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898TH ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING

HELD IN THE LECTURE HALL OF THE NATIONAL SOCIETY FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, 69, GREAT PETER STREET, WESTMINSTER, S.W.1, ON MONDAY, 5TH MARCH, 1951.

REV. CANON MARCUS KNIGHT, B.D., B.A., F.K.C., S.T.M., IN THE CHAIR.

The Minutes of the previous Meeting were read, confirmed and signed.

The following elections were announeed :—Ian George Mackay, Esq., B.Sc., Member; James D. Bales, Esq., B.A., M.A., Ph.D., Member; Rev. A. L. Blomerley, Member; John Brown, Esq., Associate; John A. Mikaelsen, Esq., Associate.

The CHAIRMAN then called on Rev. J. Stafford Wright, M.A., to read his Paper entitled "The Supposed Evidence for Reincarnation."

THE SUPPOSED EVIDENCE FOR REINCARNATION.

By REV. J. STAFFORD WRIGHT, M.A.

SYNOPSIS.

Reincarnation is taken seriously by a high proportion of the human race. Actual evidence for it, as opposed to philosophical apologetics, could come from—

(1) Revelation. Most believers in it do not regard it as a revealed truth. The Christian Bible is opposed to the theory. Alleged revelations from discarnate spirits can be quoted freely on both sides, and so are inconclusive.

(2) Memory of previous lives. Alleged examples capable of proof are rare, but several can be quoted. Hypnotism has been used to induce memory.

If the facts are established, they are capable of other explanations in the light of modern knowledge about suggestion, the unconscious, telepathy, clairvoyance, and so-called psychometry.

MOST of the books and articles that have been written on reincarnation have faced the question from a philosophical, or semi-philosophical, point of view. From this standpoint the recent book by Canon Marcus Knight, *Spiritualism, Reincarnation, and Immortality*, has dealt very well with the subject. But, so far as I can discover, no Christian writer has attempted to examine the alleged evidence for reincarnation, and to offer some alternative explanation of the facts. To do this is the purpose of this paper; and although it is necessary to touch upon some of the more general arguments,

they will not be amplified here. For if, after all our arguments that are based upon such things as the lack of memory of previous lives, we are confronted with people who say that they can remember and can give proof of their memory of previous lives, we shall be at a loss what to say. I am not claiming that this way of approach in this paper is more effective than the other way, but I believe that this is a necessary handmaid to the other.

A belief in reincarnation is part of the faith of some 230 million Hindus and 150 million Buddhists. It is held in a simpler form by many animistic peoples. In this country it is held by Theosophists, Anthroposophists, many Spiritualists, and others who are interested in the occult. Rudolf Steiner may be regarded as one of the most notable apostles of the belief in modern times. The survey, *Puzzled People*, a year or two ago said that 10 per cent. of believers in life after death held some theory of reincarnation. Eva Martin, in *The Ring of Return*, has collected the writings of some 500 people of all ages who have been either believers in reincarnation or have made serious reference to it. Pythagoras, Schopenhauer, Hegel, and Goethe, are amongst those who have held this belief, while amongst modern philosophers McTaggart and Macneile Dixon have been attracted to it. It is not therefore a childish belief that can lightly be set aside. There is much about it that is noble and extremely attractive to those who look for justice and order in the universe.

Let us see first of all what believers in reincarnation hold. Here one finds certain differences between them. Hinduism believes in the rebirth of individual souls. Hinayana Buddhism, and perhaps Gautama Buddha himself, denies the separate existence of the soul or self, but holds that a new bundle of qualities is created by the sum of the actions of the previous life. Both of these religions accept the doctrine of Karma, which means *Deed*, *Act*, or *Work*. Karma is the underlying law of the universe, which no god or man can set aside. It is the law that whatever a man sows he must reap exactly. Thus our allotment of good or evil in this present life is precisely what we have merited in previous lives, no more and no less. Most of those in this country who accept reincarnation, accept the doctrine of Karma also.

A constructive presentation of the doctrine is to be found in a recent book by Robert N. Kotzé, *The Scheme of Things*, which combines the belief with a belief in evolution. He postulates a

group-soul as "a psychic entity which ensouls a whole group of animals" (p. 42). In the earliest forms of life there would be one common psychic entity, but gradually different groups of creatures, partaking of this one group-soul, had different experiences, with the result that portions of their psychic existence could not merge into the main group-soul at death, but came together to form a new group-soul. The process continued, till one day "the portion of the group-soul incarnated in a single individual has experiences of such a nature that its temporary and incomplete division from the main body becomes permanent, and it can never again automatically reunite with it" (45). This individual has now reached the Egoic stage, and has become a human being; henceforward it incarnates in one human body at a time. At first it develops by reincarnating quickly, but it comes to spend longer and longer in the psychic world. "Finally we reach the situation as we have it to-day, where it seems that the period of discarnate existence may stretch over hundreds of years" (45). The ultimate end is "the merging of all perfected mankind into a single Divine Being" (187). "The souls of all mankind, when perfected, instead of being reabsorbed into the bosom of Nirvana, may be fused together and merged into the transcendent consciousness of a new God. The consciousness of all of us might be used as the cells, so to say, for the body of a great new Divinity, who would be the final product of our evolution" (159).

This is a magnificent theory, and the idea of group-souls may well be needed to account for such things as the guiding life-principle in colonies of bees, ants, and termites. Marais has argued for this most convincingly in *The Soul of the White Ant*. But the evolution of this group-soul from animal to God is no more than pure speculation unless some tangible evidence can be produced to support it.

We turn then to look for evidence. It would seem that if there is evidence, it will be found in one or more of the following places:

1. It may be revealed by God, or by some discarnate spirits, as a fact. The reliability of such evidence will depend upon how far we are convinced of the authenticity of the alleged revelation.

2. Certain individuals may remember previous existences, and be able to furnish satisfactory proofs of what they say that they remember. There would not appear to be any other source of evidence than these two.

Revelation.

