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978-1-108-00020-8 - Evolution and Religion, Volume 1: Eight Sermons Discussing the Bearings of the Evolutionary Philosophy on the Fundamental Doctrines of Evangelical Christianity

Henry Ward Beecher

Excerpt

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## PREFACE.

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THE universal physical fact of evolution, which a widely accepted philosophy of our day postulates as a theory of the Divine method of creation, is one which so naturally and simply fits many a puzzling lock, that it is gratefully seized by many who seem to themselves to have been shut out from hope and from the truth.

For myself, while finding no need of changing my idea of the Divine personality because of new light upon His mode of working, I have hailed the Evolutionary philosophy with joy. Some of the applications of its principles to the line of development I have to reject; others, though not proven—and in the present state of scientific knowledge perhaps not even provable—I accept as probable; but the underlying truth, as a Law of Nature (that is, a regular method of the divine action), I accept and use, and thank God for it!

Slowly, and through a whole fifty years, I have been under the influence, first obscurely, imperfectly, of the great doctrine of Evolution. In my earliest preaching I discerned that the kingdom of heaven is a leaven, not only in the individual soul, but in the world; the kingdom is as a grain of mustard-seed; I was accustomed to call my crude notion a *seminal theory* of the kingdom of God in this world. Later I began to feel that science had struck a larger view, and that this unfolding of seed and blade and ear in spiritual things was but one application of a great cosmic doctrine, which underlay God's methods in universal creation, and was notably to be seen in the whole development of human society and human thought.

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That great truth—through patient accumulations of fact, and marvelous intuitions of reason, and luminous expositions of philosophic relation, by men trained in observation, in thinking, and in expression—has now become accepted throughout the scientific world. Certain parts of it yet are in dispute, but substantially it is the doctrine of the scientific world. And that it will furnish—nay, is already bringing—to the aid of religious truth as set forth in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ a new and powerful aid, fully in line with other marked developments of God's providence in this His world, I fervently believe.

The relations of this great truth to Evangelical Christianity, so as to show that the substantial points of executive doctrine are helped and not hindered by this new aspect in which we are called to view them, offer the field in which I hope to do some work during the closing period of my life.

During the past two years I have preached with specific application of this inspiring principle to various practical aspects of the Christian life; and those discourses have been put together for issue in book form. But, for a few Sundays, during the early summer of this year, I undertook to discuss the bearings of the Evolutionary philosophy on some of the fundamental doctrines of our religious faith,—the Divine Nature, the question of Human Sinfulness, the Inspiration of the Bible, the Divine Providence, and correlated subjects; that is to say, to show what light, in my judgment, falls on those great truths from this helpful view of God's methods. I could wish that my views might have been carefully written out before delivery; but I could not write them out. I could only hope for fairly accurate reports of what I might speak. I have taken the opportunity to revise these reports before putting them in a book. They appear in the following pages (Part I.); and will serve as an introduction of the *general principles* on which the discourses of *specific application* (Part II.) have been based; and not only so, but will show the main lines along which I believe the new course of the old ship will largely be laid.

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*PREFACE.*

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It is a familiar thought that the unbelief of to-day is the faith of to-morrow: and yet to-day always condemns the premature to-morrow. The skepticism of honest men unfolds the truth, and becomes the conviction of the after-time. The theology that is rising upon the horizon will still rise. I cannot hope that it will be the perfect theology, but it will be a regenerated one, and I think far more powerful than the old; a theology of hope, and of love, which shall cast out fear. Nay more, it is to be a theology that will run nearer to the spirit and form of Christ's own teachings, he who found the tenderness of Divine Providence in the opening lilies of the field, and the mighty power of God's kingdom in the unfolding of germ and leaf and fruit.

HENRY WARD BEECHER.

PEEKSKILL, N. Y., September, 1885.

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## INTRODUCTORY.

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### THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES.

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“When it is evening, ye say, It will be fair weather: for the sky is red. And in the morning, It will be foul weather to-day: for the sky is red and lowering. O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?”—Matthew xvi : 2, 3.

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This could mean nothing unless it meant that, as the weather changes, so God’s providential developments are presenting a diversified appearance from time to time. He was in the world and the world knew him not; he was among the then most religiously cultivated people, and he was developing a very much higher conception of morality and spiritual religion than theirs, and they could not understand it. They looked upon all the miracles that he wrought, the transcendent works of benevolence and of grace, as if they were in a circus, watching the athletic feats of men and animals. It was curiosity, not moral hunger; and they followed him here and there, saying, “Now give us a sign; now do some striking thing.” He reproached them because they had no *spiritual instinct, by which to discern the work of God that was going on in their own time*. And that is the basis not only of this discourse but of the others that may be found in the following pages, on the subject of discerning those great developments of God’s providence in this world, in and around about the sphere of religion.

PLYMOUTH CHURCH, SUNDAY MORNING, May 17, 1885.

