

**THE THEOLOGY OF
AN EVOLUTIONIST.
[1897]**

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The Theology of an Evolutionist. [1897] by Lyman Abbott

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PREFACE

THIS book is a companion to two books, similar in character, already published: "The Evolution of Christianity" and "Christianity and Social Problems." Each of these volumes assumes the truth of the principle of evolution as defined by Professor Le Conte,¹ and attempts to apply that principle; the first volume in tracing the history of Christianity as a spiritual force; the second in exhibiting Christianity as a social development; the present one in a statement of Christianity as a system of doctrine. They will, I hope, eventually be followed by a fourth volume, in which the same principle will be applied in an attempt to trace the growth of the Old Testament, and possibly by a fifth, similarly tracing the growth of

¹ "A continuous progressive change, according to certain laws, and by means of resident forces." — *Evolution and its Relations to Religious Thought*.

the New Testament, as a body of literature. Neither of them would be complete without duplicating some of the ideas contained in the other volumes; for Christianity as a spiritual force cannot be dissociated from Christianity as a social order, nor either of these from Christianity as a system of thought, embodied in a religious literature. Nevertheless, though they assume the same principle and endeavor to apply it to the same great theme,—the elucidation of the Christian religion,—that theme is so large, and includes such different aspects of life and thought, that I believe it may be truly said that no one of these volumes duplicates its companions.

Each of them has grown out of a previous series of lectures or sermons: the first out of a course of lectures given before the Lowell Institute in Boston; the second out of a course of lectures given before the Meadville Theological Seminary, and subsequently repeated in a modified form in Plymouth Church; the third out of a series of sermons preached in the latter place. But neither volume is a republication of such addresses. Each has been

rewritten for permanent publication, though in the rewriting free use has been made of the material employed in the extemporaneous addresses in the pulpit and on the platform.

I received not long ago a letter from a stranger containing this significant sentence:—

“Forty years ago, while a student at the University of Munich, one of our professors, Baron Justus von Liebig, told us, a small circle of students taking extra lectures in toxicology, in a pause when an animated controversy about the bottom cause of life sprang up: . . . ‘Gentlemen, if the universe and our planet ever came to be governed by a wisdom, science, and penetration on a plan no higher than we mortals are capable of understanding and mastering, then I would most fervently wish to be out of it and in a safer place.’”

With that sentence I heartily concur. If I could conceive it possible that this universe were governed by a wisdom no greater than I am able to comprehend, I should not be able to believe in a God of infinite wisdom; for finite wisdom cannot comprehend infinite wisdom. It is, therefore, no part of my desire, still less of my purpose, to furnish in this book a system

of scientific or philosophical knowledge which shall explain the mysteries of the universe. It is no part of the desire of evolutionists to furnish such an explanation. Indeed, it would be difficult to find anywhere a nobler statement of the profound mystery of life than is to be found in the writings of Darwin, Huxley, and Herbert Spencer. The very word "agnostic," which has been applied by these gentlemen to themselves, and which was, indeed, first employed by Huxley, is an indication of their frank recognition that the universe cannot be comprehended by finite man. The creed of the evolutionist is all embodied in the statement that life is a growth. But growth is itself a mystery; and the statement that the universe is full of mysteries is not inconsistent with the statement that the history of the universe is a history of growth.

This volume is not, then, offered as a complete or comprehensive treatment of theological problems. It does not profess to furnish any final solution of the themes of which it treats. It endeavors only to indicate the direction in which modern thought is looking and ought to

look for the interpretation of spiritual life. It does not profess to add anything to Christian scholarship, but only to indicate how that material which is the common possession of all Christian scholars is to be correlated and interpreted. Its sole and simple aim is so to apply the fundamental principle of evolution to the problems of religious life and thought, that the light which that principle has afforded and the inspiration which it has furnished in the realm of natural science may be made available in the spiritual realm to the non-scholastic and non-professional reader.

LYMAN ABBOTT.

BROOKLYN, N. Y., *September*, 1897.