It is doubtful whether Hindus and Buddhists would regard their belief in reincarnation as dependent upon divine revelation. Their belief is rather part of their whole philosophy, which, they claim, can be proved by those who by means of the discipline of Yoga tune themselves to the inner reality of the universe.

Christians naturally turn to the Bible to see whether reincarnation forms part of the revelation there. In particular they turn to the teachings of Jesus Christ. If reincarnation is a fact, it is obviously a fact of the most tremendous importance; it concerns man's eternal destiny. We are not therefore demanding that Jesus Christ should make a pronouncement on some interesting trifle. But we are saying that if the doctrine is true, Jesus Christ could not have ignored it, but must have made it part of His whole teaching.

Yet nothing is more remarkable than the silence of Jesus Christ on this subject. This is admitted by reincarnationists, yet, since they hold that Jesus Christ was perhaps the greatest Teacher that the world has known, they feel bound to account for His apparent silence.

They do so in various ways. Ralph Shirley, in chapter xix of *The Problem of Rebirth*, cuts the knot by saying that there are so many discrepancies between the Gospel accounts that one cannot be certain what Christ did or did not teach. Yet even if one were to grant the existence of minor discrepancies, or to allow that the picture of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel contradicts that of the Synoptists, we still cannot find anywhere the slightest suggestion that reincarnation formed a part of the teaching of Jesus, as it must have done if He believed it to be a fact. The actual Epistles of members of the first Church bear this out.

Shaw Desmond, in *Reincarnation for Everyman*, suggests on pages 63, 64, three reasons for the silence of the New Testament, but in effect these cancel each other out. First, he says that the idea of reincarnation was so widespread that it was taken for granted. Secondly, that theologians excised passages about reincarnation in the Scriptures because they disagreed with their pet theories. Thirdly, that reincarnation, as an esoteric doctrine, had a veil of secrecy thrown over it for fear of its being misunderstood. Obviously all three of these arguments cannot be held simultaneously, and in actual fact there is no evidence at all to support a single one of them.

A more straightforward approach is that of Eugen Kolisko in *Reincarnation and other Essays*, where he says on page 21, " All who oppose the idea of reincarnation have their strongest weapon in the silence of the Gospels concerning it. In Christianity, rebirth can be achieved in one life through following the example of Christ." And again, on the same page, " For the Christian, the single life of the Redeemer assumes an incomparable value. The imitation of Christ's life becomes the ideal of every Christian. And hence the *single life* of the individual becomes the only reality ; and the Resurrection gives a new significance to death."

In these words Dr. Kolisko does not reject the doctrine of reincarnation, in which he himself firmly believes. But he apparently means that to have preached it at that time would have been to distract attention from the main call of the Christian Gospel. None the less it is difficult to see how such an important truth could have failed to find any part at all in the preaching of Jesus Christ and His first disciples. On the single occasion when the disciples suggested that sin in a previous existence might be the solution to the problem of a man born blind, Jesus Christ categorically rejected the idea (John 9 : 2, 3). Shaw Desmond dismisses this answer as " one of those interpolations and twistings from the original meaning with which the New Testament abounds " (p. 61). He himself thinks that Jesus here told the disciples that it *was* because of sins done in a previous existence that the man had been born blind. By these methods one can make Christ teach anything one wishes.

It is however commonly stated that on one occasion Christ did teach reincarnation, when He referred to John the Baptist as " Elijah which was to come." The relevant passages are Matthew 11 : 14 ; 17 : 10–12 ; Mark 9 : 11–13. We may, however, interpret Christ's words perfectly naturally in the light of Luke 1 : 17, where the angel said that John would serve God " in the spirit and power of Elijah," not that he was actually Elijah in person. It is, in fact, impossible to hold that Christ meant that John was Elijah reincarnated, when the context of Matthew 17 is borne in mind. On the Mount of Transfiguration the disciples had just seen and heard Moses and Elijah, not Moses and John the Baptist ; that is, Elijah in the other world still existed as Elijah. But even if John the Baptist was actually Elijah in person, we are dealing with something abnormal, since Elijah did not die like ordinary men. We should thus have an

argument against reincarnation rather than in its favour; for the only example of reincarnation in Scripture would be that of a man who did not pass through the ordinary channel of death.

Other arguments from the Scriptures are based on superficial understanding. Thus there is no reference to reincarnation in any statement about the Incarnation of Jesus Christ (Shaw Desmond, p. 58), nor in Christ's words about His previous life with the Father (John 17 : 5), as a Theosophist leaflet asserts. Shaw Desmond's statement that " this great Master of Life and Death, like all created things, had had to pass through reincarnation after reincarnation " (p. 58) has no warrant in the words of Jesus Himself or in the New Testament as a whole. The Incarnation of Jesus Christ is the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity, who emptied Himself of the glory which He had before the world was (Phil. 2 : 6–11 ; John 17 : 5).

Nor can arguments stand that are based on popular reports quoted in Mark 6 : 14 (Shaw Desmond, p. 62), when Herod thought that Jesus was " John the Baptist risen from the dead." Since Jesus and John were contemporaries, the one cannot have been regarded as the reincarnation of the other. The key phrase here is " risen from the dead," which explains the further popular report that Jesus was one of the old prophets. To believe in a resurrection is wholly different from believing in reincarnation.

To sum up : Scripture lends no support to the doctrine of reincarnation. It speaks of this life now as the time of decision. It goes so far as to say that " it is appointed unto men once to die " (Heb. 9 : 27). In view of this it is difficult to hold even that the doctrine was an esoteric belief in the early Church. To anyone who believes that Jesus Christ was the incarnate Son of God, it is a striking point that He was not sent into the world as a Buddhist or a Hindu, in the stream of reincarnationist teaching, but He was born as a Jew, as the climax of a non-reincarnationist religion.

A discussion of how far a belief in reincarnation existed amongst Jews in the time of Christ, and amongst Christian and semi-Christian sects later, would demand more space than can be spared here. In his article in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* Dr. Gaster does not think that there is sufficient evidence to decide when reincarnationist ideas came to be held by some of the Jews. Gnostic sects soon after the time of Christ certainly held them.

