

SOME LATTER-DAY HERESIES.

I. SPIRITUALISM.

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VERY few ideas that have hold on a large number of minds are without some foundation. Facts that cannot be classified under known laws are very easily correlated by the assumption of an unknown something that appears to satisfy the intellect. We are all aware of the definition of the unknown through the more unknown, and the word "Spiritualism" covers so many different meanings that to assert Spiritualism explains what we cannot understand—that is, classify, correlate to what we already know—is really to state we do not know and use a number of letters to explain our ignorance. The world is full of things undreamt of in our philosophy, but that does not mean that all our dreams are true. Psychical life contains a great number of experiences that elude our present psychological analysis. Human love is the strongest and most abiding of all emotions, and when centred in one beloved who has passed from us, it seeks to renew the past and live over again the soul communion that was the salt of life.

The hypothesis that we can consciously or through a medium communicate with the dead is a very natural one that demands sympathetic treatment. If we believe that man survives death and preserves his personality we cannot rule out the possibility of getting into touch with the dead who live. Believing as we do that mind persists and that thought in the world beyond is similar to thought here, there is no *prima facie* objection to "oneing" with the living dead. The whole of Christianity is centred in this "oneing" of the individual soul with Christ, and all our most precious experiences come from communion with Him Who died and rose again. As Christians we are assured we can communicate with the One Who died and rose, and this at once makes it possible for us to consider whether the dead we knew in the flesh can get into union with us. The whole subject must, therefore, be discussed on the basis of evidence as distinct from that of authority if we are to secure an answer that will satisfy the queries that are put to us.

To-day "Spiritualism" is propagated as a fact by honest men. No one who has read the works of Sir William F. Barrett, Sir Oliver Lodge and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle can deny this. The historian of the movement, Mr. J. Arthur Hill, has given us the story of its growth from the standpoint of a firm believer in the manifestation of the spirits of the departed on the earthly plane. Respectable names can be cited in support of many of the phases of thought that are now forgotten, and it is remarkable that those who propagate Spiritualism to-day have made reputations in domains of thought that are physical rather than psychological. No recognized psychological authority has thrown in his lot with the "Spiritualists." Our life-long investigators of mental states and psychological experiences have stood apart from the movement. They are just as human as the rest of us, and are as anxious to get into touch with their beloved dead as any who have lost children in the war. They are as greatly daring as other men, and have shown they are not deterred from investigation and belief by "authority."

Then the whole history of Spiritualism is vitiated by fraud. The temptation to deceive for the purpose of comfort and to self-hypnotize the moral sense has been so strong that few mediums have resisted falling into temptation that ends in deliberate deceit. Never was any cult marked by so many lapses from straight dealing, and that it has survived the exposure of the mediums of the past and present is a proof of the vitality of the "instinct" that if the dead live we must get into touch with them. Besides, there is no doubt that to dabble in Spiritualism means for many mental and moral wreckage. Very few of us are all round balanced, and the practice of occultism means very often the occlusion of reason. Canon Barnes, an eminent scientist and clear thinker, writes: "I hold that all the well attested evidence, on which the theory of spirit communication is based, will ultimately be explained by a fuller knowledge of the interchange of consciousness between living persons." In other words, he maintains that we can explain the unknown by the known and not by the still more unknown.

Spiritualism claims to be a religion. Mr. J. Arthur Hill, its most trusted historical writer and expositor, says:

It is a religion to those who sincerely say it is, and there are many. Moreover, if Myers' pithy remark is true, that "the two elements most necessary for a widely received religion are a lofty moral code and the attestation of

