

# Spiritism.<sup>1</sup>

THE history of the modern Spiritist Movement, which is considered to have begun in 1848 in America, is ignored in this paper in the interest of phases more significant. The subject has aroused considerable enthusiasm, especially since the Great War. The researches of Edison in this realm in 1920 gave the subject a forward kick. The interest is being maintained, for when Mr. Dennis Bradley announced that he constantly talked with the spirits of the departed, he received over seven thousand applications in a few months to be present at his séances; famous mediums, such as Mrs. Osborne Leonard, are booked up for years to come; and shoals of literature on the subject are being issued in many languages, from the pens of men and women of high repute. Authors are incorporating spiritistic phenomena in their books, one of whom, in a French novel, entitled "Reincarné," bolsters up spiritist doctrine in a so-called true story, by quoting the names of eminent scientists as supporting his point of view. But Flammarion says of many that they were not consulted, and it is a fact that "Reincarné" has driven a great number of people completely mad. The authority for this statement is Heuzés book *Do the Dead Live*, published by John Murray. To that book the first part of this paper is deeply indebted.

## DEFINITION OF SPIRITISM.

SPIRITISM is the name applied to a great and varied series of abnormal or preternormal phenomena, much too numerous to be mentioned here, purporting to be for the most part caused by spiritual beings, together with the belief arising from them of the intercommunion of the living with the so-called dead.

But among those who hold these beliefs distinctions must be drawn. Many Spiritists—the majority—and especially all ordinary Spiritists, are Spiritists after the fashion of Allan Kardec; they seek no further evidence; they are the Spiritist bigots. But there are also the Neo-Spiritists, or disciples of scientific Spiritism, among whom may be numbered some remarkable men. "Is Oliver Lodge a true scientist?" another great scientist was asked. "Yes, he is a very great scientist,"

<sup>1</sup> A Paper read at the Kiplin Hall Conference, 1927.

was the reply, "except where his son is concerned." That speaks worlds! This paper proposes to deal with the inquiry first by reviewing the present stage reached by Psychological Research, and second, by considering the subject in the light of the Christian Gospel of Salvation and Immortality.

#### I.—THE FOUNDATIONS OF SPIRITIST BELIEF.

According to M. Gabrielle Delanne, President of the French Society for Psychical Research, and of the Spiritist Union of France, the assertions of Spiritism are based upon the following phenomena. *First—levitation*, or the movement of objects without contact. A medium can, at a distance, and without touching it, displace an object. As the complement to the phenomena of levitation, is that of sealing a table to the ground, a feat that is claimed to be no more rare under the influence of a true medium. Sixty years ago, when Sir John Lubbock and Alfred Russell Wallace began a scientific study of it, at a time when levitation was regarded as pure trickery, they reached the conclusion that the movements are REAL AND INTELLIGENT.

Then Sir William Crookes joined in, and by the aid of an invention of his was able to register the psychic force behind the movements. The movements have their own individuality or personality, which may differ considerably from that of the medium, and which, moreover, vary with the same medium. When a table moves, it declares itself to be animated by the spirit of X. When no one knows, or could possibly have known, this X, subsequent inquiry will establish the absolute veracity of the information given by him. Says Delanne, "There can be no other possible explanation than that of the intervention of X *himself*, that is, of his spirit. Many other manifestations are claimed to be "impossible of explanation, without the intervention of the 'Discarnate.'"

#### SECOND—TELEPATHY.

The Spiritist cites the evidence of automatic writing. The medium, even without going into a trance, writes directly, sometimes with both hands at once, different messages, all the time carrying on a conversation on another subject. The replies are quite clear, capable of proof, and often written in a language unknown to him. "*It necessarily follows*," says Delanne, "that his hands *must* be under the direction of an intelligence which is not his own." As to *seeing* mediums, whether it be a matter of intuition, lucidity, clairvoyance, or clairaudience, vision at a distance, psychometry (a faculty certain persons have of getting into touch with people or things unknown by means of some

article), or tele-psychology (communication of the same kind, minus the article), *these are the mediums who give the best demonstrative evidence of "experimental Spiritism"!*

