

Neo-Spiritism.

“**A** FATHER afflicted with untimely mourning, when he hath made an image of his child soon taken away, now honoured him as a god, which was then a dead man.”¹ These words of an ancient writer are thoroughly up-to-date. The loss of life in the great war reaches a figure which we do not care to contemplate. The land is full of sorrow and mourning. Sympathy hesitates to rob the bereaved of a single source of consolation; charity gladly passes in silence much that in happier times would excite immediate dissension. But Christian teachers cannot allow without remonstrance ideas to obtain currency which reverse the doctrines revealed to mankind by the Saviour of the world. Spiritism is the earliest form of belief which ethnology presents to us. A lurking spirit was alleged in each individual form of organic life, whether tree, animal, or man. This spirit was removable from the object in which it usually dwelt, and at death became finally separate. The worship of departed relatives was a speedy addition, widespread amongst all peoples. Purified from many evil associations, civilized from many abhorrent crudities, and accommodated to much which scientific discovery has established beyond a doubt, modern teachings of intercourse with the dead possess the essential characteristics of these primitive notions, and may well be described under the name of Neo-Spiritism.

The publication of *Raymond*² is a distinct challenge to Christianity. We cannot refuse the combat to which we are bidden. The book is the most recent of those dealing with this subject from one point of view. Its large circulation³ increases the peril. But our criticisms will, as far as possible, avoid reference to the family affairs of the author, and our attention be confined to the broad principles which give substance to the new creed.

I.

The possibility of communicating with the dead is a question of fact, which must be tested by the laws of evidence. At first

¹ Wisdom of Solomon, xiv. 15.

² *Raymond, or Life and Death*, Sir Oliver Lodge. Methuen & Co.

³ Six editions within two months.

discussion turns upon the opportunities of self-deception. Has every pains been taken to eliminate the element of collusion, which is not necessarily intentional, but may unconsciously arise from lapse of memory, oversight, or leading questions? The circumstances of "sittings" or "table-tiltings" are widely open to suspicion. If A must request B to arrange a sitting for him in the house of C with a medium E under the control of F, in order that he may converse with G, there are several persons whose good faith must be investigated. The living are bound together by common interests. Even if some are strangers to one another, more may be tacitly conveyed by intervening parties than the mind is quite aware of. Before a second or subsequent sitting the medium may indirectly have ascertained much. With so many involved, the evidential force of the revelations is necessarily weakened. Similarly, with four or more persons seated at a tilting table in the presence of a medium and a recorder, the precautions required to give validity to the test are more than can be readily made. When the medium is in a trance or the table tilted by the muscles of those by it, there are no means of deciding how far the will of one or others of the persons participant is acting independently of the alleged control from the spirit-sphere. As a system, the whole method is utterly void of convincing power. Inquiry can only turn upon the issue whether the revelations imparted are of a character to corroborate the claims that are made. Has anything of real worth resulted?

The Delphic nature of the oracle impresses itself upon the student. Stress is laid upon the "Faunus" message. Word was sent from Myers to Sir Oliver Lodge through a Mrs. Piper in New Hampshire—"Myers says you take the part of the poet and he will act as Faunus." The solution of this singularly uncommunicative information depends upon acquaintance with certain lines in the Odes of Horace which in themselves are not free from ambiguity, and which are not unlikely to have been studied by those who deal with the occult. The aid of Faunus saved Horace from death by a falling tree. If a falling tree had figured in the foretold disaster, the burden of disproof would have been shifted on to the impugners of the veracity of this new science. But if the impending trouble is undefined, the terms are uncertain in significance and the prediction sure. "Man is born unto trouble as the sparks fly

upward.”¹ Any petty worry would equally have fulfilled the prophecy with the death in action of Sir Oliver’s son. Myers’ part in mitigating the severity of the blow is unrecognizable and unproven.

