

Ex-President Eliot as a Religious Thinker¹

Earl C. Davis

Pittsfield, MA

October 17, 1909²

Last Sunday I tried to present to you the interpretation of religious experience from the point of view of one who has made it his life work to study and think concerning the great revolutionary changes that are going on in our ideals and fundamental principles. Professor Foster³ may be regarded as one of the few men engaged in this line of work, who understands the tendencies and movements of thought today. If one wishes to understand the real nature of the development of modern thought, and wishes to find out in just what direction he is moving, I know of no writer of the day who can do more for him than Professor Foster. He speaks from the point of view of the theologian and philosophical thinker.

¹ Charles William Eliot (1834-1926) was President of Harvard University from 1869 to 1909; this included the period of time when Earl Davis was a student in the Harvard Divinity School. This sermon was inspired by a conference held at the opening of the 1909 Harvard Divinity School summer session. Roughly half of the sermon focuses on the address by Charles Eliot—then having just stepped down from the Harvard Presidency—which closed the conference. This address ultimately was published—Charles W. Eliot, "The Religion of the Future," *The Modern Review*, January 1912, pp. 30-39—and by comparing quotations in Davis' text with this publication, it was possible to confirm these quotations. Evidently a printed copy of Eliot's talk was made available at the conference—or Davis took remarkably good notes. To the best of my ability, using quotation indentation, I have made clear which portions of the sermon text are direct quotes from Eliot's published article.

² This is from the bound collection—"bundle #4"—that includes sermons from February 14, 1909 to December 26, 1909.

³ George Burman Foster (1858-1918) theologian at the University of Chicago Divinity School. He is the author of the 1906 book, *The Finality of the Christian Religion*, which Earl Davis was much impressed by, see <https://wordpress.clarku.edu/dbaird/the-finality-of-the-christian-religion-1906/>.

This morning I want to present to you for your consideration the point of view of a layman, whose wide knowledge and administrative experience, as well as his profound thought, gives to his utterances a great significance. Mr. Holmes⁴ presented to you the ethical bearing of his lecture and its prophetic utterance concerning the work of the churches in the social economy of the future, pointing out in no uncertain language the fact that the churches have to do with the conditions of human life in this world in which we live. But this emphasis upon the work of the social and economic conditions, to which Mr. Holmes calls your attention, is simply an evidence, or rather a manifestation of a wider and profoundly revolutionary change that is going on in our time, a revolution in our whole thought concerning man, the universe and the significance of human life. There is not a custom, an institution, or a tradition in the whole range of the social and the intellectual, and moral economy of human life that is not touched by this new movement of which Professor Eliot speaks. In all its various manifestations, intellectual, ethical, political, social, aesthetic, we are witnessing the unfolding of a new dispensation, a new social order with new purposes and new values. It carries with it the power that shall dispel the older civilization, so that we shall know no more of it than we know of the old nomadic life of the Semitic people, who, three- or four-thousand years ago, roamed the plains and hills of Asia, or of the barbarian civilization of our Teutonic ancestors, who, a thousand or fifteen-hundred years ago rescued the gleanings of a civilization from the tottering ruins of antiquity.

The significance of this lecture by Dr. Eliot becomes more pronounced when we consider the setting of it. The course of the lecture arranged for the summer session of the Harvard Divinity School, of which the lecture in question was the last, grew out of a long held conviction on the part of those who arranged it, that the developments of modern life are working a profound and far-reaching revolution in our whole social economy, and that

⁴ If this reference is correct, which seems improbable to me, Davis undoubtedly refers to Oliver Wendell Holmes (1841-1935) American jurist, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court from 1902 until 1932. But the text is ambiguous, sliding from Justice Holmes to Ex-President Eliot. It is possible—perhaps likely—that Davis meant to write Eliot, and not Holmes, in the first instance.

the real vital moral and religious thinking of our time is being done outside of the ecclesiastical institutions. Wishing, therefore, to assist and further the development of this change, the course of lectures was arranged. The plan was to reach out into all the significant activities of modern thought, and life, and bring together lines of influence that point in the direction of moral and religious interests. At the risk of being tiresome, I am going to point out the way this plan was carried out. The first group of lectures by historians dealt with the causes and the historical illustrations of religious fluctuations. The second group of lectures had to do with present religious conditions in the various countries of Europe. In each case the lecturer pointed out the fact that traditional religion, for various ethical and intellectual reasons, is going through a process of decay. Wherever the influence of modern ethical and social idealism is being felt, the ecclesiastical machinery is failing to meet the situation, and is consequently failing to do its proper work in this reconstruction.