When one recalls the failure of recent telepathic tests<sup>1</sup> one is not inclined to expect great things from Spiritism as yet, if *telepathy* is, as Sir William Crookes declared, and Delanne suggests, the foundation of Spiritist belief. Perhaps one may interject here the statement on telepathy from the Proceedings of the S.P.R. (England), April, 1927, "For the completest possible proof of telepathic phenomena it is essential that experimental evidence should be increased. *It must not be forgotten that much still remains to be done in order to establish even telepathy, beyond the possibility of dispute or cavil, among the facts universally recognised by science.*"

M. Delanne, however, says of these phenomena, "What they teach us indeed in the clearest manner is, if it be true that the brain is the seat, the essential instrument of thought during life, it is not less evident that what in us thinks, feels, and wills, has its own existence independent of that of the body. "The proofs of this existence?" he asks. "In the first place, this inner being possesses powers which are entirely independent of the functioning of the organs, and can communicate with another being at an enormous distance, say from Paris to New York."

### THIRD.—MATERIALISATIONS.

Later Delanne speaks of "the division of the soul into two parts, the one immaterial, which is the soul properly speaking; the other, semi-material or fluidic, which we call the PERISPRIT, and which serves as support to the former. Thus the soul and the perisprit are inseparable. Now, as all our thoughts, all our personality, are housed in the perisprit it follows that this personality must survive the body, together with the soul." So that what happens at a séance, when a Spirit form appears, according to the Spiritists, is this—"the soul of the dead person borrows from the medium MATTER AND ENERGY, the two elements it no longer possesses, since it no longer has a body, and makes use of its perisprit as a mould in order to reconstruct the body as it had been."

There is no doubt that the Spiritists build much upon their belief in the possibilities of the perisprit, and their claims certainly provide a fascinating study. Crawford, the scientist, has two volumes relating how he was able to establish experimentally the existence of this ectoplasmic substance, which, it is claimed, oozes

<sup>1</sup> As for example: recent telepathic tests conducted by Sir Oliver Lodge over the wireless.

from the orifices of a medium's body in the trance-state. It is claimed to be sometimes visible; that it has been weighed, analysed, and photographed. Crawford claims that one medium lost forty-eight pounds in weight after its emission. His sensational conclusions were these. "The phenomena are caused by flexible chords, comparable to rays, which are emitted from the body of the medium. *These rays are the cause of the manifestations*; levitations, movements of the table on the ground, raps, contact, or any modality of the phenomenon."

To this must be added the valuable testimony of Dr. Gustave Geley, Director of the International Metapsychical Institute, who has conducted experiments with this ectoplasmic substance. After saying that darkness is unnecessary, and that control does not impede its production, he continues, "During the whole course of the phenomenon the formation is obviously in physiological and psychological relations with the medium; every impression reacts on the medium; the ectoplasm actually is the medium himself, partially exteriorized."

The most serious result, if all this be true, is the revolution it causes in the domain of classical biology.

Dr. Geley's finding is that "the consciousness can no longer be attributed to the functioning of the brain; the living being is a dynamo-psychism" . . . "we are on the threshold of an entirely new science which will doubtless tell us nothing definite for many years to come."

#### SPIRITISM OR METAPSYCHISM?

That new science is Metapsychism, to which men, in the cold and clear environment of the laboratory, with apparatus for control and registration, would attribute the phenomena we have under consideration. Its chief exponent is Prof. Charles Richet, President of the Meta-psychical Institute of France, who declares that he does not believe a word of Spiritistic phenomena, though, on the contrary, he believes in the majority of psychic phenomena. This is what the Metapsychists say—"Whatever the phenomenon, it must be *A PRIORI* a manifestation of the forces of the living. We have no need of the intervention of the spirits of the dead. From the moment that we are able to explain certain of these phenomena through the living, we have reason to believe that we shall be able to explain the others, sooner or later, in the same way."

IT IS MOST IMPORTANT TO GRASP THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION OF SPIRITIST PHENOMENA by those who have made an expert study of it. Delanne's "only possible explanation" of the intervention of spirits vanishes under the

light of it, and recalls the statement of F. H. Bradley, in *Appearance and Reality*, "The Spiritualist appears to think that anything which is not in the usual course of things goes to prove his special conclusion. He seems not to perceive any difference between the POSSIBLE and the ACTUAL. As if to open a wide field of indefinite possibilities were the same thing as the exclusion of all others but one."