some actual intercourse between the visible and the invisible world," Spiritualism is quite specially equipped, for it has the second qualification in a degree unique among the churches. But it has other things also. It is not only a religion; it is a form of Christianity, though some of its adherents prefer not to say this, because by Christianity they mean an ecclesiastical and creedal system, which not without reason, they regard as not necessarily good or representative of the mind of Christ." In another part of the volume *Spiritualism, Its History, Phenomena and Doctrine* (pp. 258-9), "I have no objection to any one regarding Jesus as a superhuman being, far above our level. In an infinite universe there are probably infinite grades of spiritual existence, and Jesus may have belonged to some higher order than ours. I admit that I have felt this about Emerson. Not only his writings, but the records of his life with the comments of those who knew him well, make me feel that he was so much greater and better than I, that it is with a certain surprise and hesitancy that I think of him as of my own genus 'only a man.' Consequently I sympathize with those who, being rightly humble about their own persons, but perhaps rating others and human possibilities in general too low, feel the necessity of regarding Jesus as more than man. They have a right to their opinion. Humility is a great virtue. All men, and indeed all created intelligences, are sons of the great Father, and many of our Elder Brothers will pass the 'mystic line' at the upper limit of humanity, becoming 'divine' but not necessarily God Himself. Of these great spirits we know little. We may regard them as the Hindoos do, as incarnating on our own plane from time to time, as Krishna, as Jesus voluntarily did for the salvation of men. It is right in a sense to worship them even, for their worthship, their value to the world, is incalculable. Some think the time is now ripe for another such Avatar. Who knows? It may be so."

We have quoted this long passage as the most illuminating in recent Spiritualistic writings of the position assigned to our Lord by one who desires to see Him honoured. The gulf between the place given Him and that He occupies in the New Testament is incalculable. Spiritualism may claim to be a religious cult; we do not quarrel about words, but we cannot admit its right to be acknowledged a form of Christianity in any sense worthy of the word as interpreted intellectually or historically.

What is the Revelation of Spiritualism? It professes to bring human beings on earth into contact with human beings who have died. We are told they leave this earth as they were, and in the other world begin the round of development where they left off here. "In the higher state of being which we enter at the dissolution of the physical frame we shall retain, to a great extent, recollections of our past life, and shall find that there is an intimate relation between the past, the present and the future."

It is alleged we enter upon a "higher state of being." If that be so, then we should expect to receive from the departed through the medium's knowledge of a higher type than we possess here.

Revelation should be made not only confirmatory of the persistence of identity, but of knowledge hid from us here on earth that will advance the well-being of those left behind. It is admitted that the messages presumed to come from the dead are almost if not entirely trivial. It is only necessary to read "Raymond" to find proof of this. Sir Oliver Lodge is as honest as daylight, and he feels the force of the criticism. He does not, however, permit it to weigh with him, and quotes the first message sent by the late Lord Kelvin over the telephone as a vindication of the character of the communications from the other world. Lord Kelvin repeated the first lines of the nursery lines, "Hey, diddle-diddle," etc., as the first thing that came into his head, and he was confirmed in the efficiency of the instrument by hearing the words "The cow jumped over the moon." The argument that if a man of his eminence used this proof, why should not the spirits act in line with him, falls to the ground, when we ask, Were all Lord Kelvin's thoughts given over the telephone on the same plane? Did not those who spoke to him receive communications indicative of his higher intelligence, and were not a very large number of his telephonic communications proof that he possessed a mind much superior to that of ordinary men? Where in the whole of the records of spiritualistic séances do we find any coherent conversation that is equal to the talk between Lord Kelvin and a first-class scientist on the questions of mutual interest to them in the domain of science? It is not to be found. Spiritualism as far as the advance of human knowledge is concerned or the revelation of new facts, is the most barren of all revelations that claim the right to be regarded "as being a fresh departure in religious thought and experience such as we have not had for two thousand years" (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle).

There is real danger to the moral and physical health of a considerable number of men and women from dabbling in spiritual séances. It is not good to surrender the will to the control of others. It has been always recognized by psychologists and physicians that hypnotism has its grave disadvantages as well as its advantages. In all borderland studies in which the personality runs the risk of losing self-control we cannot avoid danger. The dividing line between sanity and insanity is hard to draw. Comparatively few men and women have perfect balance of intellect

that can withstand all shocks, and there are a great number who require just a little pressure on one side or the other to press them over the border. There is evil in us all, and there is evil outside ready to make use of our weaknesses for our destruction. We deliberately lead ourselves into temptation if we indulge in practices that make a strong appeal to the suppression of the personality in the effort to catch something that may come to us from the occult. Medieval thought was full of the presence of demons ready to make illicit use of individuals to their own destruction. This belief made the lives of thousands a burden to them, and we have no knowledge whatever to lead us to dogmatize that the alleged messages sent by the "spirits" have their origin in external evil spirits who seize the souls of men and women dabbling in a forbidden thing. We need no such explanation of facts that are known. Some of the writer's friends after applying themselves to spiritualistic practices dropped them because they had an injurious effect on their character, and the history of mysticism is full of stories of moral downfall of those who had resort to any form of mysticism that opened the soul of man to any other than God Himself. Whatever value the "spirit" messages may have for the comfort of those who believe in them, there is no doubt that the recourse to mediums has had a deleterious effect on a number of men and women. Balancing the good and the evil on a merely utilitarian basis it is not too much to say that the evil exceeds the good.

