# Gnosticism: Ancient and Modern.[1]

By the Rev. CANON GIRDLESTONE, M.A.

TWO books were published last March, both dealing with matters in which all Christians are deeply interested, including the doctrine of the Divine immanence. One is by a serious thinker, the other by a facile speaker; one is condensed, the other like a set of easy after-dinner speeches; one deals reverently with Christian beliefs and with the Scriptures, the other caricatures the Gospel and dispenses with our sacred books whenever it is convenient; one is cautious and modest, the other is of the "cock-sure" style, and indicates that its writer suffers from swelled head.

Sir Oliver Lodge has a world-wide reputation. He writes calmly and thoughtfully, and has a broad outlook. He is by no means dogmatic. Sometimes he hesitates when putting forth suggestions; occasionally he speculates—*e.g.*, in a Wordsworthian and in a spiritualistic direction—but when he does so he cautions the reader against accepting his utterances as positive and final. He accepts the Bible as a unique possession, and Christ as a unique Being, who is the manifestation of God in human nature. He words his thoughts scientifically rather than theologically, and urges his readers "to ask for the guidance of the Divine Spirit" while seeking truth "with modest and careful patience." At times he uses almost pantheistic expressions (p. 43), but they are counterbalanced by his strong sense of personality, human and Divine. He realizes his limitations, especially when attempting to find out God—"the higher Power of which man has but an infinitesimal knowledge" (p. 38); but he goes on to show that God must "possess powers and faculties and attributes which we ourselves possess"—at least, in their essence, though not in their modes.

[1] "The Substance of Faith allied with Science," by Sir Oliver Lodge (Methuen). "The New Theology," by R. J. Campbell (Chapman and Hall).

It is hard to deny oneself the pleasure of giving some extracts from this little book—*e.g.*, on the aim of life and the duty of "concentrating our energy on clear and conscious pressing forward with a definite mark in view"; or on the nature of sin and the blessing of pardon (p. 53); but we must abstain. Sir Oliver Lodge calls his book "A Catechism for Parents and Teachers," but it is by no means food for babes. There are many things in it from which we shrink, but we honour the writer.

It is by no means pleasant to turn to Mr. Campbell and his so-called "New Theology," or—to adopt the current word of the past generation—"Neology."

The first thing that strikes us in this book is the flippant way in which he sweeps away our old beliefs. Sometimes, indeed, he condescends to patronize, as when he calls our Lord a peerless teacher and St. John an exceedingly able writer. Sometimes he thinks he is simplifying, as when he puts the "problem of pain in a nutshell" (p. 49); but at other times he breaks loose from all bounds, as when he accuses theologians of misleading people by speaking of the wrath of God against sin (p. 52); or when he says it is time we got rid of the doctrine of the Fall (p. 58), which he considers to be a real hindrance to religion (p. 64); or when he tells us, while commenting on the idea that Christianity is the only true religion, that "we shall get on better when that kind of nonsense ceases to be spoken" (p. 70). Again, hear the oracle: "I say there is no punishment of sin in the sense in which the word 'punishment' is usually employed" (p. 213). "Why should God feel Himself so much aggrieved by Adam's peccadillo?" As we read such utterances we cannot help wondering at the absence of good taste and right feeling which characterizes the writing of a man who is capable of so much better things.

Mr. Campbell informs us that too much is made of the Agony in the Garden. Evil is treated by him as a negative term—in fact, as a vacuum—though sin is once described as the murder spirit (pp. 43, 163). Heredity is put on one side; it must

not come in even "by a back-door" (p. 63). We are told practically that all moral evil is self-generated; the early chapters of Genesis are fables; the end of man is universalism, which is only a question of time (p. 230). Of course, the doctrine of the Atonement, as it is ordinarily understood on the authority of Christ and His Apostles, is dispensed with.

Mr. Campbell professes to know and to express "the mind of to-day." What he thinks, the world ought to think. Any doctrine which does not commend itself to his reason is to be let go (p. 113). But is this all that is to be said and done in our search after truth? Is each man to follow his own ideas, whether spiritual or sensual? whether theistic, pantheistic, or atheistic? Then, indeed, truth has fallen in the street. But God has not left man in this unhappy condition.

Let us see how the case really stands.

