

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

A FEW OBJECTIONS

TO

# SPIRITUALISM,

Whether it be True or False.

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BY

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WHAT are the teachings of Spiritualism? What good results can it boast of? These are two very important questions, and I think all reasonable minds must agree that it is only fair for an investigator to seek all possible information that may tend to assist at arriving at satisfactory answers thereto, and further, to weigh and test all information unreservedly, ignoring opinions of friends or opponents except so far as any opinions may serve as a guide or assistance to the discovery of facts.

All religions, it has been asserted, are matters of opinion or faith; but Spiritualists, in advocating Spiritualism as a religion, maintain that it (Spiritualism) is not a matter of *opinion* or *faith*, BUT a matter of *FACT capable of demonstration to the fullest extent*. This being their standpoint, I claim to be entitled to reject and put aside in the consideration of the subject all questions of authority or the opinions of others, except subject to my previous limitation. It is, therefore, nothing to me whether Lord Brougham, Serjeant Cox, or other illustrious personages believed in Spiritualism, and I accordingly set aside any arguments based upon such premises. Those parties also believed in the multiplication table. So do I; but it is not *because* they believed in the accuracy of it that I do, but because it is a fact

demonstrated to myself. Such authority is a weak groundwork to start a principle upon or to prove a fact by, for the reason that at some time or other all error has been supported by the voice of authority. If I am to be influenced in my belief in Spiritualism because the *great* and *learned* have believed in it, I may as well believe in burning and putting to death of the mediums because "that great and shining light", Sir Matthew Hale and numerous other judges have believed in putting witches to death.<sup>1</sup> I mention these matters because the following question is frequently put in argument, viz.: "What do you say to, and how do you account for, the fact that so many great intellects, including peers of the realm and judges of the land, believe in Spiritualism?". My answer is: "I do not know, and cannot and do not pretend to account therefor." I might as well try to account for Cardinal Manning and other eminent personages believing in the infallibility of the Pope of Rome, the transubstantiation theory, and other (to my mind) equally improbable matters.

As to the "facts" Spiritualism proves, and whether or not the evidence warrants the assertion that such are indeed *facts*, I must leave them for further consideration. I am not prepared to deal with that branch of the subject at present. I have not sufficiently investigated the phenomena, and consequently I am not in a position to affirm or deny anything connected therewith. I cannot even say that I have formed any decided opinion thereon. I have witnessed a great deal that has surprised and interested me, that I cannot account for, and that has mystified me not a little; but then I have not been able to *test* what I have seen in the way I could have desired, and it does not appear probable that I CAN do so. Maskelyne and Cook's entertainment would probably puzzle me as much, if I were not informed that their interesting performance is accomplished by natural means, and nothing might mystify me more, perhaps, than a ventriloquial entertainment, *assuming* that I had never heard of ventriloquism, and instead of being informed that the artificial voices (so to speak) were produced from the throat of one man, *I were*

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<sup>1</sup> It is urged by Spiritualists that witchcraft really existed, and was a phase of Spiritualism.

