

## ARTICLE VII.

## SOCIAL EVOLUTION AND THE CHURCHES.

BY THE REV. HENRY DAVIES, PH.D.

I. THERE is nothing more assuring to our modern institutional religious life than the fact that we are hearing less and less from that class of critics whose special, pet aversion is an ecclesiastic or an ecclesiastical institution. To the scientific world the death of Tyndall and Huxley was sincerely lamented; and as true friends of science the religious leaders of the times looked not without sorrow on their demise. But it is equally true that there is no one to take up the task of prejudicial criticism which these and similar men have carried on for so long a time. The fact is, that to the vast majority of people religion is a serious affair; one which is somehow or other to play a dominant part in those developments which the times seem to be pointing out as the next step in the progress of the species. This fact is shown in the large number of laymen who write on the subject; in the equally large number of extra-ecclesiastical organizations which owe their initiation to men who cannot bear the idea of a religionless society, but who are equally averse to the creeds of the churches; and lastly in the practical way in which the phenomena of traditional church life form the topic of serious investigation on the part of interested outsiders. All that is done by these persons is not wise or charitable; yet we must acknowledge that this change of attitude towards the subjects involved in our religious life is a significant sign of the times and also one altogether welcomed.

It is with the view of winning more serious respect still to these much-maligned and often-misunderstood traditional churches, that this article was written. The writer feels that if the process of change which is obtaining in all other departments of social life were seen in relation to our churches; if those who turn against these churches as fossilized, unyielding institutions, incapable of making the necessary adjustments to our changed conditions; if we could see that this process is actually deeply affecting these churches,—we would not be so ready to turn away from these bodies, which have given life, literature, and law to our Western civilization. It is the belief of the writer, that if the change referred to could be considered in the light of those laws of scientific evolution which have been so influential in modifying other departments of our social organism, we should find a rapid reversal of judgment with reference to the place and influence of the church in our social evolution. One of the principal ways to do this is to show how that process is daily affecting these organizations; and with this theme this article will be mainly occupied.

By the phrase "the churches" I do not limit myself to those individual bodies which we comprise under the word "denominations." The words are used, with a generous elasticity, to denote all those organizations which are based upon the recognition of that historical faith which owes its origin to Christ. I exclude from consideration here only those purely subjective and arbitrary forms of religious thinking which have attempted to claim a lineage with this historic faith, or to assimilate its own content with that more universal outlook. We are not, therefore, concerned here with "orthodox" or "liberal," with "inspirational" or "institutional," churches. These terms, in a strict or a broad sense, have no value whatever in determining the essential nature of what we mean by the

church. They may be rightfully applied only to qualify some characteristic which that unchanging unity which we designate "the church of God" has assumed in the course of its historical manifestation. I refer, in speaking of "the churches," to those historical bodies, of whatever name or sign, which are built upon faith in Christ, without discriminating carefully between the different idiosyncrasies which they possess, or between the numerous subdivisions into which the process of disintegration is rapidly changing them to-day, as in the past.

That this process is going on is, perhaps, a truism with most of us; yet it is not equally certain that we are thoroughly convinced as to the reason, the extent, and the outcome of this change. Through a failure to grasp the full import of the evolutionary hypothesis, *as that hypothesis relates to religion*, we have much thinking which implies a certain settled conviction that evolution and religion are irreconcilable. Equally ignoble is the wholesale assumption that in the evolutionary hypothesis is the last word of the human mind on this subject. The writer is out of all sympathy with the first view, and he agrees with the latter to this extent at least, namely, that in the fundamental thesis of the philosophy of scientific evolution, the main incentive to a modification in our views is to be found.

Briefly stated, the doctrine of evolution—or development, if this word be preferred—is based on a twofold discovery. First, the process of life on our globe, and in fact wherever there is life, is *one* process. All "the manifold of experience," to use Kant's expressive and inclusive term for what transpires without the mind, and mental phenomena as well, are the manifestation of a single, persistent power of life, which has this twofold way of revelation. Thus all nature, all history, all science, under the law of action and reaction, are developments of this one source of energy. The phenomena of chemistry, their elementary classifica-

tion; the phenomena of astronomy, their discovery and systemization; the phenomena of physics, with their relation to the ultimate problems of matter and motion; the phenomena of biology, with the wonderful panorama of the processes of birth, death, and reproduction; the phenomena of mind, in their physical and psychological correlation; the phenomena of history and society, including religion,—all things stand in relation to this ultimate fact, which evolutionary science has established, namely, the presence and power of one single force, of which the manifold life of the world is the manifestation. The full import of this great discovery is very far from being grasped, especially with reference to religion; and this, because the whole of that class of phenomena called religious is embedded deep in all living and progressive developments.

