

The Popular Idea of Soul-Survival

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originally published in *The Theosophist*, Vol 1
by The Theosophical Society, Adyar, Chennai [Madras], India 600 020
and reprinted from "Theosophical Siftings" Volume 1

Published in 1879
The Theosophical Publishing Society, England

At what epoch the dawning intellect of man first accepted the idea of future life none can tell; but we know that from the very first its roots struck so deeply and so entwined themselves about human instincts, that the belief in immortality has endured throughout all generations, and is embedded in the consciousness of every nation and tribe – civilized, semi-civilized, and savage. The greatest minds have separated upon it; and [Page 21] the rudest savages, though having no name for the Deity, have yet believed in the existence of spirits, and worshiped them. If in Christian Russia, Wallachia, Bulgaria, and Greece the Oriental Church enjoins that upon All Saints' Day offerings of rice and drink shall be placed upon the graves, and in "heathen" India the same propitiatory gifts of rice are made to the departed, so, likewise, the poor savage of New Caledonia makes his sacrifice of food to the skulls of his beloved dead. According to Herbert Spencer, the worship of souls and relics is to be attributed to "the primitive idea that any property characterizing an aggregate inheres in all parts of it The soul, present in the body of the dead man preserved entire, is also present in the preserved parts of his body. Hence the faith in relics". This definition, though in logic equally applicable to the golden shrine and bejewelled relic of the cultured Roman Catholic devotee, and to the dusty, time-worn skull of the fetish-worshiper, might yet be objected to by the former, since he could say that he does not believe the soul to be present either in the whole cadaver, in the skeleton, or in any part, nor does he, strictly speaking, worship it. He but honours the relic as something which, having belonged to one whom he deems saintly, has by the contact acquired a sort of miraculous virtue. Mr. Spencer's definition, therefore, does not seem to cover the whole ground. So also Professor Max Müller, in his "Science of Religion", after having shown to us by numerous instances that the human mind had from the beginning a "vague hope of a future life", explains no more than does Herbert Spencer whence or how came originally such a hope. He merely points to an inherent faculty in uncultivated nations of converting the forces of nature into gods and demons. He closes his lecture upon the Turanian legends and the universality of this belief in ghosts and spirits, by simply remarking that the worship of the spirits of the departed is the most widely spread form of superstition all over the world.

Thus, whichever way we turn for a philosophical solution of the mystery, — whether we expect an answer from theology, which is itself bound to believe in miracles and teach supernaturalism, or ask it from the now dominant schools of modern thought, the greatest opponents of the miraculous in nature, — or whether again we turn for an explanation to that philosophy of extreme positivism which, from the days of Epicurus down to the modern school of James Stuart Mill, has adopted for its device the glaring sciolism, "*Nihil in intellectu quod non antefuerit in sensu*", and thus made intellect subservient to matter, — we receive a satisfactory reply from none.

Were this article intended for the mere collation of facts, authenticated by travelers on the spot, and concerning but *superstitions* born in the mind of primitive man, and now lingering only among the savage tribes of humanity, then the combined works of such philosophers as Herbert Spencer might solve our difficulties. We might remain content with his explanation that, in the absence of hypothesis, "foreign to thought in its [Page 22] earliest stage . . . primitive ideas, arising out of various experiences derived from the inorganic world" — such as the actions of wind, the echo, and man's own shadow — proving to the uneducated mind that there was "an invisible form of existence which manifests power", were all-sufficient to have created a like "inevitable belief" (see Spencer's "Genesis of Superstition"). But we are now concerned with something nearer to us, and higher than the primitive man of the stone age; the man who totally ignored "those conceptions of physical causation which have arisen only as experiences, and have been slowly organized during civilization". We are now dealing with the beliefs, of twenty millions of modern Spiritualists, our fellow-countrymen, living in the full blaze of the enlightened nineteenth century. These men ignore none of the discoveries of modern science; nay, many among them are themselves ranked high among the highest of such scientific discoverers. Notwithstanding all this, are they any the less addicted to the same "form of superstition", if superstition it be, than the primitive man? At least their interpretation of the physical phenomena, whenever accompanied by those coincidences which carry to their minds the conviction of an intelligence behind the physical force — are often precisely the same as those which presented themselves to the apprehension of the man of the early and undeveloped ages.

