritual life. This was especially effective in the rise of democratic education, which came partly from the Sunday School, originally for ordinary as well as religious education of poor children. Episcopalians claim that the first real Sunday School in Amer-

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\* Book of Common Prayer, Office of Holy Communion, Prayer of Thanksgiving.

ica was founded in 1814 by Jackson (later Bishop) Kemper and Doctor James Milnor as assistants to Bishop White in Christ Church Parish, Philadelphia. By 1835 the Church had a national Sunday School Society with diocesan branches, and had helped to prepare the way for the public school, by thus democratizing educational opportunity. By a natural association many Episcopalians became champions of the free public school crusade, notably Bishop Alonzo Potter of Pennsylvania. In Judge Richard S. Field of New Jersey the Church had a friend of normal schools whose influence aided Henry Barnard and other advocates of teacher-training.

The Church also favored the rise of the academy, a peculiarly American institution, in some ways the origin of the modern private "prep" school and the public high school, and in former times a sort of "popular university." An astonishing number of our clergy in the early national period were principals and teachers of academies. The Cheshire Academy, founded by the Diocese of Connecticut, and the Episcopal Academy of Philadelphia were among the ear-

liest and most typical of a host of such schools. Episcopalians have contributed also to the noble traditions of our small colleges and universities founded in that period, especially Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut; Kenyon at Gambier, Ohio, founded by our first western bishop, Philander Chase; Hobart at Geneva, New York; Saint Stephen's at Annandale on the Hudson, now Bard College of Columbia University; and the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, an ideal of Bishop Polk of Louisiana.

This educational movement was closely associated with the Church's westward and southern expansion, which produced one of the most suggestive and original of American missionary methods—the "missionary episcopate." In naming the first missionary bishop—Jackson Kemper "of All Outdoors"—the General Convention of 1835 sought to restore to the bishop his original and catholic character of a wide-ranging apostle, "sent forth" to create not merely to govern churches, like Saint Paul or the mediæval bishops on the frontiers of European Christendom. Kemper and his successors gave a new meaning to their office, creating the tradi-

tion of a popular episcopate which has made easier the ideal of Christian unity with the bishop as a bond between various denominations and a spokesman for Christendom as opposed to modern paganism.

Ministrations to scattered sheep of the white flock have been accompanied by a new and growing mission to the Indian. The work of the S. P. G. has been renewed among the western tribes and remnants of eastern ones moved to reservations. In it have lived and died many of our pioneer missionary saints: Richard Cadle, the Sisters of the Holy Nativity among the Oneidas, the Bishops Whipple of Minnesota and Hare of the Dakotas, to name but a few. The fruits of their toil are visible in churches, schools, orphanages, medical care, and community houses and in thousands of communicants among the plains and mountain tribes. The government has asked the Church to secure workers for its Indian Department and her servants have tried to protect the Indians' interests and contribute to a better Indian policy. Bishop Whipple encouraged Helen Hunt Jackson in her fight for reform of the Indian administration in

the bitter period after the Sioux War.

The missions to Negroes have been devoted largely to making easier the long period of social and moral adjustment following the attainment of nominal freedom. This has been done mostly through the Church's Commission for Work Among Colored People, created by the General Convention of 1886 for educational and religious work; and the American Church Institute for Negroes, established in 1906 for education in the southern states, which has supervised several schools for general, industrial and religious training. Another increasingly important feature is the provision of church and community life for West Indian Negroes, suddenly transplanted to this country by economic necessity, particularly in New York City and the Diocese of Southern Florida. A similar service is performed for some of the Chinese and Japanese of the Pacific Coast, in churches served as far as possible by Oriental clergy whose devotion is a credit to the Church and renders it helpful in easing the tension sometimes caused by the comparatively new contact between American and Oriental culture.

The same purpose has been furthered by the Church's policy of developing native leadership in the Oriental churches which are expected to become new branches of the Catholic Church. The American communion has co-operated with other branches of Anglicanism in the Holy Catholic Churches of Japan and China, whose very existence influences the Episcopal Church and American Christianity in general towards catholic unity.

