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100

The Central Idea of History

W. L. Cannon

Cannon 82

The further science is advanced, the more clearly is shown the truth that all things have their centres of life and motion. Acting, and interacting, moving now this way, now that, all at last tend in one direction. The intellectual, as well as physical world, is governed by this same law. "Nothing is insulated, nothing is irregular."

The stars revolve around their suns, and the suns themselves with attendant planets revolve around a central orb, and these orbs with attendant systems revolve around the "eternal throne". So, with man and society.

Each person has a distinct centre by which his life and growth are governed, and each society also has its center, forming its own system, while they all form a single system, revolving around the center of the world - God himself.

The central idea then is God in history. Being such, it is fulfilled in the advent, around which we see all the forces of society to converge; - all preceding history prepares for it, all succeeding history dates from it.

With respect to this center then, there are two periods, 1<sup>st</sup> a preparation, 2<sup>d</sup> a development. Each is the secret of the progress of events. The streams of life issuing from the same

source and flowing in various directions, in intricate windings, finally, came together and flowed in the same channel - the great Roman Empire - when was the fulfilment: from which they diverged, and have ever since been flowing in various channels, though tending to the same great ocean of eternity.

Although from this center there radiates a divine power, influencing the affairs of men, although from it there issues a voice, which reaches every individual, the happiness of whom depends alone upon perfect obedience to it, yet this power is used only for the assistance of man's restoration; - it is the balance of power, which, in the severe conflict between truth and error, gives success to the former, yet this voice is spoken to the individual only, as that of a safe guide through an unknown and perilous journey, while to the world it is the voice of the commanding general, giving orders to the embattled host.

Those who, judging from the influence of this divine power, suppose that history then must record effects necessary and unchangeable. Man is both its subject and its object. So that this center proves only the plans of his restoration. It shows the system of his progress. A progress, to be

culminated in the sublime consummation of his moral and intellectual perfection.

It is the master-key which unlocks to us the hidden treasures of the past. It is the prophetic stone which predicts the future destiny of the human race. It is the mystic wand by one wave of which we can change every deed of history into a mount Sinai where we can converse with the Deity and from him receive governing laws. It is the fulfilment of all hopes, the perfection of all philosophy, the interpreter to all revolutions. It is the key to all the seeming contradictions of the moral, physical and political world. It is life, it is immortality.

As the periods are twofold - the preparation and development - so are the objects of history twofold. Armed with this divine philosophy history has taught us "in the first place that Christianity is the great fact in this world of ours, shooting its divine rays back to the fall of man and forward to the day of Millennial glory, and in the second place that pure democracy - the freedom, purity and happiness of the individual citizen - is the great possibility which we are approximating and will eventually attain."

These two great results can now be seen even by the casual observer, of their progress to be the ends of our existence. In the first ages divine revelation was communicated by the original word, given to a particular nation, though adapted for the universal race.

These truths, being collected; were preserved till their completion was perfected in the new addition. And as soon as the two most perfect languages had received the heavenly treasure they became obsolete. So that they are now the two imperishable monument in which the divine truths are crystalized for all future consultation. Now christianity is embodied in principles, which are to work out its universal perfection. It has since been that love which should move the world. Dynasties have risen and fallen in reference to it alone. Whole nations have been swept away and supplanted by others, which did possess this vivifying power. The desert country has been made "to rejoice and blossom as the rose" the fruitful one to become desolate, as the people of each were blessed with or cursed without its presence. Its policy is the work of ages, it fills the whole race. Prophecy alone depends upon it, hence it will generally be found associated with

or rather it will assist in forming the stronger races.  
 We study the affairs of the present time, but see clearly  
 that its tendency is to universal dominion? Feeling its  
 power and knowing its efficacy the world is opening wide  
 its portals to receive it in all its purity and in all its power.  
 As the world is approximating to universal and perfect Chris-  
 tianity, so can it be easily seen that it is also approxima-  
 ting to a universal and perfect democracy. The forms of  
 government have ever been changing from the patriarch-  
 al to the representative. Every successive change has been  
 but a step towards this human perfection. The govern-  
 ing will has been removed from the one to the few, from  
 the few to the many and from the many to all. It  
 was a long time before it could be said that all the  
 political power of a state <sup>lay</sup> ~~was~~ wholly and solely with  
 the people. This progress <sup>has</sup> continued through centuries,  
 has attained its highest state of perfection in our own be-  
 loved land of liberty.

