

The Spirit of the Times

Earl C. Davis

Pittsfield, MA

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Daring and hazardous as it may be, I have certain convictions and ideas concerning the development of society in these times in which we are living. Three weeks ago I preached a sermon on the confidence that we may have in the thinking power and the thought product of the amateur thinker. Two weeks ago I presented the point of view of a philosopher and theologian who, I am sure, embodies, in his views, the ideas and faith that we are moving towards with such amazing rapidity.<sup>2</sup> He is voicing the thought and the point of view of the amateur thinker. His point of view would be not so significant, were it now for the evident fact that he speaks not for himself alone, but for the growing convictions of our times and of tomorrow. His philosophy of life is the philosophy of the modern world. Last Sunday I presented the point of view of the layman, thinker and educator, a man who has had influence in developing the scientific thought habits of the life of the nation.<sup>3</sup> Here again, the great significance of the utterance was not in the fact that a prominent man uttered it, but in the apparent fact that it voiced the religious convictions of the growing social order which is emerging out of the old. You take the three things together and you have the

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<sup>1</sup> This is from the bound collection—"bundle #4"—that includes sermons from February 14, 1909 to December 26, 1909.

<sup>2</sup> Here Davis refers to George Burman Foster (1858-1918) theologian at the (Baptist) University of Chicago Divinity School. He is the author of the 1906 book, *The Finality of the Christian Religion*, and the 1909 book, *The Function of Religion in Man's Struggle for Existence*. I have not found a manuscript for this October 10, 1909 sermon that Davis refers to. Earl Davis was much impressed by Foster, and did write about his work; see <https://wordpress.clarku.edu/dbaird/the-finality-of-the-christian-religion-1906/>.

<sup>3</sup> Here Davis refers to Charles William Eliot (1834-1926) who was President of Harvard University from 1869 to 1909. Davis' sermon from October 17, 1909, "Ex-President Eliot as a Religious Thinker," focused on an address Eliot gave at a conference launching the 1909 Harvard Divinity School summer session.

prophetic indications of the constructive spirit of the times in which we live. They indicate the fundamental character of the extraordinary revolution through which we are passing. In the process of this revolution, from the old order to the new, we are discarding old standards, old measures of value, old institutions, old customs, that belong essentially to the ideals and the standards of the old order. In their place we are producing new measures of value, new institutions, new customs, such as will interpret the genius and express the purpose of the new order. To those whose standards are of the old order, this disintegration of the old is a most gloomy and discouraging spectacle. To those whose heart is in the new, it is full of hope and inspiration, a movement pregnant with the lofty idealism of a new heaven and a new earth.

But after all, this spirit of life which we call the spirit of the modern world, is not so new after all. It is not a wild dream manufactured in the night by some unsophisticated person, and foisted on an unsuspecting and incapable humanity. It is the growth of centuries. Who shall dare say how long humanity has been at work on it? Much rather, it is the secret purpose of long ages, the thought and the inspiration of great prophetic souls, the wisdom of seers, the dream and the theme of poets, the hope of great leaders in thought and in life. It is the cry of a prodigal humanity which has taken its inheritance, and wandered away from its natural home of human life to waste its substance in riotous living amid the false gods of unreality. In the social order of feudal Europe you can see this prodigal man eating the husks of an unnatural religion, devoid of life, and hope, living upon a dry and barren earth from which he had driven his gods. Hungering and thirsting after life, he looked into the heavens and prayed in vain to his gods that lived not, nor spoke unto him. What a desolate and barren land the humanity of those days looked out upon? Everything that [the] eye could look upon was depraved, the earth and all its beauty was of the devil; men and women, with their hopes and aspirations, with their love and passions for life, were godless hopeless creatures. Only one ray of hope in all the vast domain and experience of life, and that ray was the tale told them by the church that somewhere, in some far-off part of space, was a god who had sent them his message of hope through the channels of the church. Then the sorry spectacle of the church, really the only thing that was vicious and corrupt. Indeed, it was a gloomy and barren world, devoid of gods and hope. But humanity, in whom

there glowed the fire of the divine life, could not always feed upon these dry and juiceless husks of a barren supernaturalism and sacramentalism. So, at last its voice was heard crying out for the natural men, the natural life. The rebirth of learning in the Renaissance, in the wild turbulent years of the crusades, in the years of seething war and unrest of the Reformation, we find the outward expressions of humanity repenting, and crying out for life, life, life, for the homeland, where on god's green earth, and among the human beings that lived on it, it might once again seek and find the reality for which its soul hungered and thirsted.

