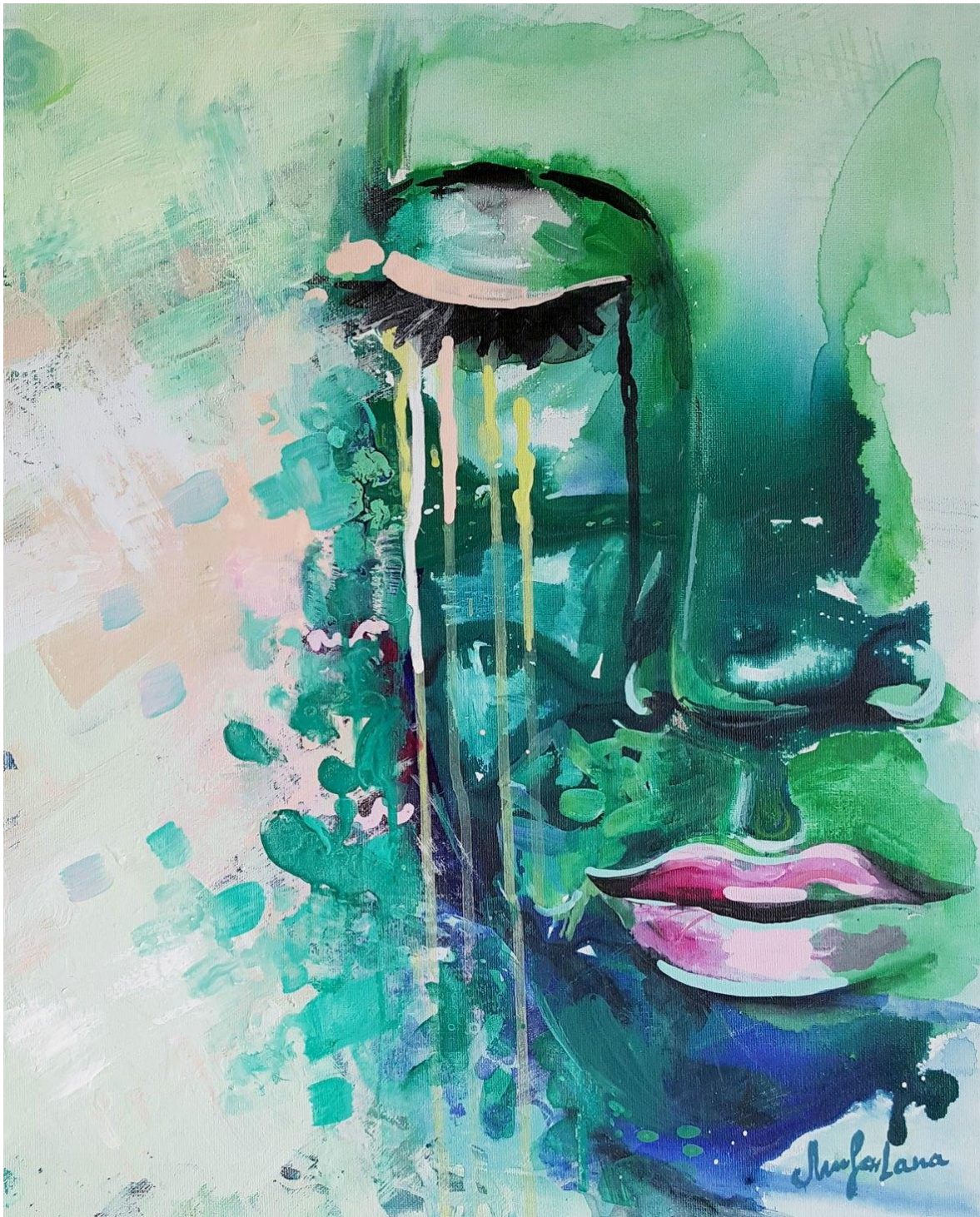


*Ancient beliefs in  
the immortality of soul*



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**A**T 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, so entwined about human instincts, that the belief has endured through all generations, and is embedded in the consciousness of every nation and tribe, civilized, semi-civilized or savage. The greatest minds have speculated upon it; and the rudest savages, though having no name for the Deity, have yet believed in the existence of spirits and worshipped 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.<sup>1</sup>

This definition, though in logic equally applicable to the gold-enshrined and bejewelled relic of the cultured Roman Catholic devotee, and to the dusty, timeworn skull of the fetish-worshipper, might yet be excepted to by the former, since he would say that he does not believe the soul to be present in either the whole cadaver, skeleton, or 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 *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, after having shown to us, by citing numerous instances, that the human mind had, from the beginning, a “vague hope of a future life,” explains no more than Herbert Spencer whence or how came originally such a hope; but merely points to an inherent faculty in *uncultivated* nations of changing 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

