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A LAYMAN ON THE "NEW THEOLOGY"

**[A STRIKING AND ABLE REVIEW OF DR. ELIOT'S
VIEWS.]**

THE following from The Religious Herald contains considerable truth and is well worth the reading as bearing on matters seen from THE WATCH TOWER: –

"You have probably seen in the papers references to the definition of the new theology given by Dr. Eliot, president emeritus of Harvard College, and for thirty-five years the first citizen of Massachusetts, if not of New England. But second-hand newspaper accounts are apt to be inaccurate; I thought you might like to see the original, and accordingly am enclosing a copy of the *Harvard Theological Review*, under separate cover, containing his lecture.

"Dr. Eliot has been much criticized, but for my part I admire his courage and honesty. Now, as always, he speaks the truth as he sees it, without fear or favor. Too many of the advocates of the new theology pursue the policy which a Methodist minister in a neighboring parish explained to me; they express their views freely at ministers' meetings, but have a tacit understanding not to mention them to the pews. And this respect for the tender feelings of the superstitious ones (!) who occupy the pews is, after all, not impolitic; for if the new theology were understood by the average layman, he would find it so hard to distinguish from the old atheism that, according to his temper, he would stay at home and save his money, or would try to get a new pastor installed.

"The Methodist clergyman I mention tells me that a great majority of the younger ministers of that Church, in this part of the country, are believers in the new theology. A majority of the

Protestant ministers that I know hereabouts adhere to it, including most of the younger men.

"You will see that Dr. Eliot's lecture consists of two parts. The first, which is negative, is practically undistinguishable, so far as I can see, from ancient atheism. In fact, the new theology, as I understand it, in its advanced form, has less belief in a God (considered as a personality, with conscience and will), who created the universe and the living creatures in it, than David Hume, Edward Gibbon, Thomas Payne, Voltaire, and J. J. Rousseau had.

"As to the positive part of the new theology – well, I shall wish to know what you think of it.

"It is easy for me to understand this state of mind of the atheist, agnostic, or materialist, and in this age so many of the foremost intellects, especially on the Continent, deny all evidence of the existence of God, that I am not surprised to learn that any man holds such views. But to deny positively, on the one hand, all those conceptions of the Creator that seem natural to man, and then, without adhering to the logic of atheism, agnosticism, or materialism, to set up the hazy, and, to my mind, illogical view of God which is presented in this new theology, hardly seems normal, nor does it seem as if it could ever acquire many earnest followers among the common people. It seems to me to bear strong internal evidence of its origin in the study of the skeptical professor of theology, and to have, if I may use the expression, a perhaps unconscious but yet hypocritical origin. Of course, when I say this, I do not at all refer to Dr. Eliot.

"But let us put ourselves for a moment in the place of the man who has been ordained to the Christian ministry, who has lost faith and lacks the courage to turn his back on his calling and his friends, to confess himself a failure, and to begin life anew. To such a one the new theology appeals strongly; it saves his

consistency; it saves his salary; it saves him from the humiliation that open apostasy would involve. Skeptics commonly feel more or less dislike of an ex-priest; the faithful consider him an apostate. But by embracing the so-called new theology, he holds his pastorate or lectureship and wins reputation as being learned, liberal and progressive.

"Whatever the cause may be, the so-called new theology seems to be dominant in most Protestant theological seminaries in Germany, England and the northern part of the United States, or where not dominant, to be rapidly increasing its influence.

"You will note in Dr. Eliot's lecture that in denying the existence of a conscious personal God (as distinguished from the God who is the sum of all living souls, human and brute, good, bad and indifferent alike), he denies all hope of a future life.

"How curious, also, the misunderstanding of the mission of pain on pages 399 and 400. The most ordinary intellect ought to see that if there were no pain in the world, a baby would chew off its own fingers; a cat, or even a child, would walk into the fire before intellect had taught him his danger; and so on to the end of the chapter.

