

A GLIMPSE AT SPIRITUALISM

BY JOHN J. BIRCH

THE term Spiritualism, as used by philosophical writers denotes the opposite of materialism, but it is also used in a narrower sense to describe the belief that the spiritual world manifests itself by producing in the physical world, effects inexplicable by the known laws of natural science. Many individuals are of the opinion that it is a new doctrine: but in reality the belief in occasional manifestations of a supernatural world has probably existed in the human mind from the most primitive times to the very moment. It has filtered down through the ages under various names. As Haynes states in his book, *Spiritualism vs. Christianity*, "It has existed for ages in the midst of heathen darkness, and its presence in savage lands has been marked by no march of progress, by no advance in civilization, by no development of education, by no illumination of the mental faculties, by no increase of intelligence, but its acceptance has been productive of and coexistent with the most profound ignorance, the most barbarous superstitions, the most unspeakable immoralities, the basest idolatries and the worst atrocities which the world has ever known."

In Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece and Rome such things as astrology, soothsaying, magic, divination, witchcraft and necromancy were common. Moses gives very early in the history of the human race a catalogue of spirit manifestations when he said: "There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the Lord."

Greek mythology and the belief in the messages of the oracles is nothing more than spiritualism as were also the public and private

seances held in ancient Rome. Pliny, the celebrated naturalist of antiquity, seems to have been one of the few to challenge this doctrine. In his *Natural History*, Book 30, Chapter 2, he says: "We may be fully assured and boldly conclude that it is a detestable and abominable art, grounded on no certain rules; full of lies and vanities, howsoever it carry some shadow of verity and to say a truth with certitude which it hath in effecting anything, proceeds rather from the devilish art poisoning practiced therewith than from the art of magic itself. But why men seek and harken after the lies which the magicians of old time have let fly and sent abroad; when I myself in my youth have seen and heard Apion, that great and famous grammarian tell strange tales. . . . That same Apion reported in my hearing that he had conjured and raised up spirits to inquire and learn of Homer, in what country he was born and from what aprents descended; but he durst not relate what answer was made again, either unto him or them." Ancient Greece and Rome were the hotbeds of spiritual deceptions and manifestations and as a consequence, many of their customs were barbarous; their social life was infamous and their worship was gross and licentious.

The early Chinese in their teleological superstitions of Taoism and Hindu Buddhism held the notion of the survival of the dead. In either religion is found all the shocking phases of mediumistic superstition and bewildering witchcraft, which in comparatively modern times so benighted the mind of Christendom. They believed that spirits were everywhere—they haunted houses, frequented thickets and roamed from place to place. Their sounds, weird and eerie were heard in the darkness of the night when the wind howled about the roof or the mice or rats held revelry in the ceiling. The dread of the spirits is the nightmare of the Chinaman's life.

In India, Siam, Africa and other heathen lands, spiritualism has come to its fairest fruitage, for it fills the mind of those ignorant people with constant terror and brings to them most debasing superstitions. Today there are thousands of spirit mediums in unenlightened India and in all essential respects they teach the same doctrines, perform the same wonders and claim the same intercourse with spirits as do the mediums of England and America. The doctrine of spiritualism has kept India in profound ignorance; it has erected thousands of temples which are the haunts of infamy and vice; it has kept that country in the deepest illiteracy and has permitted thousands of people to die from snake bites because those reptiles have

not been molested for fear of disturbing the spirits of the grandparents who are believed to have returned in that shape.

Africa has been cursed for ages by spiritualism. It has its spirit mediums, its medicine men, its witches and the spirits of the dead are the objects of worship. Fear and superstition reign supreme and the same results have been produced as in China and India. In these lands, the doctrine manifests itself in its true colors. It is the direct cause of the deepest degradation and the most debasing superstitions. It fills the minds of its ignorant and superstitious votaries with the ever-present fear of evil spirits. The mediumship of its priests, witches, conjurers and medicine men has opened the way to the most fearful tyranny and infamy. Everywhere throughout heathen lands unclean demons are working their will, leaving darkness, stagnation and death in their trains. It has contributed nothing to the advancement of these people but tended to increase their darkness and augment their superstitions.