One problem is the need to distinguish between belief in

reincarnation and belief in the pre-existence of the soul. Even the remark of the disciples in John 9 : 2 might express no more than the suggestion that the man born blind had sinned in a previous existence as a soul, before he had been born into the world at all. A number of early Christian Fathers accepted the pre-existence—though not the pre-incarnation—of the soul, and reincarnationists, who quote them, do not always observe this distinction. Origen was a notable exponent of this view, and in a somewhat similar form the view has been stated in recent times by such theologians as Dr. N. P. Williams in *The Doctrine of the Fall and of Original Sin*, and Canon Peter Green in *The Pre-Mundane Fall*, where they state a doctrine of a pre-creation fall of a world soul, of which our souls are incarnated fragments.

We suggested, however, that, if there was no revelation from God, there might be some revelation from discarnate spirits. Some have claimed that this is so, and that mediums have been the recipients of messages asserting that reincarnation is a fact.

The testimony of these messages is, however, considerably weakened by similar messages which assert that reincarnation is not a fact. Those who have studied the literature of spiritualism know that this is so. Until recently it was generally true to say that spirit messages on the Continent supported reincarnation, while messages in this country denied it. Those of us who are critical of the spirit messages might suggest that the reason for this was the influence of the tradition of Allan Kardec, who was one of the leading French spiritualists in the last century. In his book, *Le Livre des Esprits*, he quotes messages which teach a doctrine of reincarnation not unlike that of Kotzé.

Spiritualists and reincarnationists have explained these differences by saying that those who have passed over tend to retain their habits of thought and outlook. Thus a reincarnationist in this life would still hold reincarnationist views in the life to come. The reverse would also be true. Shaw Desmond puts this forward in chapter xxviii. Dr. Alexander Cannon, in *Powers That Be* (pp. 186 f.), is particularly concerned because someone had obtained information from a high spirit that "under no circumstances whatever does the soul come again to earth." Dr. Cannon suggests that the sitter had been misled. He holds that some people "get into touch with entities that have nothing valid to impart, or they find themselves catching their own reflected thoughts."

Obviously if any of these three explanations is true, it robs

the testimony of these communicators of all their value. On Shaw Desmond's explanation, the opinion of the discarnate communicator has precisely the same value as the opinion that he held while on earth. On Dr. Cannon's explanation, why should not Dr. Cannon himself be the one who is in touch with entities that have nothing valid to impart? Or why should not he be catching his own reflected thoughts?

Clearly the supposed evidence from the spirit world is worthless for discovering the truth about reincarnation, and most Theosophists and Anthroposophists pay little attention to the communications of spiritualism.

The Memory of Previous Lives.

It is admitted by everyone that only the minutest percentage of people even profess to have a memory of a previous existence. This absence of memory is regarded as one of the strongest arguments against reincarnation. But the argument can be turned in two ways. First, it can be urged that memory is almost entirely a faculty of the physical brain, and is connected primarily with bodily experiences. Each body will then build up its own train of memories, and will not inherit the memories that belonged to the brains of former existences. This is the line taken by Dr. Kolisko, though he believes that under certain conditions memories of past lives can be brought up from the subconscious.

The other way of turning the argument is to point out the necessity of forgetfulness if the reincarnated soul is ever to develop fresh experiences. This is Kotzé's explanation, and it appears reasonable. Whatever new set of circumstances may fall to my lot, I can never face them with an entirely fresh sheet. I must face them with the accumulated habits, outlook, and personality, that have become an inevitable part of myself during the years. Thus, if I were to be launched into a fresh incarnation with all the memories of this life, my growth in experience would be considerably hampered.

Yet it is claimed that by some freak of nature, or by deliberate training, some people have been able to remember incidents from their past lives. It is not easy, however, to find well-documented cases. Mostly writers refer to certain instances, often giving names, and perhaps assuring us that they have investigated them. But anyone who has followed cases of alleged apparitions and communications in the records of the Society for Psychical

Research, knows how easy it is to have a convincing hearsay story that dwindles to very small proportions once it is thoroughly investigated.

One of the weaknesses of Shaw Desmond's *Reincarnation for Everyman* is that one is confronted with a "take it or leave it" attitude. For popular propaganda this method is successful, but it is not of much value for the serious investigator. Thus Shaw Desmond gives stories of some of his own previous incarnations, some of which he can remember, and upon which he has drawn in one of his novels of ancient Roman life. About other of his incarnations, he has been "informed by those competent to judge" (p. 112). Also he names friends of his who have memories of their past lives.

But there are a few cases that are given in greater detail. Ralph Shirley, in *The Problem of Rebirth*, quotes one that appears to be well authenticated, and I cannot find any trace of anyone who has challenged the facts. It is the case of Alexandrina Samona, and is vouched for by Alexandrina's father, who was a well-known doctor in Sicily, by Count Ferdinand Monroy de Ranchibile of Palermo, by a Protestant Pastor at Palermo, and by others whose names and titles are given.

The case is briefly as follows: On March 15, 1910, Dr. Samona lost his little daughter, Alexandrina, aged about 5, through meningitis. Three days later the mother dreamed that Alexandrina appeared and said that she would come back "little." The dream was repeated, but the mother ignored it, since, owing to an operation, it seemed impossible that she could ever have another child. A little later the family, while discussing the dreams, heard three loud knocks on the door, though no one was there. They determined to hold a séance, in the course of which Alexandrina purported to communicate, and assured her parents that she would be born again before Christmas. At further séances the message came that a baby sister would be born at the same time. After about three months the communications ceased, since the alleged Alexandrina said that she would now have to pass into a state of sleep.

On November 22 twin daughters were born, and one of them, as she grew older, proved to be very like Alexandrina, both physically and mentally. Her twin, on the other hand, was completely different.