The cause of Christian unity is not novel to Episcopalians, who even in colonial times enjoyed cordial relations with some other churches, especially the Lutherans. It was therefore fitting that a foremost Lutheran family gave to us an early champion of the ideal, William A. Muhlenberg, great-grandson of Henry M. Muhlenberg, the organizer of Lutheranism in America. As pastor of the Church of the Holy Communion, New York City, he promoted the "free church" movement to overcome class distinctions and founded the great Saint Luke's Hospital and Saint Johnland, the first "social settlement" in this country. His famous "Memorial" to the General Convention of 1853 was intended

to further co-operation with men of good will in other churches. Postponed by civil strife in 1861-65, the idea was again stimulated by the General Convention of 1886, through the four suggestions familiarly called the "Chicago Quadrilateral"—the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God, the Nicene creed, the sacraments of baptism and holy communion and the episcopate. Accepted by the Lambeth Conference of Anglican churches in 1888 and the General Convention of 1910, these four cornerstones have been the contributions of American Episcopalians, and increasingly of America, to a Christian bulwark against a revival of paganism that threatens a return to barbarity. The Convention of 1910 also issued the first call to the World Conference on Faith and Order, to which the American Church gave a true leader, Bishop Brent. This has been called "The one comprehensive movement toward general organic union which has had vitality over a period of years,"\* and has resulted in meetings at Lausanne, Switzer-

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\* The Church Through Half a Century, p. 363, Christian Unity in America, Samuel McCrea Cavert.

land in 1927 and Edinburgh, Scotland in 1937. American Episcopalians are beginning to sense the value of their position as a possible center of such a movement and to take some pride in bringing to America the spiritual prestige which leadership in it must confer.

This trend of thought has been aided by the wiser leaders of the "Catholic Revival" that appeared here before its most startling emergence as the "Oxford" or "Tractarian" movement of 1833 in England. Promoted by a long succession of venerated priests and bishops from the times of Bishops Seabury and Hobart, it has emphasized the reality of the spiritual world, the sense of worship, communion with the saints, the value of the individual soul before God and the ideals of personal holiness and social service. Its spirit has been manifest in a reviving love of the Catholic Church as the custodian of sifted religious truth and the interpreter of history as the development, and of society as the means, of the Kingdom of God. Its outward forms have furthered the startling revolution in external expressions of American religion, nowhere more than in churches which once undervalued these

things to their own loss. It gave us Bishop Hopkins as one of our most notable early church architects as well as a defender of the Faith; and William A. Muhlenberg, as a pioneer in improved church music and liturgy as well as an exponent of Christian sociology. The whole movement has helped the American Church towards attaining a position of mediator between authoritative and free Christianity, which may point the way to America's becoming the home of a truly Catholic Faith. By insisting upon the value of *transformed lives*, in ministry to the needy, it has been potent in changing the Church's approach to modern society.

Our Church was therefore the natural sponsor of the modern American revival of non-Roman religious communities. Even before their rebirth in the English Church a group of young priests in 1842 established a semi-monastic community at Nashotah in the Wisconsin forest, which has become the present Nashotah House, a center of the Catholic Faith. In the same period communities for women received their first impulse from Muhlenberg's Sisterhood of the Holy Communion in New York City. This was the seed of

the Community of Saint Mary, under the auspices of Bishop Horatio Potter of New York and the guidance of Mother Harriet Cannon. For over thirty years after her profession in 1865, she was the Superior of her Community, the moulder of its life, and the administrator of its many schools and works of mercy: a woman who reminds us of the great abbesses in the golden age of monasticism. She and her few companions opened a well-spring of inspiration that has divided into many streams watering the social conscience of the Church and quickening the rich growth of schools, hospitals, rest houses, orphanages, homes for the poor and aged, parochial missions and schools of religious art conducted in many dioceses by more than a dozen other women's communities.

The consecrated life for men was transplanted from England by the Society of Saint John the Evangelist, familiarly known as the S.S.J.E. or the "Cowley Fathers." Since the community began its work in 1870 at the Church of the Advent, Boston, it has been devoted to parochial missions, training for the religious life and ministering to the poor and the Negro, and has given

to the American Church three bishops, including the saintly Charles Grafton of Fond du Lac, a spiritual father of our monastic revival. The Order of the Holy Cross was founded in the New York "East-Side" Church of the Holy Cross in 1881 and established in 1884 by the profession of Father Huntington. It has undertaken whatever service offered, especially in teaching, missions in America and Liberia, and social service. Of deeper meaning than any of these good works has been the life of the Founder, whose one passion was the Kingdom of God on earth, and whose radiant personality still warms the Church and illuminates dark corners of America. For fifty years he struggled to bring the churches into closer fellowship with the masses, and today their social service is indebted to his pioneer toil in the slums. He was one of the first leaders in any American church to notice the labor movement and was a founder of the Church Association for the Advancement of the Interests of Labor, the C. A. I. L. The American Order of Franciscans, begun in 1908 and formally established in 1917, is becoming an influence in American church life through its houses and

missions. Its deeper significance is in the fact that it expresses a widespread longing for a simpler and more holy life in a complicated pagan society. The St. Barnabas Brotherhood is a community for laymen only and is doing excellent work in caring for the poor.