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<sup>1</sup> [H. Spencer. *The Principles of Sociology* (1879), Vol. I, Ch. XXI, “Idol-Worship and Fetich-Worship,” p. 326]



. . . the worship of the spirits of the departed is *perhaps* the most widely spread form of natural *superstition* all over the world.<sup>1</sup>

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, again, turn for an explanation to that philosophy of extreme positivism which, from the days of Epicurus down to the modern school of James Mill, adopting for its device the glaring Sciolism “*nihil in intellectu, quod non ante fuerit in sensu,*”<sup>2</sup> makes intellect subservient to matter — we receive a satisfactory reply from none!

If this article were intended merely for a simple collation of facts, authenticated by travellers on the spot, and concerning but “superstitions” born in the mind of the 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 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.”<sup>3</sup> 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 own fellow men, living in the full blaze of the enlightened 19<sup>th</sup> 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 interpretations 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 and 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

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<sup>1</sup> [p. 211]

<sup>2</sup> [“Nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu,” i.e., nothing is in the understanding that was not earlier in the senses.]

<sup>3</sup> See Spencer’s “Genesis of Superstition,” *Popular Science Monthly*, March 1875.

witness against them.”<sup>1</sup> 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 which each 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.<sup>2</sup>

What all this shows us the most clearly however, is that, wrong and contradicting 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 at 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 Müller in his turn tells us that, when man wished for the first time to express

. . . a distinction between the body and something else within him distinct from the body, an easy 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 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.<sup>3</sup>

As instances of this, narratives by various missionaries and travellers 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* (Aztec *yuli*— ‘to live’)” explains M. 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, whom considered the greatest American clairvoyant and known as the “Poughkeepsie Seer,” gives us what is a perfect illustration of the belief of the Nicaragua Indians. This book<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Dr. Adolf Bastian, *Zur Mythologie und Psychologie der Nigritier in Guinea, etc.*, Berlin, 1894, p. 41 — Boris de Zirkoff.]

<sup>2</sup> [*The Principles of Sociology*, London, 1876, pp. 129, 131]

<sup>3</sup> [pp. 359-61]

<sup>4</sup> *Death and the After-Life*

<sup>5</sup> Says the Poughkeepsie Seer:

Suppose a person is dying, 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 breathe, the pulse is still, and the emanation is elongated and *fashioned in the outline of the human form!* Beneath it, is connected 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 up the life-principles. The golden emanation . . .

Among some Hindus the spirit is supposed to remain for ten days seated on the eaves of the house where it parted from the body. That it may bathe and drink, two plantain leaf-cups are placed on the eaves, one full of milk and 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.<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Davis' theory is accepted by all the Spiritualists, and it is on this model that the clairvoyants now describe the separation of the "incorruptible from the corruptible." But here, 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.<sup>2</sup>

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

Though breath, or spirit, or ghost [says further on Professor Müller] are the most common names . . . we speak . . . of the *shades* of the departed, which meant originally their shadows. Those 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 *εἰδωλον*, too, is not much more than the Little Ones, the Small Folk. 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 Schlemihl.<sup>3</sup>

Do the Amazulu and other tribes of South Africa only thus believe? 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

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is connected with the brain by a very fine life-thread. When it ascends, there appears something *white* 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 new body, down to the feet — 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 guardian to the Summer Land.

<sup>1</sup> "The Pāthāri Prabhus," by Krishnanāth Raghunathji, in the Government *Bombay Gazetteer*, 1879

<sup>2</sup> [Müller, *Introduction, etc.*, p. 361]

<sup>3</sup> [*op. cit.*, p. 365]

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, but more or less of these women may be seen sitting or lying by the skull of their child or husband — talking to it in the most pleasant and endearing language that they can use (as they were wont to do in former days) and *seemingly getting an answer back.*”<sup>1</sup>

What these poor, savage Mandan mothers and wives do, is performed daily by millions of civilized Spiritualists, and but the more proves the universality of the conviction that our dead hear and can answer us. From a theosophical, 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 magnetical affinities and relations to the defunct, than a table through the tippings of which the dead ones 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, 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 on 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, pausing as if for an answer.