MODERN SPIRITUALISM

Modern spiritualism has abandoned many of the ancient practices and now centers itself upon receiving messages from the departed dead rather than appeasing them and building temples and making sacrifices to their honor and glory. Its vast number of adherents are drawn mostly from people of an inferior intelligence as a glance into the average spiritualistic meeting or conversation with the majority of mediums will give evidence. It is with this general type of intelligence that certain psychological phenomena such as illusions, hallucinations, apperceptions and mental telepathy are carried from their field of science to that of religion, being very often misapplied and falsely used, not only by the laity but especially by the mediums. The phenomena of illusions are very often mistaken by those interested in spiritualism to be spirit manifestations. An illusion is a false or erroneous perception which is often spoken of as a deception of the senses. Illusions of sound are very common. A person may fancy having heard his name called when in point of fact the sound thus interpreted may have been anything from a summons to some other person of a similar name to the barking of a dog or the whistle of a locomotive. Similarly, when one enters a darkened room the sense of sight will often dictate that a person is sitting on a chair—an experience which most people

have had as children—and the subsequent discovery that the supposed person consists of clothing hanging upon the chair is hard to accept as true. In extreme instances, strong desires often determine errors of perception. One falsely recognizes as a desired friend or feared enemy, some stranger or even a clump of bushes or a stump seen in the moonlight; or one falsely singles out his voice or footstep among the confused mass of sounds that fall on the ear. Such instances of false recognition or illusory perception bring vividly the fact that perception is not a passive reception of a sense perception, but rather a reaction of the mind upon a cue supplied by the sense-impression.

The reverse is also true—namely that the mind will often supply not only the cue but will create the sense-impression as well. Thus, when one is listening for expected footsteps, one will find one's self time after time interpreting other sounds, as those of the awaited step. At night a nervous person will often awaken to hear burglars passing from room to room. Step follows step in stealthy but unmistakable rhythm, though the whole impression has no other objective basis than perhaps the occasional cracking of the floor, accompaniments of changing temperature.

Illusions of every sort are more readily induced if one has recently had experiences which might suggest them. When an individual comes face to face with a friend in the dark, the person will be more easily recognized if he has been thought of for some considerable time. The more keenly attentive one is to any imagined object, the more potently does imagination govern perception, both at the moment of imagining and for subsequent periods of indefinite duration. The spiritualist whose mind is continually dwelling on spirits of departed friends, will in many ways perceive illusions of the departed ones. The more easily their minds are influenced the more real will be the supposed visions or messages.

Hallucinations furnish equally as good grounds for spiritualistic fallacies. These phenomena refer primarily to the consciousness of objects felt to be physically present, when as a matter of fact no object of any kind is at hand. Many of the alleged telepathic phenomena involve hallucinations; thus for instance when one sitting in a room suddenly sees another person known to be thousands of miles distant come in and sit down. Again, when alone in the same way one suddenly hears some sentence clearly spoken. In neither case, needless to say, is any one actually present, except the owner of the hallucination, and there are no obvious external phenomena

which could be held accountable for the experience. All the senses seem to be represented from time to time in the hallucinatory perception, although hearing and vision are perhaps the ones most frequently involved.

Mysticism likewise plays an important part in spiritualism. As far as psychology is concerned, mysticism arises from the fact that we only partially can foresee and control our bodily and mental changes. What one does from habit or from direct forethought is the result of direct past or present volition, but if the hand writes something of which the writer has no knowledge or intention, such is termed automatic. When primitive man experienced loss of mental or physical control through drug intoxication or through any of the trance-inducing processes, the only possible interpretation was through mysticism or that someone else was controlling the muscles or the thought activities. Out of such mental and bodily automatisms grew spiritualistic practices for securing visions or procuring information. Wherever it is not fraudulent as it generally is in materializing seances, automatic writing or similar phenomena, it has to do with the psychological problems of the subconscious mind and mental-volitional activity.

