

Christianity and the Supernatural.—IV.

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WE have seen, from the very nature of the problem presented by moral evil as it exists in the world, that the Atonement must be essentially a transcendent, or supernatural, fact. It cannot be fully explicable in terms of the categories which belong to our natural, or even our moral, experience. But though our intellects may find it impossible to construct a complete theory, the truth of the Atonement is conveyed to our hearts by the sacrifice of the cross of Christ in a way which corresponds most perfectly to our spiritual needs. The Good Friday message is, That what man cannot even think how to do, God has accomplished. It is an assurance that there is a sphere in which the things impossible with men are not only possible, but actually done.

When we turn from the death of Christ to the gladness of the Easter morning, we find an element of exactly the same kind.

Common-sense, when it endeavours to grapple with the question of a future life, finds itself completely puzzled. On the one hand, there are needs within us, needs of the most imperative kind, which demand, for their satisfaction, a belief in a future existence. Apart from such a future, there is an intolerable incompleteness about our life in this world. As spiritual beings we cannot regard ourselves as mere passing stages in an endless process which is working towards some result in which we have no personal share. Nor can our moral nature be content to think that the sufferings of the good, the frequent instances of injustice, the triumphs of evil, can represent the final verdict of the universe; nor that any vindication of the right could take place apart from the individuality of those who suffered the wrong.

But, on the other hand, how can we conceive a future life which would give the completeness we demand? A doctrine of the immortality of the soul yields no satisfaction. Soul apart

from body must lack fulness, content, variety. A world of shades is no heaven to desire. So antiquity felt, and felt rightly.

“ I had rather live the servile hind for hire
Than sovereign empire hold o'er all the shades.”

If such a doctrine contemplates an eternity of disembodied existence, it certainly contains no promise of bliss. If it supposes transmigration, continual re-birth into this life, the Buddhist *Nirvana* becomes man's highest hope. It cannot be denied that there is an extraordinary completeness about the Eastern conception. In its own way it solves most of the problems. The doctrine of *karma*, according to which the net moral result of each man's life becomes the starting-point of a new finite existence, which, in its turn, yields a result, is an amazingly subtle solution of that problem of moral incompleteness which has just been pointed out. But the whole creed is based on pessimism. It springs from the belief that all finite and personal forms of existence are essentially evil. Its hope is the extinction of the finite and personal.

But if the conception of the immortality of the soul fails to satisfy, what is to be said of the life which many Christian people seem to present to themselves as their hope for the future, a bodily life much the same in its conditions as our life in this world, but purified from sin and pain? It is not too much to say that it is only the mystery which surrounds the whole subject and the indefiniteness of the popular conception which prevent the impossibility of this view being immediately apparent. Even if it were possible, such an immortality would be no blessing. As we are situated here, all that is immediate in our experience is essentially finite. We have sensations and emotions which possess an intense reality, but they are all fugitive. It is with these vivid but fugitive impressions that our joys are most intimately associated. When we search for a permanent element we find it only in abstract conceptions, which, taken by themselves, are the dry husks of life. Science deals mainly with these conceptions. It used to find permanence in two physical elements only—matter and energy. Now it is doubting

the permanence of the former and suspecting that the energy of the universe is probably the only persistent thing. Yet, can we call this energy a thing? We turn to any text-book of science and look for a definition. We read: energy is capacity for doing work. It is at once clear that we are dealing with a scientific abstraction. In the concrete, energy appears as the changeful, not as the permanent. So it is with all our concrete experiences. The truth is that our life here is a continual struggle after satisfactions which, when gained, are found to be fugitive. And this is true even apart from the pain and sin which are so blended with our life.

The texture of our experience, then, is such that it can yield no permanent satisfaction. This is essentially its nature. Here is the old truth seen so clearly by psalmist and sage. "Man walketh in a vain shadow, and disquieteth himself in vain. He heapeth up riches, and cannot tell who shall gather them." "I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do; and behold all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was no profit under the sun." So it must be, when an effort is made to find the permanent in what is, in its very nature, fleeting. Therefore, it is clear, a world, a life, in which experience would assume the same essential shape which it possesses in this life could not provide scope for an eternal existence.

Yet man has certain possessions which pass beyond the finite: his spirit, or self, which is for him the true permanent, relatively to his fleeting experience; love which embraces other spirits and struggles ceaselessly against change and death; a capacity for joy which is never satisfied with the fleeting enjoyments of time; hope which reaches out beyond the utmost which this life can afford; a recognition of the good which finds all the good available in this world imperfect. These possessions which present themselves to us rather as capacities or potentialities than as positive satisfactions or actualities, contrast in the strongest way with that fugitive experience which belongs to our conditions of existence in this world.

When we turn to the New Testament and scrutinize closely the doctrine of a future life which it presents to us, we find that the two opposite difficulties which we have just considered are avoided in a manner which is quite extraordinary. But it is not enough to say that they are avoided. A more accurate account of the matter would be that the New Testament doctrine escapes them by rising above them. In what follows it must be remembered that we are discussing the future life in the full sense of the term, the life which begins with the resurrection. We have to do with the doctrine of the Easter message, and not with the problem of the intermediate state.

In the New Testament a developed doctrine is to be found only in certain of the epistles of St. Paul. The Gospels give us the fact of our Lord's resurrection. The whole New Testament expresses the hope founded on that fact. For a doctrine we must go to St. Paul, and especially to his two Epistles to the Corinthians.