*Apart from the alternative interpretation of the phenomena offered by Metapsychism, the case that Spiritism makes for itself is weaker than many people suppose.* Consider these statements from two of Spiritism's greatest exponents—Delanne and Flammarion. Delanne says, "With the majority of the manifestations it is merely a question of suggestion or auto-suggestion. The intervention of the dead is extremely rare, especially in experiments." And Flammarion asks, "The souls of the dead? This is very far from being proved. In the innumerable observations that I have made during more than forty years everything has proved the contrary to me; no satisfactory method of identification has been achieved. I have searched in vain up to the present time for a sure proof of identity in mediumistic communication. Analysis discovers at the end of a test only an obscure uncertainty as to the causes: unknown psychic forces, transient entities, vanishing-shapes, nothing tangible to seize, even for the thought. The phenomena are manifestations of the UNIVERSAL DYNAMISM with which our five senses very imperfectly put us in touch." *To this uncertainty in Spiritist circles must be added many unpleasant features, deplorable to the best Spiritists, and which certainly do not recommend the cult.*

THERE IS A CONSIDERABLE AMOUNT OF FRAUD. The best mediums cheated—Katie King, Eusapia Palladino, and Douglas Home. Eusapia often used long hairs to displace objects, and Gustave Le Bon discovered by a side light that she used her hands to simulate materialised hands. Douglas Home confessed to Dr. Davis that spirits had never come his way. "A medium," he said, "cannot believe in spirits. He is, in fact, the only person who can never believe in them."

Flammarion's declaration is enough, "I can say that during forty years practically all the famous mediums have visited me in the Avenue de l'Observatoire, and that I discovered most of them cheating."

Sir W. F. Barrett cites *the deteriorising effect of Spiritism upon the mediums themselves, as incomprehensible as that which sometimes occurs among "horsey" people.* Investigators are unanimous in expressing the great danger there is in embarking upon investigation, especially for the unstable and the nervous.

Another feature that is specially to be deplored is *the unhealthy desire which abounds everywhere to-day to dabble with psychic phenomena as a form of social diversion*, often with the clear intention of making money, or attaining notoriety. It is regrettable that so many people allow their whole lives to be directed by the doubtful prognostications of this class of medium.

This part of the subject cannot be closed better than by quoting Dr. W. P. Paterson, of Edinburgh, who, in the chapter on "Religion and the Subconscious," in his Gifford Lecture, writes,

"In regard to the spiritualistic phenomena I have not been able to form an opinion which is of any value. The modest investigations which I have made have been suspended in an access of distaste and suspicion. It may be that the earthly domain is subject to irruptions from the realm of departed spirits, but what is certain is that the general life of the race has been placed on an isolated and stable footing, and that any such invasions count for no more from the spiritual point of view than the comet or the earthquake shock count for in the everyday life of mankind. The Power which placed man upon this planet furnished him with the rational endowment that was necessary to cope with the normal difficulties of his situation, and to give him dominion over the creatures; and it is also credible that, as taught in the Christian Gospel, this was supplemented by a disposition of grace which can give him the victory over the forces of sorrow, sin, and death, which must ever prove stronger than man. But it seems clear that intercourse with the spirits of the dead does not enter into the general plan under which the human race has grappled with the situation, and under which the individual has had to live his life on the earth. It may be there will be a widespread revival of the belief that there is a realm of departed spirits which is able to give signs of its existence; but, if so, it may be expected that mankind will come to realise afresh the wisdom of the warning which the great religions have been at one in giving and enforcing against reliance on subterranean traffic with the dead."

## II

Dr. Paterson's view prepares us for the consideration of the subject in the light of New Testament teaching, and in relation to Christian life and service. For, after all, the best way to meet the Spiritists' assertions is by stating positive Christian truth.

Here it is necessary in a few words to clear the ground of the debris left behind from past conflicts. The Christian Religion and Spiritism have been regarded as being in bitter antagonism.

It was said dogmatically that those who have to do with the dead can have no fellowship with the Lord, and are an abomination to Him; that one evidence of having left God, and of God having left an individual, is when recourse is made to the dead; that those who have dealings with the dead are in league with the devil. Such arguments, however earnestly made, cannot carry conviction to the modern mind.

*The Christian Religion is not in essential antagonism to Psychical Research.* One might even go so far as to believe that the phenomena of Metapsychism may yet throw considerable light upon some of the most perplexing incidents recorded in Scripture, as, for instance, the stories of the Transfiguration, and of Pentecost, with its cloven tongues of fire and many languages.

