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A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE VII.

A NEW OXFORD MOVEMENT.

BY THE REVEREND HENRY A. STIMSON, D. D.

SOME fifty years ago, a religious movement which bore the name of Oxford, powerfully affected the English-speaking world. While theological, it was mainly ecclesiastical in form. It aimed to reestablish both the church and theology in their historical connection. It strongly affected theological thinking, and exerted an influence which gave to what is called Anglican churchmanship a direction and an impulse which are still controlling. That outside the Episcopal communion it has been sharply antagonized, and has done not a little to consolidate the opposing forces which have become so powerful in the growth and unity of English dissent, does not detract from its historic importance.

To-day, after a period in which the Higher Criticism has come to the front and demanded for the time almost exclusive attention, Christian thought both in this country and in England is turning back to the fundamental questions of theology, and beginning to occupy itself with what may be called the philosophy of religion. In the psychological line Professor James's book on "The Philosophy of Religious Experience" is characteristic of the movement in one direction, and is the most widely read of the serious books of the day. In the line of pure philosophical thinking the movement finds again a powerful exponent in Oxford in the person of J. R. Illingworth, known as the Bampton Lecturer of 1904. His recent book on the "Divine Immanence" has already gone through

five editions, and by reason of its clearness, its simplicity, and the power with which it puts its propositions, is sure to have a wide influence. It already stands in the midst of a group of books along similar lines by new and vigorous writers, both Scotch and English. It is quite worth while, therefore, to give an outline of its argument. It is vitally constructive, as well as effectively controversial. I do this as largely as possible in his own words.

It grapples at once with the old problem of the distinction between matter and spirit, which it points out as being identical with the distinction between body and soul, which dates from the primitive philosophy. However we may regard spirit and matter,—whether as totally different things, or as different aspects of the same thing,—we know them only in combination. The material world outside us presents itself only through our senses, so affecting the mind, and in turn, so far as our knowledge of it goes, being affected by the mind. To know it, means simply to bring it into relation to our mind. When we turn to spirit the case is the same, for that, as we know it, is always connected with matter: we cannot think, we cannot be conscious, without a brain.

No experience, however spiritual, therefore, can be other than a state of consciousness of the material organ on which consciousness depends.

If matter and spirit are thus known only in combination, it follows that neither can be completely known, since we cannot disentangle them. What we actually know at first hand is our personal experience, since the two factors are inextricably combined. For all this, the words "spirit" and "matter" represent distinct phases of our experience and are perfectly separable in thought. To the conception of spirit alone pertains, as we know it in human personality or self-conscious-

ness, the power to make the distinction between self and all other objects; and spiritual life is the power to pursue and use the knowledge of all existing things for one's highest benefit.

From this standpoint, spirit reigns in a realm apart. Its power of self-determination enables it to recognize and obey a moral law, which is only possible to a being that is both self-conscious and free. In this way we discover that man is the highest being in the known universe. As such, we expect that the law of nature, everywhere subordinating the lower forms of existence to the service of the higher, will make all existing things subservient to the uses of his spirit. This view of man and of nature finds striking confirmation in the history of human thought, from the earliest forms of religion to the latest utterances of the poets. From the very dawn of human history, the visible universe has been a primary, permanent, world-wide agent in the education of the human soul. Matter may even be said to exist for the development of spirit; for, among all its ministries, its service in this direction is beyond comparison, the chief.

Back, then, of all theories about matter or nature, is this fact of actual experience. Man finds in the presence of nature a sense of contact with something spiritual. It is a sense so universal and so persistent, that, as it cannot be discredited either by proof that it is an illusion, or that the faculties that feel it are unworthy of trust, it must be recognized as weighty evidence of a spiritual reality behind material things. It remains a stupendous evidence that the material universe is a manifestation of spirit. The *prima facie* aspect of nature becomes strictly spiritual, for it is the judgment of our personality, as a whole, in contact with nature, as a whole. And, in contrast, nature is made to appear material, only when viewed in some

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narrow and functional relation, as in the hands of the scientist.