Thus we see the beginning of that modern world, whose purposes, whose hopes, whose idealisms, are meat and drink for us, and the hope and faith for our children. You may trace the development of it all through history, stage by stage, century by century, men have been making their way back to the natural man, the natural life, the natural world, with its human hopes, and aspirations, with its human love, and its human joy, its human possibilities and its human limitations. And lo, we are finding that the gods, which could not be found in the far-off heavens, speak to us from everything animate and inanimate. The earth becomes alive with the infinite, and in every human being we see something of the father spirit of life, striving to express itself in the world of fact and reality. We begin again to say God is in his heaven, and God is in his world, all will be right with man just as soon as we can clear away this last vestige of that barren supernaturalism, and the institutions that it created.

What I have said will serve to indicate something of the attitude and the spirit of the modern world. From its negative point of view, it seeks to leave behind all that smacks of that old supernaturalism, and the institutions of privilege and authority which it created. It seeks to remove and to forget every artificial barrier that stands in the way of men and women who are striving to achieve the possibilities of human life. Therefore, wherever you find an institution that gives privileges to a class or a group, you will find the modern man, striving to put that relic of the past onto the rubbish heap where it belongs. It has no place in the growing modern world, and in the life of the modern men and women, whose lives, whose hopes and aspirations, whose purposes, speak of the eternal in the transient, and the infinite in the finite.

But the negative spirit, and the negative work of the modern world, is not the interesting and the commanding aspect. In the positive and the constructive, we find that which appeals. Its first and fundamental principle is that of democracy. No privileged class, either rulers, or teachers or priests. But in the things which involve a common interest, and are in the nature of a common purpose, there shall be common action. This principle was clearly understood by the leaders who first began to cast off the burdens of the old world. John Ball, one of the agitators in the peasants' revolt<sup>4</sup> that broke the back [of] feudalism, said as far back as 1365 or 1370,

Good people, things will never be well in England so long as there be villains and gentlefolk. By what right are they whom we call lords greater folk than we? On what grounds have they deserved it? Why do they hold us in serfage? If we all come from the same father and mother, of Adam and Eve, how can they say or prove that they are better than we, if it be not that they make us gain for them by our toil what they spend in their pride. They are clothed in velvet, and warm in their furs and their ermines, while we are covered with rags. They have wine and spices and fine bread; we have only oatcake and straw, and water to drink. They have leisure and fine horses; we have pain and labor, the rain and the wind in the fields. And yet it is of us and of our toil that these men hold their estate.<sup>5</sup>

You see how clear-cut is the principle there stated. That was the ultimatum delivered by the leaders of the revolt and revolution that makes our freedom today as good as it is. Equality, no privileged class. That has been the watchword from that day to this. Democracy, in the affairs of common interest, there shall be a common aim and a common purpose. On this principle as a basis, has been developed all the evolutionary

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<sup>4</sup> John Ball (c.1338-1381) inspired a revolt led by Wat Tyler (c. 1341-1381) of peasants in Kent, England. Davis has written specifically about this. See his "Lecture Three: The Peasants Revolt," <https://wordpress.clarku.edu/dbaird/the-peasants-revolt-late-medieval-period-2-1350-1381/>.

