

IV

THE APPEAL OF MODERN SPIRITUALISM

THE title of this chapter should be noted for two reasons. First, I emphasize the word *modern*. Though Spiritualism may justly claim an ancient origin and lineage, yet a definite date and occasion may be given when the subject began to be investigated in a more or less scientific fashion. It is with this modern development that we are now concerned.

Secondly, I use the popular term *Spiritualism* throughout this chapter. Some people, friends and critics alike, prefer the word *Spiritism*, claiming that this is a more accurate and descriptive term. They allege that Spiritualists are concerned mainly with the survival of 'spirits,' and that there is generally nothing distinctively 'spiritual' in the nature of their inquiry. However, for our general purposes, I retain the older and better-understood word.

I

First, a short definition of the term.

F. W. H. Myers, in his arresting book *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death* defines the subject in these words: 'A religion, philosophy, or mode of thinking based on the belief that the spirits of the dead communicate with living men.' If we take this as the basis of the spiritualistic faith, it implies these two things—(i) not only do the spirits of the dead actually survive and live—most religions believe

this—but (ii) these spirits desire to communicate, and are able to communicate, with living people.

It is believed, however, that in their communications with our world the spirits do not reveal themselves 'at large' or to any and all, but can only make use of special means, or rather specially attuned people, for their messages. These specially attuned people are commonly called 'mediums.' It is round this latter question—the supposed eagerness of the spirits to speak through mediums—that most controversy gathers. How can we know that the spirits are eager to reveal themselves? Why should they be limited to certain people in their important communications? Are the mediums as trustworthy as they seem to be necessary? What tests and proofs can we justly demand?

Though we are only concerned with modern Spiritualism in our discussion, it is helpful, and indeed necessary, to notice that its basis lies in pre-history. Since ever men could reason, they have believed, in varying fashions, that the spirit is 'detachable' from the body, and that what they roughly called the 'soul' might be wholly independent of all material forms. Indeed in earlier days, especially in what are called 'animistic' religions, men believed that everything—mountains, rivers, trees, and animals—had each a spirit of its own—its genius, its principle or its divinity—which could live and exhibit itself separate from the thing itself.

Even more particularly, however, these primitive peoples asserted that this was specially true about mankind. They believed that the human spirit was not only detachable from the body, but also survived its decay and death. Moreover, they also thought that these discarnate spirits, roaming free, could be 'tapped' or controlled by suitable people—for instance, by the

'medicine man' or the wizard or necromancer—and that these spirits could 'visit' and express themselves to us by their own will and desire. No doubt this was the only way in which our forefathers could explain the strange and awesome fact that in dreams and visions our spirits could apparently leave the body lying deeply in sleep, and yet could adventure actively on all sorts of reasonable or unreasonable errands. Further, only by some such belief could they find any solid basis for the prevalent notions about witchcraft, necromancy, and clairvoyance, or believe in ghostly visitations. The story of Saul and the Witch of Endor will at once occur to our minds.

It is only right to observe this ancient lineage of Spiritualism. As they have some bearing on our discussion, the following points should be noticed here.

- (i) In pre-scientific days, this doctrine of 'visiting spirits' was the only apparent explanation of many odd and unaccountable happenings in human life.
- (ii) In every case the whole subject was regarded with fear and shrinking as if it were unnatural; and nobody 'resorted to spirits' except in some dreadful expediency.
- (iii) The entire subject was regarded as illicit, dangerous, and even devilish.
- (iv) The higher and purer religions, such as the Hebrew, constantly forbade the practice, and declared it to be against the will of God.¹

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But in spite of its ancient lineage, Spiritualism—as a practice, a religion, and a philosophy—is almost entirely modern, both in its outlook and methods. According to its own writers, the modern phase began in 1847,

¹ Deuteronomy xviii.10

roughly a hundred years ago, in a house temporarily occupied by Mr. Fox and his family in the town of Hydeville in the State of New York. His two daughters, Margaret and Kate, aged twelve and nine years respectively, were the first individuals recognized as 'mediums,' in whose presence and by whose agency many of the phenomena now common to spiritualistic practice took place. These children heard mysterious noises and rappings in the old house, and with the help of their parents and friends, they devised signals for spirit responses—three raps for 'yes,' one for 'no,' and two for 'doubt.' Considerable discredit has since been cast on the *bona-fides* of this family's methods and claims ; but at the time they gained great publicity. From the widespread interest which gathered round this family began most of the arranged sittings or seances which are now so usual a part of the daily, or rather nightly, practice of modern Spiritualism. The reports of the results obtained in this home caused world-wide interest and imitation, until in every land, east and west, societies and gatherings for investigation of these occult happenings became general. Modern Spiritualism, with its elaborate and more or less scientific attempts to investigate and test the presence and control of spirits, is the outcome of the interest aroused by the Fox family.