The other great principle underlying the evolutionary mode of thought, is, that this process of life is a process from the more simple to the more complex. Nothing appears for the first time in an adult form. The tree begins as a seed and slowly attains its majority, passing through the stress and strain of growth forward to its normal goal. Even the somewhat incalculable history of states obeys this rule in the broad interpretation of it. Human society does not begin in a perfectly developed political and religious condition. According to the development hypothesis, the human species has passed from its simpler to more complex social arrangements. Politics, after being concerned with the most elementary needs of communities, has come to be the complex and absorbing pursuit it is to-day. That life-process, which to-day culminates in the conception, so alluring, so fatuous, of an ideal state of perfected persons living in perfect relations with one another and with the world, was at one time the inspiring ideal of one brain. It has gained its prominence only by submitting to the conditions of all development. Its formation and growth

could not constitute an exception to the law of action and reaction.

But evolution or development, as related to religious and ecclesiastical history, has not been seriously or commonly accepted. A commonplace circumstance will show this. The other day, whilst walking down one of the main streets of a New England city boasting a university and public library, I read on a placard outside the Y. M. C. A. building this anomalous notice: So and so will speak here on Sunday next; subject, "Revelation or Evolution: Which?" It is implied in that notice that the public must make a choice between the two, as though there existed a radical antagonism between that process of life of which the Bible is the record and that process which, up to the present, has of necessity been largely confined to physical science!

It is the failure, on the part of many, sympathetically to grasp the inevitable bearing of this doctrine of development on religion, which accounts in large measure for the surprise and alarm which in certain quarters accompanies the obvious disintegration of the churches. Now the rationale of this movement is simple enough, the fact being that the churches are disintegrating because they cannot help themselves. The real occasion for alarm and surprise would be if they did not disintegrate. For it is, in the light of these two principal positions of the evolutionary philosophy, an inherent necessity of all life and all institutions based upon living processes, that they change; and the indispensable conditions of change are, slow disintegration of part from part; the gradual decay and death, from disuse, of neglected or exhausted sources of life; the assimilation of new and more suitable ones; and the purposive selection of means for their effectuation. Without these conditions no progress could take place, and because this is so, we are called upon to witness the breaking-up of those religious

traditions which have nourished the life of mankind for so long a time in the past. All change is a sign of progress.

"Cast leaves and feathers rot in last year's nest,  
 The winged brood, flown thence, new dwellings plan ;  
 The serf of his own Past is not a man ;  
 To change and change is life, to move and never rest :—  
 Not what we are, but what we hope, is best."

II. Thus far we have seen the bearing of the theory of development upon the churches in its most general aspect. It remains, in this second part of my article, to mention three changes which have occurred in the process above referred to, and which are destined to shape the future of the churches to a very considerable extent.

I. The first is concerned with the idea of religion. It is a fact that the idea of religion is undergoing profound modification both from within and without. We are growing more and more familiar with the ethical conception. The old metaphysical, suprarational conception made of religion a something out of all connection with the working of our ordinary understanding ; a something which needed official interpreters or sacramental mediation. Right life and religion were separated. You must "get religion," according to this view. Among thinking men this conception has largely been superseded.

In nothing, perhaps, is this change more clearly indicated than in the vital way theology has modified its systematic views of God. It will be agreed, by all reflective readers, that for religion nothing is so central as the idea of God. All religious tenets depend ultimately upon our deepest thought of God. It is as this thought is modified that the idea of religion changes. Now, the question comes, How has evolution modified our idea of God? By bringing to light new facts and relations, by which we gain broader views of the cosmical process. We can gain no higher synthesis than that which the facts at hand justify. Widen