Wherever mysticism is a systematic practice, the procedure contains certain common elements. The first is the withdrawal of attention from the activities and sense stimuli of the common life—a negation of personality as it were and the second is extraordinary concentration of attention upon some particular object, oftentimes suggested by the medium of hypnotism. More or less elaborate directions are given to the tyro as to methods of procedure and the stages of the process are carefully set forth. In oriental mysticism, there are directions as to how to sit; how to control the breath, and how to exclude the distraction of the senses. It is an emptying process of the mind thus especially fitting the individual for the reception of external suggestions. It is upon the susceptibility of the mind that spiritualism builds its superstructure and the successful perpetuation of its frauds depends upon this very thing. Very susceptible persons, those of a weakened mind, those of easy convictions and those ignorant of physical laws, are chief among its adherents.

The psychological ground of mediumship lies largely in their ability to keenly analyze the mind of their subjects and by adroit questions gather material for their messages. This can very easily be done with the average person appearing before a medium for a reading. Personally I have tried this with a number of celebrated

mediums. Very carefully and tactfully they have suggested questions in the course of their message which I made a point of answering, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly. Then by carefully watching, I noticed they added superfluous details to what I had already told them and returned the same to me as a message. I remember with special vividness one seance in which I suggested to the medium that I was a teacher of biology and soon he began to tell me all about my teaching and that I was soon to be placed in different circumstances, etc. I gave him cues from time to time to which he added details and returned as messages. The facts of the case is that at that time I was not a teacher, neither had I ever taught biology.

With mediums, the imagination frequently becomes a creative power of the first order, vast in quantity, if not in quality. If they can once secure an insight into the desires or past life of their subjects they manipulate that data so that very plausible messages are constructed. When most of the communications are carefully analyzed they are found to be made up of two parts: One a reflection of what we read in the Book of Revelation giving a vision of the heavenly city, the condition of the departed and their desire to inform those of earth that they are happy and contented and the other part merely a reflection of ordinary earthly appetites and habits gathered by the mediums from their subjects.

Hypnotism is also very frequently resorted to by mediums. This is especially adaptable to small public meetings where the medium can hypnotize an individual, making an automaton of one and then magnetize the others. This is a condition very easily obtained when one realizes that the general type of people who attend seances or adhere to the faith are those whose hearts are sorrowing for the loss of loved ones. It appeals to the human heart at a point when it is peculiarly liable to deception and unless there is a very robust common sense and a very stalwart faith, far removed from credulity, there is a great temptation for practicing deception as well as there is a great liability to deception. The medium comes with the "ouija" board, the trance, the spirit materialization, the tipping table and the saddened heart or inquiring mind easily translates the rappings and writings and vision into its own desires. Spiritualism fattens on the weakness of human nature.

It is claimed by mediums that their mood and the condition of their health have a great bearing on the character of their work. When these statements are made one is often tempted to inquire

whether or not the mentality of the person desiring a reading does not create in them an unfruitful mood. That is to say, if upon observing the person coming to them, they believe him to be unsusceptible to suggestion or of a superior mentality, they can resort to the plea of being incapacitated or otherwise unable to give a successful reading.

FRAUDS PERPETRATED BY SPIRITUALISTS

The spiritualists themselves have spoken their own death sentence. For a long time the Fox sisters, who were the original exponents of spiritualism in this country, baffled investigating committees relative to their work in regard to mysterious tappings. However, professors Flint, Lee and Coventry of Buffalo, New York, discovered that the baffling noises were produced by one of the sisters as she partly dislocated and restored to place the bones of her knees.

Besides the general arguments for supposing that the physical phenomena of spiritualism may be due to conjuring, there are several special reasons which gain force as time goes on. Principal among these is the fact that almost every medium who has been prominently before the public, has at some time or other been detected in fraud or what cannot be detected from fraud, except on some violently improbable hypothesis and also that although it is easy to devise experiments of various kinds which would place certain phenomena above the suspicion of conjuring by eliminating the necessity for continuous observation on the part of the investigators, there is no good evidence that such experiments have ever succeeded.