At 8 years old Alexandrina II described a visit to a certain Church that she had never seen, whereas Alexandrina I had

been there shortly before her death. Amongst other things she said, " We went there with a lady who had horns, and met with some little red priests in the town." In fact they had gone with a lady who had certain disfiguring excrescences on her forehead, and had met a group of young Greek priests with blue robes decorated with red ornamentation.

Ralph Shirley gives several similar stories in this chapter V of his book. Shaw Desmond in chapter XI has a case of a different nature from India, for which he says that he has some corroborative details from the headmaster and two other masters of the Government school. In this instance Vishwa Nath, born on February 7, 1921, in Bareilly, began at the age of 1½ to give minute details of his previous life in Pilibhit. On being taken a little later to Pilibhit, he pointed out " himself " in a group photo, and thus established his identity as Laxmi Narain, who had died on December 15, 1918. His descriptions of his house, neighbours and manner of life, proved to be correct. Shirley quotes a similar case of a girl, Shanti Devi, which was reported in the *Illustrated Weekly of India* of December 15, 1935 (p. 72).

An example of a different type is quoted by Shaw Desmond and Ralph Shirley. This concerns the Glastonbury Scripts, made famous through Mr. Bligh Bond's two books, *The Gate of Remembrance* and *The Company of Avalon*. There is no reasonable doubt that by means of automatic writing Mr. Bligh Bond obtained information that led to the discovery of certain unknown buried chapels at Glastonbury. The main communicator claimed to be Ambrosius, a mediaeval monk-architect. The lady who acted as automatist for some of the investigations is said by Ambrosius to have been a Brother Symon in a previous incarnation, when he had been a great woman hater. Now he had been reborn as a woman to atone for his previous attitude.

Some interesting experiments have been made to induce memories of previous lives through hypnotism. The pioneer in this was, I believe, Colonel A. de Rochas, who gave an account of his experiments at the beginning of this century in his book, *Les Vies Successives*. His subject was Eugenie, a widow of 35. Under hypnotism he took her back earlier and earlier in her memories until she reached infancy. Then earlier still (according to Shirley, p. 140) " into a state in which she declared herself to be no longer on the physical plane, but floating in a semi-obscurity, without thought or physical needs, and apparently in an entirely subjective condition." Then earlier still she declared

herself to be living in a previous life on this earth, in which she was called Elise.

Similar experiments have been carried out by Dr. Alexander Cannon, and are mentioned by him in his book *Powers That Be.* His conclusions are: " It has been shown in these sittings that the average person may live seven times on Earth as a man and seven times as a woman. . . . There is an average interval of one thousand Earth-years between each Earth-life, during which intervals the entity achieves astral life on other planets, where it inhabits new ' planetary bodies ' " (p. 194).

One must use such evidence with great caution. I had the opportunity of discussing this subject for a few moments with a hypnotist after a lecture. Although I think that he himself was inclined to a belief in reincarnation, he said that there might be a tendency for a subject to accept the hypnotist's suggestion to such an extent as to play up to what the hypnotist wanted. Shirley himself admits this, and quotes the experiments of Prof. Flournoy of Geneva, who found that his subject readily romanced about previous existences, though in one instance she claimed to have been a Hindu princess named Samindini, whose name and existence was unknown at the time, but who was afterwards discovered to have been a real person (Shirley, pp. 142 f.).

How then are we to assess these apparent memories of earlier lives, whether they come in some sense naturally, or whether they are induced by hypnosis? It might appear to be the simplest course to accept them as valid. Yet the Christian, with the example of the teaching of Jesus Christ before him, naturally hesitates before agreeing. To accept the doctrine of reincarnation would demand a complete readjustment of some of the basic truths of Christianity.

Moreover the statements of those who claim to know are far from being unanimous about the periods that must elapse between each incarnation. We have already quoted Dr. Alexander Cannon as stating, after careful research, that an average person reincarnates some 14 times, with an average interval of 1,000 years between each incarnation.

This is also the view of Dr. F. Rittelmeyer, a staunch disciple of Rudolf Steiner, in his book, *Reincarnation.*

Hindus and Buddhists, on the other hand, believe in hundreds of incarnations, generally with only a short time between each. Lewis Spence, in the article on Reincarnation in *The Encyclopedia of Occultism,* states that the period between each incarnation

grows longer as the soul progresses upwards on the path of evolution. Paul Brunton, in *The Wisdom of the Overself*, says that " the individual karma, modified by the evolutionary karma of the planet, decides its length in each case. Consequently a man might be reborn after one year or after a thousand years. But a new body cannot be taken until the flesh has totally turned to dust " (p. 110). This last sentence is something that I do not remember meeting elsewhere, though Lord Dowding in *Lychgate* says that normally a soul must suffer what he calls the second and third deaths of the astral and mental bodies before reincarnating. On the other hand, Margery Lawrence, in *Ferry over Jordan*, quotes two cases of people who are said to have found their own remains from a previous incarnation (pp. 121, 123).

One could wish that the cases that have been quoted had been subjected to a more critical examination. The Society for Psychical Research does not appear to have touched them at all. It is therefore open to the sceptic to reject them all out of hand. But if we accept them as in the main true, is it possible to suggest other explanations ?

Where the alleged memory is fairly general, one may safely ascribe it to suggestion. Eric Cuddon, in *Hypnosis, its meaning and practice*, gives an experiment in which he suggested to a subject under hypnosis that she had been the favourite slave of the Emperor Nero, and had been taken by him on a trip to Egypt. Although she had no conscious recollection of the suggestion, on being asked a week later whether she had lived before, she replied that she was quite certain that she had been the favourite slave of the *Egyptian* Emperor Nero. Several people have called attention to the fact that quite a number of women " remember " having been Marie Antoinette. I myself can " remember " the sensation of taking off in an aeroplane, though I have never travelled by plane in my life, and certainly did not do so in a previous incarnation.

