

EXAGGERATED NATIONALISM

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HE peace of Christ in the reign of Christ." This motto of our present Holy Father represents the goal he has set for himself and for the Church committed to his care to attain. In encyclical letters, in consistorial allocutions, by all the means at his command, he has continually recalled to the Church and to the world at large this noble ideal, urging men and nations to its attainment. Perhaps the most striking instance of this was the encyclical *Quas Primas* of December 11, 1925, instituting the feast of Christ the King, and recounting with unerring accuracy the basic causes of the discontent, oppression, and strife rampant among men and nations today, in individual life, in domestic relations, and in public affairs. Previously the Holy Father had written that "the hope of a lasting peace among men and states would never dawn so long as individual men and states denied and excluded the empire of Our Saviour." At that time well-informed, unimpassioned students of history and public affairs were beginning to ask themselves whether the catch-phrases about "war to end war," "making the world safe for democracy," and similar ones so freely bandied about during the hysteria of the Great War were to have any real influence in the solution of the problems brought by the cessation of armed conflict. Reluctantly students were compelled to answer negatively, and with the passing of time conditions seem not to have improved to any notable degree.

The establishment of the feast of Christ the King was a clarion call to men and nations to lay the foundations of a world-wide peace on the bed-rock of Christian ethical and moral principles. The obstacles preventing this desired consummation are many in number and appalling in magnitude. Prominent, if not indeed foremost among them is that philosophy called by the formidable name of "nationalism." The term is taken in varying senses; here we shall concern ourselves with that one which is actually the most widespread and the most subversive of Christian principles of charity, justice, and peace; and we shall limit ourselves to suggesting but a few of the ways in which it subverts these principles.

Nationalism, in the words of the foremost authority on the subject¹ may be defined as a "condition of mind among members of a nationality, perhaps already possessed of a national state, a condition

of mind in which loyalty to the ideal or to the fact of one's national state is superior to all other loyalties, and of which pride in one's nationality and belief in its intrinsic excellence and in its 'mission' are integral parts." Nationalism, then, is first of all a condition of mind; it is a mental or spiritual factor, and as such it is intangible, it cannot be circumscribed or delimited, yet by this very fact it obtains the driving power which it exercises in the world today, for nationalism thus understood is what "colors thought and conditions action in political, social, and cultural spheres, in domestic circles and foreign relations." This condition of mind makes loyalty to the national state superior to all other loyalties, and herein consists the fundamental defect of modern exaggerated nationalism. It is in direct violation of the only true ethical and moral principles—so ably recapitulated by Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical on the Christian constitution of states, *Immortale Dei*, of November 1, 1885. There the Pontiff repeats in clear and unmistakable terms the true doctrine that the primary loyalty of all individuals and of nations is to God, not to the abstract concept of the state.

Historians are not agreed as to the period when modern nationalism took its rise. Like other movements and phenomena of history, nationalism did not spring full-blown and matured into existence on any precise day nor in any precise year; a multitude of causes and occasions, currents and cross-currents, almost hopelessly interwoven, contributed to its rise and growth. It is generally recognized that the dim origins of nationalism are to be recognized in the aftermath of the Crusades of medieval Europe against the Muslim power in the Holy Land. Rapid acceleration of the movement came from the unlimited individualism and selfishness spawned by the Protestant Rebellion of the sixteenth century. Additional and more potent impulses were given by the Industrial Revolution in England and its contemporary the French Revolution, with their resultant upheavals in human life that reached far beyond the borders of their respective countries. But the chief impetus arose from the philosophical and literary *Zeitgeist* of the Romanticist Movement of the early nineteenth century, the nationalist leaders of which were Sir Walter Scott in England, Chateaubriand in France, and Schlegel in Germany. Their writings led to marked development in the sciences of philology and history, and the latter especially assumed a virulently nationalistic character. Yet, incidentally, not all of its effects were

¹ Prof. C. J. H. Hayes, *Essays on Nationalism*, New York, 1926. To this searching and thought-provoking analysis of nationalism, the present paper is chiefly indebted.

evil. Though prompted by an exaggerated nationalism, and intended for an even more extensive propagation of nationalism, it produced the great collections of national historical documents laid open for the use of scholars, the *Rolls Series* in England, the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, in Germany, the *Documents Inédits* in France, the *Coleccion de documentas ineditas* in Spain, and so on in every country in Europe. In America there came the work of Peter Force, unfortunately left incomplete, in editing the *American Archives*. One of the popularized and pernicious effects of nationalistic history-writing was the propagation of the myth of "Nordic superiority," originated in Germany, avidly borrowed by the English universities in the mid-nineteenth century, and taken up in parrot-like fashion by the more militantly bigoted Protestants of the United States.

Writers of this school, imbued, whether consciously or not, with the corrosive principles of jingoistic nationalism, described their doctrines as "wholesome national patriotism" and offer an imposing array of specious arguments in support. The best that can be said for such writers is that they are indulging in verbal chicanery. There is a rampant, blatant nationalism stalking through the world today which breeds intolerance, militarism, and war, inculcating in the process such an exaggerated belief in the inherent excellence and superiority of one's own nationality that unthinking devotees are led to bestow on the state what amounts to supreme religious worship. Along with this we get the concept of a purely national "god" who is to be the personification of a chosen people, and jealous of all other national "gods." During the past twenty years there has been much written in this country about a "new God for America"—a deity who is to be a queer combination of current non-Catholic theological, and exaggerated nationalistic concepts, a synthesis of all that is believed good or serviceable in the doctrine of non-Catholic sects flavored with a boisterous Americanism hardly consonant with twentieth century American idealism.