*But further, we hold the positive belief that the invisible spiritual world exists.* We believe, if our hymns are any criteria (though we often sing hymns with mental reservations) that the Christian Church on earth has "mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won." Over more organs than the one at Cragg Chapel, Rawdon, the lines of Wesley appear, "Let Saints on Earth in concert sing, with those to Glory gone." At the Table of our Lord we are often sensible of our unity with those who have passed on. Surely F. W. H. Myers is right when he addresses Christians thus, "You believe that the spiritual world exists, and that it acts on a material world still, for you believe that prayer is heard and answered."

We reiterate the protest with all our hearts and minds against a materialistic interpretation of the Universe. We believe that the flag which bears the sign, "REALITY," has been carried far beyond that trench in which we lay the mortal remains of our beloved dead, and that the spiritual world into which they have entered must be charted among the possessions of the Realm of Truth. We believe that we are encompassed about with a great cloud of witnesses.

*But where does Spiritism teach us more than we already know, or more than the teaching of Christ and the Apostles would lead us to expect?* The future life, with all its accompanying facts of personal moral responsibility, and of the possibilities of continued progression or retrogression are all to be found in the New Testament.

*It is my personal conviction, though not shared by all my colleagues, that a belief in survival that rises from a strong consciousness of God's Loving Fatherhood is a much sturdier form of faith than any that depends upon doubtful visual and auditory fragments of evidence.* This is in accord with the highest spiritual teaching of the Old Testament, and of Jesus and

the Apostles. It is sufficient to quote Dr. Gore in a sermon in the *Church Times* (1917), "The Jews were repeatedly debarred from dealings with the dead, and for long years from any revelation of a life beyond the grave, in order that belief when it came, might grow out of their assured faith in God, and not from any real or imaginary communications from the dead." The wisdom of this counsel for many people is admitted by Arthur Hill, a leading Bradford spiritualist and writer on the subject. After referring to the above passage, he continues, "But many good people are without this God-consciousness, and faith in the friendliness of the universe is impossible for them without some objective evidence of personal survival." One recognises the gravity of this rejoinder, and recalls some well-known instances of spiritually minded Christian men whom one would believe to be possessed of a strong faith in God, such as would survive all shocks, but who have found comfort in Spiritism when the shadow of bereavement has come upon them. These have been known to say that they wanted *proof* that their loved ones were safe. One deeply sympathises in such cases. But the answer Jesus gave to the disciple who refused to believe without outward evidence establishes once for all the happier condition of those for whom FAITH alone is enough, "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed."

*One misses in Spiritism any challenge to service for Christ's Kingdom, and to the bringing about of a true brotherhood of man.* On these points the Spiritist cult has nothing to say, and hereby reveals its barrenness and its inadequacy as a religion. The crying needs of the world are forgotten. One has only to think of the nature of spiritist "revelations" alongside Kenneth Maclennan's *Cost of a New World*, to feel a passion of impatience rising within one at the thought that men should be satisfied in such days as ours with a cult that teaches them nothing of the duty of man to man, that is purposeless so far as society is concerned, and that contains no dynamic that urges men to do their part in redeeming the world.

*Finally, it is of infinitely greater importance to realise that our communications are with another and a higher life.* The Christian knows that this higher life is real, because he is in daily, hourly fellowship with it. There is within him a surging protest against the dominion of the "mind of this world," knowing its inability to satisfy the ceaseless longings generated by the "mind of Christ" which is in him. He has received already the "earnest of the Spirit in his heart," which is the guarantee that God will ultimately give this higher life to him in all its perfection and fulness. He is in constant communication with the other



world. The Christian's fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. He rejoices in communion with that Gracious Helpful Spirit who moulds and makes and builds up in him the Temple of a holy character. IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO KNOW THAT OUR LOVED ONES HAVE CONQUERED DEATH. We want an assurance that they and we will be delivered from the faults and failings that mark the earthly sojourning. We want to know that SIN shall die: that this STING of spiritual death, if not the cause of physical death, is to be removed for ever. For ANY Gospel of survival to be in any real sense a Gospel, it must assure us that the arch-enemy of souls is dead, and that the Life to come is worth the living. SPIRITISM MAKES ITS GREATEST FAILURE HERE; while the New Testament regards it as the supreme concern of man to enter here and now into the Life Eternal; into that quality of Life which by its very essence in God, must be as everlasting as He.

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