



## *Barbarism the First Danger* Horace Bushnell (1847)

*Horace Bushnell was a white Congregational minister in Connecticut who became prominent as a theologian. He was a supporter of the American Home Missionary Society, founded by Protestants from multiple denominations with the goal of raising funds and personnel to build up congregations in the United States' western territories. Barbarism the First Danger is a speech Bushnell gave, then published as a tract, to promote the American Home Missionary Society's work. Propagating the right kind of Christianity among western settlers is essential, Bushnell insists, if the United States is to become "a new Christian empire" and "the leading power of the earth."*

Nothing is more certain [...] than that *emigration, or a new settlement of the social state, involves a tendency to social decline*. There must, in every such case, be a relapse toward barbarism, more or less protracted, more or less complete. Commonly, nothing but extraordinary efforts in behalf of education and religion will suffice to prevent a fatal lapse of social order. [...] Just here hang all the struggles of our history for the two centuries now past and for at least another century to come. [...] The great problem of American society is not solved [...] Still we are rolling on from east to west, plunging into the wilderness, scouring across the great inland deserts and mountains, to plant our habitations on the western ocean. Here again the natural tendencies of emigration toward barbarism, or social decline, are displayed in signs that cannot be mistaken.

[...] Western character has many powerful and promising qualities, but it wants the salt of religious virtue, the sobriety of discipline, and the modesty of true intelligence. [...] A very large portion of the western community, it is well known, are already so far gone in ignorance as to make a pride of it and even to decry education as an over-genteel accomplishment. They hold, of course, their manhood in their will, not in their understanding, which is the same as to say that law is weak, and passion violent. Hence the many public murders committed in the newer states of the west and south, which are never legally investigated. [...] Is it not well understood that a partially wild race of men, such as cannot any longer be properly included in the terms of civilization, is already formed? I speak of what is sometimes called the pioneer race. They roll on, like a prairie fire, before the advance of regular emigration; they have no fixed habits and do not care to appropriate the soil; consequently, they have no education or religion. They live mainly by hunting and pasture; and when a regular settlement begins within an hour's ride, they feel the proximity too close, quit their hut of logs (which is, in fact, only their tent), and start on, by another long remove, into the wild regions beyond them. These semi-barbarians, too, are continually multiplying in numbers and becoming more distinct in their habits. Ere long, there is reason to fear, they will be scouring in populous bands over the vast territories of Oregon and California, to be known as the pasturing tribes—the wild hunters and robber clans of the western hemisphere—American Moabites, Arabs, and Edomites!

Or if it seem extravagant to speak of any such result, let it not be forgotten that one emigrant family of the Saxon race has already sunk into barbarism since our history began. I speak of the Dutch Boers in South Africa. They are Calvinistic Protestants; they began their settlement at Cape Town, in the year 1651. And now they are virtually barbarians, for they are scarcely less wild in their habits than the Hottentots themselves. They subsist by pasture, roving from place to

place. Lynch law and private revenge are the principal methods of revenging injuries. Their habits are filthy. Their women do the work. Education is forgotten, and the cruelties they practice in their sanguinary wars are such as resemble them to beasts of prey. They are now a race of nominally Christian barbarians—[...] a standing proof that Protestants, and that too of the Saxon blood, may drop out of civilization and take their place on the same level of ignorance and social brutality with the barbarous tribes of the earth. Let no American that loves his country refuse to heed the example. [...]

OUR FIRST DANGER IS BARBARISM—Romanism next [...] Let us empty ourselves of our character, let us fall into superstition through the ignorance, wildness, and social confusion incident to a migratory habit and a rapid succession of new settlements, and Romanism will find us just where character leaves us. [...] Man is a religious being, and if he cannot come to God through his intelligence, he will come to what sort of God his superstitions offer him. When, therefore, I consider how certainly an ignorant soul is prepared to superstition, remembering also the vast amount of ignorance that prevails among the western people, I want no other proof that superstition has already a wide and terrible sway over the western mind. Or if I suffer a doubt, the great Mormon city and temple<sup>a</sup> rise as proof visible before me—proof, however, that does not accrue as against the west alone, save that it shows how all fantastic errors and absurdities will assuredly congregate there. Who could have thought it possible that a wretched and silly delusion like that of the Mormons could gather in its thousands of disciples in this enlightened age, build a populous city, and erect a temple rivaling in grandeur even that of the false prophet at Mecca? And when we see [...] facts like these, [...] it is vain to imagine that Romanism can find no affinities prepared among us. [...] If we persist in training a barbarous people for its use, let us indulge no regrets that Romanism gives them such a religion as they are capable of receiving. [...]

