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# **Christianity and Progress**

Harry Emerson Fosdick

# Imprint

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## THE COLE LECTURES

The late Colonel E. W. Cole of Nashville, Tennessee, donated to Vanderbilt University the sum of five thousand dollars, afterwards increased by Mrs. E. W. Cole to ten thousand, the design and conditions of which gift are stated as follows:

"The Object of this fund is to establish a foundation for a perpetual Lectureship in connection with the School of Religion of the University, to be restricted in its scope to a defense and advocacy of the Christian religion. The lectures shall be delivered at such intervals, from time to time, as shall be deemed best by the Board of Trust; and the particular theme and lecturer will be determined by the Theological Faculty. Said lecture shall always be reduced to writing in full, and the manuscript of the same shall be the property of the University, to be published or disposed of by the Board of Trust at its discretion, the net proceeds arising therefrom to be added to the foundation fund, or otherwise used for the benefit of the School of Religion."

### Preface

No one who ever has delivered the Cole Lectures will fail to associate them, in his grateful memory, with the hospitable fellowship of the elect at Vanderbilt University. My first expression of thanks is due to the many professors and students there, lately strangers and now friends, who, after the burdensome preparation of these lectures, made their delivery a happy and rewarding experience for the lecturer. I am hoping now that even though prepared for spoken address the lectures may be serviceable to others who will read instead of hear them. At any rate, it seemed best to publish them without change in form—addresses intended for public delivery and bearing, I doubt not, many marks of the spoken style.

I have tried to make a sally into a field of inquiry where, within the next few years, an increasing company of investigators is sure to go. The idea of progress was abroad in the world long before men became conscious of it; and men became conscious of it in its practical effects long before they stopped to study its transforming consequences in their philosophy and their religion. No longer, however, can we avoid the intellectual issue which is involved in our new outlook upon a dynamic, mobile, progressive world. Hardly a better description could be given of the intellectual advance which has marked the last century than that which Renan wrote years ago: "the substitution of the category of *becoming* for *being*, of the conception of relativity for that of the absolute, of movement for immobility." [1] Underneath all other problems which the Christian Gospel faces is the task of choosing what her attitude shall be toward this new and powerful force, the idea of progress, which in every realm is remaking man's thinking.

I have endeavoured in detail to indicate my indebtedness to the many books by whose light I have been helped to see my way. In addition I wish to express especial thanks to my friend and colleague, Professor Eugene W. Lyman, who read the entire manuscript to my great profit; and, as well, to my secretary, Miss Margaret Renton, whose efficient service has been an invaluable help.

**H. E. F.**

New York

[1] Renan: *Averroès et L'Averroïsme*, p. vii.

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# LECTURE I

## THE IDEA OF PROGRESS

### I

The supposition that fish do not recognize the existence of water nor birds the existence of air often has been used to illustrate the insensitive unawareness of which we all are capable in the presence of some encompassing medium of our lives. The illustration aptly fits the minds of multitudes in this generation, who live, as we all do, in the atmosphere of progressive hopes and yet are not intelligently aware of it nor conscious of its newness, its strangeness and its penetrating influence. We read as a matter of course such characteristic lines as these from Tennyson:

"Yet I doubt not thro' the ages one increasing purpose runs,  
And the thoughts of men are widen'd with the process of the  
suns."

Such lines, however, are not to be taken as a matter of course; until comparatively recent generations such an idea as that never had dawned on anybody's mind, and the story of the achievement of that progressive interpretation of history is one of the most fascinating narratives in the long record of man's mental Odyssey. In particular, the Christian who desires to understand the influences, both intellectual and practical, which are playing with transforming power upon Christianity today, upon its doctrines, its purposes, its institutions, and its social applications, must first of all understand the idea of progress. For like a changed climate, which in time alters the fauna and flora of a continent beyond the power of human conservatism to resist, this progressive conception of life is affecting every thought and purpose of man, and no attempted segregation of religion from its influence is likely to succeed.