We begin with the evidence of the senses. This evidence is taken in, digested, classified, and acted upon by the mental and spiritual faculties. This is personal experience.

To this we speedily add the experience of other people with whom we are daily brought in contact from infancy upwards. Thus, the authority of our own experience is supplemented by the authority of parents and others.

Thirdly, there is the authority of learning—*i.e.*, of books, and of teachers who have made a special study of certain subjects, such as geology, botany, etc.

Similarly, there is the authority of history—that is, of the experience of other ages and countries—which has been accumulated and recorded with more less accuracy by writers who have passed away. Our convictions in religious matters and morals, as well as in science and politics, are by these means born and bred within us, and we yield to one or another influence according as we will, and we act out either what we think right or what we think pleasant.

Behind all this there is, we are well persuaded, truth which is absolute and objective, whether we believe in it or not. This truth reaches us partly through the realities of life, partly

through implanted intuitions and instincts, and partly through inspiration or the influence of the True One. But is there such a Being? Does He know and care for us individually? or is God simply a name for the whole of the universe, past, present, and to come? These are vital questions.

I take the Bible in my hand. I am confronted by a long series of professedly historical facts telling me of the Being who is the originator and sustainer of this universe; who fills all heaven and earth with His presence; who takes personal care and has personal cognizance of every human being in existence; who is not restricted by the limitations of space and time as we are; who inhabits eternity, yet dwells in the contrite heart. The Bible narrative is from the first page shaded with human wrong-doing and enlightened by Divine promise. The promise becomes a programme; and so the Old Testament ends. Four centuries pass, and Jesus comes on the scene. He teaches, and does mighty works, and trains a few followers, then lays down His life "a ransom for many," in accordance with the programme which He recognizes as His Father's will, and which He came into the world to fulfil. Yes, He died for our sins, because God so loved the world. The canons of history, the claims of reason, the demands of conscience, are satisfied with the mission of Christ. Experience tells us that these things are real. They are part of an unfinished scheme; they have a serious bearing on our life and destiny. Our limitations of thought and language hinder us from taking in the whole truth, but in Christ we are very near it, and the more we share His spirit and live His life the nearer we get to the ultimate reality. God is light, and God is love. We love Him because He first loved us.

Christianity began with an appeal to facts. Samples of these facts are recorded in the books. These things are true, and Christ is the Truth, and His kingdom is a kingdom of Truth. We cannot extricate ourselves from the facts of Christianity: they are foundation-stones. To preach another Gospel would be to build on the sand; it may be philosophical, scientific, or

socialistic, but it cannot become to the human mind and heart what Christ is to a true believer.

Mr. Campbell wants us to preach a gospel of "Cosmic Emotion" (p. 16); to substitute "the all" for the Creator of all; to tell people that "ultimately your being and mine are one, and we shall come to know it" (p. 33); that God is the soul of the universe, and that if you kill a stag or rabbit its life is not extinct, but returns to the soul of the universe (p. 51). Unbelief in God is, according to neology, an impossibility (p. 17), because, whatever you believe in, that thing (or nothing) is part of God. The human self is dethroned from his high position, and is no longer to be regarded as a delegated centre of consciousness, clothed with faculties and forming an individual character with great possibilities.

The man who gives way to the most gross animal passions is in so doing unwittingly seeking after God, and, apparently, God is not "bothered" with man's wrongdoing (pp. 18-21), although man is part of Him. Is this the way in which the Lord Jesus Christ—"God's last word"—speaks? But then, if we press the teaching of Christ, the edge of it is parried by the affirmation of the limitations of Christ's consciousness (p. 78). It was "as purely human as our own." The "trend of human thought" has done away with His unique position as possessing two natures. The evidence of the Gospels to the unique knowledge which Christ constantly exhibited as to what was past, present, and future—with one exception—is simply ignored.

