

Spiritualism

Introduction

Spiritualism is a diffuse religious movement centered on the notion that direct contact with spirits, including but not limited to the spirits of the dead, is possible through the medium of human bodies. Originating in upstate New York in the late 1840s, spiritualism can be described as a particularly modern western analogue to possession cults and spirit practices elsewhere in the world, with which it has in some cases also mixed over the past century. Part of the so-called "occult revival" of the late 19th century, spiritualism influenced early Theosophy, gave rise to a number of new religious movements, and was the main impetus for the development of "psychical research," which has later turned into parapsychology. In its more doctrinal varieties, it is influenced by the ideas of Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) and the trance practices associated with Franz Anton Mesmer's (1734–1815) "animal magnetism," which places it in the historical trajectory of Western esotericism. Through its French reception, elaborated by Allan Kardec (1804–1869) and usually spelled "spiritism" to distinguish it from its Anglo-American variety, it has had a major impact on the religious field in South America, particularly in Brazil. Spiritist ideas have also been absorbed into Umbanda as well as the Brazilian ayahuasca religions, like the União do Vegetal. Today spiritualism exists in a variety of forms: 1) as a cluster of institutionalized religious practices, such as the British National Spiritualist Union, the North-American National Spiritualist Association of Churches, or the Brazilian Spiritist Federation; 2) as a set of adaptable and loosely networked practices that typically take the shape of "client cults"; 3) as a stock element in popular "occulture" in the shape of films, TV series, and medium shows.

Historical Background

The historical spiritualist movement is usually said to have started in 1849 when the sisters Kate (1837–1892) and Margaret Fox (1833–1893) of Hydesville, New York, claimed to communicate with spirits through a system of noises they called "rappings," and consequently put on public séances, managed by their older sister, Leah (1831–1890), which attracted much interest. The shows rapidly developed into a popular movement, which attracted both enthusiasm and skepticism. While the Fox sisters' activities collapsed under the mounting pressures of Kate's alcoholism and Margaret's eventual confession of fraud, numerous other mediums, both male and female, had taken up the mantle and spread the movement

throughout Europe and the Americas. Along the way, intellectually minded spiritualists with a background from other esoteric currents as well as from political reform movements (e.g. Fourierism, and the early abolitionist and women's rights movements) took an interest in the phenomena and developed basic theological doctrines to go with the practices. Of these, Andrew Jackson Davis (1826–1910) in the US is the foremost example, bringing ideas from Mesmerism and Swedenborgianism along with his doctrine of "Summerland," universal harmony, and egalitarian values. The utopian socialist Robert Owen (1771–1858) famously converted to spiritualism in the 1850s, and the black medical doctor and abolitionist Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825–1875) mixed spirit mediumship with his other occult interests (including Rosicrucianism and sex magic). On the other side of the Atlantic, Kardec developed an elaborate theological system, which, unlike the Anglo-American variety, emphasized reincarnation and the progressive development of souls in successively higher worlds. Kardecist spiritism is probably the most influential branch today, initially spreading through the entire French colonial diaspora, from Vietnam to the Caribbean, and influencing many NRMs in the developing world. As a religious movement in its own right, Spiritualism has typically experienced growth in periods of massive exposure to death. American spiritualism blossomed in the aftermath of the Civil War, and in Europe, the Great War was a major catalyst for the spread of spiritualist practices and beliefs.

The controversies that spiritualism engendered led to increased interest from scientists. While many sought to debunk the phenomena, some approached it as a genuine new frontier that science needed to take seriously. Some, such as the physical chemist William Crookes, the physicist Oliver Lodge, or the naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace were motivated by personal beliefs and sympathies for individual mediums; others, such as the philosopher and pioneer of psychology William James, the Nobel Prize winning physician Charles Richet, and the psychologist William McDougall were approaching it from a genuinely agnostic point of view. The interaction between spiritualism and the scientific profession resulted in the emergence of parapsychology, which fuelled the widespread interest in "psychic powers" and "the paranormal" that remains a stock element of popular beliefs among secularized western populations. Moreover, the study of spiritualist phenomena has had repercussions in the history of (abnormal) psychology, for example in producing ideas about "multiple personalities," and the study of dissociation phenomena more broadly. These phenomena have in their turn influenced the world of art and literature, for example through "spirit drawing" and "automatic writing."

Religion, Science, and Authority: Spiritualism and Modernization

Modernization and secularization were preconditions for spiritualism's success. The decline in church authority, the privatization of religious life, the social and political unrest wrought by revolutions in work and habitation, as well as the increased cultural emphasis on technology, empirical demonstration, and scientific knowledge characteristic of the industrializing nations all provided perfect conditions for a form of religion in which the source of authority rested with individual experience and where the spirits, often through disenfranchised bodies, gave voice to utopian political ideas. Through its many entanglements with social issues, indigenous practice, and rejected esoteric ideas, spiritualism occupies a central place in the modernization of religion and its place in society.

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Further reading:

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Cross-references:

Esotericism, Theosophy, New Religious Movements, Secularization, Modernization