The significance of this judgment becomes the more clear when we note the fact that the idea of progress in our modern sense is not

to be found before the sixteenth century. Men before that time had lived without progressive hopes just as before Copernicus they had lived upon a stationary earth. Man's life was not thought of as a growth; gradual change for the better was not supposed to be God's method with mankind; the future was not conceived in terms of possible progress; and man's estate on earth was not looked upon as capable of indefinite perfectibility. All these ideas, so familiar to us, were undreamed of in the ancient and medieval world. The new astronomy is not a more complete break from the old geocentric system with its stationary earth than is our modern progressive way of thinking from our fathers' static conception of human life and history.

## II

It will be worth our while at the beginning of our study to review in outline this development of the idea of progress, that we may better understand the reasons for its emergence and may more truly estimate its revolutionary effects. In the ancient world the Greeks, with all their far-flung speculations, never hit upon the idea of progress. To be sure, clear intimations, scattered here and there in Greek literature, indicate faith that man in the past had improved his lot. Aeschylus saw men lifted from their hazardous lives in sunless caves by the intervention of Prometheus and his sacrificial teaching of the arts of peace; Euripides contrasted the primitive barbarism in which man began with the civilized estate which in Greece he had achieved—but this perceived advance never was erected into a progressive idea of human life as a whole. Rather, the original barbarism, from which the arts of civilization had for a little lifted men, was itself a degeneration from a previous ideal estate, and human history as a whole was a cyclic and repetitious story of never-ending rise and fall. Plato's philosophy of history was typical: the course of cosmic life is divided into cycles, each seventy-two thousand solar years in length; during the first half of each cycle, when creation newly comes from the hands of Deity, mankind's estate is happily ideal, but then decay begins and each cycle's latter half sinks from bad to worse until Deity once more must take a hand and make all things new again. Indeed, so far from reaching

the idea of progress, the ancient Greeks at the very center of their thinking were incapacitated for such an achievement by their suspiciousness of change. They were artists and to them the perfect was finished, like the Parthenon, and therefore was incapable of being improved by change. Change, so far from meaning, as it does with us, the possibility of betterment, meant with them the certainty of decay; no changes upon earth in the long run were good; all change was the sure sign that the period of degeneration had set in from which only divine intervention could redeem mankind. Paul on Mars Hill quoted the Greek poet Aratus concerning the sonship of all mankind to God, but Aratus's philosophy of history is not so pleasantly quotable:

"How base a progeny sprang from golden sires!  
And viler shall they be whom ye beget." [1]

Such, in general, was the non-progressive outlook of the ancient Greeks.

Nor did the Romans hit upon the idea of progress in any form remotely approaching our modern meaning. The casual reader, to be sure, will find occasional flares of expectancy about the future or of pride in the advance of the past which at first suggest progressive interpretations of history. So Seneca, rejoicing because he thought he knew the explanation of the moon's eclipses, wrote: "The days will come when those things which now lie hidden time and human diligence will bring to light. . . . The days will come when our posterity will marvel that we were ignorant of truths so obvious." [2] So, too, the Epicureans, like the Greek tragedians before them, believed that human knowledge and effort had lifted mankind out of primitive barbarism and Lucretius described how man by the development of agriculture and navigation, the building of cities and the establishment of laws, the manufacture of physical conveniences and the creation of artistic beauty, had risen, "gradually progressing," to his present height.[3] Such hopeful changes in the past, however, were not the prophecies of continuous advance; they were but incidental fluctuations in a historic process which knew no progress as a whole. Even the Stoics saw in history only a recurrent rise and fall in endless repetition so that all apparent change for good or

evil was but the influx or the ebbing of the tide in an essentially unchanging sea. The words of Marcus Aurelius are typical: "The periodic movements of the universe are the same, up and down from age to age"; "He who has seen present things has seen all, both everything which has taken place from all eternity and everything which will be for time without end; for all are of one kin and of one form"; "He who is forty years old, if he has any understanding at all, has, by virtue of the uniformity that prevails, seen all things which have been and all that will be." [4]