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That there is a great change going on, every man that is past forty years of age has at least a vague idea. Things are not as they were. Any church in any denomination that lives in the great thoroughfares of life is not what it was thirty, forty or fifty years ago. If it is so, it must be some church placed away in the mountains or off in the remote valleys, some kind of catacomb church, some church as well preserved as the mummies in Egypt. But the churches that live out-doors and have a free sun and free circulation of air,—it is preposterous to say that they are not changed and changing. Men are greatly alarmed about this,—just men, good men, conscientious men. Nor are we to trifle with their alarm. Yet I rejoice at that which they grieve over, and I grieve over that which they rejoice in.

For example, everybody notices that Sunday is not kept as it used to be; whether for better or for worse—a little of both, I think. The cords are not so tight. We do not begin Sunday on Saturday night any more. We do not absolutely forbid all cheerful converse on the Sabbath morning. We more than smile, we are not afraid to lay forth our hand, nor to walk forth in the communion of nature in field or garden. In various ways the Sabbath has been “popularized,” as it is said; and over that some grieve. But whatever may be the change, there is this change:—the Church is not so awful as it used to be. It is larger, freer; it is more cheerful. Children are not petrified as they used to be. I used to love to go to church because I did enjoy walking down the half-mile of street and hearing birds, hearing the winds in the trees; but when I got into church I didn't dare to stir; and so I went to sleep, chiefly,—with an occasional rap of grace on my head. But the church was always cold and unsympathetic to my young nature. The old Litchfield church, mounted on that high hill and standing in the middle of the green,—a hill on which all the winds swept, and swept always from every direction, apparently—that great old shackling building, whose pulpit is now in the Brooklyn Historical Society—I can remember no single thing in my young history inside of that

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church that ever touched either my imagination or my heart,—except the flying in of swallows once in a while, that would come in of a summer-day when the windows were open. That was a means of grace to me. They were my humble angels. Now things are different. Children do really like to go to meeting, in many places, and I wish more of them were brought hither.

Then, too, religious doctrines are not so rigorously preached as they used to be. A sermon on fore-ordination, election, decrees, reprobation, would be a novelty in most congregations. And I venture to say that where they are yet preached it is done at times of exchange; the minister does not like to live in his own parish after he has preached a rousing sermon on those subjects.

The change in doctrine is even greater than I can speak of now; I shall have more to say on that when I take up some of the doctrines specifically and discuss them. But one thing is true: I had almost said our enemies, but our troubled friends I will say, are mourning at the decay of doctrine, the laxity of doctrine, the want of what is called discriminating doctrines. Their grief, if it is a matter of grief, is well founded. Old-fashioned doctrinal preaching has very largely gone out of use. It remains here and there, but it is not general; and it is growing less and less.

For there are many ancient dogmas which are either renounced or are falling into oblivion. The great doctrine of retribution in the future is an example; the eternity of conscious torment of all that have not known Christ and been accepted by him, in its former savage and hideous form is almost never taught in the pulpit to-day—to the honor of religion and to the glory of God I speak it.

This growing disinclination to preach on the standard dogmas is creating a good deal of alarm; for although councils are slow to ordain or license a man who is not perpendicular on the doctrine of the eternity of future retribution, yet they are growing more and more charitable; and with a little smoothing, with a little explanation, men are being licensed by good sound orthodox councils, who,

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on that subject, are as far from their fathers as the east is from the west.

Then, there is in the whole subject of religion far more cheerfulness and elasticity than there used to be. It is true that the Roman Church, which has a great many things in it that we might well copy, dedicated one half of every Sunday to gloom, awe, profound submission of the soul to God in religion; but after the morning service had passed, the Church dedicated the afternoon to social life and to cheerfulness, and hilarity even. The old Puritan element did not. They locked Sunday from sunrise to sundown, and made it hard and barren for most men. Now the Protestant church life has changed. Church parlors have become popular. I believe Plymouth Church was the first in America that ever had in the building a suite of parlors, as I think it is also the first church in America that ever had flowers every Sunday on the platform; and the first church that ever had a hymn-book that gave to the people all the tunes as well as all the hymns that were to be sung. There are multitudes of such books now, but I believe "Plymouth Collection" was the pioneer. And taking the churches up and down through the land, more provision is made for social life and enjoyment, even for amusement. The whole region of Sunday-school life is raised many, many, many degrees above anything that was known in my childhood. It really is a comely and beautiful sight now to go into a Sunday-school and see how happy the children are; to see and enjoy the various festivals that are provided for them.

The clerical position too, is changed very much. When the minister walked down the street fifty years ago in New England, children ran into the back doors and hid. He was dressed like a magnate. He talked and walked like a being superior to those round about him. He had an atmosphere of authority, he was magisterial. He was ordained to feel that he was the channel by which God spoke directly to the people. God speaks through every man that tells the truth and speaks in love; and ministers that do not either speak true or speak in love—no ordination can give them the right

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to speak for God. Once being ordained, it was in my boyhood thought that the minister was a superior being. But the voice of the preacher to-day is "Men and brethren, we are men of like passions with you." They are no longer worshiped. They stand mostly just for what they are, and not for what their office is. They are elder brethren, not God's vicegerents.