What, then, is the relation of the universe to that Spirit of which it so persistently seems to speak? The unity of nature which modern science has so thoroughly established, leaves no place for polytheism or dualism. If the universe is guided by spiritual power, that power must be ultimately one. And if we are to form any conjecture of the way in which this spirit is related to the material order, we must recur to the starting-point of all knowledge, namely, ourselves. Human personality is the only thing we know at first hand, and from within, and it exhibits spirit and matter in combination. When we consider ourselves we find that what we call our "spirit" transcends and is independent of the body, on which, otherwise, it so entirely depends. However intimately allied, they can, in our thoughts, never for a moment be identified or confused. The spirit is immanent in matter, in that it pervades the whole bodily organism, as well as that it makes it subservient to its needs. And this immanence extends, in what may be called a secondary degree, to the inanimate objects of the external world. For a man imprints his spiritual character on all the things with which he deals,—his house, his clothes, his furniture, the various products of his hand or head. In the pictures of Raphael, the music of Beethoven, the poetry of Dante, the philosophy of Plato, the spirit of the great masters is affecting us as really as if we saw them face to face.

As self-conscious, self-identical, self-determined beings, we possess qualities which transcend or rise above the laws of matter. At the same time we can only realize these qualities, and so become aware of them, by acting in the material world, from which we are and remain essentially distinct. If, then, we are to raise the question, What is the relation of the

Supreme Spirit to the material universe? this is the analogy from which we must proceed, for we have no other,—that of our experience, in which transcendence and immanence are combined.

Pantheism and Deism at once are shut out as possibilities, for Pantheism, however plausible, is mere immanence, or materialism grown sentimental, and Deism, as belief in a merely transcendent God, is to-day inconceivable. Monism,¹ as the view that matter in motion is identical with mind, is equally shut out; for, whether material or spiritual, Monism is not based upon what we know in ourselves, and what is to that extent solid fact, but upon distrust of that; that is, upon a skeptical foundation which cannot possibly support a positive conclusion. Monism, in fact, started from the physical side, from the analysis of cerebral conditions of thought; it rests on physical analogies and is colored by physical modes of thought, and the attempt to make it metaphysically tenable seems an impossible *tour de force*.

On this analogy, then, of the human personality, the Divine Presence which we recognize in nature will be the presence of a personal Spirit which infinitely transcends the material order, yet sustains it and dwells within it. While we cannot explain the method either of the transcendence or the indwelling, the Trinitarian conception of God, which we Christians have independent reasons for believing, is intellectually the most satisfactory, for it accords most closely with the human analogy. As man has an essential immanence in his body which is consequently often called his person, and a somewhat different immanence in the works which he creates, so the

¹ It should be said that "Spiritual Monism" as defined in that new and powerful work, W. L. Walker's "Christian Theism," is a very different thing from the "Monism" as used in the text and in common parlance.

first Person of the Trinity finds in the second Person the express image of his person, "in whom dwelleth the fulness of the Godhead bodily"; while, also, "by him were all things made," giving the complete immanence of the Father in the Son, and as a result an immanence, also, in creation, analogous to our presence in our work.

The immanence in man follows obviously from His immanence in creation; and conscience, the most mysterious of human attributes, becomes of this at once the witness.

**"As God's most intimate Presence in the soul
And his most perfect Image in the world."**

As both the universe and man have a history, the revelation of God in his works must be progressive; and we are prepared to find it culminating in his actual incarnation, the climax of his immanence in the world. Such incarnation, if it does occur, will be unique in its method, as it is a unique fact. The objection to it, that it is a miraculous interference with the order of nature, falls to the ground when it is remembered that man and nature are inseparable parts of one whole, and that foremost among man's spiritual attributes is his belief in the absolute worth of his personality, as against all impersonal things. This conviction is inherent in the very make and constitution of man, and as such it is an element in the universe, as real as any other. What we find, therefore, is not an order of nature on the one side, and human interest on the other; but a single universe holding in combination two elements, of which one possesses the attribute of claiming supremacy over the other. To say, therefore, that the order of nature is not likely to be altered for man, or, in other words, that matter is not likely to be altered in the interests of spirit, is to contradict our fundamental conception of the relative importance of the

two, and to draw our influence from only one section of nature, ignoring the other. And no argument from moral improbability can lie against miracle as such.