People of all sorts—scientists and philosophers, critics and friends alike—took an eager interest in this new investigation or entertainment. Naturally, many ridiculous claims were made by credulous people who had no gift either for cool scientific observation or balanced judgment. Moreover—of this there can be no question—much fraud was practised by unscrupulous mediums who began to take up the subject as a 'pro-

fession,' in which unfortunately their livelihood depended upon 'results.' On the other hand—this cannot be overstressed—no-one regretted and deplored this outcome more than the hundreds of serious-minded investigators and Spiritualists, who were only interested in unearthing facts and making discoveries. Indeed, no-one has so honestly admitted, as these serious students have done, the prevalence of considerable fraud on the part of unworthy mediums who faked results and preyed upon the anxious credulity of their trusting victims. These scientific investigators have admitted this fully; but they have also claimed that amid and in spite of the many frauds, there were great and sure results.

The climax of this new and serious investigation was the formation of the *Society of Psychical Research*, founded in 1882. The founders of this Society were serious students, whose only desire was to investigate the whole subject as impartially as possible and ascertain facts. While they were sympathetic and open-minded, they had no axe to grind, one way or another. The Society's results have been published in numerous volumes of its official *Proceedings*, where their tests and experiments are fully recorded. We may therefore say that this year, 1882, is a distinct landmark in the study of this difficult subject. Then, for the first time, men of accredited ability and training tried to find honest results and employ fair tests. If many of their published answers seem vague and inconclusive to us, the reason lies more in the nature of the subject itself and the difficulty of effective proof than in any fault of the men and women concerned, or of their honesty and impartiality.

Since that time, especially as a result of the two

World Wars and the anxious longing of bereaved people to know about their own dear dead, the interest in spiritualistic inquiries has greatly increased. I deal with this subject for one special reason only—that unfortunately many practising Spiritualists have thought it right to separate themselves from the Christian Church. Some even impugn its teaching and attack its faith. Not all, by any means. I have some fellow ministers among my friends who are avowed Spiritualists—and who regularly attend seances. In all reasonableness, I do not see why any honest Spiritualist should need to separate himself from the faith of Jesus Christ. Surely in that faith he has the one perfect guarantee of what he hopes to establish—the survival and identity of the spirits of those who have died. I cannot see as fine or as final a guarantee of their hopes and claims as the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the character and promise of God.

On this point, for instance, the article in *Chambers's Encyclopædia*, written by an avowed Spiritualist, has this typical criticism: 'It is urged that the present life will assume a new value and interest when men are brought up not merely in the vacillating and questionable *belief*, but in the settled and indubitable *conviction* that our existence in this world is really but one of the stages in an endless career. . . .' That phrase 'the vacillating and questionable belief' shows the trail of the serpent! To the Christian, the belief in the immortality of the soul is undoubtedly a *faith*—as indeed all great spiritual truths must be—but in the victory of Jesus Christ, and the power and promise of the God of all sovereign love, it is not in any sense either *vacillating* or *questionable*. It can only be questionable to those who question God.

With this short and inadequate introduction to the origin and history of modern Spiritualism, let us state its main claims and creed.

In doing so, by way of preface may I say that I am not speaking at second-hand, at hearsay, or merely from reading other people's experiences? I have attended seances at the invitation of those who were interested in the study. They asked me to be present—let me say this to their credit—mainly because they knew that I was critical and mentally aloof. As a result of these experiences, I say here and now that I have seen things at some of these gatherings which I cannot explain by what I at present know. But then—I say this quite as frankly—I was not given any opportunity to investigate, as I should naturally examine and test any other phenomenon. For one thing, the sittings were invariably held in the dark. On a cold winter night there was not even a fire allowed in the room. To account for this apparent inhospitality, my friends asserted that the spirits did not favour light or heat. I do not know *why* this should be so, or how my friends ever learned this interesting fact. But certainly that was the reason given to me quite seriously. Let me admit straight away that some things happened—for instance, apparent levitations, movements in the air, touches on my hand—which under the darkened conditions I could not explain or account for. But then, as I said, I was not afforded any opportunity to test what these happenings were, or given any chance to examine them, as I should examine anything else. In the only instance, however, where I could actually test anything—the alleged voice of a man, a dead

Edinburgh man, who claimed close acquaintance with me and recalled himself to my mind—I have only to say that I never met that man in my life.