When with these Greek and Roman ideas the Hebrew-Christian influences blended, no conception of progress in the modern sense was added by the Church's contribution. To be sure, the Christians' uncompromising faith in personality as the object of divine redemption and their vigorous hope about the future of God's people in the next world, if not in this, calcined some elements in the classical tradition. Belief in cycles, endlessly repeating themselves through cosmic ages, went by the board. This earth became the theatre of a unique experiment made once for all; in place of the ebb and flow of tides in a changeless sea, mankind's story became a drama moving toward a climactic denouement that would shake heaven and earth together in a divine cataclysm. But this consummation of all history was not a goal progressively to be achieved; it was a divine invasion of the world expectantly to be awaited, when the victorious Christ would return and the Day of Judgment dawn.

The development of this apocalyptic phrasing of hope has been traced too often to require long rehearsal here. If the Greeks were essentially philosophers and welcomed congenially ideas like endless cosmic cycles, the Hebrews were essentially practical and dramatic in their thinking and they welcomed a picture of God's victory capable of being visualized by the imagination. At first their national hopes had been set on the restoration of the Davidic kingdom; then the Davidic king himself had grown in their imagination until, as Messiah in a proper sense, he gathered to himself supernal attributes; then, as a child of their desperate national circumstances, the hope was born of their Messiah's sudden coming on the clouds of heaven for their help. Between the Testaments this expectation expanded and robed itself with pomp and glory, so that when the Christians came they found awaiting them a phrasing of hope

which they accepted to body forth their certainty of God's coming sovereignty over all the earth. This expectation of coming triumph was not progressive; it was cataclysmic. It did not offer the prospect of great gains to be worked for over long periods of time; it offered a divine invasion of history immediately at hand. It was pictured, not in terms of human betterment to be achieved, but of divine action to be awaited. The victory would suddenly come like the flood in Noah's day, like the lightning flashing from one end of the heaven to the other, like a thief in the night.

To be sure, this eager expectation of a heavenly kingdom immediately to arrive on earth soon grew dim among the Christians, and the reasons are obvious. For one thing, the Church herself, moving out from days of hardship to days of preferment and prosperity, began to allure with her inviting prospects of growing power the enthusiasms and hopes of the people, until not the suddenly appearing kingdom from the heavens, but the expanding Church on earth became the center of Christian interest. For another thing, Christ meant more to Christians than the inaugurator of a postponed kingdom which, long awaited with ardent expectation, still did not arrive; Christ was the giver of eternal life now. More and more the emphasis shifted from what Christ would do for his people when he came upon the clouds of heaven to what he was doing for them through his spiritual presence with them. Even in the Fourth Gospel one finds this good news that Christ had already come again in the hearts of his people insisted on in evident contrast with the apocalyptic hope literally conceived. For another thing, dramatic hopes of a sudden invasion of the world are always the offspring of desperate conditions. Only when people are hard put to it do they want history catastrophically stopped in the midst of its course. The Book of Daniel must be explained by the tyrannies of Antiochus Epiphanes, the Book of Revelation by the persecutions of Domitian, the present recrudescence of pre-millennialism by the tragedy of the Great War. But when the persecution of the Church by the State gave way to the running of the State by the Church; when to be a Christian was no longer a road to the lions but the sine qua non of preferment and power; when the souls under the altar ceased crying, "How long, O Master, the holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?"

then the apocalyptic hopes grew dim and the old desire for a kingdom immediately to come was subdued to an expectation, no longer imperative and urgent, that sometime the course of history would stop on Judgment Day.