<sup>5</sup> Earl Davis gives no source for this quote, but a likely source is H. de B. Gibbins, *Industry in England: Historical Outlines*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906. p. 163.

changes in government forms. A common purpose, and a common capacity, and a common responsibility. With that as a guiding hand, you may trace your way through all the history that separates the great age of feudalism and supernaturalism, and privileged classes, down to the present, with its tremendous development towards democracy. If you have followed at all the present day movements in the direction of the extension of suffrage, you will discover the same principle and the same arguments. Witness the movement for equal suffrage by the women citizens. That is clearly and definitely in keeping with the spirit of the modern world, and the day is not far distant when we shall see the work of its heroic defenders rewarded with the right of the ballot. The spirit of the modern world demands it, and will achieve it. It is a concrete application of the fundamental principle of the modern world, and is one of the movements of today that bears witness to the constructive spirit of the modern world. It is a far journey from the idea of the divine right of kings, and the authority of the church, to the ideal, however imperfectly realized, of a democratic government of the people by the people and for the people. But it indicates the direction in which the modern world is traveling.

But the other principle which manifests the spirit of the modern world, and which these first fruits of the modern spirit understood, is the doctrine of work or labor. I want to take this in its widest sense. That which we have, that which we are, is ours only by virtue of labor, by work, by experience. Nothing is given to us free-handed. Our power over nature, our ability and capacity to supply the necessities of life, our grasp of truth, our grasp of life itself, is [the] product of labor and unspeakable toil. But before I show how thoroughly and completely this doctrine of labor is permeating, and has permeated, our modern life, I want to refer again, as I have before, to the writing where it finds its classic expression. William Langland's "Piers the Plowman" was written about 1365.<sup>6</sup> He was a contemporary and co-worker with John Ball. In this

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<sup>6</sup> William Langland (1332-1386), author of the poem "The Vision of Piers Plowman." There are many editions available, one the Davis may have used is Langland's Vision of Piers the Plowman, London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1895. Davis discusses this in his "Lecture Three: The Peasants Revolt," <https://wordpress.clarku.edu/dbaird/the-peasants-revolt-late-medieval-period-2-1350-1381/>.

famous poem of his, he has a dream in which he sees all the people of the earth in the field between the tower of truth, and the dungeon of care. In this dream he pictures all the social conditions of the times, economic, moral, religious. He awakes from this first dream, and soon has another. In the second dream Reason is preaching to the people, they repent and seek to find the tower of truth. But no one is able to lead them there. The princes and rulers, the church and the priests, are not up to the task. Just at this juncture comes the only man who knows the way to the tower of truth. He is Piers the plowman, a working man, and he does the trick by putting them all to work. That was a revolutionary doctrine at the time, and in some respects it is today. Yet if you stop to think of it, you will see that it is at the bottom of all our modern thinking. As an illustration, Professor Foster's book<sup>7</sup> and President Eliot's lecture<sup>8</sup> both stand on the ground that all our knowledge and wisdom is the product of experience in life. Nothing is given to us ready-made in the world of ideas. The truth that we come to know, the hopes that we come to have, the intelligence that we achieve, the ideals that we cherish, every single one of them are gleaned from the universal life in unspeakable toil and labor. This principle of truth gained in experience, which is at the bottom of all modern thinking and activity, is but the wider meaning of the truth expressed by Langland when he brings forth the workman, Piers the plowman, to lead the lost people to the tower of truth. It is also the doctrine back of the economic and political philosophy of socialism, to which I shall refer shortly. Let me quote from Professor Foster,

What is our answer to the question, What is man? Not the saint of the church, not the Greek or the Roman, not the finished product of the rationalist, not the forest-man and the nature-man, but a *task*, an *achievement*. Man *is* not until he *becomes*. To *become* means the work of *forming*, and *ordering* the personal and the social. Individuality is an endowment, personality is an acquirement; nature-man is a gift, culture-man is task.

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<sup>7</sup> George Burman Foster, *The Function of Religion in Man's Struggle for Existence*, Chicago: University of Chicago, Press, 1909.

<sup>8</sup> Charles W. Eliot, "The Religion of the Future," *The Modern Review*, January 1912, pp. 30-39. Davis discusses this lecture in his October 17, 1909 sermon, "Ex-President Eliot as a Religious Thinker." See [WEBSITE TO COME](#).