I hope no open-minded person will think that this prejudices me as a judge. I am quite ready to be convinced by any fair test that is open and above-board. But I am compelled to say that on this one opportunity where I had a chance to verify these alleged voices of spirits, I found the claim to be either fraudulent or faked. I only relate this, however, to show that I am not speaking at second-hand.

What then are the claims of Spiritualism? In a word, it claims that we receive communications, more or less directly, from those who have ‘passed over.’ These communications, either by agreed signals or by direct speech, take the form of intelligent and intelligible assurances regarding the *survival* and the *identity* of those who have died. It is believed that these ‘discarnate spirits’ are continually and anxiously striving to reveal themselves to us, and to tell us of the conditions of their new life. Therefore they are said to make eager use of any attuned person in our midst who may have the necessary gift of receptiveness. This receptive person, as I have said, is commonly called a medium. More and more, modern Spiritualism centres round the question of this medium—his or her receptiveness, quality, passivity, trance-power, personal attributes, honesty and reliability.

Here we come upon the first important difference between ancient and modern Spiritualism. Dr. F. C. S. Schiller¹ puts the point concisely, ‘Whereas a spirit was originally supposed to produce effects *in virtue of its own powers*, the tendency in modern spiritism is

¹ *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*

towards a subtle theory which regards the presence of a medium as always necessary, even where it is not recognized.' It is this change in theory that accounts for the arranged sittings or seances which have become so common since the days of the Fox sisters. Before that time, it was presumed that the spirits 'in virtue of their own powers' revealed themselves to some person of their own choice, and by their own desire; but now, the spirits are almost 'tapped' by the trance of a suitable medium, and may in a certain sense be 'commanded' by this medium. Thus, more and more, modern Spiritualism may be said to centre round the personality of a suitable medium.

If some of us complain—perhaps justly enough—that there are astonishingly few revelations from departed spirits, considering how eager they are presumed to be to reveal themselves and give messages, the answer is given—also justly enough—that the scarcity of the communications is entirely due to the fact that there are so few attuned mediums. A quite reasonable point if we accept the spiritualistic theory.

I could readily agree with the reasonableness of this, were the average medium a somewhat different type of person from what he or she usually is. It is this whole question of the medium that is one of my prime difficulties. Even Sir Oliver Lodge has admitted that the average medium is a person of 'low' intelligence—in his own words 'as a rule not particularly able or highly educated folk.' With the best will in the world, I cannot understand why spirits, presumably purified from the clogging influences of the body, should choose to manifest themselves, only or mainly, to people of this order. If they manifested themselves to saintly souls or to those who live on a high spiritual and

mental level, I could at once appreciate this. All the great revelations that have been given to mankind down the ages—and Spiritualism seriously claims to be a great revelation—have been given to saintly people who lived and dreamed the best, or to people of noble mind, fine character and visionary quality. Why should this revelation, which should mean so desperately much to the human mind, come only through people whom Sir Oliver Lodge quaintly calls people of low intelligence? This in itself seems to run counter to the history of man's best experience, and it contradicts all man's previous dealing with the spiritual world. Frankly, I am puzzled and disturbed by it. God has always chosen the finest instruments to proclaim His finest message.

Further, as a practice and as a religion, modern Spiritualism is not only the study of any *chance* communications which may occur here and there, but also a concerted endeavour by expectant people to obtain deeper and fuller revelations. It is for this purpose that these regular seances are arranged and held by sympathetic people. Those who engage in these gatherings seek to control or 'command' the spirit who comes into their presence, or rather, to put it more fairly, to be controlled and commanded by the spirit. By the use of a code or device of signals they hope to spell out or voice the communication which the spirit may desire to give. Many of the asserted results of these seances have been published, as I already mentioned, in voluminous tomes, particularly in the official *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*.

Any criticism of these results must obviously centre round the following points—accuracy of observation ;

strictness of tests; the quality and worth of the messages; opportunities of fair examination; questions of possible fraud on the part of the medium; self-deception or even mass-deception on the part of the audience; psychological questions of the unknown influence of mind upon mind; finally, most important of all, questions of explanation and interpretation.