What should be the attitude of the Christian Church towards Spiritualism? The Archbishop of Canterbury has announced that a Committee of Enquiry is now engaged on the subject and its Report will be considered by the forthcoming Lambeth Conference. The present writer deprecates anything like a dogmatic fulmination against Spiritualism. The age of proscriptions by authority has passed. Something more is required than the condemnation of men who call themselves experts by a body of men who have given little or no attention to the subject. The phenomena of Spiritualism require explanation, classification and scientific examination. The use of the X-rays by the unskilful leads to fatal illness. The man of science knows how to employ them and to guard against their evil effects. So it should be with Spiritualism. Men whose training fits them to investigate should be asked to apply themselves to its

study. That has been done in the past, and as a whole the verdict has been against the objective reality of communications from a spirit world. Certain supposed messages and facts are unexplained, but that is the case in every department of human knowledge, except in these studies, where arbitrary postulates and definitions and axioms lead to definite conclusions. We need something more now, when Spiritualism finds a seed plot in so many sorrowing hearts. Knowledge can alone kill the cult where it is pernicious. Neither ridicule nor denunciation on *a priori* grounds can bring conviction to the minds of the devotees of Spiritualism. The cult will not die as long as a strong human interest leads men and women to place value in mascots and in superstitious practices of all kinds. We must face the fact that the mind of man is not always logical, and where strong emotion leads, strange practices will follow. On the other hand, clear authoritative expositions by those who have no axe to grind but depend for their conclusions on the dry light of reason applied to occurrences that can be contemporaneously tested, will do much to confine the danger to a very small circle. The supposed facts are ready for investigation. We can no more prove a negative by strong assertion of impossibility without evidence, than establish communication with the dead by evidence that has not been subjected to the most thorough-going scrutiny.

Christianity satisfies the cravings of the heart of man by its doctrine of life in Christ and the Communion of Saints. We believe that the blessed dead live in Him. We know Him in our experience and through Him we are one with them in Him. The Church is one, triumphant with Christ in the heavenly places—if we must use spatial terms—militant here on earth. Those who love their Saviour and have found Him precious know that those who died in Him are safe in His keeping. More has not been revealed to us. It is not unnatural to ask for personal touch—for communion with the dead. We have as yet been vouchsafed no sure evidence of this fact. What passes for evidence seldom stands even superficial examination, and it may well be that part of the Divine discipline is to test our faith by relying on the promises of the Gospel and by avoiding the dubious methods that profess to add to our knowledge by the dark séances and the narratives of mediums who in the majority of cases have proved moral failures—unable to withstand the temptation of saying more than they know and

professing more than they can perform in order to retain their reputation as men and women with special gifts.

In his chapter, "Private Sittings at Mariemont," Sir Oliver Lodge concludes with the following "warning": "It may be well to give a word of warning to those who find that they possess any unusual power in the psychic direction, and to counsel regulated moderation in its use. Every power can be abused, and even the simple faculty of automatic writing can with the best intentions be misapplied. Self-control is more important than any other form of control, and whoever possesses the power of receiving communications in any form should see to it that he remains master of the situation. To give up your own judgment and depend solely on adventitious aid is a grave blunder, and may in the long run have disastrous consequences. Moderation and common sense are required of those who try to utilize powers which neither they nor any fully understand, and a dominating occupation in mundane affairs is a wholesome safeguard." These are wise words, but is it too much to say that the "psychics" are not always remarkable for their self-control and their moderation and common sense? Some may be, but the so-called psychic temperament is not seldom united with a lack of mental balance and is incapable of a dominating occupation in mundane affairs.

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