"What is a shadow?" asks Herbert Spencer. "By a child or a savage, a shadow is thought of as an entity". Bastian says of the Benin Negroes that "they regard men's shadows as their souls". . . thinking "that they . . . watch all their actions and bear witness against them". According to Crantz, among the Greenlanders a man's shadow "is one of his two souls — the one which goes away from his body at night". By the Fijians, the shadow is called "the dark spirit, as distinguished from another that man possesses". And the celebrated author of "The Principles of Psychology" explains that "the community of meaning, hereafter to be noted more fully, which various unallied languages betray between shade and spirit, show us the same thing".

What all this shows us the more clearly, however, is that, wrong and contradictory as the conclusions may be, yet the premises on which they are based are no fictions. A thing must be, before the human mind can think or conceive of it. The very capacity to imagine the existence of something usually invisible and intangible is itself evidence that it must have manifested itself some time. Sketching in his usual artistic way the gradual development of the soul-idea, and pointing out at the same time how "mythology not only pervades the sphere of religion . . . but infects more or less the whole realm of thought". Professor Max Müller in his turn tells us that, when men wished for the first time to express "a distinction between the body and something else within him distinct from the body . . . the name that suggested itself was breath, chosen to express at first the principle of life as distinguished from the decaying body, afterwards the incorporeal . . . immortal part of man — his [Page 23] soul, his mind, his self . . . When a person dies we too say that he has given up the ghost; and ghost, too, meant originally spirit, and spirit meant breath". As instances of this, narratives by various missionaries and travelers are quoted. Questioned by Father F. de Bobadilla, soon after the Spanish conquest, as to their ideas concerning death, the Indians of Nicaragua told him that "when men die, there comes forth from their mouth something which resembles a person, and is called Julio (in Aztec Yuli means to live, explains Mr. Müller). This being is like a person, but does not die, and the corpse remains here. . .". In one of his numerous works, Andrew Jackson Davis, whilst considered the greatest American clairvoyant and known as the *Poughkeepsie* seer, gives us what is a perfect illustration of the belief held by the Nicaraguan Indians. This book, ("Death and the After-Life") contains an engraved frontispiece representing the

death-bed of an old woman. It is called the "formation of the spiritual body". Out of the head of the defunct there issues a luminous appearance — her own rejuvenated form. ["Suppose a person is dying", says the Poughkeepsie seer, "the clairvoyant sees right over the head what may be called a magnetic halo — an ethereal emanation, in appearance golden and throbbing as though conscious The person has ceased to breath, the pulse is still, and the emanation is elongated and *fashioned in the outline of the human form!* Beneath, it is connected with the brain Owing to the brain's momentum, I have seen a dying person , even at the last feeble pulse-beat, rouse impulsively and rise up in bed to converse, but the next instant he was gone — his brain being the last to yield to the life-principle. The golden emanation is connected with the brain by a very fine life-thread. When it ascends, there appears something bright and shining, like a human head; next, a faint outline of the face *divine*; then the fair neck and beautiful shoulders; then in rapid succession come all parts of the human body down to the feet — a bright shining image, a little smaller than the physical body, but a perfect prototype In all except its disfigurements. The fine life-thread continues attached to the old brain. The next thing is the withdrawal of the electric principle. When this thread snaps, the spiritual body is free [!!] and prepared to accompany its guardians to the summer-land]

Among some Hindus the spirit is supposed to remain for ten days seated on the eaves of the house in which it parted from the body. That it may bathe and drink, two plantain-leaf cups are placed on the eaves — one full of milk, the other of water. "On the first day the dead is supposed to get his head; on the second day, his ears, eyes, and nose; on the third, his hands, breast, and neck; on the fourth, his middle parts; on the fifth, his legs and feet; on the sixth, his vitals; on the seventh, his bones, marrow, veins, and arteries; on the eighth, his nails, hair, and teeth; on the ninth, all the remaining limbs, organs, and manly strength ; and, on the tenth, hunger and thirst for the renewed body".