This last point is really the most important. To my mind—even if we frankly admit that some happenings do take place which seem to transcend our present understanding of nature—there is the greater, indeed the final, question of *interpretation*. It is not the facts, but the interpretations of the facts, that matter most. In attempting to explain the facts and occurrences, are we necessarily shut up to a belief in the agency and intervention of spirits? Do not let us blind ourselves to the fact that there are two separate things involved—the occurrences themselves, whatever they may be, and the interpretation of these occurrences. The whole question, for or against the claims of Spiritualism, lies in what sort of interpretation we give to these events.

In considering this, I should like to say quite definitely these three things :

(i) If there is anything to support or justify the results that are claimed, every fair man should desire to see the whole question fully and scientifically investigated. It will not do to say 'nonsense' or 'balderdash,' and rule the matter out of court. The claims of Spiritualism are serious and important, and should receive serious consideration. This is why we should welcome such open testing and such sifting of evidence as has been assured in the past by the Society for Psychical Research. Dogmatism *against* Spiritual-

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ism is just as meaningless as dogmatism *for* it. But while we should welcome the fullest investigation by accredited people, there is one word of caution which ought to be said. It is one thing to institute a fair and serious inquiry; it is quite another thing for untrained or credulous people, who have no experience either in observation or in judging evidence, to put themselves in the hands of clever mediums, where they may have no chance of testing fraud or examining claims. That way lies sheer credulity and self-deception.

(ii) This also should be said. Let me quote from Mr. Myers, who says, 'We have shown that amid much deception and self-deception, fraud and delusion, veritable manifestations do reach us from beyond the grave.' May I say that if this were the case, even though there were only *one indubitable instance*, the whole matter would be settled for me? For with one proved case of spirit intervention, the *principle itself* would be established.

(iii) But my next remark is just as important. Please notice Mr. Myer's claim. A logical mind will see at once that his sentence merely begs the question. We may admit with him quite frankly—anyone who has studied some of the authenticated cases must admit—that results have occurred which are apparently beyond any of our present known ways of ordinary communication. That may be openly acknowledged. But it is quite another matter to turn and say, as Mr. Myers does, that these puzzling results are due to one cause, and one cause only—the intervention of spirits. *Is this not the very point to be proved?* He merely assumes it. In other words, he begs the question he seeks to prove. We may admit the puzzling results; we must. But it is the explanation or interpretation

of these results that matters. He says in effect 'The only explanation of these manifestations from beyond the grave is the intervention of spirits.' We reply—*Is it?*

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This then is the one point at issue, for everything in this curious controversy centres round interpretation or explanation. What explains some of the things and happenings that are recorded? So many explanations have been offered, both by friends and critics, that it may be best for us to tabulate and examine a few of the more common.

(i) Some say that the results are due mainly or only to *fraud* and *conjuring tricks* in the dark. I do not agree. Admittedly there have been some dreadfully heartless ramps practised on simple and gullible seekers who are only too ready to believe what they want to believe. Nobody has been so honest in admitting these cruel frauds as the best and sincerest investigators. As a consequence of this, the Society for Psychical Research will never make use of any medium who has been even suspected of jugglery or deceit. I fear however that there is bound to be a constant temptation to fraud so long as mediums have to make their living by their profession and are paid more or less by results. But fraud, however often it may have occurred, will not account for many authenticated happenings.

(ii) Some say that *self-deception* explains everything. Sitters for instance regard as 'supernormal' some information which they themselves have unwittingly given to the medium. Further, we know how difficult it is to keep continuous attention, and how easy it is to have lapses of observation of which we ourselves

are not aware. But again, while this may be true of ordinary untrained people, it surely does not apply to the type of men and women who form the Society for Psychological Research.

(iii) Many prominent psychologists account for the 'psychical' phenomena—impersonations, premonitions, automatic writing, supernormal knowledge—by referring them either to *subconscious memory* or *multiple personality*, or other processes of the queer unknown depths of the human mind. In a recent broadcast on the BBC Third Programme, Professor Price spoke of what he called 'a common unconscious,' and he seemed to suggest that as there is a definite association of ideas in every conscious mind, so in a trance state there may be a tapping of a 'common unconscious'; for he alleged that 'at the unconscious level there are no boundaries between separate minds.' However interesting this may be, it is too hypothetical to account for all that happens at seances.