The doctrine of immanence is confessedly the central thought in neology. It comes to the front in both of the books which are under review. It is the virtual presence of the Divine Being in the whole material universe, so that whatever is done by the force of Nature is really done by God. This is, of course, a Biblical doctrine, but it has to be held in connexion with other truth, for it is liable to misinterpretation in two directions. First, there is the risk of losing sight of the personality of God, of His transcendence, and of His spirituality. Secondly, there is the risk of losing sight of the will of man, which is to

a considerable extent, though not wholly, free, and the exercise of which leads to the formation of character, and brings with it responsibility and Divine judgment. The Scriptures give us a clue to the right method of dealing with the subject. The two passages in the New Testament which are usually quoted in favour of Divine immanence are specially guarded. In Acts xvii. the immanence of ver. 28 is to be read alongside of the making of the world (ver. 24), the doctrine of the Divine Fatherhood (ver. 29), and the call to repentance with the prospect of judgment (vers. 30, 31). In Col. i. the immanence of the Son is correlated with redemption through His blood and with headship to the Church (vers. 14, 18).

We complain of Mr. Campbell, not for setting forth this doctrine, but for doing it in a vague, one-sided fashion. He says, "How can there be anything in the universe outside of God?" as if this triumphant question answered itself. After all, it is a mere quibble, a playing with words, an acknowledgment that our philosophy is only skin deep. All depends on the meaning of the word "outside." Whatever God has delegated to man is in a practical sense outside God. If man is not identical with his works, why should we be driven to identify God with the operation of His hands? God is the spring of all force, but is not the direct cause of all action. He rules what is good, and He overrules what is evil. In the end it will be found that good is victorious, and that evil is defeated, and so God will be justified. We need to be reminded of some old words: "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." The Bible is a very practical book. We are often reminded as we read it of one of the initial sayings of Aristotle's "Ethics"—a book which a neologian would do well to ponder over—namely, that his object in writing was not knowledge, but practice. Gnosticism would have met with little favour from Aristotle; and the Bible has such a grand outlook that neology becomes in its presence little more than a wandering star destined to go out into darkness.

A few words ought to be added concerning Mr. Campbell's

dealing with history. He has nothing original to offer, but calmly denies the fact that our Lord was born of a virgin, though we have two historical documents which assert it. He appears to follow the line of Professor Gardner in his "Exploratio Evangelica," and imagines that if one historian omits reference to an event recorded by another, that event is unhistorical. Let any student who understands Jewish localities, customs, and ways of writing, set down the narratives touching the birth of Christ given by St. Matthew and St. Luke; he will speedily see that the two are capable of entire adjustment. The same is true of the appearances of our Lord to the women after the Resurrection, if the Revised Version be followed attentively. We are told that to regard these narratives as matters of fact is to misunderstand them (p. 103). They "give us a vision of truth too great for prosaic statement!" One is inclined to answer, "Thank you for nothing; we prefer fact to fiction."

Mr. Campbell is anxious to be thought original. He thinks he is raised up to reform the Churches and to reinstate the faith. But what faith? Not the faith of the Lord and His Apostles, or of the early creeds, but the faith of the gnostics. The pendulum has swung back from agnosticism to gnosticism. "Religion, according to the gnosticism of the second century, was to be founded, not on historical facts, but on ontological ideas; through speculations on existence . . . men were to be led to a comprehension of the true meaning of what Christianity represents under an historical veil. Men were to be saved, not by the historical, but by the metaphysical." So says Dean Mansel in his great work on "Gnostic Heresies," published after his death (Murray, 1875). Early speculation, he tells us, gathered round two questions—the origin of evil and the nature of absolute existence, and it led in many cases to the denial of the personality of God. "Instead of a religious relation between God and man, the relation of a person to a person, this philosophy substitutes a metaphysical relation between God and the world." Many—*e.g.*, the Ophites—recognized Jesus Christ as the centre of their teaching, and attributed to Him in a perverted form

some kind of work which they regarded as a redemption. But this redemption began with the creation of man, the work of Christ being its last act. Judaism combined with heathenism in a great deal of this teaching. In the Jewish Kabbala, which represented much older thought, the idea of a universal and infinite substance, always acting, always thinking, and in process of thought developing the universe—this was the substitute for a personal God. Dr. Mansel points out that the Epistle to the Colossians, the Second Epistle of St. Peter, the Epistle of St. Jude, the Gospel of St. John, and the Apocalypse, contain warnings and exhortations which indicate the presence of the germs of gnosticism amongst the early Christians. This is seen also in the reference by St. Paul to the error that "the resurrection is past already" (2 Tim. ii. 18). Of course, some gnostics reduced the Lord's resurrection body to the condition of a phantom; and others denied the Virgin Birth, and counted Jesus as originally distinguished by His prudence, wisdom, and justice. God was regarded as the soul of the universe, which attracts to itself whatever has emanated from it. As for Scripture, the great "free-handler" was Marcion, who threw overboard the Old Testament because it contained things that ought not to be expected from a God of perfect wisdom and goodness, who rejected most of the New Testament because it was a corruption of the "pure doctrines of Christianity"! He also omitted from St. Luke (his mainstay) the account of our Lord's infancy and the genealogy.

