

CHAPTER III.

THE LIFE OF THE DEAD.

THE object of this book, we saw at the beginning, is to trace the evolution of the idea of God. But the solution of that problem implies two separate questions—first, how did men begin to frame the idea of a god at all; and second, how did they progress from the conception of many distinct gods to the conception of a single supreme God, like the central deity of Christianity and of Islam. In other words, we have first to enquire into the origin of polytheism, and next into its gradual supersession by monotheism. Those are the main lines of enquiry I propose to follow out in the present volume.

Religion, however, has one element within it still older, more fundamental, and more persistent than any mere belief in a god or gods—nay, even than the custom or practice of supplicating and appeasing ghosts or gods by gifts and observances. That element is the conception of the Life of the Dead. On the primitive belief in such life, all religion ultimately bases itself. The belief is in fact the earliest thing to appear in religion, for there are savage tribes who have nothing worth calling gods, but have still a religion or cult of their dead relatives. It is also the latest thing to survive in religion; for many modern spiritualists, who have ceased to be theists, or to accept any other form of the supernatural, nevertheless go on believing in the continued existence of the dead, and in the possibility of intercommunication between them and the living. This, therefore, which is the earliest manifestation of religious