When we come to more definite and provable memories, there are one or two points to be taken into consideration. Previous papers before this Institute have discussed the now proved facts of telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and retrocognition. In my paper in 1948 on *The Bearing of Psychical Research on the Interpretation of the Bible* (p. 41), I also mentioned psychometry (so-called), and referred particularly to Dr. Osty's experiments recorded in *The Supernormal Faculties of Man.* In psychometry

a person who has certain gifts can take an object, and by contact with it can frequently tell facts about the past and future of its owner, or others who have handled it. It is *as though* experiences have an objective existence, and continue in some form in which they can be picked up, and partially relived, by those who are tuned in to them. Many people, who have no such gift, are familiar with the experience of sensing the atmosphere of even an empty house, and are able to say that the house has had a happy or a gloomy history.

One might also raise the evidence of certain dreams. Ralph Shirley in chapter VI gives some examples of dreams in which the dreamer seemed to be transported back into a previous existence. His next chapter concerns dream travelling in the present and future, when the dreamer dreams repeatedly of some unknown house to which later he or she goes to live. In one or two cases the dreamer is seen as a ghost by the people living in the house at the time of the dream. I see no reason to doubt such dreams of the future, especially as I myself had personal experience of such a case, when the dreamer, who had had a vivid dream of a house that she had never seen, described it to me in detail before she went to look at a certain house in another part of the country in case it should prove to be the same. It was.

We thus have to face the whole question of the relation of the unconscious to time and space. If the dreamer can on occasions transcend the normal conditions of space, it is equally possible that he can on occasions transcend the normal conditions of time also. The quiet of sleep might release on these occasions something like psychometric powers, so that the dreamer becomes tuned in to some occasion of the past. But if this can happen in sleep, it might also happen to people of a particular type even when they were awake, giving them the conviction that they had actually lived in the past themselves.

The most striking modern example of such a thing is the story by Miss Moberly and Miss Jourdain, simply entitled *An Adventure*. Because of its startling character the book was first published anonymously, since the writers held important educational posts. The book has run through many editions, and in spite of several attempts to invalidate it (one being as recently as January–February, 1950, in the *Journal* of the Society for Psychical Research), the main facts would appear to be substantiated. In brief the facts are that these two ladies, walking in the Gardens of Versailles in 1901, found that they had walked back into the

period of 1789, and met people of that period, including one who appeared to be Marie Antoinette.

I have already mentioned the part that Marie Antoinette plays in " memories " of previous incarnations, and there may be a clue here to the explanation of these memories of the past. Many of them concern some strongly emotional situation. The same is true of hauntings of places. May it not be that a powerful emotional disturbance throws off some element which lingers in space and time, and which can be sensed by certain people under certain conditions ? The tragic situation of Marie Antoinette is one such emotional condition. A battle for life and death in the Roman arena, such as Shaw Desmond remembers, is another.

Those who have read the late Mr. Whately Carington's book, *Telepathy*, will remember his arguments for the existence of what he calls *Psychon Systems*. It is impossible here to do justice to his carefully built-up case. The portion of it that concerns this paper is where he maintains that a thought-system, which is the product of someone's thinking, may exist in its own right ; and, in the presence of some link that is common to the original thinker and the new percipient, it may pass into the consciousness of the new percipient.

Whately Carington himself incidentally connects his theory with the theory of reincarnation, and in particular with the fact of sudden genius, which is often urged as a strong argument for reincarnation. Briefly, he holds that the mental work done by previous researchers may often be the source of those sudden ideas that flash into the minds of people doing similar work today (pp. 141, 42). If this is true, it would account for such a fact as the Glastonbury scripts.

There is, I think, a more general feeling today that the individual mind is not an isolated unit, but that below the surface there is some kind of link-up. Jung's Collective Unconscious is an example of something of the kind. Jan Ehrenwald, in *Telepathy and Medical Psychology*, is convinced that there is telepathy between the psychiatrist and his patient. Alice E. Buck, in a small booklet, *Group Psychology and Therapy*, takes it for granted that there is " a degree of telepathic interaction " between members taking part in group therapy.

One cannot therefore rule out the possibility of unconscious telepathy in the case of Alexandrina Samona. The resemblance of the two Alexandrinas is no more than occurs in a fair propor-

tion of families when the children are under the age of 5. In this case the problem might appear to be increased by the fact that the coming of Alexandrina II was announced beforehand. But since it is almost impossible to deny that certain people, including mediums, have a genuine gift of seeing into the future (whatever the explanation may be), the preliminary announcement of Alexandrina's return does not in itself throw any light on whether the child who was born was in fact Alexandrina.

Other experiences, such as that of the Indian boy, are, even according to the reincarnationist hypothesis, so rare that they must be due to something abnormal in the make-up of the child. The abnormality might consist in an unconscious linking-up with another mind, in this special case with someone living at Pilibhit. The thoughts that this person had of the deceased Laxmi Narain then became a part of the thoughts of the child Vishwa Nath. This would not be anything essentially different from the employment of clairvoyant powers, though where an adult clairvoyant could distinguish between his actual life and the thoughts and experiences of others received clairvoyantly or telepathically, a child might not so distinguish.

Conclusion.

To the ordinary man in the street these explanations may appear so strange that it would seem far simpler to accept reincarnation as a fact. As a Christian I have given reasons why I feel bound to look for some other explanation than the superficial one. The general explanation that I have suggested is not strange to anyone who has made some study of the facts of telepathy and clairvoyance, and of the workings of the human mind at its deep levels. The explanation ought not to seem strange to believers in reincarnation also, since the majority of them speak of what they call the *Akashic World Record.* This term expresses the belief that all the events of the world are somehow impressed upon material objects that were present when the events happened. A person with the psychometric sense developed can perceive these events, as a soundbox picks up the sounds from the track of a gramophone record. I quote this belief, not as accepting it myself, but as an *argumentum ad hominem.* On the reincarnationist's own hypothesis, it seems to me to offer an alternative explanation for the apparent memory of previous lives; these memories need be no more than the picking up of fragments of the world memory.