"Perhaps one might think that because this lecture was delivered at Harvard it is too extreme a statement of the New Theology. But the New Theology is world-wide. For many of its disciples it has no God (except as the soul of the universe may be a God, if one can grasp that idea), no inspired Bible, no heaven-sent Savior of the world; its fundamental principle, if I have been able to make it out, is the absolute and positive negation of any supernatural **[R4581 : page 100]** power whatever in the past, present or future, with all that that implies. And as far as its professors and votaries have come under my observation, it is, in this fundamental principle, pretty much the same at Harvard, Union, Yale, Chicago; very much the same among Episcopalians,

Methodists and Baptists as it is among Unitarians and Congregationalists; and it seems to have won a large majority of the young clergy of the Protestant Churches in this section. There are minor differences, of course; Dr. Eliot's position is the advanced logical position, towards which all the others are tending, but which not all have yet reached. Some men, moreover, are entirely subject to the influence of the new theology; others are influenced partly by the new and partly by the old in all stages of progress, but in general acquiring a little more of the new leaven and losing a little more of the old each year.

"Well, this is rather a long letter on theology from one who is not a theologian. My interest is not wholly, perhaps not chiefly, theological; it is rather practical and sociological. I have long been convinced that the Church could not adopt Darwinism without being killed by it, and the New Theology is largely the effect of Darwinism on the Church.

"We all know that there is a sort of elective affinity between unbridled democracy and atheistic socialism. By unbridled democracy, I mean the kind which gives to the Sea Island negro the same political weight as to his former master; which gives to the half-pauper, half-vicious denizens of the slum districts of our great cities the same voting power as the independent householder or business man possesses; aye, which gives them more, since as they are more numerous, they who pay no direct taxes are allowed, in effect, to levy them on those who do, by electing aldermen and other officers as worthless as themselves – the sort of democracy which really believes the old maxim, "Vox populi, vox Dei." This may seem like political heresy to many, but when the new theology shall have destroyed the common man's belief in God, the feeling of moral obligation to him and to our fellows, as his children (as it will do if it is not vigorously opposed), and when the Marxian missionaries shall have made as much progress in teaching their gospel of robbery to the negroes of the South and

the poorer classes of our cities as they have already made on the Continent, and are making in London, we shall begin to appreciate what sort of a *Vox Dei* the *Vox populi* of a godless people can be. This affinity between extreme democracy and atheistic socialism has long been strikingly manifest on the Continent; it begins to be seen in England and America. The North of Germany, I am told, is so far won by atheistic and Marxian socialism – the so-called Social Democracy – that the existing order is chiefly maintained in the German Empire by the Catholic South, the country districts, and the well-drilled bayonet.

"And to me, one of the most interesting things in connection with the so-called new theology is the fact that so many of its disciples are showing about as much affinity for militant socialism as the atheism of the Continent shows, and for the same reasons. This, of course, is not true of all its disciples or teachers – is emphatically not true of Dr. Eliot – but it seems to me to be a tendency of the system.

"Christianity teaches that man is inclined to sin; that his natural impulses are often bad; that he needs human government as well as Divine guidance; "the powers that be are ordained of God." The majority of the followers of Marx and many of the professors of the New Theology alike deny the existence of God (in the sense in which the Church has heretofore understood that existence), and the tendency of man to sin; they say that man's natural impulses are good and for the most part teach that salvation lies in the destruction of poverty and misery. Christianity teaches brotherly love, but forbids robbery and even covetousness. Marxian socialism pretends to advance brotherly love, but its maxim is the appropriation [R4582 : page 100] of all the means of production (farm and factory alike) to the use of the State, without compensation; and the majority of its apostles, knowing well that it can never succeed where Christianity prevails, wage constant and bitter warfare on the Church. And it

is from their camp that the attacks on the doctrine of a future life, as tending to make contented slaves of men in this world, most frequently come. That rather astounding doctrine has to my knowledge resounded from at least three or four of the pulpits of this country within the last year, without exciting remark or answer, so far as I have heard.

"The inter-relations or inter-actions between Darwinism, the New Theology (or its equivalent, for most practical purposes, the old skepticism) and Marxian socialism are interesting and in a way important, but much too large for a friendly letter."

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