This cryptic character conspicuously reappears in an incident which is narrated as “a peculiarly good piece of evidence,” for “this episode of the photograph is a good and evidential one.” Two “sittings” are involved. In the first the medium was palpably in error, declaring “before he went away you had a good portrait of him—two—no, three.” Whether there were two or more is uncertain, but the third alluded to was not at the time in the possession of the family, nor was it seen by them till more than two months after this interview. After a lapse of sixty-seven days Sir Oliver, having received information about a group photograph of which he had now heard, solicited from a different medium a fuller description. A leading question opened the dialogue, “He said something about having a photograph taken with some other men.” Other conversation followed before the medium reported that “he thinks there were several others taken with him, not one or two, but several.” How indefinite! or, how perverse the memory! There were twenty-one of them. Replies were also very evasive. “Were they friends of yours?” “Some of them, he says. He didn’t know them all, not very well. But he knew some; he heard of some; they were not all friends.” “Was he standing up?” “No, he doesn’t seem to think so.” “Were they soldiers?” “He says yes—a mixed lot.” These non-committal answers are indubitably accurate, for they would fit any conceivable circumstances. Another leading question, “Did he have a stick?” “He doesn’t remember that.” The first medium had reported, “He is particular I should tell you of this. In one you see his walking-stick.” So the memory is again defective. The mention of this stick is regarded as evidentially most important. Is it unusual for an officer to carry a walking-stick? Thirteen are visible in the photograph, others may be concealed by the grouping. The photograph was taken ten days before Raymond’s death. Proofs were seen at once, although final prints were not made until a later date when the negatives had reached London. Twenty-two persons at least were present when it was taken. Who can trace all the conversa-

¹ Job v. 7.

tions or letters about it? How can it be quite certain that neither medium was aware of its existence?

The "Honolulu" incident appears to us the most forcible. Simultaneous sittings were being held at Mariemont and in London. At the former it was agreed to ask Raymond to mention at the other the word "Honolulu." This was done. Putting on one side all possibility of contrivance, and declining explanations of telepathy or the association of ideas, the testimony yet fails in demonstrative ability. As accomplished by other than merely human or natural agency the result is miraculous. But a miracle does not prove a theory.

In a familiar paragraph of *Literature and Dogma* Matthew Arnold wrote: "That miracles, when fully believed, are felt by men in general to be a source of authority, it is absurd to deny. One may say, indeed: Suppose I could change the pen with which I write this into a pen-wiper, I should not thus make what I write any the truer or more convincing. That may be so in reality, but the mass of mankind feel differently. In the judgment of the mass of mankind, could I visibly and undeniably change the pen with which I write this into a pen-wiper, not only would this which I write acquire a claim to be held perfectly true and convincing, but I should even be entitled to affirm, and to be believed in affirming, propositions the most palpably at war with common fact and experience."¹ As an argument against the Christian miracles this was very ingenuous. Yet these are not used to prove the revelation, but rather the reverse is the case. The miracles are so inwrought as an integral part with the revelation, that without them the revelation would be incomplete and bereft of much of its self-convincing power. The truth of the doctrine rests on its own inherent qualities of beauty, appropriateness and value, and is confirmed by the exterior effects of its acceptance and application in the heart and life of man. The miracles display the content of the revelation. In this "Honolulu" occurrence the intimate connexion of miracle and revelation is not discernible. The alleged facts would equally serve the purpose of any counter-theory which the mind of man might conceive as the ground of their performance.

It should be added that the records of communications received

¹ P. 128. Cf. A. B. Bruce, *Chief End of Revelation*, p. 171.

are not seldom fragmentary, discursive and erroneous. The conversations are frequently abrupt owing either to rapidity of utterance preventing note-taking or to confused sounds which became unintelligible. On the whole to a logical mind the evidence is worthless. The matter might at once be dismissed as an idle fantasy, were it not for the extreme danger to the soul's life with which it is fraught.

II.

"The Spirit speaketh expressly that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils."¹ The emphatic teaching of the Holy Spirit demands careful attention. The phrase "in the latter times" (*ἐν ὑστέροις καιροῖς*) must not be severely pressed, for elsewhere² the Apostle speaks of "the last days" (*ἐν ἐσχάταις ἡμέραις*). The words "doctrines of devils" (*διδασκαλίας δαιμονίων*) must be examined. Alford comments: "Doctrines taught by, suggested by evil spirits: gen. subjective." As a grammatical interpretation this is undoubtedly correct, but perhaps the association of "evil" is not necessarily implied. And who are the spirits?