the area of facts, and you necessarily heighten the synthesis. Now physical science, during the past half-century or so, has added very materially to our sum of knowledge. The growth has been extraordinary, and equally so has been the searching criticism to which this knowledge has been subjected at the hands of the critical philosophy. All this has tended so to modify our conceptions of religion and of God, the central fact of religion, that we can no longer conceive of him as the eighteenth century thinkers thought—justifying Huxley's jest at what was called by him "the carpenter theory." For just so long as he was conceived of as distant from the world, the idea of religion assumed fatalistic and non-moral features. There can be no reasonable doubt that this was the fact. The conception of God and his relations with the world held by many of the prominent post-Reformation thinkers, though ostensibly intended to aid in establishing a truly ethical religion, really involved the baldest fatalism. A perusal of the leading symbols of the post-Reformation churches will serve to explain, at least in great part, the vehemence of the protest which the modern spirit is making against their unethical implications. The controversy over Deism, which I apprehend is still unsettled, whilst agnosticism enjoys its unabated vitality, was only one feature of this general tendency.

Evolution, on the other hand, has brought the transcendent and the actual into such close proximity, that the mind easily makes the inference, clear and fruitful in theology, that God is *in* his world. If we reflect for a moment, we can see the immediate consequence of this modification. It elevates our thought of the world, making it more worthy of our admiration and esteem, and, if I judge correctly, this thought of the world underlies most of our reactionary philosophy. To us the world is not a means simply of material progress; it has æsthetical and even eth-

ical significance. God is filling things with ideal elements, showing thus that he is not unfriendly to the natural world. Every tree and flower, so runs much of the religio-poetical thought of our day, is a shekinah: "every bush is aflame with God." But we also gain, by this modification, in our idea of man. Man, it is true, is part of the complex unity called the Universe, but he receives special dignity in so far as he is made more nearly akin with the Author of this complex unity. This, evolution has really, though unconsciously, done. By tearing aside much of the metaphysical drapery from God, we have discovered more clearly the essential relationship between him and his creatures. Man participates in the divine nature; is, in fact, a divine being, and therefore a religious, i.e., devoted, consecrated person. Under the impulse of these ideas, we feel a strong desire for more knowledge of one who is so near us, whose awful presence is so dignifying and inspiring. Under this impelling desire, reflecting men have turned their eyes backwards, and cast a searching glance to the past, and found loyalty to this divine element in man a characteristic of all the great personalities of history. This is so much a habit of our thinking to-day that we take it for granted, although, like most of our mental habits, it has a history.

The results of these modifications, introduced by serious thinking, are obvious in almost every living pulpit which is in touch with the times. The idea of religion which is gaining increasing power is not the notion that it consists in belief of a creed; but in conduct, regulated by an ideal conception of God's nature and relations with the world. It is not going to church and worshiping once a week in a building "consecrated" for that purpose; but the life lived in the vivid consciousness and joyous fellowship of the Universal Father. It is not "otherworldliness," but the intensest devotion to the affairs of the present as preparing for a better state in this world and a probable next.



But what we specially desire to notice is, that these modifications would have been impossible, so far as we can see, without corresponding changes in our philosophical thinking, in our scientific views, and also in the realm of social achievement. They have come as a result of these changes. The higher synthesis of philosophical truth with the moral ideal could not fail to modify the idea of God, and therefore of religion. It is an ethico-philosophical conception of religion which appeals to the deepest life of the present time, and in this fact lies the substantial ground for believing that religion will remain with us, now as ever, the most significant factor of modern life.

2. The second sign of disintegration may be dismissed with greater brevity. There is a marked tendency, quite in harmony with the evolutionary mode of thought, to emphasize union in the essentials of religion.

It is not necessary to refer to statistics here; and, even if it were, they would not be a reliable source of knowledge. Statistics either prove too much or too little. Besides, we are dealing with those impalpable transformations which may be called "the tendencies of modern religious life." We shall therefore continue upon the lines already adopted, and try to show that, owing to the operation of the inevitable laws of change, the churches, so long separated, are now rapidly coming together upon terms of mutual agreement in those essentials of religion which, historically and philosophically, can be regarded as constituting the *raison d'être* of religion itself.

