*The Cole Lectures for 1922*
*delivered before Vanderbilt University*

# Christianity and Progress

By
HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK
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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'Averroisme, 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 re-

cent 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. . . .

[1]Aratus of Soli: Phaenomena, lines 122-3.

The days will come when our posterity will marvel that we were ignorant of truths so obvious."[1] 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.[2] 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 every-

[1]Lucius Annaeus Seneca: Naturalium Quaestionum, Liber VII, 25.

[2]T. Lucretius Carus: De Rerum Natura, Lib. V, 1455 —"Paullatim docuit pedetentim progredienteis."