(iv) The commonest explanation of all centres in what we call *telepathy*, i.e. the communication of thoughts or facts from one mind to another by ways other than the five senses. People make much or little of this according to their acceptance of the claims of telepathy. But it is only right to remember that many of us speak of telepathic communication as if it were a proved science—which it is not. The belief in telepathy rests on a very narrow experimental basis; most of its claims have been contested and challenged; and it is altogether too tenuous to be a satisfactory explanation. Moreover—a very interesting point—it is worth remembering that if we think it reasonable to believe in a telepathic communication between a living mind here and another living mind, there is no reason at all

to disbelieve in a telepathic communication between a living mind here and a similar mind in another state of being. Thus telepathy might not disprove the claims of Spiritualism, but rather establish them.

(v) Another curious theory, by way of explanation, is suggested by the psychologist, William James, who became greatly interested in the phenomena of Spiritualism—that there is a sort of *cosmic reservoir* of knowledge which the medium's mind unconsciously taps. This is so similar to Professor Price's 'common unconscious' that it is subject to the same objection—we cannot account for difficult facts by mere speculation.

(vi) There is the well-known Roman Catholic doctrine, supported by many of their theologians, that the spirits who take part in these seances are always *evil spirits*, what they call 'devils,' who pretend to be the spirits of the dead for their own wicked ends. But though the theologians concerned do not seem to see it, this gives their whole case away. For if there are actually spirits taking part in these sittings, no matter whether they are *evil* or *good* spirits, then that is 'spiritualism' in some definite form. This Roman Catholic doctrine of evil spirits taunting and misleading people in these seances is merely a disguised admission of the claims of Spiritualism, that spirits of some kind do reveal themselves to us through the trance of a medium.

(vii) Lastly there is the claim of modern Spiritualists that the spirits of the departed do communicate with us and speak to us, through responsive mediums, of themselves and their discarnate life. According to them, this is the only feasible interpretation of the events and happenings which take place at seances.

NEW FORMS OF THE OLD FAITH

I have detailed these possible explanations and theories to show one thing—not that the facts are questioned, viz. that certain remarkable things have taken place which we cannot account for by our present knowledge of the world and ourselves, but that it is the *interpretation* of these facts which is alone in question. Personally, I can see no grounds for believing that the spiritualistic explanation is in any sense proved. It is just as much an *assumption* as any of the others I have mentioned. The man who says that the results are all due to fraud, or self-deception, or conjuring, or multiple personality, or telepathy, may not be able to prove his case: we say that he is just making an assumption. *But so is the Spiritualist.* That the voice heard through the medium so often claims to come from the spirit world is no proof whatever. You may believe it. I do not, and will not, so long as there are no tests as clear as daylight.

I am not concerned at the moment in trying to give a satisfactory explanation of the occurrences which take place at these seances. I have no explanation to give—at least, none that would completely cover all the reported results. (Many of the results, I admit, are more than explained by some of the suggested explanations which I have detailed above—fraud, conjuring, self-deception, multiple personality, and so-called telepathy.) But I am only concerned at the moment to deny that the claims of Spiritualism are valid. I can see no grounds—either in religion, philosophy, or science—for believing in the ‘intervention of spirits.’ Some of the other explanations which I have mentioned are much more reasonable than that. I am convinced that the hypothesis of Spiritualism is wholly unproved, and is so much

against every reasonable theory of God and the Universe that it should not be entertained until every other explanation has been proved wrong. Many of the results may seem super-normal in the meantime, but I refuse to believe that they are supernatural.

5

Why do I reject the claims of the Spiritualists ?

A fellow-minister said to me not long ago, ' My dear sir, why do you not hail the tenets of the Spiritualists as an added proof of the Christian faith ? Would it not be unassailable to be able to say to the world that we have this new testimony that the spirits of the dead still live ? '

I answer (i) *There is no such proof, but only an unwarranted inference.* Apart from the assertion of the medium, so often proved to be not only lying but rascally, there is no reason to believe that the spirits of our dead visit us, and especially that they can only do so through the trances of such people. The results of the seances are in two categories—physical and psychical. Regarding the merely physical, a famous conjurer has declared that there is no single phenomenon which he himself could not do, and do better, and do it in the daylight. In any case, it should not be forgotten that nearly all the so-called facts are in dispute, and are capable of many alternative explanations. And regarding the psychical, especially the giving of specialized knowledge about our beloved dead, I quote Dr. Podmore, who has written the best dispassionate study of our subject, ' I cannot point to a single instance in which a precise and unambiguous piece of information has been furnished, of a kind

which could not have proceeded from the medium's own mind, working upon the materials provided in the hints let drop by a sitter.' ¹