In all these Greek and Roman, Hebrew and Christian contributions, which flowed together and then flowed out into the medieval age, there was no suggestion of a modern idea of progress, and in the medieval age itself there was nothing to create a fresh phrasing of expectancy. Men were aware of the darkness of the days that had fallen on the earth; even when they began to rouse themselves from their lethargy, their thoughts of greatness did not reach forward toward a golden age ahead but harked back

"To the glory that was Greece  
And the grandeur that was Rome,"

and their intellectual life, instead of being an adventurous search for new truth, was a laborious endeavour to stabilize the truth already formulated in the great days of the early Church. Indeed, the Church's specific contribution of a vividly imagined faith in a future world, as the goal of the most absorbing hopes and fears of men, tended rather to confirm than to dissipate the static conception of earthly life and history. With an urgency that the ancient world had never known the Christian world believed in immortality and visualized the circumstances of the life to come so concretely that in a medieval catechism the lurid colour of the setting sun was ascribed to the supposition that "he looketh down upon hell." [5] Nothing in this life had any importance save as it prepared the souls of men for life to come. Even Roger Bacon, his mind flashing like a beacon from below the sky-line of the modern world, was sure that all man's knowledge of nature was useful only in preparing his soul to await the coming of Antichrist and the Day of Judgment. There was no idea of progress, then, in the medieval age. Human life and history were static and the only change to be anticipated was the climactic event

"When earth breaks up and heaven expands."

### III

The emergence of modern progressive hopes out of this static medievalism is one of the epic occurrences of history. The causes which furthered the movement seem now in retrospect to be woven into a fabric so tightly meshed as to resist unraveling. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to see at least some of the major factors which furthered this revolutionary change from a static to a progressive world.

Among the first, scientific invention is surely to be noted. Even Roger Bacon, prophesying with clairvoyant insight far in advance of the event, foresaw one of the determining factors of the modern age: "Machines for navigating can be made so that without rowers great ships can be guided by one pilot on river or sea more swiftly than if they were full of oarsmen. Likewise vehicles are possible which without draught-animals can be propelled with incredible speed, like the scythed chariots, as we picture them, in which antiquity fought. Likewise a flying machine is possible in the middle of which a man may sit, using some ingenious device by which artificial wings will beat the air like those of a flying bird. Also machines, small in size, can be constructed to lift and move unlimited weights, than which in an emergency nothing is more useful." [6] So dreamed the great friar in the thirteenth century. When, then, we find the minds of men first throwing off their intellectual vassalage to antiquity and beginning to believe in themselves, their present powers and their future prospects, it is this new-found mastery over nature's latent resources which is the spring and fountain of their confidence. Cardan, in the sixteenth century, marveling at the then modern inventions of the compass, the printing press, and gunpowder, cried, "All antiquity has nothing comparable to these three things." [7] Every year from that day to this has deepened the impression made upon the minds of men by the marvelous prospect of harnessing the resources of the universe. The last one hundred and twenty-five years have seen the invention of the locomotive, the steamship, the telegraph, the sewing machine, the camera, the telephone, the gasoline engine, wireless telegraphy and telephony, and the many other applications of electricity. As one by one new areas of power have thus come under the control of man, with every conquest suggesting many more not yet achieved but brought within

range of possibility, old theories of cosmic degeneration and circular futility have gone to pieces, the glamour of antiquity has lost its allurements, the great days of humanity upon the earth have been projected into the future, and the gradual achievement of human progress has become the hope of man.