There are some curiously striking parallels between nationalism as a religion and the historic religions of the world, parallels which follow the individual from birth, through the public schools, to his life as a citizen and finally to the grave. The noblest act of citizenship is held to be death in battle for the sake of his country—just as the violent death of a Christian martyr in testimony of his Faith is the noblest act of genuine religion. Nationalism has its "sacred books" to rival the Bible or the Koran; in England they are Magna Charta and the Bill of Rights; in France the Constitution of the Third Republic; in America the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Nationalist devotees brook no criticism, however

academic it be, of these "sacred" documents. Whereas the Rationalistic schools of Biblical criticism in the nineteenth century strove desperately and unhampered to undermine the foundations of Christianity by attacking the Bible at every possible point, criticism of nationalistic sacred books brings down on the head of the hapless critic storms of violent protest and cries of "traitor." And while the Rationalist critics of the Bible were met on their own grounds and decisively defeated by Christian apologists, the answer of nationalists to their critics takes the form of jail-sentences, fines, persecutions, and ostracism, if not exile.

A ritual and ceremonial are not wanting to nationalism in its exaggerated form, and these are usually centered around the flag of the country concerned—whether it be the Union Jack, or the Tricolor, or the Rising Sun or the Stars and Stripes; every country, too, has its national hymn, invariably martial in tone, *Rule, Britannia*, or the *Marseillaise*, or *Deutschland Uber Alles*, or *The Star-Spangled Banner*. The parallels could be extended indefinitely, all tending to show the exaggerated, and in some instances ridiculous lengths to which the virulent brand of nationalism has gone. At the same time, however, and nowhere more than in the United States, there has ever been vividly present to the large majority of sensible citizens a sanely-balanced love for, and genuine appreciation of national institutions and ideals, particularly as evinced in such epoch-making documents as the Declaration and the Constitution.

The inconsistency of extreme nationalists is evinced in numberless ways. One of their weaknesses is a notable failure to observe the Gospel parable of the mote and the beam. There has recently occurred in some quarters in this country an indignant outburst against the action of some historians in writing biographies of certain American heroes in which more than usual prominence was given to the human frailties and foibles of the characters concerned. Furiously indignant rebukes from press, platform, and pulpit were administered to the biographers, yet little effort was made to discover if by any chance the apparently derogatory statements might be historically true. At any rate, these statements were not complimentary to national heroes—and therefore they must be untrue; such is nationalist logic. We are not concerned here with the question of the propriety of the biographers' action—that is a problem for historiography. Yet it must be noted that among the historians most exacting in their demands for scientific accuracy of statement, scholars who cannot be said to be blinded by exaggerated nationalism, this practice has been widely condemned, since it too presents a distorted view of the individuals discussed. Whereas the nationalist offends by an effusive

hero-worship, the realist offends by an equally excessive iconoclasm; and excess in either direction prevents a well-balanced view of the character and achievements of the subjects in question.

It seems more than a mere coincidence that those who have been loudest in their denunciation of the "defamers" (?) of American heroes have been of the very ilk that is ever ready and willing to give full and uncritical credence to every wild tale ever concocted against, for example, the popes. No matter how wildly improbable or far-fetched a calumny may be hurled at the popes, pretending to reveal faults of their private lives, it is accepted without question. Historians of the nationalist stripe prattle much about "impartiality" in history-writing, when it is question of giving currency to vile stories concerning the popes, but let the same methods be applied to nationalist heroes, and there is no longer any mention of "impartiality." Let a few facts be brought to light that picture some national hero as a human character, and as such, less magnificent than the legends and myths grown up around his name in the years since his death—and what an outcry goes up! Not only is the history denounced as false, but demands have actually been made for the life of the offending biographer.

What, then, are we to think of this exaggerated, chauvinistic nationalism as a political and social philosophy? How does it conform to or differ from Christian principles of morality? Only insofar as it conforms to the one, true, unvarying standard set up by these principles can nationalism be regarded as a factor for good in the world today. And to the degree that it inculcates a sanely-balanced love of country, a laudable pride in the worthy and noble achievements of one's native land, a wholesome respect for and sympathetic understanding of, other countries and races and peoples, nationalism merits nothing but praise. But to the degree that it inculcates a distorted notion of the superiority of one's nation in all particulars, with a corresponding contempt for and intolerance of all other nations, to the degree that it sets up the national state as the highest form of religion, and demands for it the highest form of loyalty, to the degree that it produces suspicion and jealousy of one nation by another, and thus leads inevitably to unjust wars, with their attending misery, bloodshed, and suffering, nationalism is a curse and a menace to the peace of the world. It is this type of nationalism which must be purified, enlightened, and guided by Christian principles of morality, those broad principles of charity, justice, and peace, which when rightly understood, and whole-heartedly practised by men and nations lead straight to the goal of mutual understanding, sympathy, and toleration, "the peace of Christ in the reign of Christ."