(ii) I do not see how such physical effects as Spiritualism generally favours—materialization, apports, voices, levitations, photographs, etc.—can possibly substantiate a *spiritual* fact. That spiritual fact, the very basis of our Christian faith, is that the dead do live *by God's power alone*, and when they die, they are with God from whom they came. How can physical facts substantiate what must always be only a spiritual faith? Our future life, being what it is, can only rest on one thing—God—God's power, character and promise. In spite of all our common talk, there is no basis for this future life *except in God*. Our belief in Him is our only possible assurance—the pledge of His character and love. It is this power of God which raised Christ from the dead. I can think of nothing—certainly nothing physical—which can add to that assurance. Proofs? A spiritual faith cannot need material proofs!

(iii) Jesus Christ has shown us that no 'messages from the dead' can be of any spiritual value, or can supplant or buttress a living faith. In that striking story or parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man, Jesus pictures the Rich Man asking that a messenger be sent to his brothers on earth to warn and influence them about the reality of the future life. But the answer was given, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. . . . If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.' This puts the real religious issue in one sentence: a belief in the future of the human

¹ *Modern Spiritualism*, vol. ii, p. 342

soul rests not on any miraculous testimony but only on one supreme thing, our faith in the character and promise of God. The people of Christ's day had 'Moses and the prophets,' and that was enough. We have infinitely more. If we will not accept this as our final assurance, all the miraculous appearances from the dead and all the assurances of the spirits will be of no avail. The future rests on that one thing, the character of God, of which there can be no proof except its own self-evidencing truth. And nothing (especially nothing material and physical) can increase that certainty.

(iv) Even if we accept its results as verified, Spiritualism, so far as it has gone, has only suggested *continued existence*, and not the permanence of a decent personal *identity*. I am chary of criticizing the type and quality of the messages which have been received. The best Spiritualists themselves are fully aware of their inconsequent triviality, though they claim, justly enough, that what may seem trivial to an outsider or a third party may mean a great deal to the person directly concerned. I admit this. If my mother or my wife were to send me a message which meant something peculiarly personal to me, no matter how trivial it might appear to other listeners, this might have an evidential value which other people might not appreciate. I admit this. But my spiritualist friends will understand me when I say—they have admitted this to me—that not only have the reported messages been trivial and inconsequent, but there has never been received a message that has had any moral or religious value. This, as we think it out, is one of the most damning criticisms of these messages from the 'other side': (a) That fine thinkers who were deeply concerned about the future

life while they lived among us should speak such commonplace trivialities is almost unbelievable. (b) That they should have so degenerated in every mental and spiritual quality of their real personality, is even more unbelievable. (c) Some convinced investigators—F. W. H. Myers, for instance—were so anxious to broadcast to their friends from beyond the grave, and thus establish the fact of spirit-communication, that they left sealed envelopes here with recorded messages, which were to be opened and compared when a message should be received at a seance. *In no case has there been any correspondence whatever between the sealed and the received message.*

Indeed, some of the messages received—for instance, from Raymond Lodge—are not only trivial, but obviously crude and false. Raymond tells his father that he lives in ‘a house of brick’ among trees and flowers, and that the ground on which he stands or walks is solid! Others tell us that their homes are designed by those who were architects in this world and are built by capable workmen. Another record comments on the weather of ‘This summer Land’ and remarks ‘you have only to breathe your desire and the thing is created.’ All this type of crude materialism, from a world of spirits who are presumed to have left behind all that is earthly and material, is a little more than our common sense, let alone our religious sense, can decently accept. Surely it seems quite obvious that the kind of message is governed by the *kind of intelligence* possessed by the medium, and suggests that the message is only a reflex of the medium’s type of thinking.

It is only fair to state how Spiritualists answer some of our common objections to the nature and quality

of the messages received. For instance, when a departed scientist has sent a message, and we complain that nothing of any scientific value or insight has been given, Spiritualists ask us how we could possibly verify new information, if it were sent? Or when we remark on the confusion and general irrelevancy of the messages, this is explained as being natural in communications 'with one asleep through one asleep.' Or should we complain that many of the results are mere 'antics' or the ridiculous pranks of an undeveloped mind, we are told—and it is not a bad reason—that perhaps this is the *real side* of many people who were only prosy or conventional here!