These communities have grown from the spiritual convictions of cultured and devout persons, a type always nurtured by the Anglican Church when free to express its real nature. Far out of proportion to their numbers they have contributed to reviving in America the ideal of the consecrated life not as a romantic refuge for the timid and incompetent but as a school for spiritual warfare against social and personal waste.

If a star were confin'd into a tomb,  
Her captive flames must needs burn there;  
But when the hand that lock'd her up, gives room,  
She'll shine through all the sphere.\*

The Church's capacity for social action has found room also in the "institutional church movement" that arose about fifty years ago upon foundations largely laid by her great-city parishes, like Saint George's, Grace, and Trinity in

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\* Henry Vaughan.

New York City. Many downtown churches, left stranded by a receding tide of fashion, without losing their religious character have become flourishing community centers for poor foreign-born people with little chance for rest or wholesome activity. In an entirely different atmosphere but during the same period the Church has established missions among the white mountain people of the South, in several dioceses from Virginia to Georgia. This work includes not only religious ministrations but also education, recreation and medical care, and especially industrial training to promote economic improvement and independence.

From these good works have come men and women—too many to name here—who are already enrolled among the awakeners of American "social consciousness," and some are still pleading the cause of the slum-dweller, the wage-earner and "the boy without youth." They have shown to the nation that its frontier is no longer the one Kemper knew—that of the squatter and the river boatmen—but the populous wilderness of the "big town," where crime and poverty breed and kill. They have founded and

nourished groups that help to fight the never-ended battle for social justice—

“The crazed, immortal struggle of the weak.”

The ideal of the modern charity organization society was promoted first by an Episcopalian priest in Buffalo. The C. A. I. L., founded in 1887 as “the first organization of social Christianity in an American Church,”\* investigated the wretched tenements and sweatshops and successfully advocated reforms, when most labor leaders reasonably regarded religion as social “soothing syrup.” The confused and desperate post-war year, 1919, witnessed a startling growth of the Church’s sense of social responsibility, shown in the efforts of her clergy to make peace in the great steel strike, the founding of the Church League for Industrial Democracy—the C. L. I. D.—and the Church Congress, which among many other subjects considered the Church’s relations to labor problems. The League, a voluntary organization including several bishops, has not only stimulated the con-

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\* The Church Through Half a Century, p. 307, The Church in Society, Phillips Packer Elliott.

science of Church people with respect to industrial relations, but has also brought peace in several conflicts. A few Churchmen have taken even more direct action by working with the American Civil Liberties Union to defend common rights whose loss will mean the eventual suppression of religious freedom as well.

While these movements have engaged the zeal and energy of individuals, the cause of social justice has obtained official support. In 1901 the Episcopal Church organized a standing committee on the relations between capital and labor, and in 1910 the General Convention pointedly suggested a Christian society in place of a pagan one that even then appeared to be mistaking monopoly for general security and charity for genuine social responsibility. In 1930 this feeling was expressed by the foundation of a school of Christian social ethics at the Wellesley Annual Conference for Church Work. The recent economic depression has given the Church’s social creed a more precise definition in the bishops’ “Davenport Pastoral” of 1933, which placed before her members and the nation the ideal of a Christian society as one which shall provide the

more than bare physical subsistence without which spiritual progress is not possible for the mass of mankind. The growing social consciousness of the Church is organically expressed through the Department of Christian Social Service of the National Council, which by frequent participation in welfare conferences, and by Labor Day Messages and pamphlets on pressing social questions, endeavors to sustain a lively interest in current social thought and a sense of individual and corporate responsibility for Christian action to realize our Lord's Prayer:

*Thy kingdom come*

*Thy will be done*

*On earth*

*As it is in heaven.*

AMEN.

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