Now I count these various changes as mere symptoms of greater changes that have taken place and are taking place underneath. They are merely the efflorescence, on the skin, of that which is at work in the blood of theology. I do not altogether wonder that some men fear these symptoms; but how much they will dread depends on their temperament, on their education, on their habits of judging. Are these changes and those from which they spring to be really feared by good men? Are we drifting into atheism? Are we drifting into infidelity? Are we drifting into absolute worldliness that shall supplant all moral and religious impulse and worship?

As for myself, while these symptoms, more or less exaggerated, naturally would excite fear if not analyzed and understood—I am impressed with gratitude and with joy and with the most hopeful courage for the future on account of them. I thank God that I see these changes going on; just as I thank God for seeing what the spring is doing outdoors to-day. God is certainly advancing the Church and the world in upward directions. These special changes, I have said, are only part of a great development which is in progress; which springs from the very foundation of things; resulting from no single or special influence, from no particular men or philosophies; which hardly cares for help from human hands, and which cannot be hindered by human opposition. It is organic, universal, divine. If things are being taken up by the roots, it is to be transplanted into a nobler soil. It is such a movement as proceeds among the spheres. The sun does not rise for New York, it rises for every State from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. It rises over every land which it illumines. There is going on a work that includes more or less directly the whole human



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family. We ought to have expected it ; for the voice of the whole Bible is the voice of one looking forward hopefully. Substantially, the testimony of every part of the sacred scriptures, Old Testament and New, is " It doth not yet appear." In every age prophets, martyrs, witnesses, said: " God is unfolding greater things in the future than any that are known." And everywhere the testimony of sacred writ is that of expectation, of fore-looking, of hopefulness, of courage.

We have very generally been accustomed to throw forward to the millennium that hopefulness of the future; but we are taught by more recent philosophies and theologies : " The kingdom of Heaven is a seed, the smallest of all ; but when grown,"—ah ! that growing, that unfolding ! When it has sprouted it ceases to be a seed. Shall nature weep because the seed is dead ? Except the kernel of wheat die, it cannot live or bring forth, saith the New Testament. And so in every age, whatever has come as the fruits of past experience is the seed of the future, to be planted again and largely to perish, in order that it may bring forth an advanced condition of things.

It has been thought that in the millennium, or, as others put it, at the Second Advent, when Christ shall come again on earth, he then, as some seem to think by physical force, by authority, will change things ; and the wicked shall all be burnt up, and the righteous shall flourish. But now we are taught that that process of change has been going on from the beginning, slowly, slowly ; that we are on the eve of a day in which that development is to come much more rapidly, and that it is to be an unfolding that is to affect every process of human thought—our notion of dogma, doctrine, government, laws, institutions, philosophies, theologies, everything. These are all growing to a future blossom and future fruit. And of this not only are the witnesses such men as Paul, who says that now we see through a glass darkly ; all knowledge that we have now shall at length seem like child's play ; all teaching that we have now shall pass away when the perfect day is come :—but also we have that other Voice, " that hath promised, saying,

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Yet once more, I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. And this phrase *Yet once more*, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of those things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain." That is, in other words, we have here set forth the relativity of all knowledge, and the coming of things that are not relative, but are permanent and shall be forever. This is the presage of those later stages of the evolution of the human race which we are bound to expect and to hope for, though many of us will die without the sight.

Many admit that philosophy—human philosophy; science—the physical sciences; human institutions, such as legislatures, judiciaries, laws, are subject to unfolding; that laws and customs naturally would change—with climate, with nationality, and with advanced experiences of mankind. They have learned to accept the fact that civilization is progressive. Ecclesiastics believe that the Church moves as a locomotive does, but does not change; the track is laid by God's hand and no man may move it. It is admitted that mere human inventions and devices may grow, change and waste, but asserted that religion is a thing perfected—a jewel fashioned in heaven, and the Church a divine casket exactly adapted, and authoritatively chosen; it, and no other! Like mathematical quantities, like arithmetic or geometry, religion is definite, absolute and unchangeable. But daily experience contradicts this notion Religion is simply Right Living. In both Old and New Testaments it is called Righteousness. It begins as a seed. It develops as a growth. It is relative to the individual characteristics, to the age, the institutions, the whole economy of life.

Every father and every mother knows that in the process of bringing up their own families there is nothing that is absolute to the little children. You cannot convey directly a large thought to a child. You are generally obliged to convey ideas to children through fictions. In the history of the unfolding of truth in this world, God has made it absolutely necessary that we should work by the shadows of things, by the pictures of things. So then fables, para-