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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

THE
CHURCHMAN

AUGUST, 1903.

ART. I.—THE TRUE THEORY OF THE SUPER-
NATURAL IN RELATION TO MODERN DOUBT.

THE use of the word "supernatural" is hardly likely to be abandoned, as the late Duke of Argyll has suggested that it should be, by all who make any pretensions to accurate thinking. Regarded as a relative term, and used in a certain conventional sense, it has its value, and we cannot afford to dispense with it—at least, until someone shall have invented a satisfactory substitute. At the same time, it is more than probable that the employment of this ill-chosen term in theological literature has been a fruitful source of misconceptions, and in these days of scientific progress has probably contributed in no small degree to the spread of doubt.

The tendency of all modern and scientific thought has been to represent Nature as one great, self-consistent, and harmonious whole; and the sentiment expressed by Tennyson, that "nothing is that errs from law," has taken so strong a hold on the mind of thoughtful men, that whatever theory appears to be opposed to such a view of things seems to many to be little less than an insult offered to the human understanding. Yet this is what the word "supernatural" is believed to imply by most of those who profess themselves unable to regard it as either thinkable or possible. Is this mysterious something, which is supposed to be above Nature, such objectors are inclined to ask, opposed to Nature, or is it in harmony with it? If it is opposed to Nature, how comes it to pass that it is believed to have produced Nature? Is it conceivable that it actually produced that which is opposed to itself? If, on the other hand, it is in harmony with Nature, how can it be distinguished from Nature, and why should it

be called "the supernatural"? Does it err from law, or not? If it does, how comes it to pass that it has produced the universe of law? If it does not err from law, how can it be distinguished from that great empire of law to which we give the name of Nature?

If the supernatural is to be regarded as an arbitrary force, subject to no control save its own caprice, how more than strange that it should have produced a well-ordered universe that would seem to be a standing protest against that caprice! If, on the other hand, like other forces in Nature, it works true to law, and there is nothing capricious about it, what is there in its operation to distinguish it from these other natural forces of which the same is true?

The plain fact is that the word, although distinctly convenient, when used in a certain limited and conventional sense, will not bear critical examination. It implies an antithesis between God and Nature which has no existence in fact, and it suggests a limitation of the idea expressed by the word "Nature" which is wholly unjustifiable. For Nature is not limited to earth, nor even to what sense can discern or science discover outside the narrow bounds of this planet. If there be such a thing as a spiritual world, all that it contains must have a nature of its own, and therefore must be part and parcel of that mighty whole to which we give the name of Nature.

When Cicero wrote "*De Natura Deorum*," he no doubt regarded himself as investigating one important department of Nature, and had there been gods many and lords many to investigate, he would have judged rightly. But if there be but one God, He, too, must have a Nature of His own; and in contemplating this we are still considering Nature, and that in her most august and exalted manifestation of herself. But if there be such a thing as the Divine nature (*Θεία φύσις*) as St. Peter teaches us to believe that there is, to speak of the "supernatural" will be to go behind the Divine.

We may venture, then, boldly to affirm that there is, and can be, no such thing as the supernatural in the true etymological sense of the word; for the word involves a contradiction, inasmuch as that which we designate the supernatural has a nature of its own, and therefore is not, and cannot be, above Nature. For what is Nature, after all, but the sum total of all that God either is, or causes to be? If we carry our minds back to the very commencement of all things, and imagine the first creative act as only beginning to begin, we have not gone behind Nature, for God will still be Nature to Himself. And if we project our mind into the limitless future, and contemplate all things as brought into subjection to God,

it is still Nature in her completest development that we are thinking of.

These considerations must lead us to abandon all belief in the supernatural if we adhere to the strict etymological sense of the term. But there is no reason why we should be bound by this, and if we assign to the word a certain modified significance, it may yet prove a convenient and useful term, so long as it is clearly recognised that we employ it in this circumscribed sense.

