The Creed of Dr. Russel Wallace.

The promised work of Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace is now in our hands, and few who are interested in the serious discussion of religion will fail to study with respect this definitive expression of the creed of a distinguished man of science who is, at the same time, a distinguished Rationalist. Rationalism imposes no dogmas. It is the cult of a method of inquiry. It has rolled the heavy burden of a despotic authority from the mind of a large part of our generation, and led the enfeebled judgment in the attainment of conclusions more consonant with the culture of our time.

The whole doctrine of evolution, and even the eternity of the material universe, have been accepted, the question of a guiding intelligence will remain open.

The most curious feature of the situation is that the able adherents of this advanced natural theology seem reluctant to put their creed in any fullness before the public. One cannot wonder at the blunder of those who say at times that almost all our scientific men are Agnostics; but the larger blunder of those who, like Sir Oliver Lodge, say that the “wave of materialism” has passed, and men of science are “returning” to religion, is not so easy to understand. Nothing in the whole zealous campaign of Sir Oliver Lodge has been so remarkable as his splendid isolation. The spring-time of this new religious revival has consisted of one swallow. Dr. Lionel Beale complains bitterly of his own isolation in the world of physiology. Dr. Wallace candidly acknowledged that he is alone in the field of natural history. Sir W. Crookes has virtually deserted Sir O. Lodge in the region of physics. And Lord Kelvin’s slender and obscure creed died with him. In these circumstances the extreme Rationalist will find all the consolation he seeks without attempting to penetrate the reticence of the vast majority of our men of science.

Dr. Russel Wallace is one of the outspoken advocates of a liberal theology, and has now offered us his mature convictions on the subject.* Candidly, we should have preferred a differently-proportioned work from the one he has given us. The first third of the volume, with its generally crude illustrations, might have been omitted without loss to his argument, while the more critical points of the argument needed fuller elaboration. We traverse with pleasure a series of powerful chapters in defence of Darwinism and in refutation of Mendelism, wondering where the supreme intelligence can possibly intervene, and then find it suddenly intruding in a very superfuous fashion. We could wish, too, that Dr. Wallace had omitted his numerous and unfortunate references to Professor Haeckel. Haeckel’s book does not “claim to be a solution of the riddle of the universe” (p. 8), but on the first page expressly disclaims it; and his doctrine of unconscious soul is a perfectly legitimate way of saying that the mind or soul of man is identical in kind with every other complex of energies in the universe. However, let us summarise Dr. Wallace’s general argument before examining it.

The argument is Paleyism reconciled with evolution. The chief part of the work is a summary review of the life-story of the earth; and the specific observation, which occurs throughout, is that each succeeding phase, which plainly prepares the way for a higher phase of life-development, must be regarded as the outcome of a foreseen design, and produced by guided agencies. Life appears in the pre-Cambrian age, when the conditions are at length suitable for it. In Dr. Wallace’s view this fitness of the earth must have been deliberately achieved, and certain spiritual intelligences, acting under the control of the supreme intelligence, directed the elements in their evolution and produced the first germs of life. Then the land must be prepared for the higher development of life. The great forests of the Carboniferous age must overspread the earth, and purify the atmosphere for the breathing of finer organisms. Dr. Wallace sees in them an evidence of design and control. The plant-world must be refined and perfected, and the way of saying that the mind or soul of man is identical in kind with every other complex of energies in the universe. However, let us summarise Dr. Wallace’s general argument before examining it.

* The World of Life, (Chambers and Hall) 1885, pp. 1-169.
Permian period: Dr. Wallace sees a mysterious significance in their long hesitation to overrun the earth. But cattle, dogs, etc., must be developed, flowers and the more useful and valuable plants must appear, the useful and precious metals—even the materials of glass—must be brought into position, before man's triumphant career is possible. Dr. Wallace is forced to see in each preparatory stage, even in the locating of iron and of the material of glass, the action of disembodied intelligence.

This is the main argument of the work. Of the subsidiary considerations I have space to notice only one of the most important. It is contended that the forces at work within the organism show just as cogent evidence of the action of mind. Neither mechanical nor vital forces can explain the building of the intricate frame from a germ, and the selection of the various tissues of the body. Even the structure and growth of a feather are held to be quite inexplicable unless we admit the operation of intelligence. Thus the whole past and present of the earth, the agencies at work in nature and in the living frame, bear witness, in Dr. Wallace's view, to the operation of intelligence. Thus the whole past and unceasing control of matter by disembodied intelligence.

It will be seen that the only element of novelty is the introduction of subordinate intelligences into the work, and the very daring and extensive application of the argument. Both of these elements seem to weaken, instead of strengthening, the new Paleyism. To most of us it always seemed that the introduction of intelligence into the history of things was the solution of a mystery, instead of what might be a temporary obscurity. What is disembodied intelligence? How can it act on matter? The moment you reflect on it you are confronted with a long series of mysteries which no advance of scientific research will ever penetrate; while the advance of research may conceivably remove the obscurity which these mysteries set out to explain. As long as science can explain that a certain phase of cosmic evolution arises necessarily out of the preceding phase, there is no room for "guidance." As long as physiology can show that a certain function or structure follows inevitably upon a certain other function or structure, there is no room for intelligence. This has already been done to an enormously greater extent than Dr. Wallace supposes, and for the rest we may trust the science of to-morrow. Like the creed of Sir O. Lodge—from which, however, it profoundly differs—the creed of Dr. Wallace is an interesting personal expression, and will find hardly a single adherent among his colleagues throughout the world.

Joseph McCabe.