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The Evolution of Christianity

Lyman Abbott was an American liberal theologian and a confidant of Theodore Roosevelt. He was a moderate man who sought to re-establish Christian faith among the American people in a period of change. This book, first published in 1893, argued that spiritual experience is always new and therefore every age requires a new expression for it. A believer in the possibility of harmonious co-existence between the Church and evolutionary theory, Abbott proposed a 'more intelligible and credible' religion that endeavoured to sustain faith by expressing it in contemporary terms. He maintained that science and faith were compatible and that both natural and spiritual elements belonged to a shared kingdom governed by the law of progress. Blending faith in historical Christianity with belief in progress and evolutionary theory, Abbott aimed to provide a bridge between religious life and late nineteenth-century philosophical thought.

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VOLUME 1

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THE EVOLUTION OF CHRISTIANITY

BY

LYMAN ABBOTT

LONDON
JAMES CLARKE & CO.
13 & 14 FLEET STREET

PREFACE.

WE are living in a time of religious ferment. What shall we do? Attempt to keep the new wine in the old bottles? That can only end in destroying the bottles and spilling the wine. Attempt to stop the fermentation? Impossible! And if possible, the only result would be to spoil the wine. No! Put the new wine into new bottles, that both may be preserved. Spiritual experience is always new. It must therefore find a new expression in each age. This book is an attempt to restate the eternal yet ever new truths of the religious life in the terms of modern philosophic thought.

The teachers in the modern church may be divided into three parties: one is endeavoring to defend the faith of the fathers and the forms in which that faith was expressed; one repudiates both the faith and the forms; one holds fast to the faith, but endeavors to restate it in

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

iv

PREFACE.

forms more rational and more consistent with modern habits of thought. To confound the second and third of these parties, because they agree in discarding ancient formularies, is a natural but a very radical blunder. The New Theology does not tend toward unfaith; it is, on the contrary, an endeavor to maintain faith by expressing it in terms which are more intelligible and credible. I hope that the reader of these pages will discover that I have not abandoned the historic faith of Christendom to become an evolutionist, but have endeavored to show that the historic faith of Christendom, when stated in the terms of an evolutionary philosophy, is not only preserved, but is so cleansed of pagan thought and feeling, as to be presented in a purer and more powerful form.

Mr. Drummond has contended, not that there is an analogy between natural and spiritual laws, but that the natural and the spiritual belong to one kingdom, so that the natural laws are projected into the spiritual world. It is my endeavor in this volume, in like manner, not to trace an analogy between evolution in the phy-

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE.

v

sical realm, and progress in the spiritual realm, but to show that the law of progress is the same in both. In the spiritual, as in the physical, God is the secret and source of life ; phenomena, whether material or spiritual, are the manifestation of his presence ; but he manifests himself in growth, not in stereotyped and stationary forms ; and this growth is from lower to higher, from simpler to more complex forms, according to well defined and invariable laws, and by a force resident in the growing object itself. That unknown force is God — God in nature, God in the church, God in society, and God in the individual soul. The only cognizable difference between evolution in the physical and evolution in the spiritual realms is that nature cannot shut God out, nor hinder his working, nor disregard the laws of its own life ; but man can and does. These principles constitute, to borrow a musical phrase, the *motif* of this book.

The chapters which constitute the book were originally delivered, extemporaneously, as lectures before the Lowell Institute of Boston. After their delivery their publication was called for. They had not been reported in full, and

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

vi

PREFACE.

compliance with the request for their publication necessitated writing them. In some instances criticism showed that I had failed to make my meaning clear. In such cases I have modified my original statements. But this has been done only for the purpose of avoiding misapprehension, not because in any case I have thought it prudent to modify the opinions expressed. I have not hesitated to incorporate in the book, as in the lectures, the substance, and in some cases the phraseology, of previous periodical publications; chapter fourth is to a considerable extent such a modification of matter previously printed.

To some readers the chapter on the Evolution of the Bible, and that on the Evolution of the Soul, may seem to surrender vital and essential articles of Christian faith. I hope to others they will make all that is vital in the faith of the church concerning justification, sin, and redemption more rational and credible. My aim has been, not to destroy, but to reconstruct.

LYMAN ABBOTT.

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 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. EVOLUTION AND RELIGION	1
II. THE EVOLUTION OF THE BIBLE	26
III. THE EVOLUTION OF THEOLOGY: THE OLD THE- OLOGY	68
IV. THE EVOLUTION OF THEOLOGY: THE NEW THE- OLOGY	96
V. THE EVOLUTION OF THE CHURCH	136
VI. THE EVOLUTION OF CHRISTIAN SOCIETY	173
VII. THE EVOLUTION OF THE SOUL	203
VIII. THE SECRET OF SPIRITUAL EVOLUTION	229
IX. CONCLUSION: THE CONSUMMATION OF SPIRITUAL EVOLUTION	245