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Lyman Abbott

Excerpt

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# THE EVOLUTION OF CHRISTIANITY.

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## CHAPTER I. EVOLUTION AND RELIGION.

EVOLUTION is defined by Professor Le Conte as “continuous progressive change, according to certain laws, and by means of resident forces.” Religion has been defined by an English divine as “the life of God in the soul of man.” It is my object to show that the Christian religion is itself an evolution; that is, that this life of God in humanity is one of continuous progressive change, according to certain divine laws, and by means of forces, or a force, resident in humanity. The proposition is a very simple one; illustrated and applied, it may help to solve some of the problems which are perplexing us concerning the Bible, the church, theology, social ethics, and spiritual experience.

All scientific men to-day are evolutionists. That is, they agree substantially in holding that all life proceeds, by a regular and orderly

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sequence, from simple to more complex forms, from lower to higher forms, and in accordance with laws which either now are or may yet be understood, or are at all events a proper subject of hopeful investigation. The truth of this doctrine I assume; that is, I assume that all life, including the religious life, proceeds by a regular and orderly sequence from simple and lower forms to more complex and higher forms, in institutions, in thought, in practical conduct, and in spiritual experience. It is my purpose not so much to demonstrate this proposition as to state, exemplify, and apply it.

As "evolution" is the latest word of science, so "life" is the supreme word of religion. All religious men agree that there is a life of God in the soul of man. Max Müller suggests a more scientific definition of religion, — but the two are identical in sense, though different in form. He says that "religion consists in the perception of the Infinite under such manifestations as are able to influence the moral character of man."<sup>1</sup> The Christian religion, then, is the perception of that manifestation of God, historically made in and through Jesus Christ, which has produced the changes in the moral life of man whose aggregate result is seen in the complex life of Christendom, past and present. As

<sup>1</sup> *Natural Religion*, p. 188.

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all scientific men believe in evolution, — the orderly development of life from lower to higher forms, — so all Christians believe that there has been a manifestation of God in Jesus Christ which has produced historical Christianity. As I assume the truth of evolution, so I assume the truth of this fundamental article of the Christian faith. With the scientific believer, I believe in the orderly and progressive development of all life; with the religious believer, I believe in the reality of a life of God in the soul of man. It is not my object to reconcile these two beliefs, but, assuming the truth of both, to show that this divine life is itself subject to the law of all life; that Christianity is itself an evolution. Applying this law to the history of the Christian religion, it is my object to show that the manifestation of God in Jesus Christ has been a gradual and growing manifestation, and that the changes wrought thereby in the moral life of man have been gradual and growing changes, wrought by spiritual forces, or a spiritual force, resident in man.

There are in Professor Le Conte's definition of evolution three terms. Evolution is *first* a continuous progressive change; *second*, according to certain laws; *third*, by means of resident forces. Each of these elements enters into and characterizes the development of Christianity.

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Christianity has been, not a fixed and unchanging factor, but a life, subject to a continuous progressive change; this change has been, not lawless, irregular, and unaccountable, but according to certain laws, which, though by no means well understood, have never been either suspended or violated; and the cause of this change, or these changes, has been a force, not foreign to man himself, but residing in him. Thus Christianity, whether regarded as an institutional, an intellectual, a social, or a moral life, has exemplified the law of evolution.

A few more words of exact definition are needed, for it cannot be doubted that in the discussion concerning the relation of Christianity to evolution — or in the larger and less exact phrase, concerning the relation of theology to science — there has been much ignorance and more prejudice: on the part of theological experts, ignorance respecting the true nature of evolution; on the part of scientific experts, ignorance respecting the true nature of religion. The theological discussions of our time grow out of an attempt, on the one hand, to restate the principles of the Christian life in terms of an evolutionary philosophy, or in terms consistent with that philosophy; and, on the other hand, out of resistance to this attempt, either by denying evolutionary philosophy altogether, or by main-

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taining that the Christian religion is an exception to the ordinary laws of life: that it is not and cannot be a continuous progression, but is and must be always unchanging; that it is not governed by certain laws, certainly not by laws which man can understand, but is dependent on the inscrutable if not capricious will of an unknown Person; that it has its operating causes, not in a force or forces resident in humanity, but in a force or forces outside humanity. As I have said, I do not propose to discuss this question, except as an attempt to restate the principles of the Christian life in the terms of an evolutionary philosophy is such a discussion; but it is evident, if such a restatement is to be made, that we must understand at the outset what we mean both by evolution and by the Christian life.