In conclusion I would say again that in this paper I have deliberately refrained from the general philosophic and semi-philosophic arguments for and against reincarnation. There is very much that can be said on those lines, and that would have to be said if this were a complete discussion of the question. But the aim has been to make a preliminary investigation of the evidence, and in that evidence to include what must always be for the Christian the outstanding evidence for eternal and spiritual realities, namely the revelation made by God in the Bible. It is because reincarnation appears to be excluded by the teachings of Jesus Christ and the inspired writers of the Bible, that the Christian is bound to see whether there can be any other possible explanation of what, after all, are the comparatively few concrete instances that reincarnationists produce in support of their belief.

Discussion.

The Chairman (Canon Marcus Knight) said: Perhaps I can begin with a few comments on this interesting subject, which I think to be considerably important. I appreciate Mr. Stafford Wright's kindly reference to my own small book, which touches on some aspects of this problem.

People are already beginning to think on some lines of the kind suggested by our speaker. Such enquiries as I have been able to make for myself give one the feeling that one is trying to grope a way over a rather dark quagmire, but with no feeling of a hard and firm territory on which to travel.

One does not feel inclined to explore too deeply because you seem not only to be opening up possibilities of new knowledge which might be available, but also (as I have found in attending spiritualistic séances) you seem to be getting into certain territories where you seem to be far away from reasonable thought and clear investigation of the kind which lies behind such a paper as we heard read. What I think is so necessary is to try and give to these questions serious and reasonable thought, and what I like about this paper is that Mr. Stafford Wright does show that open mind and readiness to look into strange phenomena.

We decided that we must not discuss all the attractions of reincarnation as a theory appealing to the modern mind. If you can forget the Christian religion, I must say reincarnation has certain

attractions, and the reason why so many people believe in it is because it does have many of these attractions. One, for example, is the solution it offers of the problem of evil, and the doctrine of Karma has a certain attraction because it seems to be so scientific.

If we find the law of Cause and Effect running through human experiences and actions in a way which would seem to show that there must always be consequences borne by the individual, which, if they are not borne in this existence, should in justice be borne later on (or, alternatively, if there are compensations to be paid, they should be received now or later on) ; and if, instead of accepting the Biblical belief in eternal life, you simply hold people down to this world of space and time ; then it is possible to see in reincarnation a solution of the problem. Our system of thought seems to be so scientific that this theory of successive reincarnation must have some attraction to many who ignore the Christian religion.

Then, on pages 80 f, Kotzé's doctrine seems to me to be extremely attractive to anyone who ignores the Christian religion. It obviously answers a great many problems and suggests something which is scientific and reliable, but immediately one feels in following this aspect of science that we are really *making* a deity. It seems almost as if, instead of a pre-existent Deity behind all this order God would be the goal of human endeavour, so that His existence is something which is created out of human endeavour. This is far removed from the Biblical doctrine of Creation.

The second point is the word " merging." Always with the reincarnationalist theory we get this difficulty about " mergence." On page 81 of the paper occurs these words : " . . . the souls of all mankind when perfected, instead of being re-absorbed into the bosom of Nirvana, may be fused together and *merged* into the transcendent consciousness of a new god." Think what that means. It is an oriental idea very different from anything we know in Christian doctrine. Perhaps this can be seen if we consider the two terms " merging " and " unifying "—merging suggests being swallowed up as a tributary in the ocean, while unifying suggests some element of unity and fellowship between unifying persons, and the Biblical doctrine seems to prefer that.

I should like to comment on the impossibility of evidence in the Bible for reincarnationist theories. The more you conceive from

the Scriptures the active, saving, loving, forgiving God of the Old and New Testaments, the more necessary it is to conceive of the co-operative personality with whom that kind of God goes to work. We hear of the " God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," *i.e.*, of *persons*.

One interesting scriptural passage is in John 9 : 2. And I suppose, if there were any point in the New Testament where you might begin to think that the assumption of reincarnation was present, it would be there ; but one must remember that the assumption always was that all suffering was related to sin. This was a common idea in the time of Christ, but, as we see, this man was perfectly innocent and yet suffered, which is a complete denial of this idea. I suppose the disciples were simply assuming that there was some sin behind the blindness, and that it must have been caused either by the man or by his parents. But Christ says that part of His mission of the Kingdom of God is to " open the eyes of the blind " and He proceeds to do it. Does not this rejection of the connection of sin and personal suffering tie up more with the remarks of Christ about the Tower of Siloam (Luke 13 : 4), which conclude, " Think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem ? "

My last comment is on the hypothesis which Mr. Stafford Wright puts forward about discarnate spirits and communications from other worlds. I entirely agree with almost every word he has said on this. It has explained a great many things in the world of spiritualist phenomena. They are much more ready to say, " Here is some evidence, obviously these are discarnate spirits ! " At this stage I would say that, in several experiments in which I took part, no kind of new knowledge was given ; all the knowledge that was obtained already existed in the minds of the mediums or in the minds of the people in the room. It seems to me you can perfectly argue that there is evidence of communication of mind with mind, but that would not necessarily justify the explanation which spiritualists all seem to think it does. I agree with Mr. Stafford Wright's explanation of the case of the Indian boy who began to give details of his previous life. I am also interested in the case of the Italian child on page 87. I do not know whether you noticed an odd difference there. The birth of the child occurred on November 22nd and its conception normally about February 22nd previously. The death of the first child took place on March 15th—

unless there was something extraordinary the conception of the later child had already taken place. It seems rather odd that the original child was still alive when the new one was conceived. There may be some minor point there for further enquiry.

I should like to say how much I have enjoyed listening to Mr. Stafford Wright's paper and I hope the Society will make further enquiries into this kind of subject. At the same time, it is difficult and strange territory, which requires exceptionally sane and balanced people to tread it, and I think Mr. Stafford Wright one of that kind.

Dr. WHITE said : This paper embodies a considerable amount of reading and research, and Mr. Stafford Wright is to be congratulated on the pains he has taken.