It is curious to find the Fall of man, which neology calls "a stumble upwards," described by Ophite gnostics as a stage in the process of man's elevation to spiritual life. In the pantheism of those days free will and moral guilt had no place; God was stripped of the attributes which call men to worship Him; finite existence was but a mode of the existence of the infinite; and, to use the words of Hippolytus, "the non-existent God made a non-existent world from things non-existent, having cast down and deposited a single seed having in itself the universal seed of the world."

We commend a study of Dean Mansel's work, not only to the orthodox but to the unorthodox. Perhaps it has escaped the notice of neologians. Another course may be wisely adopted. Take in your hands Origen's work against Celsus, written A.D. 230-240. He is at once a moderate free-handler and a firm defender of Scripture. Note his view of historical evidence, of the fidelity of the Gospels, of miracles, of the Virgin Birth, of the Lord's resurrection, of the supposed inconsistencies in the accounts. Origen's view of the doctrine of immanence is to be found in his work "De Principiis" (ii. 1), where, after illustrating from the analogy of the body and soul, he quotes some of the passages already referred to in his review as teaching that God, the Father of all things, fills and holds together the world with the fullness of His power. His discussion on free will (iii. 6) is good and wise; his view of the Incarnation (ii. 6) most reverent; his treatment of the resurrection body deeply interesting and almost modern. He held that Christ possessed a human and rational soul, but without the feeling or possibility of sin. He discusses the two meanings of the word "Paraclete" as applied to Christ and to the Holy Spirit, and upholds the interpretation Intercessor in one case and Comforter in the other.

Enough, it is hoped, has now been said, though it is all too brief, to justify the title at the head of this paper. The mind of man will always philosophize. The twentieth century cannot adopt the exact language of the first. But Christ remains the same, and the Gospels stand secure. We are still to check modern philosophic speculation by ancient historic fact.

We may well close with some stirring words of Dean Mansel to be found in the book already referred to[1]: "Every attempt to represent the course of the world, including man as a part of the world, in the form of a necessary evolution, or of a series of phenomena governed by necessary laws (whether it take the pantheistic form which represents human action as part

[1] Page 108. See also Professor Flint's "Anti-theistic Theories," pp. 336-439.

of a Divine process, or the materialistic form which reduces it to an inevitable sequence of consequent upon antecedent), must, as the very condition of its existence, ignore the distinction between good and evil (except in their consequences, not in themselves), and must annihilate the idea of sin, which is not a *consequence*, but a *transgression*, of God's law. Let no philosophy be trusted, however tempting its promises, however great its apparent success, which does not distinctly recognize the two great correlative ideas of a personal God and a personal—that is, a free-willing—man. With these, its efforts, however feeble, may be true as far as they go; without these, its most brilliant seeming achievements are at the bottom a mockery and an imposture."

## The Witness of Pentecost to the Claims of Christ.

By the Rev G. S. STREATFEILD, M.A.

THE question which meets us on the very threshold of our subject is this: Did Christ promise the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as in the Gospels He is reported to have done? Or is this promise to be put down to the imaginative and inventive faculty of primitive Christianity, which, if we are to believe many of our modern writers, put so much into the lips of our Lord that never actually came from them? Few questions are more important in their bearing upon the great problem of this and every age—namely, the nature of our Lord's Person.

We will begin our inquiry by briefly considering the implicit belief of the early Church that Christ had definitely, before withdrawing from sensible intercourse with His disciples, promised an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This primitive tradition we have in its most detailed form in the Fourth Gospel. Even if this record stood alone, whatever date we might assign to the Gospel, the doubt could scarcely arise as to