Mr. Davis's theory is accepted by all the Spiritualists, and it is on this model that the clairvoyants now describe the separation of the " incorruptible [Page 24] from the corruptible". But here the Spiritualists and the Aztecs branch off into two paths; for while the former maintain that the soul is in every case immortal and preserves its individuality throughout eternity, the Aztecs say that "when the deceased has lived well the Julio goes up on high with our gods, but when he has lived ill the Julio perishes with the body, and there is an end of it".

Some persons might perchance find the *primitive* Aztecs more consistent in their logic than our modern Spiritualists. The Laponians and Finns also maintain that, while the body decays, a new one is given to the dead which the Shaman can alone see.

"Though breath, or spirit, or ghost", says, further on, Professor Max Müller, "are the most common names we yet speak of the shades of the departed, which meant originally their shadows These who first introduced this expression — and we find it in the most distant parts of the world – evidently took the shadow as the nearest approach to what they wished to express; something that should be incorporeal, yet closely connected with the body. The Greek eidolon, too, is not more than the shadow. . . . but the curious part is this that people who speak of the life or soul as the shadow of the body have brought themselves to believe that a dead body casts no shadow, because the shadow has departed from it; that it becomes in fact, a kind of Peter Schemihl". — (*The Science of Religion*)

Do the Amazulu and other tribes in South America alone believe this? By no means; it is a popular idea

among Slavonian Christians. A corpse which is noticed to cast a shadow in the sun is deemed a sinful soul rejected by heaven itself. It is doomed henceforth to expiate its sins as an earth-bound spirit till the day of the Resurrection.

Both Lander and Catlin describe the savage Mandans as placing the skulls of their dead in a circle. Each wife knows the skull of her former husband or child, and there seldom passes a day that she does not visit it, with a dish of the best cooked food There is scarcely an hour in a pleasant day when one or more of these women may not be seen sitting or lying by the skulls of her children or husbands, talking to them in the most endearing language that they can use, as they were wont to do in former days, "and seemingly getting an answer back".

What these poor savage Mandan wives and mothers do is also done daily by millions of civilized Spiritualists, and only proves more clearly the universality of the conviction that our dead hear and can answer us. From a magnetic, hence in a certain sense a scientific standpoint, the former have, moreover, far better reasons to offer than the latter. The skull of the departed person so interrogated has surely closer magnetic affinities and relations to the defunct than a table through the tippings of which the dead answer the living; a table, in most cases, which the spirit while embodied had never seen nor touched. But the Spiritualists are not the only ones to vie with the Mandans. In every part of Russia, [Page 25] whether mourning over the yet fresh corpse or accompanying it to the burying-ground, or during the six weeks following the death, the peasant women, as well as those of the rich mercantile classes, go to the grave to shout, or, in Biblical phraseology, to "lift up their voices". Once there, they wail in rhythm, addressing the defunct by name, asking of him questions, and pausing as if for an answer.

Not only the ancient and idolatrous Egyptians and Peruvians held the curious notion that the ghost or soul of the dead man was either present in the mummy, or that the corpse was itself conscious, but there is a similar belief now among the orthodox Christians of the Greek and the Roman Churches. We reproach the Egyptians with placing their embalmed dead at the table, and the heathen Peruvians with carrying round the fields the dried-up corpse of a parent, that it might see and judge of the state of the crops. But what of the Christian Mexican of today, who under the guidance of his priest dresses up his corpses in finery, and decks them with flowers, and, when the defunct happens to be a female, even paints its cheeks with rouge; then seating the body in a chair placed on a large table, from which the ghastly relic presides, as it were, over the mourners seated round it, they eat and drink the whole night, play various games of cards and dice and consult the defunct as to their chances. On the other hand, in Russia, it is a universal custom to crown the deceased person's brow with a long slip of gilded and ornamented paper, called *Ventchik* (the Crown), upon which a prayer is printed in gaudy letters. This prayer is a kind of letter of introduction to his patron saint, with which the parish priest furnishes the corpse, recommending the defunct to the saint's protection. [It runs in this wise: "St Nicholas (or St. Mary So-and-so), holy patron of (follow defunct's full name and title), receive the soul of God's servant, and intercede for remission of his or her sins.] The Roman Catholic Basques write letters to their deceased friends and relatives, addressing them to either Paradise, Purgatory, or Hell — according to the instructions given by the Father-Confessor of the late addressees — and, placing them in the coffins of the newly departed, ask the latter to safely deliver them in the other world, promising as a fee to the messenger a certain number of masses for the repose of his soul.

