

*[The Presbyterian, January 12, 1922]*

Dr. McCosh and Evolution

By Rev. David S. Clark, D.D.

In your issue of December 8, your correspondent, Dr. D.J. Satterfield has given us an interesting article on Christian Evolution, for which he deserves the thanks of the readers of THE PRESBYTERIAN. His review of Dr. McCosh and the lengthy quotations from his works, are welcome material to those interested in the subject. But when all has been said, the question remains: Was Dr. McCosh an evolutionists? And if so, what sort of an evolutionist was he?

About the year 1885, Dr. Henry Ward Beecher preached a series of sermons on "Religion and Evolution," in which he claimed all the forward-thinking people of his day as evolutionists, including Dr. McCosh by name, and dispensing his pity to the mossbacks who clung to primitive beliefs.

The writer has had sort of a premonition that some one would come forward in the public prints to claim Dr. McCosh as an evolutionist without discriminating closely what sort of an evolutionist he was.

Your correspondent has done a good service in pointing out the theistic nature of Dr. McCosh's position. Dr. McCosh stresses the uniformity of nature's laws; which, after all, is rather a general uniformity than an absolute uniformity, which latter would be quite as detrimental to life on the globe as its opposite. With Dr. McCosh the development of the world was a divine and not a naturalistic process. He stood at the antipodes from Tyndall, Huxley, Spencer, Haeckel and their materialistic schools; and sought to replace a naturalistic uniformitarianism with a supernaturalistic uniformitarianism. Darwin was perhaps a theistic evolutionist, in that he recognized a supernatural creation of primordial elements, while saying too little of an immanent divinity that wrought in the process of evolution.

So far, then, as a concurrent divine efficiency wrought with purposeful aims toward intelligent and beneficent ends, we know where to place Dr. McCosh. Indeed, it has been said that Dr. McCosh was a theologian, not a philosopher; said, no doubt, by those who knew little of the man or his works.

Enough digression is pardonable to say that Dr. McCosh had no superior as a metaphysician in his day, nor since. Some universities seem not yet awake to the fact that the "Common Sense Philosophy," as it was called, inductive in its method, was the complete answer to the Sensationalists and the speculative Transcendentalist that so largely held the stage. No one can read Dr. McCosh and not feel that he has pricked the bubble of false philosophies, and set our feet on terra firma. Some of our schools are still exalting Kant as if he had any virtues worthy of exaltation. He did indeed meet the

Impressionists of his day by stressing the intuitive elements of man's mental nature; but in general it may be said that he met the errors of his day by inculcating a system more erratic than the one he opposed. Dr. McCosh, in dealing with these great systems of thought, has shown himself a master-hand in exposing their fallacies and pointing the way to a true metaphysic.

With this digression we still have to answer: What kind of an evolutionist was Dr. McCosh? When one touches this point he must proceed with a measure of discrimination. It is not sufficient to say that Dr. McCosh was a theistic evolutionist, while Haeckel, et al, were materialistic evolutionists. If I understand Dr. McCosh, and I think I do, the distinction was at another point as well.

The crux of the Darwinian hypothesis is not the fact of development, not the feature of natural selection, but the crucial, distinguishing factor of transmutation of species. No one is a Darwinian, however much he may believe in development, however much he may insist that the present came out of the past and will issue in the future, if his theory of continuity stops short of actual transmutation. That is what evolution stands for in the accepted sense of the word. There are men who call themselves evolutionist, as Dr. McCosh did, who repudiate Darwinism, or evolution in the specific sense attached to that word.

Now we are ready to answer the question: what sort of an evolutionist was Dr. McCosh? And we are ready to define Dr. McCosh as a developmentalist; but not a transmutationist. Sitting in his class-room we gathered that much from his conversation; but his own published works and his own definition of his position will express him more accurately than the memory of the writer.

“No living creature can proceed except from a parent of its own kind; no vegetable or animal can spring from a vegetable or animal inferior to itself in the order of beings. This is one of the best established generalizations of natural history, and it has not been shaken by any attempts that have been made to find exceptions to it.

“The parents seems to be endowed with a power to produce an offspring 'after their kind,' that is, of the same species, and no other. There is no power on the part of an inferior plant to produce a higher, on the part of a vegetable to produce an animal, or on the part of an inferior animal to produce a higher. In particular, human beings with intelligences, and such only—certainly not apes and monkeys—can have an offspring possessed of reasonable and responsible souls.”—*Intuitions of the Mind*, page 190.

“There is no fact that has been demonstrated more completely to the satisfaction of every man of real science, than that there is no known power in nature capable of creating a new species of animal, or of transmuting one species of animal into another. Yet geology reveals the introduction of new species of living creatures at various periods in the history of the ancient earth. Finding no cause

among natural agents fitted to produce the effect, we rise to the only known cause capable of producing it—the fiat of the Creator. All who acknowledge the creation of the world at the beginning, must be prepared to admit the possibility of subsequent acts of creation, and should be read to believe, on the production of sufficient evidence that there have actually been such acts.”—*Divine Government*, page 155.

“Mr. Darwin has succeeded in showing that the principle of 'natural selection' may account for the disappearance of species. But this is all. In the historical period we have no unequivocal instance of the formation of new species, say of monkeys, being exalted into human beings. Mr. Darwin does not attempt to show, and all attempts of others have failed to prove, that the law of selection, or any other, can account for the origin of life, the origin of consciousness, or of knowledge generally, and the origin of man with his psychical qualities. It is as true as ever that we know no law of nature operating at present which is capable of producing these phenomena. It may be safely asserted that, if the origin of these powers be ever accounted for, it will be by far higher agencies than those contemplated by Mr. Darwin or Mr. Huxley.”—*Ibid*, page 157.

“I suspect that the theory has not yet been devised—it has certainly not been published—which is fitted to give a satisfactory account of the relation of the brute to the human faculties. I suppose Bonnet is right when he says that we shall never be able to understand the nature of brute instinct, till we are in the dog's head without being the dog. It is certain that we have at this moment nothing deserving the name of science on this subject.”—*Scottish Philosophy*, page 294.

This is sufficient to show that Dr. McCosh was no transmutationist, though he may have called himself an evolutionist in the broad sense of that word—of a successive order in the world, the present proceeding from the past, development of one age from another, a general uniformity of nature's laws, and a connected plan running from the beginning throughout.

As to specific evolutionism, or Darwinism pure and simple, he would perhaps agree with Prof. Virchow: “It cannot be proved by science that man descends from the ape or any other animal. Ever since the announcement of the theory, all real scientific knowledge has proceeded in the opposite direction.”

We are to-day recognizing the immanence of God as well as his transcendence. While not losing God in the universe, nor identifying him with his creation, we recognize that the universe wears the appearance of being operated from within. When man builds a house, he does it from without; when God builds a tree or a world, he does it from within.