Let it be understood that by the word "Nature" we mean to denote Nature as we know her and are familiar with her, and then the supernatural will be, not, indeed, something higher than Nature, but something higher than that portion of Nature with which we are ourselves in sensible contact, or about which we are able to draw inferences from what we do ourselves know. The supernatural will be thus only the natural on a higher plane, and there will be nothing either unscientific or self-contradictory in believing in it.

Let us attempt to illustrate this use of the term in order that we may form a clear idea of what we must needs mean when we use it; and in doing so we shall find ourselves, as it seems to me, necessarily approaching a true theory of the supernatural. Let us picture to ourselves, to begin with, that which geology teaches us must have at one time existed—a lifeless, or, as the geologist would say, an azoic, world. Here the highest achievements of nature would be discoverable in nothing more wonderful than various chemical combinations, producing crystallization and other phenomena, which, although in themselves very amazing, are a small matter when compared to the miracle of life.

Into this azoic world let the first germs of vegetable life be introduced, and at once we find ourselves face to face with the far more astonishing products of vital energy. Let us suppose that this world of ours could become sentient and intelligent with regard to all that occurs on her surface; surely in that case the novel phenomena of vegetable life would appear "supernatural," as compared with all that she had known of before. And yet to us it seems perfectly natural that this mysterious force, which no one can define, should go on year by year performing the miracles, as we might well call them, which not even our familiarity with them robs of their mysterious impressiveness. And we are quite right in regarding this as natural. It is Nature's work, but wrought on a higher plane.

Let us take a further step, and suppose animal life to make its appearance on this planet, and once more Mother Earth would be contemplating what seemed supernatural, as measured

by all that had gone before. What a miracle the independent motion and activity of animal life must appear to her, when compared with the necessary limitations of all merely vegetable forms of existence! Yet once again we know that this is not the supernatural, but merely the natural working on a higher plane.

We rise one step higher still when we suppose the Earth to detect on her surface the presence of an intelligent being, capable of exercising reason and possessed of moral capacity. A new series of phenomena at once begin to result from his presence, and how utterly supernatural they seem as compared with anything that unreasoning animal life could accomplish! Perhaps the most apparently supernatural element of all in this new display is the presence of moral freedom in the individual. It might seem as if here we parted company with the reign of law, and therefore did actually rise above Nature. Yet reflection teaches us that the moral freedom of man is as much a product of Nature, as is the fixed necessity that regulates the action of lower organic forms. We notice, too, that the moral region has laws of its own, though more mysterious and recondite than those which prevail in the material world.

But does Nature end here? Is it at this point that we can arbitrarily draw a dividing line, as if we would say: "Here Nature reaches her limit, and here the supernatural begins"? Have we any right to do so? In answering this question, it will be as well first to refer to those mysterious phenomena which it is usual to call "psychic," although it is indeed a moot problem how far they belong to the body and how far to the soul. Surely the time is passed in which it was possible to sneer at such subjects as clairvoyance, hypnotism, thought-reading, and animal magnetism. Most thoughtful observers accept the phenomena as clearly proven, though the examination of them has hardly yet received the amount of scientific attention that the facts seem to call for.

Considered from the standpoint of our ordinary human experience, these phenomena have all the appearance of the supernatural. When, for instance, a clairvoyant describes to you quite accurately what is happening in a distant apartment, delineating scenes and persons that she could have had no possible knowledge of before, the feat has the appearance of being quite as supernatural as was the spiritual insight of Elisha, of whom it was reported to the Syrian monarch, "He telleth the King of Israel the words that thou speakest in thy bedchamber."

Yet, just in so far as we find reason for believing that these marvellous phenomena are either psychic or neurotic or cerebral, all disposition to regard them as supernatural passes

away. They belong merely to a province of the natural that has hitherto been left unexplored; nay, further, we feel at once inclined to conclude that much that has been supposed to be supernatural, such as the phenomena of witchcraft, and even of so-called "spiritualism" (which had better be designated "spiritism"), may be explained when we know a little more about these subtle natural forces.