The doctrine of evolution, then, makes no attempt whatever to explain the nature or origin of life. It is concerned, not with the origin, but with the phenomena of life. It sees the forces resident in the phenomena, but it throws no light on the question how they came there. It traces the tree from the seed, the animal from the embryo, the planetary system from its nebulous condition; it investigates and ascertains the process of development: but it does not explain, or offer to explain, what is the

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difference between the seed which is a living thing and the grain of sand which is dead, or between the vitalized and the unvitalized egg, or what there is in the nebulae which produces out of chaos a beautiful world fitted for human habitation. One may with Haeckel believe in spontaneous generation, or with Tyndall disbelieve in it, and in either case be an evolutionist. Evolution traces only the processes of life; it does not offer to explain the nature or the origin of life. Life antedates all progress; and evolution only traces progress. The evolutionary theologian, then, must believe that the spiritual life shows itself in a continuous progress according to an orderly and regular sequence; but his belief in evolution will throw no light whatever on the question as to the secret of that life which antedates spiritual progress. He must believe that this spiritual force is resident in humanity; but how it came to be resident in humanity, evolution cannot tell him. This he must learn, if at all, elsewhere.

Making no attempt to explain the origin of life, the evolutionist insists that the processes of life are always from the simple to the complex: from the simple nebulae to the complicated world containing mineral substances and vegetable and animal life; from the germinant mollusk through every form of animate creation up to the ver-

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tebrate mammal, including man; from the family, through the tribe, to the nation; from the paternal form of government, through the oligarchic and the aristocratic, to the democratic; from slavery, — the patriarchal capitalist owning his slave on terms hardly different from those on which he owns his wife, — to the complicated relationship of modern society between employer and employed. In this movement, notwithstanding apparent blunders, false types and arrested developments, the evolutionist sees a steady progress from lower to higher forms of life. The Christian evolutionist, then, will expect to find modern Christianity more complex than primitive Christianity. For the purpose of this comparison, I do not go back of Bethlehem: then, the confession “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” — now, the Episcopal Thirty-nine Articles, the Methodist Episcopal Twenty-four Articles, or the Westminster Confession of Faith of Thirty-three Chapters, with their numerous sub-sections; then, the simple supper-talk with the twelve friends, met in a fellowship sanctified by prayer and love — now, an elaborate altar, jeweled vestments, pealing organ, kneeling and awe-stricken worshipers; then, meetings from house to house for prayer, Christian praise, and instruction in the simpler facts of the Master’s life and the

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fundamental principles of his kingdom, — now, churches, with preachers, elders, bishops, sessions, presbyteries, councils, associations, missionary boards; then, a brief prayer, breathing the common wants of universal humanity in a few simple petitions, — now, an elaborate ritual, appealing to ear and eye and imagination, by all the accessories which art and music and historic association combined can confer; then, a brotherhood in Jerusalem, with all things in common, and a board of deacons to see that all were fed and none were surfeited, — now, a brotherly love making its way, in spite of selfishness, towards the realization of that brotherhood of humanity which is as yet only a dream of poets. And he will expect to find that the Christianity of the nineteenth century, despite its failures and defects, is better, intellectually, organically, morally, and spiritually, than the Christianity of the first century.

The doctrine of evolution is not a doctrine of harmonious and uninterrupted progress. The most common, if not the most accurate formula of evolution is “struggle for existence, survival of the fittest.” The doctrine of evolution assumes that there are forces in the world seemingly hostile to progress, that life is a perpetual battle and progress a perpetual victory. The Christian evolutionist will then expect to find



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Christianity a warfare — in church, in society, in the individual. He will expect Christianity to be a Centaur, — half horse, half man; a Laocöon struggling with the serpents from the sea; a seed fighting its way against frost and darkness towards the light and life. He will recur continually to his definition that evolution is a continuous progressive change by means of resident forces. He will remember that the divine life is resident in undivine humanity. He will not be surprised to find the waters of the stream disturbed; for he will reflect that the divine purity has come into a turbid stream, and that it can purify only by being itself indistinguishably combined with the impure. When he is told that modern Christianity is only a “civilized paganism,” he will reply, “That is exactly what I supposed it to be; and it will continue to be a civilized paganism until the civilization has entirely eliminated the paganism.” He will not be surprised to find pagan ceremonies in the ritual, pagan superstitions in the creed, pagan selfishness in the life, ignorance and superstition in the church, and even errors and partialisms in the Bible. For he will remember that the divine life, which is bringing all life into harmony with itself, is a life resident in man. He will remember that the Bible does not claim to be the absolute Word of God; that, on the contrary,

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it declares that the Word of God was with God and was God, and existed before the world was; that it claims to be the Word of God, *as perceived and understood by holy men of old*, the Word as spoken to men, and understood and interpreted by men, who saw it in part as we still see it, and reflected it as from a mirror in enigmas. He will remember that the Church is not yet the bride of Christ, but the plebeian daughter whom Christ is educating to be his bride. He will remember that Christianity is not the absolutely divine, but the divine in humanity, the divine force resident in man and transforming man into the likeness of the divine. Christianity is the light struggling with the darkness, life battling with death, the spiritual overcoming the animal. The end is not yet. We judge Christianity as the scientist judges the embryo, as the gardener the bud, as the teacher the pupil, — not by what it is, but by what it promises to be.

The doctrine of evolution is not inconsistent with the existence of types of arrested development, nor with deterioration and decay. The progress is continuous, but not unbroken. Nature halts. She shows specimens of unfinished work. Evolution is not all onward and upward. There are incomplete types, stereotyped and left unchanged and unchanging; there are no-