This disintegrating process, like that which has resulted in the ethicalizing of our idea of God, and therefore of religion, arises from the factors involved in the universal method of progress. Disintegration presupposes reintegration, and implies separation of part from part—not necessarily, it is true, integral parts—which results in revealing common features among those parts. In this way we

arrive at what we call "laws." For example, those periodical ways of acting which the study of the heavenly bodies manifests are called "the modes of their behavior," or, "the laws of the heavenly bodies"; but what we mean in reality is that in the critical process of our knowledge of an extra-mental world, we have noticed the regular processes which certain bodies, under the attraction of gravitation, possess. Similarly, what we call politics, and the "laws" of political economy (often, it must be confessed, anything but stable quantities), are nothing but our observations of the habitual functioning of certain well-considered and separated phenomena. In religious evolution it is coming to be admitted that the same is true. We are beginning to find that the churches have certain "ways of functioning" common to them all, and that these ways of functioning are essential to the existence of the churches; as distinguished from other matters up to the present considered important, but which do not belong to the "nature" of the elements under examination.

It is important to observe that it is not enough that certain common features in our religious life be thus made manifest; it is necessary that, for a complete case, these be the absolute ones, all others being regarded as introductory to these. This only a long process of conflict, criticism, and change, such as the last thousand years or so has witnessed, could thoroughly show. Now, not only is evolution as thus described, destroying unnecessary growths upon the substance of religion, thus revealing her true and beautiful lineaments; but, as part of the same critical process, we are beginning to grasp the fact, as never before, that these common features lead to a more "socialistic" construction of the point of view in religious matters. We are beginning to see that religion is not only a concern of the individual, but also a social force of the highest magnitude. The great inconsistency of religious faiths has al-

ways occurred at this point. For example, much time has been expended in the endeavor to determine which was first, the individual or society, in the conception of Jesus. The truth is that both are held in his thought in indissoluble simultaneity. His ethical ideal is, to put so much in brief: *realize yourself by sacrificing yourself to a social ideal, the kingdom of God.* Man is to find himself in society, not in isolation from it. Under this ethical impulse, we are forced in this age, in the contemplation of the social ideal, to approach nearer to one another, to acknowledge the unity which underlies our separated, corporate ways of acting, and to yearn for an acknowledgment of our common brotherhood in that which is highest. The point at which this process tends to culminate is the spectacle of society completely ethicalized under the highest idea of God, and local distinctions yielding to the feeling of a common unity in religion comprehending all mankind.

As this article is only intended to indicate tendencies, not to particularize results, I need not pause to mention the positive directions which this movement is taking among the churches. The great influence of the Parliament of Religions at Chicago will have lost much of its power and significance, if we do not learn that it is only by a patient and painstaking process of scientific thinking that we can reach a satisfactory statement of what the essential features of religion are. I say advisedly *scientific* thinking. For there is much thought and work expended on these subjects which is sheer waste of time. We cannot, by the strenuous necessities of our mental nature, anticipate the result, which some seem so anxious to consider already settled. Only as the ever-rolling stream of time slowly completes the disintegration, can the fellowship so happily inaugurated reach its final consummation. The human heart must suffer much yet, before it can feel, in all its freedom and freshness, the touch of that master heart which beat

in sympathy with all humanity, and which always bade us hope for the realization of the ideal brotherhood.

3. The last illustration of our topic which I shall permit myself to employ is of a more positive and practical, if not also personal, nature. It is this: the ethicalizing of the great test by which the churches are to be judged. Briefly expressed, that test is: deeds, not doctrines. The ethical idea of religion, which we have seen has resulted from the changed conception of God, brought about by the evolutionary philosophy, is also responsible for this third development. It was inevitable and natural, under the new impulse, that a church's claims and rights should be measured by its previous fulfillment of duties, since we have no conception of rights which do not so originate. This judgment has been accelerated immensely by the new school of ethical thinkers, chiefly prominent in Germany and among the younger professors in America. They are the teachers of a new ethical ideal of personality. That ideal is, that it is man's right and duty to strive after the completest possible development of his whole personality. So largely, however, has the church occupied itself with a single corner or section of man's complex life, that the disproportion between the results and this new ideal has only excited the daily criticism of all thinking and serious minds. Believing that religion is the profoundest element in man's life, the writer cannot but regard these criticisms with some concern. They show how natural and necessary this new step is, and also that, for the future at least, that church which asserts the religious, but does not equally acknowledge the intellectual and moral, dignity of man, is foredoomed to destruction in the evolutionary process. The supreme privilege of the churches to-day is that they have a "door of opportunity" open to them, whereby they may prove their right to respect, and that is by becoming the champion of the rights of "the whole man." As a matter

of fact, the judgment is on, and according as they are faithful or unfaithful to this ethical test—deeds not doctrines—will their permanence be settled, and not according to the vehemence of their protests against the advance of ideas with which they have no sympathy. The doom is set and will “go by forever” between “the bloom and blight,” “the darkness and light,” of its hearing or failing to hear this its knell of judgment by the world. In other words, the evolutionary process has brought to light the essential ethicality of that social ideal to realize which the churches stand pledged by their Founder. This, it is hoped will be seen, it has done at the vast expense of much that was considered of value to our fathers. For it was inevitable that society should cast aside its old clothes, and that new ones should be assumed. We cannot live “coffined in brick and stone” when “the unmapped prairie” can be our own.