Another element in the emergence of the modern progressive outlook upon life is immediately consequent upon the first: world-wide discovery, exploration and intercommunication. Great as the practical results have been which trace their source to the adventurers who, from Columbus down, pioneered unknown seas to unknown lands, the psychological effects have been greater still. Who could longer live cooped up in a static world, when the old barriers were so being overpassed and new continents were inviting adventure, settlement, and social experiment hitherto untried? The theological progressiveness of the Pilgrim Fathers, starting out from Leyden for a new world, was not primarily a matter of speculation; it was even more a matter of an adventurous spirit, which, once admitted into life, could not be kept out of religious thought as well. In Edward Winslow's account of Pastor Robinson's last sermon before the little company of pioneers left Leyden, we read that Robinson "took occasion also miserably to bewaile the state and condition of the Reformed Churches, who were come to a period in Religion, and would goe no further than the instruments of their Reformation: As for example, the *Lutherans* they could not be drawne to goe beyond what *Luther* saw, for whatever part of God's will he had further imparted and revealed to *Calvin*, they will die rather than embrace it. And so also, saith he, you see the *Calvinists*, they stick where he left them: a misery much to bee lamented; For though they were precious shining lights in their times, yet God hath not revealed his whole will to them: And were they now living, saith hee, they would bee as ready and willing to embrace further light, as that they had received." [8] Static methods of thinking are here evidently going to pieces before the impact of a distinctly unstatic world. They were looking for "more truth and light yet to breake forth out of his holy Word" [9] because they lived in a time when new things had been happening at an exhilarating rate and when pioneering adventure and general travel in a world of open avenues were al-

ready beginning to have that liberating effect which has increased with every passing century.

Closely allied with the two elements already noted is a third: the increase of knowledge, which, as in the case of astronomy, threw discredit upon the superior claims of antiquity and made modern men seem wiser than their sires. For ages the conviction had held the ground that the ancients were the wisest men who ever lived and that we, their children, were but infants in comparison. When, therefore, the Copernican astronomy proved true, when the first terrific shock of it had passed through resultant anger into wonder and from wonder into stupefied acceptance, and from that at last into amazed exultation at the vast, new universe unveiled, the credit of antiquity received a stunning blow. So far was Aristotle from being "the master of those who know" whom the medievalists had revered, that he had not even known the shape and motion of the earth or its relation with the sun. For the first time in history the idea emerged that humanity accumulates knowledge, that the ancients were the infants, that the moderns represent the age and wisdom of the race. Consider the significance of those words of Pascal in the seventeenth century: "Those whom we call ancient were really new in all things, and properly constituted the infancy of mankind; and as we have joined to their knowledge the experience of the centuries which have followed them, it is in ourselves that we should find this antiquity that we revere in others." [10] For the first time in history men turned their faces, in their search for knowledge, not backward but forward, and began to experience that attitude which with us is habitual—standing on tip-toe in eager expectancy, sure that tomorrow some new and unheard of truth will be revealed.

New inventions, new discoveries, new knowledge—even before the eighteenth century all these factors were under way. Then a new factor entered which has played a powerful part in substituting a progressive for a static world: new social hopes. The medieval age had no expectation of a better social life on earth. Charity was common but it was purely individual and remedial; it did not seek to understand or to cure the causes of social maladjustment; it was sustained by no expectation of better conditions among men; it was valued because of the giver's unselfishness rather than because of

the recipient's gain, and in consequence it was for the most part unregulated alms-giving, piously motivated but inefficiently managed. In the eighteenth century a new outlook and hope emerged. If man could pioneer new lands, learn new truth and make new inventions, why could he not devise new social systems where human life would be freed from the miseries of misgovernment and oppression? With that question at last definitely rising, the long line of social reformers began which stretched from Abbé de Saint-Pierre to the latest believer in the possibility of a more decent and salutary social life for human-kind. The coming of democracy in government incalculably stimulated the influence of this social hope, for with the old static forms of absolute autocracy now broken up, with power in the hands of the people to seek as they would "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," who could put limits to the possibilities? The medieval age was gone; the modern age had come, and its distinctive note was progress, with new inventions, new discoveries, new knowledge and new social hope.