Under the third group of lectures, contemporary movements were considered. In psychology, Professor Munsterberg⁵ gave two lectures on psychotherapy. Professor Parker⁶ followed with four lectures on the present state of theories of evolution. These lectures were followed [by] a series of lectures on the religious aspect of present social movements, especially the labor movement. Then followed four lectures on the religious implications of contemporary philosophy—dealing with naturalism, idealism, pragmatism, and the new realism. Following these were two lectures on the present scientific attitude towards matter and ether; two on the principles and methods of biblical criticism, and two on the effect of New Testament criticism on modern religious life and thought. This third group of lectures were dealing, as you see, with present movements of modern life, and presented a very comprehensive survey of modern thought and activities.

Then followed six lectures on religious conditions and prospects in the United States. The whole course was completed by the remarkable address of Dr. Eliot. I have taken this time

⁵ Hugo Münsterberg (1863-1916) German psychologist who was on the Psychology faculty at Harvard University.

⁶ Davis very likely refers to George Howard Parker (1864-1955) American zoologist who was on the faculty at Harvard University.

in outlining the course in order to show that his lecture is important, not alone because it presents the opinion of a prominent man, but also because it really states the convictions of a great international religious movement. It has nothing whatever to do with sects and denominations, but it voices the religious and ethical purposes of the times.

With this as a background, I want to present briefly his point of view. You will find quite a full abstract of the lecture in this month's issue of the calendar.

A short portion of the address is devoted to showing what the religion of the future will not be, i.e., in pointing out the non-essentials of form that are being sloughed off in the process of reconstruction. This negative side is presented under seven heads.

(1) The religion of the future will not be based on authority, either spiritual or temporal. The decline of the reliance upon absolute authority is one of the most significant phenomena of the modern world. This decline is to be seen everywhere, in government, in education, in the church, in business, and in the family. The present generation is willing, and often eager to be led; but it is averse to being driven, and it wants to understand the grounds and sanctions of authoritative decisions.⁷

Second, in the religion of the future there will be no personifications of natural forces, and third, there will be no worship of ancestors, and no identification of any human being, however majestic in character, with the Eternal Deity. Fourth, in the religious life of the future the primary object will not be the personal welfare or safety of the individual in this world or any other. The religious person will not think of his own safety or welfare, but of the contribution to the common good. Fifth, it will not be sacrificial, an attempt to purchase the favor of some god, but it will purify itself of these barbarous ideas. Sixth, the religion of the future will not perpetuate the Hebrew anthropomorphic idea of God. It will not think of God as an enlarged glorified man, who walks in the

⁷ Charles W. Eliot, "The Religion of the Future," *The Modern Review*, January 1912, p. 31.

garden in the cool of the day. The nineteenth century has made all of these conceptions of God look archaic and crude.

(7) The religion of the future will not be gloomy, ascetic or maledictory. It will not deal chiefly with sorrow and death, but with joy and life. ... When its disciples encounter wrong and evil in the world, his impulse will be to search out its origin, source, or cause, that he may attack it at its starting point.⁸

So much for the negations. They are very sweeping, and in their realization we shall see many existing customs, and institutions swept into the rubbish heap. Let us take due care that we do not hinder and prevent this cleaning process.

But we now come to the positive aspects of this presentation, touching first the idea of God from the point of view of modern thought.

The twentieth century religion will accept literally and implicitly St. Paul's Statement, "In him we live, and move and have our being."⁹ ... God is so absolutely immanent in all things, animate and inanimate, that no mediation is needed between him and the least particle of his creation. In his moral attributes, he is for every man the multiplication to infinity of all the noblest, tenderest, and most potent qualities which man has ever seen or imagined in a human being. In this sense, every man makes his own picture of God. Every age, barbarous or civilized, happy or unhappy, improving or degenerating, frames its own conception of God within the limits of its own experiences and imaginings. In this sense, too, a humane religion has to wait for a humane generation. The central thought of the new religion will therefore be a humane and worthy idea of God, thoroughly consistent with the nineteenth-century revelations concerning man and nature, and with all the tenderest and loveliest teachings which have come down to us from the past.