To a Christian, however, the singular thing about the bulk of these reported messages is—*how little there is in them about God*. From the messages received one might well imagine that He did not matter, or perhaps did not exist, instead of being *the only conceivable source and guarantee of any sort of continued existence beyond the grave*. Without the power of God, our present life can only be as the beasts that perish. This singular absence of any mention of God, or indeed of any reference to the concerns of the spiritual life, would almost justify the common complaint that the one thing that Spiritualism lacks is the 'spiritual.' All the crude messages about the 'material' conditions of the new life suggest that this creed may be merely a subtle materialism. At one seance I was asked if there was anyone from whom I should specially like to hear. I thought for a moment, and then said, 'Yes! Jesus Christ.' My request was met with heavy silence as if it were only *irreverent* to ask for His word from the world where He alone reigns and which His victory alone guarantees. To a Christian, it is really an ominous thing that in the

alleged messages from the spirit world, which is guaranteed only by the power of God, there should evidently be no reference to God at all.

6

There are some points in the theory and practice of Spiritualism which are particularly difficult for me to accept.

(a) According to their messages, these spirits claim to inhabit some part of a 'material universe,' where they handle a type of life which seems to be little different from our own. They speak constantly of *fleshly frailties*—being tired, or unhappy or cross-tempered—working, walking or doing things—building, eating, sleeping, drinking. This is quite evidently a materialistic view of what must be, and can only be, a spiritual existence of personal souls. In essence it differs very little—and sometimes not to its own advantage—from the crude views about some pagan Heavens—a kind of modified Valhalla or Mohammedan after-life. Whatever the future life may be, no Christian can accept these messages as evidence of its conditions.

In strange contrast to the usual material pictures, Sir Oliver Lodge describes the location of the spirits' abode as being in the 'luminiferous ether.' What is this luminiferous ether? The 'ether' is something which is assumed to fill all space. But modern science throws grave doubts on this theory.

(b) It is asserted that the spirits have always been extremely anxious, from time immemorial, to reveal themselves to the human mind, to hold communion with us, and unfold the great truths of the after-life. If so, the results have been singularly sparse, and when

received, singularly unenlightening. I repeat that there has not been one message that possesses any *ethical worth or any spiritual distinction*. I have already admitted that I can understand how messages might seem trivial and even silly to some third person, and might yet mean a great deal to some anxious inquirer. But this cannot certainly alter the fact that no message of any *moral value* has ever been received through this spirit-mediumship, either to guide or aid us in the problems of human living. This is such a strange thing—particularly when the voice claims to come from some great man whose advice was so rich while he was among us—that it at once arouses suspicion.

(c) It seems odd to me that these spirits should so constantly speak of the universe in terms that have been long outdated by science! They talk of *spheres, circles, and planes* of life which were only the inventions of pre-scientific speculation, of ideas long thrown on the scrap-heap by modern research. This inevitably reflects the jargon of unintelligent mediums, and casts suspicion at once on the reality and genuineness of their messages. If these mediums are only a 'colourless channel' for the message of the controlling spirits—as they claim to be—they yet seem to be able to limit the spirit to their own intelligence and their own out-dated notions. 'Planes' and 'circles' and 'steps' were all right when men knew no better. They will not do now, except for speculating Brahmins and Theosophists!

(d) The usual 'machinery' at any seance I have attended makes me suspicious. The darkened room, the unnatural conditions, the inability to see and examine, the absence of any normal control, and sometimes the 'high dudgeon' of mediums when I have

suggested the most ordinary precautions, as if this were a reflection on their honour and not only a desire on my part for some convincing proof—all this makes me feel as if clear evidence is not wanted or welcomed. I still cannot see why the spirits should only reveal themselves in darkness.

(e) How is it possible to verify the truth of any information given us by the mediums? Dr. Glen Atkins, in this connection, points out an ‘inescapable dilemma’ which Spiritualists cannot overcome. On the one hand, ‘only those things which are utterly *unknown* to the living anywhere—can be finally and conclusively a testimony to communications from the dead.’ But on the other hand, ‘unless the information thus received is *known* to the living, its truth or falsity can never be proved or disproved.’¹ But if it is known to the living, there is obviously no guarantee that it has not been transmitted, consciously or unconsciously, by some of those who are present.