Josephus, a younger contemporary of St. Paul, indicates that the word "demons" was employed in his time to denote the spirits of deceased men. "What man of virtue is there who does not know, that those souls which are severed from their fleshly bodies in battles by the sword are received by the ether, and . . . become good demons and propitious heroes, and show themselves to their posterity afterwards."³ And again: "Those called demons, which are no other than the spirits of the wicked, that enter into men that are alive and kill them, unless they can obtain some help against them."⁴ Thus demons may be either good or bad; but they are the spirits of dead men.

In the second century this meaning was accepted by philosophers. Augustine quotes the opinion of Appuleius: "He says that the souls of men are demons, and that men become *Lares* if they are good, *Lemures* or *Larvæ* if they are bad, and *Manes* if it is uncertain whether they deserve well or ill . . . the *Larvæ* are hurtful demons made out of wicked men . . . the blessed are called in Greek ἐν-

¹ 1 Tim. iv. 1.

² 2 Tim. iii. 1.

³ *Wars of the Jews*, vi. 1, 5 (Whiston's translation).

⁴ *Wars*, vii. vi. 3.

δαίμονες, because they are good souls, that is to say good demons, confirming his opinion that the souls of men are demons." ¹

The worship of the genii of the Emperors gave throughout the Roman world an impetus to the cultus of the dead. The word "demon" appears to have lost its connexion with the deities or semi-deities of Greece, and to have received a definitely human reference of morally neutral character. Allusions in this sense are not infrequent in the early fathers of the Church. In the spurious epistle of Ignatius to the Smyznæans we read: "For I know that after his resurrection also He was still possessed of flesh, and I believe that He is so now. When, for instance, He came to those who were with Peter, He said to them, 'Lay hold, handle Me, and see that I am not an incorporeal spirit' (f.n., literally 'demon')." ² Tertullian remarks that "offerings to propitiate the dead . . . are idolatry: idolatry in fact is a sort of homage to the departed; the one as well as the other is a service to dead men. Moreover, demons have abode in the images of the dead"; ³ and "we decline to swear by the genii of the Caesars . . . are you ignorant that these genii are called 'Demonēs,' and thence the diminutive 'Daimonia' is applied to them." ⁴ In later times, as the custom of worship increased, the demons held an intermediate position between the gods and men. The word reverted to its older sense as the beings became invested with quasi-divine or satanic honours and the human origin was forgotten.

This interpretation adds force to the LXX translation of Psalm xcvi. 5, "All the gods of the nations are idols (*δαίμόνια*), but the Lord made the heavens," and gives cogency to the parallelism of Psalm cvi. 28, "They joined themselves also unto Baal-Peor, and ate the sacrifices of the dead," especially when read together with verse 37, "They sacrificed their sons and their daughters unto devils (*δαίμονιους*)." In Deuteronomy xxxii. 17, the Greek word in this sense seems very suitable, "They sacrificed unto devils (*δαίμονιους*), not to God; to gods whom they knew (*ἤδεισαν*) not, to new gods that came newly up, whom your fathers feared (*ἤδεισαν*) not."

In the New Testament St. Luke, the intimate friend and fellow-traveller with St. Paul, supplies unmistakable evidence to this

¹ *Civitas Dei*, ix. 11 (Clark's translation).

² *Apostolic Fathers* (Clark's translation), p. 242.

³ Tertullian, vol. i (Clark's translation), p. 21.

⁴ *Ib.* p. 111.

use of the word. The Athenians were, according to St. Paul, if reported verbatim, "too superstitious" (*δεισι-δαιμον-εστέρους*),¹ even as the Corinthians, whom the Apostle visited immediately after leaving Athens, also "sacrificed to devils" (*δαιμονίους*).² The word was taken from the philosophers, to whom St. Paul "seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods (*ξένων δαιμονίων*), because he preached unto them Jesus and the resurrection."³ Festus in like manner said, "Of their own superstition (*δεισι-δαιμονίας*), and of one Jesus which was dead, whom Paul affirmed to be alive."⁴

The interest of St. Paul's declaration to Timothy is not only that of a precise prophecy clearly fulfilled, but it provides the searching test whereby we may decide the relation of Neo-Spiritism to Christian doctrine. Do the revelations and teachings of the dead lead towards, or repel from, Christ, Who is our only hope of immortality?

III.