It would be a fascinating task to watch these interweaving factors at their work and to trace their commingled influence as slowly their involved significance became clear, now to this man and now to that. The best narrative that has been written yet of this epochal movement is contained in Professor Bury's volume on "The Idea of Progress." There one sees the stream of this progressive conception of life pushing its way out as through a delta by way of many minds, often far separated yet flowing with the same water. Some men attacked the ancients and by comparison praised the modern time as Perrault did with "The Age of Louis the Great"; some men foresaw so clearly the possibility of man's control over nature that they dreamed of terrestrial Utopias as Francis Bacon did in "New Atlantis"; some men, like Descartes, sought to grasp the intellectual conditions of human improvement; and others, like Condorcet, became the fervid prophets of human perfectibility; some, like Turgot, re-examined history in terms of the new ideas; and some, like Saint Simon and Comte, sought to discover the law by which all progress moves. This new idea of life and history came "by divers portions and in divers manners," but no one can doubt its arrival. The life of man upon this earth was no longer conceived as static; it

was progressive and the possibilities that lay ahead made all the achievements of the past seem like the play of childhood.

At last, in the nineteenth century, the climactic factor was added which gathered up all the rest and embraced them in a comprehensive philosophy of life. Evolution became a credible truth. No longer a dim conjecture, it was established in biology, and then it spread its influence out into every area of human thought until all history was conceived in genetic terms and all the sciences were founded upon the evolutionary idea. Growth became recognized as the fundamental law of life. Nothing in the universe without, or in man's life within, could longer be conceived as having sprung full-statured, like Minerva from the head of Jove. All things achieved maturity by gradual processes. The world itself had thus come into being, not artificially nailed together like a box, but growing like a tree, putting forth ever new branches and new leaves. When this idea had firmly grasped the human mind, the modern age had come indeed, and progress was its distinctive category of understanding and its exhilarating phrasing of human hope. Then came the days of mid-Victorian optimism with songs like this upon men's lips:

"Every tiger madness muzzled, every serpent passion kill'd,  
Every grim ravine a garden, every blazing desert till'd,

"Robed in universal harvest up to either pole she smiles,  
Universal ocean softly washing all her warless isles." [11]

#### IV

Any one, however, who has lived with discerning thought through the opening years of the twentieth century, must be aware that something has happened to chasten and subdue these wildly enthusiastic hopes of the mid-Victorian age. Others beside the "gloomy dean" of St. Paul's, whether through well-considered thought or through the psychological shock of the Great War, have come to look upon this rash, unmitigated enthusiasm about the earth's future as a fool's paradise. At any rate, no treatment of the

idea of progress would be complete which did not dwell upon the limitations to that idea, now definitely obvious to thoughtful men.

As early as 1879, in Saporta's "Le Monde des Plantes," we run upon one serious setback to unqualified expectations of progress. Men began to take into account the fact that this earth is not a permanent affair. "We recognize from this point of view as from others," wrote Saporta, "that the world was once young; then adolescent; that it has even passed the age of maturity; man has come late, when a beginning of physical decadence had struck the globe, his domain." [12] Here is a fact to give enthusiasm over earthly progress serious pause. This earth, once uninhabitable, will be uninhabitable again. If not by wholesale catastrophe, then by the slow wearing down of the sun's heat, already passed its climacteric, this planet, the transient theatre of the human drama, will be no longer the scene of man's activity, but as cold as the moon, or as hot as colliding stars in heaven, will be able to sustain human life no more. "The grandest material works of the human race," wrote Faye in 1884, "will have to be effaced by degrees under the action of a few physical forces which will survive man for a time. Nothing will remain, not even the ruins." [13]

Every suggested clew to a possible escape from the grimness of the planet's dissolution has been followed up with careful search. The discovery of radioactivity seemed to promise endlessly extended life to our sun, but Sir E. Rutherford, before the Royal Astronomical Society, has roundly denied that the discovery materially lengthens our estimate of the sun's tenure of life and has said that if the sun were made of uranium it would not because of that last five years the longer as a giver of heat.[14] Whether we will or not, we have no choice except to face the tremendous fact, calmly set down by von Hartmann in 1904: "The only question is whether . . . the world-process will work itself out slowly in prodigious lapse of time, according to purely physical laws; or whether it will find its end by means of some metaphysical resource when it has reached its culminating point. Only in the last case would its end coincide with the fulfilment of a purpose or object; in the first case, a long period of purposeless existence would follow after the culmination of life." [15]