(f) The use of these mediums, and especially of the common kinds of medium, makes up my worst difficulty. Modern Spiritualism is now definitely tied to mediums, and to me this is the rope that strangles it. I cannot see how a great and wonderful revelation—a revelation which, if it is true, means so much to the human mind—should come to us only in this very dubious fashion. In no other sphere, as I have said, does the God and Father of Jesus Christ work in this dark and tortuous way. How openly has He revealed Himself to every needy soul! But always—mark this—in one special way, that whenever and wherever He has spoken to mankind, He has invariably spoken through our noblest souls, men and women of light, vision, and

¹ Glen Atkins, *Modern Religious Cults and Movements*, p. 313

character—through messengers like Moses, Abraham, Isaiah, Amos, Jeremiah, and lastly through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Even our great revelations of art, poetry, philosophy, ethics and music have come through our dreamers and our people of responsible genius, not through people of ‘low intelligence,’ many of whom, unfortunately, have been so often convicted of trickery and deceit.

Countering my objection, some may say to me—as one Spiritualist did say to me—that this is not a revelation from God at all. ‘*God does not come into it : it is only a question of spirits trying to contact us.*’ Then if God does not come into it—and that in His own world—neither do I.

7

Anticipating this lecture, when it was advertised, one good Christian, who is also a Spiritualist, wrote me and asked ‘Why does the Church not take up this great aid to our belief in the after life?’ As I close, may I answer this point?

(1) *The Church has taken it up.* To my knowledge, most churches, barring the Roman communion, have appointed influential committees of investigation who have heard and examined the available evidence and have attended official seances. My own Church of Scotland appointed a strong committee under the able chairmanship of the late Lord Sands, a judge of our Supreme Court; and they investigated the whole subject in a generous and handsome fashion. Their findings, published in our Church ‘Reports,’ are as non-committal as all honest men feel they must be, when the subject is as occult as this is, and where there is no evidence, apart from the assertions of the mediums,

that there is any assured 'intervention of spirits.' Like the famous Scots Third Verdict in murder trials, their judgment was 'not proven.'

(ii) Here I must return to a point which is central to me—*what is the faith of the Church?* We believe, even more firmly than any Spiritualist ever can do, that the human spirit survives what we call death, and not only survives, but remains the same developing identity. Our spirits come from God, and go back to God. Our lost loved ones are now with God, in His presence; and they are now being purified and made perfect. We cannot tell—no-one can tell—what that future life is. We only know—and it is enough—that the future life is as sure as God, and as certain as His love. Even Jesus our Lord spoke with great reserve about the future. But He has said everything that the human soul needs to know—not only that our souls live in the future, but that they live in God. 'Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. . . . I go to prepare a place for you. . . . I will come again and receive you unto myself: that where I am, there ye may be also.' Thus He has made us sure of the one thing that matters—that God, whose love passes all understanding, has us and our loved ones in His eternal care.

I know not where His islands lift
 Their fronded palms in air.
 I only know I cannot drift,
 Beyond His love and care.

What other message, most of all through dubious mediums, can give us an assurance like this?

Considering the whole matter, and remembering especially some cases I know, I am led to finish with this short warning.

Certain nervous, anxious, and unstable people become easily caught and immersed in this kind of enthralling occult trafficking. From my experience, I know that this may be exceedingly dangerous, not only to Christian faith, but even to character and stability. It is easy to see how an unhealthy excitement may ruin peace of mind, and even undermine all sensible judgment. Should these people be misled into believing the results a curious thing takes place—they always tend to give this a more 'evidential value' than their Christian faith. Worst of all, they become such a quick prey to unscrupulous people who play upon their emotions, and even their agonies. May I make one suggestion to any of my Christian readers? Leave this investigation to the able and balanced people who belong to the various accredited societies. These people are capable scientists, and will guarantee all good investigation. If they obtain verifiable results, I at least will be one of the first to give them a hearing. I trust we shall remain open-minded enough to afford the evidence a fair and honest test. Let those who have scientific knowledge and cool judgment proceed with any means they think right, and give us their impartial verdict. But I am convinced that dabbling in these experiments by untrained observers, who are not accustomed to weigh or sift evidence, is as useless as it is dangerous—useless because it can prove nothing, and dangerous because it can unsettle a nervous person's reason and faith.