Furthermore, the Incarnation, an event in its nature unique, the sole and only possible occurrence of its kind, has no "usual order" with which to come in conflict; it cannot, therefore, be called a miracle in any ordinary sense of the word. It may be strange, surprising, stupendous, but nothing in the course of nature, nothing in the previous history of man, can create a shred of reasonable presumption against it. It follows, therefore, that, as the result of the Incarnation, such miracles as Jesus wrought—the healing of the sick, the raising of the dead, and the rest—are so probable that we should even call them natural. They were perfectly and obviously natural to him, he being what he is.

The proper form of question concerning a miracle as recorded in the Gospel, is not, "Is it likely to have happened?" but, "Is it likely to have happened, if Christ was God?" Difficulty with the miracles really means difficulty with the divinity of Christ. We question the one because of restricted faith in the other. Apart, then, from any question of revelation, it may be as natural, so to speak, for God to become man as for God to create man, and the incarnation may, for all we know, be an inevitable consequence of creation, as some theologians have ventured to assert.

The primary evidence for the Incarnation is and must be spiritual, for it is primarily a spiritual act. It is the presentation of a person, and the proof lies in the character of the person presented. Jesus is his own self-evidence. He appeals to his character to substantiate his claims. He bids men look at him, and recognize that he must be what he says. It was an appeal to spiritual insight, and of course failed with those

who did not know Goodness when they saw it, i. e., with the morally and spiritually blind. But those who could see, and who accepted him, found themselves quickened into a new life. And it was this inner circle of witnesses who were gradually trained by Jesus Christ, first to believe in him, then to understand him, and finally to proclaim him to the world.

This, then, was the primary proof of the Incarnation, the self-revelation of a person to persons. But it was unquestionably accompanied, as Christians believe, by works of super-human power, and sealed by the crowning miracle of the resurrection from the dead. If Jesus Christ was what he claimed to be, his miracles, so far from being improbable, will appear to be the most natural thing in the world. For no one will deny that in this case he could have worked them; and, when we look at them, it seems likely that he would; for they harmonize completely with his whole character and work, being mainly acts of charity and mercy either to the bodies or the souls of men, and at the same time profoundly symbolical of spiritual truth. They are, indeed, so essentially a part of the character depicted in the Gospels, that, without them, that character would entirely disappear. They flow naturally from a person who, despite his obvious humanity, impresses us throughout as being at home in two worlds. The miracles attributed to Christ are not merely congruous with his whole personality, but are a part of it. And there cannot be a shadow of doubt that this was an integral element in the total impression which he produced. His miracles did not prove his character, but they essentially confirmed the claim which his character meanwhile predisposed men to accept.¹ The

¹ "We can discuss Christianity to a certain distance without accepting its alleged miracles as true; but we cannot discuss it at all without accepting them as parts of the system. If we leave them out of it we shall not be discussing Christianity, but some figment of our own" (H. M. Gwatkin, *The Knowledge of God*, vol. 1. p. 2).

lapse of years which has diminished their appeal to modern eyes has in the plan of God developed a new kind of testimony to take their place, namely, the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Gospels, in the spread and dominion of the kingdom of Christ. The work of Jesus Christ comes before us to-day, not as a hypothetical breach of nature's laws, but as the actual restitution of these laws when obviously and beyond controversy broken, the counteraction of the miracle of sin. The redeemed man made new in heart and life is to-day the final witness to the living Christ.

The objections to the story of the Virgin birth disappear when it is remembered that sinful humanity is not normal but abnormal, an anomaly in the universe. A complete break with sinful heredity is of the very essence of the Incarnation, and the account of the method of that breach which has come down to us rests on precisely the same evidence as the account of the Incarnation itself.