If God is so thoroughly immanent in the entire creation, there can be no secondary causes, in either the material or spiritual universe. The new religion rejects absolutely the conception that man is an alien in the

⁸ Charles W. Eliot, "The Religion of the Future, *The Modern Review*, January 1912, p. 32.

⁹ Acts 17:28.

world. It rejects also the entire conception of man as a fallen being, hopelessly wicked and tending downward by nature. And it makes this emphatic rejection of long-accepted beliefs because it finds them all inconsistent with a humane, civilized, or worthy idea of God.¹⁰

The religion of the future

will pay homage to all righteous and loving persons who in the past have exemplified and made intelligible to their contemporaries, intrinsic goodness and effluent good-will. ... These are the "good" people.

To the wretched, sick, and downtrodden of the earth, religion has in the past held out hopes of future compensation. ... for present human ills, however crushing, the widely accepted religions have offered either a second life, presumably immortal, under the happiest conditions, or at least peace, rest, and a happy oblivion.

...

The religion of the future will approach the whole subject of evil from another side, that of resistance and prevention. ...

Its priests will be men especially trained in the best methods of improving social and industrial conditions of life. When people suffer the

familiar evils caused by over-crowding, impure food, and cheerless labor, the modern true believers contend against the sources of such misery, ... they attack the sources of physical and moral evil. The new religion cannot supply the old sort of consolation

by offering rewards for the future,

but it will diminish the needs for such consolation¹¹ by removing the preventable causes that produce them.

Working together will be one of its fundamental ideas, of men with God, of men with prophets, leaders, teachers, of men with one another, of men's intelligence with the forces of nature. It will teach only such uses of authority as are necessary to secure the cooperation of

¹⁰ Charles W. Eliot, "The Religion of the Future," *The Modern Review*, January 1912, p. 34.

¹¹ Charles W. Eliot, "The Religion of the Future," *The Modern Review*, January 1912, pp. 34-5.

several or many people to one end; and the discipline it will advocate will be the training of the cooperative goodwill.¹²

Thus the negations and the assertions concerning the present development of religion among us. Thus an indication of the old clothing of religion that we are casting off, and the patterns of the new that we are cutting, and making ready for use.

Whether it will prove as efficient to deter men from doing wrong and to encourage them to do right as the prevailing religions have been, is a question which only experience can answer. In these two respects neither the threats nor the promises of the older religions have been remarkably successful in society at large. The fear of hell has not proved effective to deter men from wrong doing, and heaven has never been described in terms very attractive to the average man or woman. Both are indeed unimaginable. The great geniuses, like Dante and Swedenborg, have produced only fantastic and incredible pictures of either state. The modern man would hardly feel any appreciable loss of motive power toward good or away from evil if heaven were burnt or hell quenched. The prevailing Christian conceptions of heaven and hell have hardly any more influence with educated people in these days than Olympus and Hades have. The modern mind craves an immediate motive or leading, good for today on this earth. The new religion builds on the actual experience of men and women, and of society as a whole. The motive power it relies on have been, and are at work in innumerable lives; and its beatific visions and its hopes are better grounded than those of traditional religion, and finer, because free from selfishness, and the imagery of governments, courts, social distinctions and war.

Finally this twentieth-century religion is not only to be in harmony with the great secular movements of modern society,¹³

but also in essential agreement with the direct, personal teachings of Jesus, as they are reported in the Gospels. The

¹² Charles W. Eliot, "The Religion of the Future, *The Modern Review*, January 1912, p. 38.

¹³ Charles W. Eliot, "The Religion of the Future, *The Modern Review*, January 1912, pp. 38-9.

revelation he gave to mankind thus becomes more wonderful than ever.

In this address it seems to me we have a clear and concise statement of the rough outlines of principles and motives that are, and shall be, the controlling forces in the coming of the new dispensation, in which the beauty and wonder of human life shall become the recognized channels of the divine, in which the cooperative goodwill among men shall permeate every activity, and every corner of society. By tradition, by conviction, and by joyous goodwill we are dedicated to the unfolding and establishment of this new interpretation of religion in human life and in human society.