If now you ask what is to be the conclusion of the great problem we have on hand: Shall we go clear, at last, of all these perils—shall we rise into order, law, intelligence, and religion—or will parts of the nation go down, at last, below the capacity to rise? [...] The answer hangs, not on what we may think or reason, but on what we shall do! [...] We have it on hand to struggle up, for a half century or a century to come, against the downward currents of decline, and bear up the nation with us into a settled condition of Christian culture and virtue—which, if we do, the critical point of our destiny is turned. We are then to be the most august and happiest nation that has ever appeared on earth, the leading power of the world's history. Was there ever a struggle offered to the good and great of mankind, so fit to kindle enthusiasm or nerve the soul to patient sacrifices!

WHAT, THEN, SHALL WE DO?

[...] We must get rid, if possible, I answer, of slavery. It aggravates every bad tendency we suffer. We cannot, as American Christians, be at peace with it any longer. [...] We must also

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<sup>a</sup> Bushnell is referring to a Mormon settlement and temple in Nauvoo, Illinois, not to the more famous temple that Mormons later erected in Salt Lake City, Utah. By the time Bushnell gave this speech, in 1847, violent opposition from their neighbors had led Mormons to abandon Nauvoo, at which point most migrated to the intermountain west.

return, as soon as possible, to a condition of peace, and maintain it, as the only hope of moral and social progress in our country. War is the proper work only of barbarians—the bane, therefore, of all social order and virtue. [...] Be it also understood that the sooner we have railroads and telegraphs spinning into the wilderness and setting the remotest hamlets in connection and close proximity with the east, the more certain it is that light, good manners, and Christian refinement will become universally diffused. [...] Education, too, is another and yet more sacred interest which we are to favor and promote by every reasonable means. [...]

This brings me to speak, last of all, of that which is really the chief, the all-important work, viz: to provide a talented and educated body of Christian teachers and keep them pressing into the wilderness as far as emigration itself can go. [...] We must throw ourselves out, therefore, upon HOME MISSIONS as the first and sublimest Christian duty which the age lays upon us. Religion is the only prop on which we can lean with any confidence, and home missions are the vehicle of religion. [...] There is no shape of society, least of all any shape of new society, that will not rot itself down and dissolve unless there descend upon it, from above, a conserving power which it has not in itself. Nothing but religion, a ligature binding society to God, can save it.

[...T]he Home Missionary Society, for which I now speak [...], has now a spiritual army six hundred strong in these fields and waits to make its hundreds, thousands. [...] Here we feel that we have the future in our charge, and we mean to see the trust faithfully fulfilled. To save this mighty nation; to make it the leading power of the earth; to present to mankind the spectacle of a nation stretching from ocean to ocean across this broad continent; a nation of free men, self-governed, governed by simple law, without soldiers or police; a nation of a hundred millions of people, covering the sea with their fleets, the land with cities, roads, and harvests; first in learning and art and all the fruits of genius; and, what is highest and best of all, a religious nation, blooming in all the Christian virtues, the protector of the poor, the scourge of oppression, the dispenser of light, and the symbol to mankind of the ennobling genial power of righteous laws and a simple Christian faith—this is the charge God lays upon us, this we accept, and this, by God's blessing, we mean to perform with a spirit worthy of its magnitude. [...]

Thus will we go on and give it to our sons and daughters to come after us. We will measure our strength by the grandeur of our object. The wilderness shall bud and blossom as the rose before us, and we will not cease till a Christian nation throws up its temples of worship on every hill and plain; till knowledge, virtue, and religion, blending their dignity and their healthful power, have filled our great country with a manly and a happy race of people, and the bands of a complete Christian commonwealth are seen to span the continent.

And now, Jehovah God, thou who by long ages of watch and discipline didst make of thy servant Abraham a people: be thou the God also of this great nation. Remember still its holy beginnings, and, for the fathers' sakes, still cherish and sanctify it. Fill it with thy light and thy potent influence, till the glory of thy Son breaks out on the western sea, as now upon the eastern, and these uttermost parts, given to Christ for a possession, become the bounds of a new Christian empire, whose name the believing and the good of all people shall hail as a name of hope and blessing!

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