It must be remembered that the opposition to miracles is as old as Christian history, and has passed through many phases which the Christian faith has outlived and survived. But its particular revival in the present day would seem to date from the time when the doctrine of the uniformity of nature began to be emphasized; and that phase of thought has already somewhat lost its vogue. There was an undue simplicity about it, and men are becoming far more ready to recognize that "there are more things in heaven and earth." We now think less of the uniformity than the unity of nature,—that oneness which the very word "unity" implies, the intimate correlation between the whole and its parts. Uniformity may be merely mechanical, but unity is essentially a spiritual conception. We cannot conceive a merely material unity, since spirit is the only unifying agent we know.

The order of the system is the witness of the creative and omnipresent Spirit. As spirit ever affirms its own absolute supremacy, and ever exercises the right of using all things for its own end, the antecedent probability of miracles is immensely increased. The more we recognize that nature has a spiritual coefficient, the less confident do we become that we have a complete knowledge of the processes of nature. All causation must obviously run back into the spiritual region, in other words, must be ultimately spiritual.

When we examine our own mental processes, we find that our will is the starting-point of our plans and progress. It is an agent whose reason for action is contained within itself. When we have traced an occurrence to the intervention of the human will, we are at once content. We know not merely how it began, but why; we have reached its absolute beginning. This is the source of the idea of cause. We mean by it something which initiates changes without external compulsion, therefore out of its own nature, and is hence their real starting-point,—a self-determined, and therefore self-conscious, and therefore spiritual, being. And this is what we postulate in the universe at large, when we say that it must have a cause. It must originate in a will which is its law, and therefore its own explanation, a being whose will and intellect are only one. What we call secondary or natural causes are therefore an aspect of this divine energy at work. We recognize that the unity of nature and the causal connection of its parts land us in the spiritual region, and make it easy to believe that the Spirit, that which habitually controls matter, may sometimes exhibit its supremacy in extraordinary ways. As the greater a man is, the more methodical and consistent will he be in the usual situations of life, and at the same time in a crisis his greatness will be shown by his ability and his

courage to devise new methods and to act upon them, so the habitual course of nature, which alone makes life and knowledge possible, may well be traversed by lightning flashes from the spiritual world, if both alike are being guided by one power to one end, and that end, in a strict sense, supernatural. The Incarnation, in our Christian view of it, is a supreme instance of the action of the Absolute,—the Being who is behind all things therein coming to the front, and exhibiting, as a necessary part of the process, his authoritative relation to the world. It is not merely an event in the history of man, but an event, at least as far as the earth is concerned, in the history of matter; analogous, upon a higher plane, to the origin of life, or the origin of personality; the appearance of a new order of being upon the world.

The Incarnation, once accepted, throws a new light upon the entire world. For, on the one hand, against mere idealism, it emphasizes the value and importance of matter, as being the agent through which God's spiritual purpose is effected; and, on the other hand, against mere materialism, it interprets this value and importance as consisting in the capability to subserve that higher purpose of God. This new revelation has brought within the range of our knowledge new facts so important as to make the Incarnation, and all that was connected with it, the center of our speculation and of our practical life.

If, now, it be asked, "Can we not conceive an Incarnation without miracles, and might not such a conception be equally the center of the world?" we answer, Undoubtedly; we might frame such a conception. But we do not believe in the Incarnation because we can conceive it, but because we have evidence that it happened. And the only evidence we have that it happened, is also evidence that it happened in a certain way. To borrow from that evidence the general notion of an

Incarnation, and proceed to clothe it in the colors of our own imagination, is absurd. The only alternative is to accept the miraculous accompaniment of the Incarnation as we find it, and, so doing, to view the world in its light. This gives us the knowledge of God as a living, personal, particular Providence, as a hearer and answerer of prayer, working alike through material and spiritual means. We, his children, are the object of his immediate and personal interest. And this knowledge, coming to us through Jesus Christ and certified by our ever-recurring individual experience, makes the Gospel story in all its details both credible and natural.