At a séance held by a well-known medium in America, Mercedes, late Queen of Spain, announced herself, and came forth in full bridal array — a magnificent profusion of lace and jewels, and spoke in

several different tongues with a linguist present. Her sister, Princess Christina, came also just after in much plainer costume, and with a timid school-girl air.

Thus we see, not only can dead people deliver letters, but even, returning from their celestial homes, bring back with them their "lace and jewels". As the ancient pagan Greek peopled his Olympian heaven with feasting and flirting deities; as the American Red Indian has his happy hunting-grounds, where the spirits of brave chiefs bestride their ghostly [Page 26] steeds and chase their phantom-game; as the Hindu has his many superior lokas, where his numerous gods live in golden palaces, surrounded with all manner of sensual delights; as the Christian has his New Jerusalem with streets of "pure gold as it were transparent glass", and the foundations of the wall of the city "garnished with precious stones"; so the modern Spiritualist has his "summer-land zone within the milky way", [See *Stellar Key to the Summer-land*, by Andrew Jackson Davis] though somewhat higher than the celestial territories of other people, [In the same author's work, "The Spiritual Congress", Galen says through the clairvoyant seer, "Between the Spirit Home and the earth, there are, strewn along the intervening distance . . . more than four hundred thousand planets and fifteen thousand solar bodies of lesser magnitude"] There, amid cities and villages abounding in palaces, museums, villas, colleges, and temples, an eternity is passed. The young are nurtured in thought, the undeveloped of the earth matured, the old rejuvenated, and every individual taste and desire is gratified; spirits flirt, get married, and have families of children. [The *New York Times* of June 29, 1879, contains an account of the marriage of the spirit-daughter of Col. Eaton, of Leavenworth, Kansas, a prominent member of the National Democratic Committee. This daughter, who died at the age of three weeks, grew in some twenty odd years in the Summer-land to be a fine young lady, and is now wedded to the spirit-son of Franklin Pearce, late President of the U.S.A. The wedding, witnessed by a famous clairvoyant of New York, was gorgeous. The "spirit-bride" was arrayed in a dress of mild green. The wedding supper was spread by the spirit's order, with lights and bouquets and plates placed for the happy couple. The guests assembled, and the wedded ghosts fully "materialized" of themselves, and sat at table with them]

Verily, verily, we can exclaim with Paul, "O death, where is thy sting ? O grave, where is thy victory ? "

Belief in the survival of ancestors is the oldest and most time-honored of all beliefs. Travelers tell us that all the Mongolian, Tartar, Finnish, Tungusic tribes, besides the spirits of nature, deify also their ancestral spirits. The Chinese historians, treating of the Turanians, the Huns, and the Tukui — the forefathers of the modern Turks — describe them as worshiping "the spirits of the sky, of the earth, and the spirits of the departed". Medhurst enumerates the various classes of Chinese spirits thus: — "The principal are the celestial spirits (*tien-shin*), the terrestrial (*ti-ki*), and the ancestral or wandering spirits (*Jin-kwei*). Among these, the spirits of the late Emperors, great philosophers, and sages, are the most revered. They are the public property of the whole nation, and are a part of the State religion, while each family has besides this its own Manes, which are treated with great regard, incense being burnt before their relics and many superstitious rites being performed".