Not only the ancient and idolatrous Egyptians and Peruvians had 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 having carried around 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; bedecks them with flowers, and in case of the defunct happening 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 carrion presides, as it were, over the mourners seated around the table, who eat and drink the whole night, and play various games of cards and dice, 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 gilt and ornamented paper, called *Ventchik* (the crown), upon which a prayer is printed in gaudy letters. This prayer is a kind of a letter of introduction with which the parish priest furnishes the corpse to his patron Saint, recommending the defunct to the Saint’s protection.<sup>2</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Catlin by H. Spencer in *The Principles of Sociology*, London, 1876, Chap. xxi, pp. 326-27

<sup>2</sup> 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.”

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, more or less masses for the repose of his soul.

At a recent *séance*, held by a well-known medium in America,<sup>1</sup>

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, the Princess Christina, came also just after in much plainer costume, and with a timid school-girl air.

Thus, we see that not only can the 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; and the American Red Indian has his happy hunting-grounds where the spirits of brave chiefs bestride their ghostly steeds, and chase their phantom game; and the Hindu his many superior lokas, where their numerous gods live in golden palaces, surrounded with all manner of sensual delights; and the Christian 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”; where bodiless chirping cherubs and the elect, with golden harps, sing praises to Jehovah; so the modern Spiritualist has his “Summer Land Zone within the Milky Way,”<sup>2</sup> though somewhat higher than the celestial territories of other people.<sup>3</sup> There, amid cities and villages abounding in palaces, museums, villas, colleges and temples, an eternity is passed. The young are nurtured and taught, the undeveloped of the earth matured, the old rejuvenated, and every individual taste and desire gratified; spirits flirt, get married, and have families of children.<sup>4</sup>

Verily, verily we can exclaim with Paul,

O death, where is thy sting; O grave, where is thy victory!

Belief in the survival of the ancestors is the oldest and most time-honoured of all beliefs.

Travellers tell us that all the Mongolian, Tatar, Finnish, and 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

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<sup>1</sup> See *Banner of Light*, Boston, June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1879.

<sup>2</sup> See *Stellar Key to the Summer Land*, by Andrew Jackson Davis.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> The latest intelligence from America is that of the marriage of a spirit daughter of Colonel 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 now is wedded to the spirit son of Franklin Pierce, late President of the U.S. The wedding, witnessed by a famous clairvoyant of New York, was gorgeous. The “spirit bride” was “arrayed in a dress of mild green.” A 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” themselves and sat at table with them. (New York *Times*, June 29<sup>th</sup>, 1879.)

— show them as worshipping “the spirits of the sky, of the earth, and the spirits of the departed.” Medhurst enumerates the various classes of the Chinese spirits thus: The principal are the celestial spirits (*tien shin*); the terrestrial (*ti-ki*); and the ancestral or wandering spirits (*jün kwei*). Among these, the spirits of the late Emperors, great philosophers, and sages, are revered the most. They are the public property of the whole nation, and are a part of the state religion, “while each family has its own *manes* which are treated with special reverence and honoured by many superstitious rites.”<sup>1</sup>

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 differ widely. In fact, among the educated, only the modern Spiritualists 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 *bhūtas* — 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 Moksha, they have to linger upon earth until either their next transmigration or complete annihilation, and thus 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 — 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 childbirth, she will return to see and watch over her child. Therefore, on their way back from the ghāt, after the burning of the body, the mourners thickly strew mustard seeds 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 different kinds of meat; thou hast all thou canst desire: but do not trouble us, do not come back near us.<sup>2</sup>

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,

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<sup>1</sup> [Quoted by M. Müller, in *Introduction, etc.*, p. 208 — *Boris de Zirkoff*.]

<sup>2</sup> M.A. Castrén, *Vorlesungen über die Finnische Mythologie*, p. 122. [Quoted by Max Müller in *Introduction, etc.*, p. 213]



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 Kabbalist, the greatest magnetizer living, Baron Du Potet, in his *La 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 but 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 of belief in soul-survival could have so engrafted itself upon every succeeding age — despite the extravagances woven into it — if it be but a shadowy and unreal intellectual conception originating with “primitive man.” Of all modern men of science, although he does his best in the body of the work to present the belief alluded to as a mere “superstition” — the only satisfactory answer is given by Prof. Max Müller, in his *Introduction to the Science of Religion*. And by his solution we have to abide for want of a better one. He can only do it, however, by overstepping the boundaries of comparative philology, and boldly invading the domain of pure metaphysics; by following, in short, a 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 conceptual 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 the 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 worshipping the spirits . . .<sup>2</sup>

H.P. BLAVATSKY



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<sup>1</sup> [Müller, *op. cit.*, p. 18]

<sup>2</sup> [*op. cit.*, p. 214]