The expose of Eusapia Palladino in the autumn of 1909 at Columbia University, is a most conclusive proof that fraud is widely used. Professor Munsterberg of Harvard considers that all the phenomena produced in the presence of Eusapia are fraudulent. He relates in a fascinating manner how in a dark seance where he was present, a spectator, lying on the floor near the chair of the medium, the better to observe her, caught her bare heel at the very moment she was reaching her leg behind her in order to obtain possession of a stool. It is said that other American investigators who have seriously studied her case have also met with fraud and trickery, stimulated by trance and no trace of true hysteria.

The exposure made in Boston by prominent newspapers before large audiences also point to the falsity of spiritualistic materialization. At a certain theatre in that city when a prominent medium was giving a demonstration of spirit return, the lights suddenly flashed on and newspaper men rushed upon the stage, opened the materialization booth and revealed to the audience the lecturer among his array of wigs and make-ups. Personally it has been my pleasure to attend a number of select materialization assemblies. During the first of them I sat in the rear of the darkened room, far removed from a tent from which the spirits emerged. Finally it was my good pleasure to sit nearer the tent in such a position that I could see the side of the canvas structure. Communicating with it from the back was a small door through which the supposed spirits entered. A number of spirits appeared and likewise a number of people in the audience recognized them as departed relatives or friends. Finally, a spirit appeared with a message for me and I followed the custom of the others and left my seat in the dark and shook hands with the supposed relative materialized in a body. Then the next day as I was walking on the street I happened to meet the party who conducted the meeting. She having become more or less acquainted with me, stopped and we shook hands. While grasping her hand I told her that her voice sounded very familiar and her hand felt equally so—in fact very much like the voice and the hand of the evening before. Her face became very much flushed and she uttered these words: "There are lots of fools who like to part with their money." From her own mouth she admitted the falsity of her practices.

There are persons who will undoubtedly say that this is not spiritualism nor spirit manifestations. In reply I must say this: That whatever it is, it goes under the name of spiritualism and is being carried out by celebrated mediums in various parts of the country.

At another time I was invited to a trumpet meeting. Before entering the house where the gathering was to be held I sprinkled calcium sulphide in my hair and on my face. This chemical has the property of glowing with a yellowish-blue light in the dark and therefore soon after the lights were turned off my head and face began to glow with a faint light. The medium informed me that I had a wonderful aurora and that my father was materializing in my form. Also a message was given me from my sister. The fact of the case is that my father was at home that night listening to the radio and as for my sister, I never was fortunate enough to ever have had one.

After the meeting several persons told me of the wonderful stimulating effect I had given to the meeting and described the "aurora" about my face and head. The medium who conducted the meeting did not approach me, but the others fully believed that I possessed psychic power—thanks to my knowledge of the chemistry of luminous compounds.

GREAT MEN AND SPIRITUALISM

There are some who ask how the names of celebrated men such as Doyle, Hyslop, Flammarion and others can be associated with such spurious practices. The explanation is that they have been interested in the subject so long and allowed it to occupy such a major part in their mental activity that they have actually forced themselves to believe it and in consequence they do. I might illustrate it by an elderly gentleman of my acquaintance. He will tell me most vividly of the battle of Gettysburg and how he spent those awful days of battle. But the fact is that he never fought in that battle at all, for he enlisted in September and the battle was fought in the previous July. His mind is not at all deranged. He joined the remnants of one of the companies which had fought at Gettysburg and at the close of the war his company was remembered as having fought in that battle. He began by not denying he was at the battle and later told stories of the battle until at last after years of story telling,—in reality, lying, he now fully believes he passed through the siege of Gettysburg. He forced upon his own mind this belief and did not stop to compare calendar dates. This is the same with men who hold to any false doctrine. They have lead themselves to their present belief and have not met the facts squarely and been honest with themselves to admit their errors.