It seems to me that the positive evidence he produces is very weak and will hardly stand up to critical examination. Is it credible that a child of one-and-a-half years of age could give minute details of his previous life ? Without specific descriptions of what he actually said then and later, one would hardly accept this as evidence of reincarnation. Similarly, the lady who was alleged to be a reincarnation of Brother Symon, and the people who, under the influence of hypnotism, claimed to remember previous existences on earth, do not provide reliable evidence. Patients suffering from mental diseases often identify themselves with various historical personages. One gentleman told me that he was Julius Cæsar and had conquered Britain in 55 B.C. This was one of his many delusions. In dreams, in hypnotic states and in emotional disorders brought about by drugs, it is not uncommon for people to weave fantasies of previous existences having no relation to reality.

The phenomena of *déjà vue*, in which there is a feeling of " having been there before " when some new experience arises, was used by Plato as evidence of the soul's previous existence on earth. In his book, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud deals with this subject, and gives a clear and reasonable explanation which avoids the necessity of invoking the doctrine of reincarnation. Mr. Stafford Wright's remarks about psychometry are very suggestive and appear to be a more probable explanation of certain phenomena than a doctrine of reincarnation.

When we find that a belief in reincarnation is so widely held, and

has continued to be accepted over such a long period of time, we should not dismiss it as meaningless, but rather seek for an explanation. A possible explanation is to be found in the pressure exerted on men's minds by the universal emotion of guilt and the deeply inbred feeling that wrongdoing must be punished. Apart from the Christian religion, there is no solution to the problem of sin and guilt, and no conception of a loving and forgiving God. How can sin be atoned for ? Evidently men do not always suffer in this life in proportion to their sin ; men were therefore driven to postulate a series of reincarnations in which the sins of previous lives on earth would be gradually paid for in striving and suffering. Thus, the soul would strive on through a series of lives on earth, paying off the debt of sin incurred and slowly reaching the holiness he desired.

The Bible makes it plain that "it is given unto men once to die and after death the judgment," and there is no place in Christianity for any doctrine of reincarnation.

Written Communications.

Dr. B. F. C. Atkinson wrote : I received my copy of my friend, Mr. J. S. Wright's, paper only this morning and now find that I have been reading it during at least part of the time when he himself was due to be reading it aloud. I may say, however, that I have received no mental impression of the faces of the audience or the remarks of the Chairman !

This paper seems to me as fascinating and stimulating as his papers always are, but I would like to throw out the following suggestion. Is not suggestion to the human mind by personal and intelligent spiritual beings a simpler and more scriptural explanation of the phenomena than the explanations suggested by Mr. Wright ? And would not such access to the human mind account for all the facts ? (See, for instance, 1 Sam. 16 : 14 ; John 13 : 27.)

Mr. Douglas Dewar wrote : Mr. Stafford Wright's most interesting paper has stimulated me to suggest that the main reason why he has not been able to discover any Christian writer who has attempted to examine the alleged evidence for reincarnation is that many Christians regard the theory as fantastic, because it is inconsistent with the basic Christian doctrine as set forth by St. Paul

in I Cor. 15 : 51 f. and I Thess. 4 : 16 f., that at the last trump the dead shall be raised incorruptible.

According to the reincarnation theory, many of the dead bodies on resurrection day will have no soul because the souls which they once possessed will have entered other bodies.

Kotzé's theory of reincarnation, while it says much for his powers of imagination, is not likely to commend itself to biologists because, according to it, "a man is not altered in character at death. . . . When the period of mental and spiritual digestion is complete—a period which may be long or short—the soul again becomes imbued with a desire to return to the earth life. The soul is then attracted or guided to suitable parents for his new incarnation and is duly born again. His character and his faculties in the new life will be largely determined by the deeds and thoughts of his previous incarnation" (*The Scheme of Things*, p. 152). Thus, according to Kotzé, babies do not inherit the mental attributes of their mother and father, and if a child has cruel or wicked parents it has only itself to blame!

The incidents recorded in Mr. Wright's paper show that there are phenomena for which, in the present state of knowledge, we are not able satisfactorily to account, but is it not better to say *ignoramus* than to seek the aid of a theory which bristles with difficulties?

In view of the strange effects on the human brain produced by pressure or electrical stimuli, it may be that in some of the recorded cases the brains of those who have recorded their experience have been slightly abnormal, or were subjected to abnormal internal stimuli.

Dr. R. E. D. CLARK wrote: Mr. Wright's paper is one of interest and importance. He has shown convincingly that the supposed evidence for reincarnation must be viewed in the light of all the many queer metapsychical phenomena with which the occult abounds.

The reference to Carington's psychon systems is interesting. It may be that psychical research is leading us, not so much to a specialised belief in psychon systems, but to a vindication of what Christians have always believed—that truth is objective and eternal. The philosophic arguments for the view that truth is not something that happens in our brains, but that it has relation to something

outside of ourselves, could hardly be stronger than they in fact are. And the objectivity of truth is supported by the experience of the mathematician and the scientist who, so often, feel that the truths they discover are not truths of their own invention, but that they are merely discovering what was already there—" suddenly everything fell into place in my mind just as if I had been told " is the way that Bragg puts it.

Perhaps the position to which we are coming is that all ideas, facts, truths, or whatever we please to call them, have eternal objective reality. If so, the supposed evidence for reincarnation, like that for spiritualism, hauntings and the like, must be regarded simply as proving that on rare occasions man can " tap " the non-human sources of knowledge with which our universe abounds.

Mr. W. E. LESLIE wrote: The references to reported " supernormal " phenomena might be a little more critical in tone. May I refer to one case in particular—F. Bligh Bond's *Gate of Remembrance* and *Company of Avalon*. The atmosphere of Anglo-Catholicism, Mysticism, quasi-Theosophy, Astrology, and Gematria suggests caution. If a " script " states that an object will be found in a certain place, and it is so found, then, if script and discovery are duly attested, that is a good experiment which (if the operation of chance be excluded) would establish some form of ESP. But it seems that much of the digging was done in collaboration with archæologists who knew nothing of the scripts, and to whom apparently the work appeared to be directed by the kind of intelligent anticipation to be expected from an expert. Is it not possible that this was in fact the case, but Mr. Bond's anticipations passed from his unconscious to his conscious mind in the dramatic form usual in such cases? This may not cover all the cases. We then have to choose between some kind of retrocognition going back hundreds of years, or precognition a few days ahead. I think the latter is the easier theory. It is interesting to note that Mr. Bond does not admit " what is commonly called ' reincarnation ' " (*Avalon*, p. 13).