But this is not <sup>the goal</sup> the terminus of man's existence -  
 for then there could be left for us no progress in the  
 thousands of coming years. The universal and perfect  
 enfranchisement of the human race is our end & object.

This is plainly seen in the present condition of affairs.

Liberty has been acknowledged the very watchword of our age. At the south of us, there is now a country being laid waste by the devastation of opposing truth.

In the old world nearly every government is making concessions to this principle. But what means that martial array, that gathering of contending armies which brood over the south of Europe like the fall of night. The classic plains of Italy have been desecrated by the footprints of tyranny. Her people once so proud and free, <sup>who would</sup> say truly that "to be a Roman was greater than <sup>(to be)</sup> a king" have been galled by oppressions yoke. But now assisted by the gallant army of France and by the sympathies of the whole world, they are contending for their ancient and natural right - for liberty.

There is epitomized the history of man. Liberty and tyranny, so opposite in their policy, so antagonistic in their progress, are in dread conflict. Upon the battle field where the richest treasures are wasted, and the most precious blood poured forth, freedom is ever to be obtained. The tree of liberty derives its best nourishment from human suffering. Such was it with our forefathers; so will it be with them. And as they conquer, so will it ever be with oppressed and struggling man.



As a country increases in liberty, so does it tend to true democracy. Hence we can't but conclude that our race must be free.

Our present elevated position has been reached through successive struggles. The agencies accomplishing it are divine and human. They both work together for one object—man's restoration. This is seen particularly in the lives of great men, in revolutions and in different nations and periods.

Looking down the long line of centuries, there looms up before us, at certain intervals, great master spirits who have borne the heat of the contest, who now appear wreathed with time honored chaplets in token of praiseworthy deeds.

"In lonely watchfulness they stand,

Upon times heavy sleep.

And glory's flickering beam lights

For coming ages keep."

They have been the centers of every separate movement of truth as the Infinite is the center of the whole. As the finger board to the lost traveller, so are these men who show us the true direction of the world's progress.

As the world's drama advances new interests are awakened at every scene, and the nearer it appears to reveal the grand final. Sometimes the play swells into momentous importance as upon the stage appears universal man in dread connection.

Such is the nature of revolutions - the outbursts of smothered but kindling flames, - which mark the ebb of history.

In these clearly are shown the workings of providence. They stand forth as bright evidences that history has its center, its system and its destiny.

This is exemplified in the early reunion of the races, when each diversified tribe, having learned the peculiar lesson of nature, around these, brought their respective discovered truths to one common shrine, where all could enjoy the benefits of each.

And when centralization had done its duty, and fulfilled its destiny, we see this same guiding power in the breaking up of the Roman Empire. It was the great turning point when christian ascendancy, permeating all governments, sowed the seed of constitutionality and civil liberty. Christianity was then and ever after, has been the basis and bulwark of the governing powers.

This became a 'spell' by which the world was covered. As the pallor of cloud was used in ancient times for the protection and guidance of the chosen hosts of old, so in the middle ages the darkness, gloom, night, sleep, and the like, ~~which~~ which the moderns seem inclined to attribute to ~~them~~ <sup>them</sup>, were but other words for the same guiding and protecting cloud, the shadow of which veiled the intricate

and sublime workings of the Deity. Through the middle ages to the reformation, and through the reformation to the present time, during contention, and peace, has this truth been shown the more clearly, and now the American is proud to acknowledge the presence of the guiding hand in our early struggles.

The life of it here was such, as to portray direct communion of man and divinity, for though he spoke like other men, yet he acted like a God.

Such is history, with its centre & system; without these the whole history of the world is nought else than a huge pile of the blocks & fragments of an unfinished edifice, with these the temple is complete.

Junior Prize Contest Oration of William L. Cannon, Class of 1860  
Transcribed by Michael M. Geduldig, June 19, 2006  
Edited by Don Sailer, November 2009

### The Central Idea of History

The further science is advanced, the more clearly is shown the truth that all things have their centres of life and motion. Acting and interacting, moving now this way, now that, all at last tend in one direction. The intellectual, as well as physical world is governed by this same law. "Nothing is insulated, nothing is irregular."

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which we can change every deed of history into a mount Sinai where we can converse with the Deity and from him receive governing laws. It is the fulfillment of all hopes, the perfection of all philosophy, the interpreter to all revolutions. It is the key to all the seeming contradictions of the moral, physical and political worlds. It is life, it is immortality.

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