Neo-Spiritism is grossly materialistic in tone. The departed spirits live in brick houses, wear clothes, smoke cigars, drink whisky and soda. In their laboratories all sorts of things are manufactured. They suffer pain and soon get tired. The occupations of the former life occupy their minds. The old pets—horses, dogs, cats, or birds—rejoin them after death. Flowers reappear on the scene. The reconstruction of the body is hindered by cremation or the loss of a limb. Such conceptions are of purely earthly origin. No truth is revealed, previously unimaginable. The prejudices of the adherents are manifest in the scheme. The details are repugnant to most educated people. In contrast with the Christian doctrines there is miserable failure to grapple with human need.

Neo-Spiritism ignores sin. The perpetuation of our weaknesses, with a faint-hearted endeavour to outgrow them, is its contribution to this subject. The ill effects of Babel linger where each spirit continues to use his former language. The life beyond the grave is still disfigured by its petty tiffs and quarrels. Raymond has "heard of drunkards who want it [strong drink] for months and

¹ Acts xvii. 22.

² I Cor. x. 20, 21. The only passage other than I Tim. iv. 1 in which St. Paul uses the word.

³ Acts xvii. 18.

⁴ Acts xxv. 19.

years over here." The Christian hope of a better life is only provided after an endless series of evolutionary processes. The instincts of the heart repudiate such pessimism.

Neo-Spiritism denies the atonement of Christ. The only remedy for iniquity is in its slow decay. What should then prevent a further outburst does not appear. "Spirit-doctors" have their daily rounds to minister to the prevalent sufferings, which, as represented, are more physical than spiritual in nature. The Saviour is not so much as mentioned in His redeeming power. The Cross of Christ is a stumbling-block. The ordinary desires of unregenerate man to avoid the narrow ways of God are discernible.

Neo-Spiritism offers no consolation to those who mourn the lost. They live on in a continued existence of toil, trouble and difficulty. Annihilation would be preferable. Is such a life all that Christ offered to the penitent thief? Is this what St. Paul craved in his intense desire to depart and be with Christ? In truth, Christ seems to have removed farther away. For three months Raymond had not seen Him. There was no need. "All the sad ones see Him, if no one else can help them." "I am not expecting to see Him yet." Thus are we deprived of our consolation that our friends "sleep in Jesus" and that in the last day they shall rise first to meet Him.¹

Neo-Spiritism has no room for prayer or the worship of God. The question may fairly be raised whether it attains to the level of Deism. Remorseless and inexorable law, governed by no personal will, controls all events and all developments. The vague allusions to the power of prayer are meaningless. "Prayer helps when things are not relevant." "There is a lot in prayer. Prayer keeps out evil things, and keeps nice clean conditions." But such assertions ill fit the general system, and nothing can be made of them. Bias against ecclesiasticism yields support both to prayers for the dead and prayers to the dead. These incidental allusions are worthless for lack of guidance. As a concession to popular opinion prayer is permitted: in reality its value is nil.

Neo-Spiritism repudiates the Scriptural doctrines of resurrection and judgment. "All the decay that goes on on the earth plane is not lost. It doesn't just form manure or dust. Certain vegetable and decayed tissue does form manure for a time, but it

¹ I Thess. iv. 14-16.

gives off an essence or a gas, which ascends, and which becomes what you call a 'smell.' Everything dead has a smell, if you notice; and I know now that the smell is of actual use, because it is from that smell that we are able to produce duplicates of whatever form it had before it became a smell . . . rotting wool appears to be used for making things like tweeds on our side. . . . My suit I expect was made from decayed worsted on your side." The solemn and the ridiculous intermingle. How different it all is to the triumphant utterance of St. Paul, "God giveth it a body as it hath pleased Him," "We shall be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump,"¹ "Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father."² Of judgment hereafter there is no trace in this modern anti-Christian creed.

Neo-Spiritism is void of inspiration to assist in the battles of the present life. Certain members of the Corinthian Church had "hope in Christ" for "this life only." Their condition is described as "most pitiable."³ But Neo-Spiritism is more deplorable, for it destroys our "hope in Christ" here. When the grave is emptied of all significance, when life just goes on without any vital interruption, insistence upon the new birth or regeneration becomes a mockery.

The claims of those who profess to have had intercourse with the dead are without charm or potency to all such as have "learned Christ; if so be that ye have heard Him, and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus."⁴

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¹ 1 Cor. xv. 38-51. ² Rom. vi. 4. ³ 1 Cor. xv. 19, R.V. ⁴ Eph. iv. 20, 21.