But if all nations equally believe in, and many worship, their dead, their views as to the desirability of a direct intercourse with these late citizens [Page 27] differ widely. In fact, among the educated, the modern Spiritualists alone seek to communicate constantly with them. We will take a few instances from the most widely separated peoples. The Hindus, as a rule, hold that no pure spirit of a man who died reconciled to his fate, will ever come back bodily to trouble mortals. They maintain that it is only the Bhutas — the souls of those who depart this life unsatisfied and having their terrestrial desires unquenched, in short,

bad, sinful men and women — who become *earth-bound*. Unable to ascend at once to Maksh, they have to linger upon earth until either their next reincarnation or complete annihilation, and thus they take every opportunity to obsess people, especially weak women. So undesirable is to them the return, or apparition of such ghosts, that they use every means to prevent it. Even in the case of the most holy feeling, of the mother's love for her infant, they adopt measures to prevent her return to it. There is a belief among some of them that whenever a woman dies in child-birth, she will return to see and watch over her child. Therefore, on their way back from the Ghaut after the burning of the body, the mourners strew mustard seeds thickly all along the road leading from the funeral pile to the defunct's home. For some inconceivable reason they think that the ghost will feel obliged to pick up, on its way back, every one of these seeds. And as the labour is slow and tedious the poor mother can never reach her home before the cock crows, when she is obliged, in accordance with the ghostly laws, to vanish till the following night, dropping back all her harvest. Among the Tchuvashes, a tribe inhabiting Russian domains, a son whenever offering sacrifice to the spirit of his father, uses the following exorcism: "We honour thee with a feast; look, here is bread for thee and various kinds of food; thou hast all thou canst desire, but do not trouble us, do not come back near us". Among the Lapps and Finns, those departed spirits which make their presence visible and tangible are supposed to be very mischievous, and "the most mischievous are the Spirits of the priests". Everything is done to keep them away from the living. The agreement we find between this blind popular instinct and the wise conclusions of some of the greatest philosophers, and even modern specialists, is very remarkable. "Respect the spirits, and — keep them at a distance", said Confucius, six centuries B.C. Nine centuries later, Porphyry, the famous anti-theurgist, writing upon the nature of various spirits, expressed his opinion upon the spirits of the departed by saying that he knew of no evil which these pestilent demons would not be ready to do. And in our own century a Kabalist, the greatest magnetizer living, Baron du Potet, in his "Magie Dévoilée", warns the spiritists not to trouble the rest of the dead. For "the evoked shadow can fasten itself upon, follow, and for ever afterwards influence you; and we can appease it only through a pact which will bind us to it — till death! "

But all this is a matter of individual opinion; what we are concerned with now is merely to learn how the basic fact in soul survival could have [Page 28] so engrafted itself upon every succeeding age, despite the extravagance woven into it, if it be but a shadowy and unreal intellectual conception originating with "primitive man". Among all modern men of science, although doing his best in the body of the work to present this belief as a "mere superstition", the only satisfactory answer is given by Professor Max Müller, in his "Introduction to the Science of Religion". And by his solution we must abide for want of a better one. He reaches it, however, only by overstepping the bounds of comparative philology, and boldly invading the domain of pure metaphysics; by following, in short, the path forbidden by exact science. At one blow he cuts the Gordian knot which Herbert Spencer and his school have tied under the chariot of the "Unknowable". He shows us that "there is a philosophical discipline which examines into the conditions of sensuous or intuitional knowledge", and "another philosophical discipline which examines into the conditions of rational or conceptional knowledge"; and then defines for us a third faculty, "The faculty of apprehending the Infinite, not only in religion but in all things; a power independent of sense and reason, a power in a certain sense contradicted by sense and reason, but yet a very real power, which has held its own from the beginning of the world, neither sense nor reason being able to overcome it, while it alone is able to overcome both reason and sense".

The faculty of intuition — that which lies entirely beyond the scope of our modern biologists — could hardly be better defined; and yet, when closing his lecture upon the superstitious rites of the Chinese and their temples devoted to the worship of departed ancestors, our great philologist remarks: "All this takes place by slow degrees. It begins with placing a flower on the tomb; it ends with worshiping the spirits".