I do not understand how Mr. Wright can say that the main facts of *An Adventure* appear to be established in view of the severe criticisms which he (very properly) mentions.

Space forbids reference to many excellent points in the paper.

Mr. H. V. GOOLD wrote: I feel that this paper has been well thought out, and carefully worded. There is, however, one very important point with which I think the writer has dealt weakly; it concerns the attitude of Jesus Christ towards reincarnation.

As a Christian, one who believes Jesus Christ to be the "Only" Son of God, just as Isaac was the "only" son of Abraham (Gen. 22 : 2)—the one son (though there was also Ishmael, and later many more (Gen. 25 : 1–6))—who was *wholly* like his father, I hold that in everything Jesus did and said He revealed to us *what God is like.* By this *one* test we judge of Christ's authenticity (John 5 : 37). Is all that He said and did identical in character with what we—if we have eyes to see and ears to hear—see and hear God doing and saying, all around us and within us, all our lives through?

In view of this test, what then is Christ's attitude towards man's speculation regarding reincarnation? We must expect to find His attitude *identical* with that which God has manifested towards man since ever the world began. And this is precisely what we do find: God has ever kept absolutely secret the conditions of the future state to which men attain after death. The Old Testament tells nothing about it. The New Testament tells nothing about it. Man's experience of earthly life tells nothing about it. And the Son of God, because He is wholly like His Father, and is wholly loyal to His Father's secrets, also tells absolutely nothing about it. Reincarnation is therefore not excluded from His teaching, but is completely concealed. To say, therefore (page 52, lines 12–14 of paper), that "if the doctrine is true Jesus Christ must have made it part of His whole teaching," is clearly incorrect.

May I further draw attention to the fundamental distinction between Christ's teaching and that of Theosophy. The latter teaches broadly that man returns again and again to earth, progressing spiritually by slow degrees, until finally he attains Godlike character, and so needs no further earthly discipline. Christ, on the other hand, teaches that man's business on earth is to acquire the basic principles of true living, and this done, he is *immediately* ready for the heavenly state: "You have *become* faithful in a *very little:* have authority over *ten cities*" (Luke 19 : 17). It is like learning to play a musical instrument: the first two or three years are full of stumblings and mistakes, but when once the basic

principles of theory and technique are mastered, no further errors occur, but all further progress is blissfully smooth and enjoyable. That is the simple scientific truth; and against it the teachings of Theosophy cannot stand.

Personally, I am convinced that even if we do not return to this earth again, yet those of us who have not mastered the true principles of living—and the vast majority of men, I fear, do not—must inevitably return to conditions similar to those of this earthly life: for until we become *real*, we can only continue to exist in conditions of unreality—those of the flesh, which "half conceal and half reveal the soul within." How profoundly significant is that word "*any*" in Luke 20 : 36 !

Author's Reply.

I am grateful for the kind and helpful comments that have been made on this paper. If I do not comment on them all, this is not because I think them valueless. I quite agree with the Chairman on what he says about the puzzling nature of all psychic phenomena. We seem to be in a world that refuses to measure up to those standards by which we judge the rest of our experience.

Both the Chairman and Dr. White rightly call attention to the need for a stricter examination of the alleged evidence. But very few of us are in a position to investigate this for ourselves. In this paper I have had to take the best evidence available and assume that it is in the main accurate. But certainly one would like some medical evidence as to whether the birth of Alexandrina II was premature. Also it would be helpful to have a psychiatrist's first-hand report of some of these people who identify themselves with characters of the past.

Dr. Clark's interesting theory is developed elsewhere in this volume. He goes further than I have.

Dr. Atkinson's explanation is certainly simpler than mine, but the examples that he quotes from Scripture are not of people who are led by evil spirits to suppose that they have previously been someone else. I am rather afraid of using Satan as a *deus ex machina*, as has sometimes been done in other connections.

Mr. Leslie cautions against accepting alleged supernormal phenomena too readily. Since I am now convinced of the facts of Psi phenomena, I am, perhaps, more ready to accept some case

as genuine than I should be if I were approaching it without any previous knowledge of Psi. This may in another way be relevant in considering the evidence for *An Adventure.* In dealing with this case in the *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research,* Vol. 44, No. 2 (April, 1950), W. H. W. Sabine calls attention to the fact that Miss Moberly had comparable experiences on other occasions; in other words, she was apparently one who was open to psychic impressions. Therefore, even though her original experience at Versailles may have been touched up in the process of time, there remains, in my judgment, sufficient indication that she did perceive something abnormal then. Mr. Sabine startlingly regards the experience as one of precognition, and not of retrocognition. Mr. Leslie suggests the same as a possibility in the experience of Mr. Bligh Bond. Scientific commonsense, if forced to choose between retrocognition and precognition, would say that retrocognition was more "likely" than precognition, since at least one is dealing with events that have happened, and so have a sort of existence. But the evidence of Psi phenomena would forbid us to say that one is more likely than the other—or so it seems to me. But admittedly I have made more use of the idea of retrocognition in this paper, since the reincarnationist is "remembering" events that are past.

In spite of what Mr. Goold says, I still think that, if Jesus Christ had known reincarnation to be true, He would inevitably have indicated it in His teaching about man's future destiny. If a Christian rejects the idea of reincarnation, he does not thereby reject the idea of progress hereafter; though I personally believe that the Bible suggests that such progress begins at the resurrection, when the Christian is once again fully man, and not a disembodied spirit.