Enough has been said to show the main lines according to which our religious life is working itself out. The direction which it is at present taking, we observe, is not only towards a greater comprehensiveness, but towards increased effectiveness. Perhaps the two go together. This is clear from the prominence which ethical considerations take in it at every point. Hence we need not be in doubt long as to the whither of scientific theology or as to the tendency which the churches must take, in obedience to the scientific teaching of religion. For it must ever be in the direction of greater freedom. The days of religious individualism, like those of economic individualism, are drawing to a close. Augustine and Calvin must yield to Justin Martyr and Origen. The reason of man, finding new areas in which to exercise itself, cannot but apply itself to the new problems thus opened up before it. These new problems are the result of that slow but certain work of change which the conditions of human existence inevitably involve.

As regards the future of the churches, to win greater respect to which this article was written, we can speak only tentatively. Great and radical changes have already been accomplished in these historic institutions. These are not of a superficial character, as our remarks show, but concern the very life of these ancient bodies; so that it is no longer possible for them to hold, in the way of the past, the attitude of suspended judgment in regard to those matters which were in doubt. Evolutionary philosophy and biological science necessitate unconditional surrender to their main thesis by all social forces whatsoever. Only, therefore, as the churches, in the person of their members and ministry, adjust themselves, with all haste consistent with decorum, to the changes already accomplished, can these churches take their position as the leading factors in the social regeneration we desire and expect. This it has already done to a considerable extent, though the results are ridiculously inadequate. Our greatest need to-day is, it seems to me, men who understand the situation. The pulpits need thinkers: men, to use Carlyle's words, "who can tell what o'clock it is in the universe." The future of the churches can be secured only as they are provided more and more by such men. Their power is increasing, however.

I claim for the churches a deeper respect on account of their good faith in the midst of our social and intellectual palingenesis. Evolution is always slow, and the church is the slowest, the most conservative, of our social agencies. It is not wise, it is not just, to break away from them, when we remember how inscrutable are those forces which are gradually forcing upon them and upon all of us the logic of events. Instead of ostracism by the cultured and enlightened, they merit the utmost consideration at the hands of this entire generation. For probably no establishment of modern society has more to contend with just now than

it, and certainly none has a harder task before it. Least of all should we ignore this factor in the social evolution of the world. For it is far from being proved yet, that the power of spiritual life which every age needs is not, in some way, immediately connected with the existence of these much-maligned and much-misunderstood historic channels of the world's blessing. Rivers always take the course of channels already formed.

One important lesson our churches need constantly to lay to heart is the constant need of adjustment to new conditions of thought and action. If they will unitedly make a corresponding effort at understanding the world to which they are to minister; if they will yield as gracefully as may be to the social forces which beset us, such as the intellectual renaissance herein described; if the attitude of its leading thinkers—Origen, Erasmus, Beecher, etc.—become the attitude of its rank and file,—much of the abuse and absurd prejudicial criticism which has been leveled at it would disappear. The church is an integral element in the problem of society. It is the highest source of inspiration and expresses ideally the highest life yet attained by the human species. To underestimate or ignore it is folly. This the church itself needs to bear in mind.

It is impossible for us to revert to any condition which has ceased to contain those living religious inspirations which have been blessings in the past. Try how we will, we can never revive in detail any primitive religion in our vast and complex civilization. Our hope lies in the combination of the scientific and religious forces at work among us; that is to say, in a deeper comprehension of the unity which underlies the whole circle of life. Philosophy has the deepest word to say here, and a wise philosophy will not deny that development must never so absorb our minds as to exclude the exercise of rational faith in the world and its reality and in love, which is the key to all its growing mysteries. After all, development is without meaning apart from the knowledge of God.