We are not men, our vocation is to *become* men. This means the development of the inchoate into *organic* life, personal and social. It means the humanization of all animal impulses and passions, the ennoblement of all that is rude and vulgar, the culture of all that is raw. To be a man is not to possess by donation the alien goods of thought, but to develop from within a function of thinking of one's own.<sup>9</sup>

Thus does Professor Foster tell us that we reach the Tower of truth by work. We develop into men and women through experience. We have the gift in our nature-man to become men of culture and nobility.

Thus the foundation. Upon this foundation, upon this faith that men have the power to develop and to grow into the highest possibilities of human life, we are developing our modern social order. As an illustration of this, witness our public school system, in fact our whole system of education, inadequate and imperfect as it is, not alone in its realized products, but also in its ideals. The whole system is constructed on the idea that men have the capacity to develop their possibilities, and education is provided that they may have the more effective tools with which to achieve their end. But I cannot stop to expand this idea.

Now the other side of this principle comes to the front for consideration. The purpose of man is to achieve the highest possibilities of human life, in thought, in aspiration, and in activity. That he has the capacity, as a nature gift, is also the conviction of the modern world. What more does he need?

The early modern man saw the pungency of this question, and answered it in his time as we must answer it in our time. He needs freedom and opportunity, said the agitator of early days. The feudal man cannot hope to become man, because he does not have the opportunity. He spends so much of his time in providing for the luxury and the comfort of a privileged class that he cannot rise above the animal. This has been the answer all the way down through the ages given by those who have contributed to the progress of the social order. This is the answer that is

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<sup>9</sup> George Burman Foster, *The Function of Religion in Man's Struggle for Existence*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1909, pp. 43-44. Emphasis in the original.

given by the socialist today. He says that so much of the product of the labor, by which men should achieve their manhood, goes to feed and maintain the excessive wealth and luxury of a privileged class that the vast majority of men have not the opportunity of doing that broad work, of having that broad experience that makes for manhood and womanhood, and human life. He begins his manhood life with hopes and aspirations, but soon they begin to give way to hopelessness, and despair, and finally all his possibilities die away and are buried beneath the grim burden of incessant toil, through which he succeeds if he is fortunate in feeding his body, that he may continue his toil, and in continuing his toil that he may feed his body. So the socialist takes the doctrine that all things are the product of human toil from the lips of the philosopher, and asks the pertinent question, If all things are the product of human toil, then why is it that but a few have the opportunity of using those things that humanity produces in its toil? His answer is a plain straightforward one. There is a privileged class, who gets more than they earn, and there is an exploited class who gets less than they earn. There is an unequal opportunity. Let us do away with this inequality of opportunity, and in those things which all have shared in producing, let all share in using, so that men and women who are overburdened with the toil and drudgery of labor, may have the opportunity of developing for themselves their own function of thinking, and living in the upper stories of life. All this is strictly in accord with the underlying principles of modern life, and, in the development of the socialist movement we see one of the most characteristic movements of the spirit of our times. It is the attempt to express, and to realize in the industrial world, through the medium of political effort, the principles that have been at the bottom of all the historical development that separates us from feudal Europe, and its social, intellectual order.

Thus the principles of our time. Equality of opportunity, and the achievement of truth and life through human effort, in providing the necessities of life, and in realizing the richness of the highest possibilities of life. In all our great activities, those which make for the extension of the principle of democracy, not alone in politics, but in education, in industry, in art, in music, in literature, in life itself, in hope and aspiration, in philosophy and thought, these are manifestations of the spirit of the modern world in the life of our times, these are the tasks which our fathers, who once



fought a good fight for freedom and human life, have given us to accomplish. These are the tasks to which we set ourselves as children of the modern world, who have faith in the natural men and the natural life.

The way is not always clear before us. We do not always see the next essential step, but we have the purpose, and we believe that he that seeks shall find, and to him that knocketh, the door of truth shall be opened.<sup>10</sup> He that has the will shall know the doctrine. We are not anxious for the outcome so long as we face the future, and have our hearts and minds set on the things that shall be, so long as we press forward to the prize of the high calling of God in human nature. These principles of the modern world are our working tools, and their incarnation in life is our task, and that work is in the spirit of our times.

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<sup>10</sup> See Matthew 7:7-8.