But when we pass beyond this, do we even now leave the natural behind? Let us, without making any rash admissions, suppose, for the sake of argument, that the millions of persons who strongly believe to-day in what I prefer to call "spiritism" are right in their interpretations of the undoubted phenomena of the case, and that there are spirits all around us with whom it is possible, under certain conditions, to come into sensible communication. We may think and speak of such communications as supernatural because they astonish us; but what is there supernatural about them? If spirits exist, their existence is as much a part of the established order of nature as is the existence of mammals; and if there are certain conditions under which it is possible for them to make their presence known to us, that also is part of the same established order. It is only once more the natural on a higher plane—if, indeed, it be higher.

Whatever be the truth about these wandering spirits who are supposed to frequent the séances of those who dabble in these curious arts, Scripture certainly teaches us to believe in the existence, and even in the ministries, of angels. How these mysterious beings stand related to us, and in what way their ministry is carried out, we have no means of knowing; but the thought of their close connection with us would seem to have been a very familiar one, both to our Lord Himself and to the primitive Christians. But when we have granted that they have their place in God's universe, and that their relations to us and to other objects is regulated by law, we have already taken them out of the category of the supernatural, and, once again, in thinking of them we are only contemplating the natural on a higher plane.

Thus we approach the highest level of all, and are pointed to the conclusion that the action of Almighty God is just as natural to Him as the action of man is to him or the action of angels is to them, and that therefore what we call the supernatural is nothing more or less than the natural action of God. We cannot conceive of God as acting in a way that would be supernatural to Himself; that would, of course, involve an absurdity as well as a contradiction. All that we can say of His action is that, being natural to Him on that higher plane on which He has His being, it seems super-

natural to us on that lower plane on which we have ours. And thus we arrive at an approximate definition of what we are to understand by our limited use of the term "supernatural." We mean, not that which is above the natural, but that which is *the natural above*. We mean that which is natural on a higher plane exhibited in operation on a lower plane, where its operation is not usually and normally exhibited.

With this definition the word "supernatural" may still be permitted, and, what is more important, it may cease to some extent to be the stumbling-block to modern doubters of the scientific class that it has so long been. We might venture to go a step further, and affirm that such an employment of the term removes all reasonable objection to the supernatural on abstract grounds, were it not that in God we recognise a Being who is in all Nature, while He transcends the limitations of that particular portion of Nature to which we ourselves belong, and with which we are partially acquainted.

If God were merely a sort of superior archangel residing in another sphere, but capable of exercising a benign influence in this world of ours, we might feel that this definition sufficiently met the difficulties of the case, and cleared it of all anomalies and contradictions. But this is not the relation in which God stands to Nature as we know it, and, we confidently assume, to Nature throughout the universe. What is Nature, after all, but the material embodiment of a Divine idea? and what are her laws but the behests of the Omnipotent? If God were merely an august Personality, outside the limits of Nature as we know them, and only making occasional incursions within this sphere, we should have no difficulty in describing such action on His part as supernatural, in the sense which we have just assigned to the word.

But when we think of God as the great Spirit of the universe, penetrating all things with His mysterious influence, and securing universal order by His presence, His power, and His skill, it may well be asked, What room is there left for the supernatural, even in the restricted sense that we have attributed to the term? If God be the Author of the laws of Nature, must He not stultify Himself by interfering with the operation of laws that He has Himself laid down? If these laws were the best that could be laid down, why should He interfere with them? If they were not the best that could have been framed, what shall we say of His skill?

This difficulty needs to be honestly faced, and in dealing with it we should endeavour to realize how heavily it must needs bear upon those whose scientific training makes it specially hard to imagine any sort of suspension of the opera-

tion of natural law. To my own mind, I confess the objection seems to be so far valid as to be absolutely fatal to all such theories of the supernatural as involve any interference with, any abrogation, suspension, or even modification, of natural law.