There is no passage of Holy Scripture more familiar, nor more impressive by reason of its associations, than the fifteenth chapter of the first of these Epistles. Yet it is amazing how little its sublime teaching has availed to prevent those misunderstandings which result from the supposition that the resurrection means the mere re-animation of our earthly bodies. St. Paul's teaching is absolutely clear that the resurrection is the entering into new and higher conditions of existence. The conception of the spiritual body implies this, whatever its full significance may be.

From the material point of view personal identity does not consist in the identity of the particles of which the body is composed. Nor does it even consist in identity of arrangement. All it implies is continuity. Suppose for the moment that thought is impossible apart from a special kind of arrangement of material particles, what would then be required for personal identity would be that the arrangement for each moment of personal existence should be so related to the arrangement for the next as to produce, or make possible, a certain order of

relationship between the corresponding thoughts. This consideration disposes in a moment of all the objections to the idea of a bodily resurrection which have been urged by the more popular exponents of scepticism. It even gets over difficulties which such writers as the late Professor Tyndall regarded as insuperable.

How much more are we lifted out of the realm in which such objections have weight by St. Paul's doctrine of the spiritual body? As he himself tells us, the resurrection means the entering into a higher state of existence in which our bodies—that is, the sum total of those powers which form our means of connexion with the world—shall undergo complete transformation without loss of continuity.¹

In the Second Epistle to the Corinthians we find this teaching in a still more highly developed shape. "We know," he writes, "that if the earthly house of our tabernacle be dissolved, we have a building from God, an house not made with hands, eternal, in the heavens." Here the reference is clearly to the spiritual or resurrection body. In implicit contrast to the earthly body, it is characterized as eternal and in the heavens—that is, it belongs to a state of being higher than that in which we now live. But St. Paul proceeds to express himself even more definitely as to the relation between the earthly body and the resurrection body. "For verily in this we groan, longing to be clothed upon with our habitation which is from heaven: if so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. For indeed we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened; not for that we would be unclothed, but that we would be clothed upon, that what is mortal may be swallowed up of life."

These are words of extraordinary concentration. It is usual to find in them a reference to the hope that Christ would return to earth in the lifetime of the Apostle, and thus to explain the strong and emphatic expression "clothed upon," as meaning that the resurrection body would be, as it were, put on as an outer garment over the earthly body, and so "what is mortal"

¹ 1 Cor. xv. 42-45 and 51-56.

(the mortal element) be swallowed up of life. If this be accepted, it does not exclude, but rather strengthens, the interpretation which finds in these words a distinct doctrine of the relation which the resurrection body bears to the earthly body. The body, it must be considered, is the connecting link between the spirit and the world. When, therefore, we compare or contrast the resurrection body and the earthly body, we are really comparing or contrasting two modes of existence—the life in this world and the life of the eternal world. Each body corresponds to, and is representative of, the whole state of being to which it belongs. Again, St. Paul has very distinctly in his mind a double contrast. The future life is contrasted first, with our bodily life in this world ; secondly, with a state of disembodied existence. If our earthly life is imperfect and unsatisfying because it is essentially corruptible and mortal—that is, fugitive and perishing—in its nature, a disembodied state is unsatisfying because it is a condition of “nakedness.” It is stripped of its garment of vivid actuality. Therefore St. Paul says, “Not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be clothed upon.”

What, then, is St. Paul’s doctrine? It is just this : at the resurrection there shall supervene upon the lower modes of existence (the life of this world or the disembodied state) a life of higher reality. In that higher reality all the conditions of being which make this life imperfect and unsatisfying shall be transmuted and disappear. The mortal shall be swallowed up of life. We shall not be unclothed, but clothed upon. We shall not lose connexion with the universe around us ; we shall gain a vastly fuller and more perfect connexion, a richer and larger life. The eternal shall descend upon the temporal, the heavenly upon the earthly, and effect a glorious transformation.

And here we shall find our thoughts greatly assisted by that conception of *degrees of reality* which we found so useful when considering the doctrine of the Atonement. The future life must be higher in the scale of reality than this life. When this distinction has been fully grasped, it becomes impossible to

regard the eternal world as a region of the material universe. The endeavour to locate "heaven," to imagine, for example, that it is some great central sphere round which all the celestial bodies, as they are revealed to us by modern astronomy, revolve in their courses, is at once seen to be futile. As the old idea of an upper world above the blue dome of the firmament had to vanish at the advent of the Copernican doctrine, so will every physical or quasi-physical conception of heaven be found, sooner or later, inadequate or impossible. To those who are familiar with the tendencies of modern thought, both scientific and philosophical, this fact is perfectly obvious. But instead of being a subject for regret or a cause of doubt, it should be a reason for profound hopefulness and restored confidence. For modern thought yields a conception which more than gives back all that the Copernican astronomy took away. Can anything be more suggestive of despair than a retreating heaven, a heaven which disappears further and further into the depths of space as scientific methods of investigation increase in power, a heaven which flies before the telescope and the spectroscope? What becomes of the near heaven and the ever-present God, which are so essential to our Christian faith?

When the conception of degrees of reality has been grasped, these difficulties vanish. The eternal world lies, not beyond the stars, but behind the veil. And the veil is that very world of space and time in which our present existence is passed. Yet this is perhaps a misleading mode of representation. St. Paul's language corresponds far more nearly to a just expression of the relation between the temporal and the eternal: "Not that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon; that the mortal may be swallowed up of life." Here we are led to think of the eternal as supervening upon the temporal, assimilating and transmuting it. Thus, instead of the eternal world being a region of the world in space and time, an element in the temporal, we are taught that the temporal is, rather, to be regarded as an element in the eternal, an element which must ultimately be wholly absorbed and resolved in the fuller reality.