This is a theory of the supernatural that one frequently hears affirmed, but I cannot bring myself to regard it as anything else but a most regrettable mistake, and one that is likely to excite a strong prejudice against Christian religion on the part of thoughtful and intelligent people.

The laws of Nature, as we call them, are either necessities inherent in the nature of things, and therefore incapable of any modification, as is the case with all mathematical truths, and probably with a great deal besides mathematics, or they are the product of creative skill, and are therefore the essential conditions of the maintenance of universal order.

If this be so, we must look for the explanation of the supernatural in another direction, and we shall find it in a full recognition of the personality of God. The laws of Nature do not change, and those laws represent the mind of God with regard to the things that He has Himself created; but it does not follow from this that God has merged *His own personality in the mechanism of the universe* which He has Himself called into being; and if He retains His personality, He must needs be capable of direct personal action. This action will be related to the laws of Nature very much in the same way as is our own. Man possesses no power of neutralizing the forces of nature or of altering her laws, but he can interpose by the action of his own personality, so as to modify the resultant phenomena.

If, to give a homely illustration of my meaning, I see an apple falling from a tree, and catch it in its fall, I have not abrogated the law of gravitation, but I have prevented it from spoiling that particular apple. If, just to do this, I had been suddenly introduced to a world that possessed nothing higher than vegetable life before, my action would be supernatural, as compared with all that previously existed on that planet. It would not, however, have altered the laws of nature there, but in that one particular instance it would have modified *the product* of those laws.

Similarly, when our Lord walked upon the sea, and permitted Simon Peter to do the same, He did not for a moment suspend the law of gravitation, which would have dragged both Himself and Simon down into the depths; but by the personal employment of some other force, unknown to us, but familiar to Him, He prevented the force of gravitation from producing the effect that it was natural to it to produce. It

was there, and hard at work all the time, as was abundantly proved by the fact that the moment unbelief robbed Simon of the support of that other force which held him up he began to sink.

The only objection that occurs to me against such a theory of the supernatural as this is this, that it seems to cast a reflection upon the skill of the Almighty Creator of the universe, when we thus maintain that He has to intervene thus personally, in order to modify the natural results of His own work. If, it might be argued, I make a watch, I make it to keep time, and if it won't keep accurate time without my subsequent interference, clearly I have made a bad watch. The statement of such an objection, however, argues a complete misapprehension of the Christian theory of the supernatural, particularly with respect to its object and purpose.

Supernatural interventions do not occur in order to supplement supposed defects in natural order. They are designed for two great ends: First, they are signs, to use the word constantly employed of them in the New Testament, witnessing to the fact that God is a living Person, and that He desires to enter into direct personal relations with us. I may infer from the normal phenomena of nature the presence in the universe of a great Intelligence, to whom it owes its order and its beauty. But it is only when the abnormal occurs that I begin to gather, from the mysterious telegraphy of the supernatural, that this great Supreme desires to enter into direct communication with man.

And, secondly, they are designed to establish the closest spiritual relations between myself and the Great Unseen;—to make me aware of His interest in me and His love for me. And thus the supernatural pervades all true spiritual experience, rendering it all one long miracle. For Christian life begins with a supernatural birth, and is sustained by a constant supernatural flow of vital influence from the heart of God to man. Every prayer that wins an answer brings about a new manifestation of the supernatural; every spiritual gift and grace is a fresh intervention of God Himself. All that we mean by the life of God in the soul of man, by the indwelling presence of the Holy Ghost, by the forming of the nature of Christ within, and by the power of His resurrection, is dependent upon this direct and personal action of God upon the moral nature of man.

This Divine intervention does not indeed abrogate moral law, any more than the presence of Christ on the waters of Galilee suspended the law of gravitation. But it introduces a new force into our moral experiences, as it introduced a new force into Simon's physical experiences, which saves us from

what would otherwise be the inevitable effect of the operation of law. How many poor fallen sinners who, if left to the inexorable operation of moral law, would have been dragged down to perdition, as surely as ever St. Peter would have been dragged down by gravitation to the depths of the sea, are to-day rejoicing in liberty and safety, because the Son of God has made them free, and now they are free indeed! They may have no theory of the supernatural, whether correct or otherwise; but they know that supernatural facts have transformed their lives, and they are just as sure of their supernatural experience as ever the once-blind man was when he exclaimed, "One thing I know, whereas I was blind, now I see!"

In affirming our belief, then, in the supernatural, we are not merely contending for the authenticity of the Gospel narrative, and for the consistency of the miraculous events described there, with a reasonable view of our relations with God, and His with us: we are defending the very essentials of our faith, and are contending for all that is most vital to our Christian experience.

It would not, indeed, be worth while to make a stand for the miracles of the past, if we expected to know nothing of the supernatural in our present experiences. If there be no such thing as the intervention of God to-day, it is but sorry comfort to retain the conviction that He did intervene in human affairs eighteen centuries ago. What we need in these days, in which wise men are urging us to relieve our religion from the incubus of a senseless faith in the supernatural, is a fuller experience of it in our own personal lives and in our ministry.

It was this that gave to the primitive Church its amazing aggressive force and capacity of rapid and sustained progress. It was because they were "filled with the Holy Ghost" and with supernatural power, that the pioneers of Christianity, although everywhere spoken against, were able in the lifetime of a single man to spread the knowledge of the Gospel from one end of the Roman Empire to another. The secret of that amazing success is disclosed when we read that the Lord worked with these Apostolic missionaries, and confirmed their word with signs following; and it is only the promise of a similar personal intervention of the Divine that can warrant us in hoping for a similar success to-day.

Our best and most impressive answer to the denial of the supernatural, so prevalent everywhere, is to show that we are ourselves possessed of it, and that it makes our life a different thing from the lives of those who have it not, and our ministry a power such as merely natural causes will not explain.

We may be doubtful as to the authorship of the closing verses of St. Mark's Gospel, and may therefore not feel quite sure whether the promise that outward miracles are to continue to distinguish the career of true believers comes to us with the full authority of a Divine utterance. Or, again, we may be disposed to question whether, if this be so, the promise was for all time, or whether these special gifts were only designed to meet the special needs of that early period, when Christianity had all the world against it. But no such doubt can rob us of the testimony that runs through the whole New Testament as to the supernatural phenomena that we have a right to expect to flow from faith, through the whole course of our life's experience.

Let us boldly claim our birthright privileges in this respect, remembering that to have a form of godliness, but to deny the power, is one of the features of the final apostasy. We hail with no small satisfaction the revival of interest in the ethical side of Gospel truth, that is a characteristic of our time, and our hearts respond to any and every call to walk in the steps of our great Exemplar; but we will not let our sympathetic appreciation of teaching of this kind modify, in the slightest degree, our estimate of the supreme importance of what we may well name the dynamics of Christianity. Remembering that what we call the supernatural is only the natural with God, we will dare to expect it of Him that He shall still be true to His own nature in fulfilling His own promises of Divine head and personal intervention. So shall we be able to re-echo with equal confidence the Apostle's exclamation: "I can do all things through Christ, who strengtheneth me."

W. HAY M. H. AITKEN.



ART. II.—THE LIMITS OF THE OXFORD MOVEMENT.

UNLIKE other great religious revivals, the Oxford Movement was at first purely academic, or "aristocratic," as W. Palmer called it. The men who originated it were among the acutest intellects of the University, and the questions raised were such as could be adequately discussed only by professed theologians. Keble himself was a brilliant scholar; Pusey was the most learned man of his time in Oxford; C. Marriott is described by Dean Church as "naturally a man of metaphysical mind, given almost from a child to abstract and even abstruse thought"; Hurrell Froude, Isaac Williams, Copeland, J. Mozley, Ward, and, above all, J. H. Newman, formed a small but remarkable group of men far above the