told that they were the voices of spirits, I might be puzzled to the same extent that I now am as regards spirit manifestation, so I prefer to confess that my mind is not settled on the subject. One point, however, I am satisfied upon—viz., that either the manifestations I have witnessed are genuine and true, or they are the result of deliberate fraud and imposture of the blackest type. There is no intermediate course open to consider the subject upon. It is no question of imagination or fancy that can be raised to meet my experience. I have seen "Spirits" materialised, and have conversed with them in a perfectly ordinary way. I have felt their touch, and have seen their writing—all this at times when I have been as cool and free from excited imagination as I am at the time of writing these words. I say that all that I have seen and experienced is *real* and *what it is represented to be*, or it is the practice of *fraud and imposture*. The "materialised spirit" was *in fact* a materialised spirit, or *it was* a man *fraudulently representing himself to be a spirit*. There is no possibility of forming any other conclusion on the subject. It is one of the two alternatives. Therefore, to find *against* the truth of what I have witnessed I MUST decide that the medium, and those persons who have *invited* my attendance at the *séances*, are fraudulent deceivers, so villainous that it would be impossible to *find one extenuating point* in their favor. It is no wonder then that I hesitate to form a judgment entailing such a serious condemnation of others whom, (it is only fair to them for me to say) from what I *know* of them, I should consider the least likely to be guilty of such conduct; and I confess that it is here that I find myself in real difficulty at arriving at any conclusion adverse to the existence of the phænomena. Of course, if we were to argue upon probabilities, I admit that it would be more *probable* to think the medium false than that the phænomena is true. I, however, prefer not to enter upon this part of the question; but, for the purpose of dealing with the subject upon its merits, I will argue on the *assumption* that the phænomenon is all that it is represented to be: that the manifestations are true; and what I have seen actually and really transpired in the manner and to the extent represented.

Arguing, therefore, on the basis that Spiritualism is a fact, and not an hypothesis, I place the believers therein

on common ground with myself to deal with the question arising out of the following remarks.

Apart from the fact that it teaches a life of some sort after this, Spiritualism cannot be said to possess any teachings of any consequence. It is true that a number of Spiritualists profess to believe in the principles of Theism, but from my experience with them they do not appear to possess any more positive belief in or knowledge of God, or His existence and His laws, than has hitherto been taught apart from Spiritualism; and this will seem the more forcible when I state that there are members of its body accepting the details and phenomena who are *orthodox* in point of religion. There are many who even go so far as to found evidence for their belief in Spiritualism upon the Bible, as the actual word of God, whilst there are others who are Deists, and others who incline to a natural religion *ignoring Deity*.

Swedenborg was a Spiritualist who professed to believe not only in Heaven and Hell, Eternal Felicity and Eternal Damnation, but even is stated to have visited both those places and actually witnessed both those spheres of existence. Modern *unorthodox* Spiritualists repudiate all question of Eternal Damnation and Hell, the Fall, the Incarnation, and Atonement, but accept the more reasonable belief of Eternal Progress. Yet, notwithstanding—and curious though it be to relate—they do *not dispute* that Swedenborg *actually* saw and held intercourse with those spheres before referred to, and in the manner represented by him so to have done, but *accept his statements* as to these matters by asserting that he was made the dupe of “orthodox spirits”. I cannot say that the religious views of Spiritualists are as numerous as those who do not believe therein, but there is reason to believe that they would be as diversified *IF* as large a number of people believed in Spiritualism as those who do not. This, to my mind, goes to prove that its teachings may be said to be uncertain and to amount to *nil*. In asserting this, I trust I shall not to be misunderstood to say that a number of the persons claiming to be Spiritualists do not possess and teach sound ideas of right and wrong, for no doubt some of them do, and many to a very marked and advanced extent; but whatever religion of life they do possess is not founded *upon* Spiritualism, but *annexed* to it, rather than

the outcome or result of it. I firmly believe that those Spiritualists who are good, and who have sound ideas of life, have not obtained their ideas from the spirit-world, although it may be possible that some of the previously discovered teachings of men may be reproduced by spirits. So far as I can ascertain there has been *absolutely nothing* ever written, spoken, or otherwise taught by the supposed spirits or their mediums which has excelled, or even approached, the teachings of embodied spirits; and I again assert that nothing new has been taught or discovered through the aid or by the means of Spiritualism—nothing more has been found out than human reason had previously discovered. Of course, Spiritualists claim to prove “the life after this”. For my part they are welcome to such proofs, and can remain in undisturbed possession of them. Such lives that are “proved” can neither be said to be desirable, attractive, or useful. On the other hand, a great argument against Spiritualism as a religion is supplied by the fact that different “spirits” have taught different and opposing doctrines. Coming from the spirit-world, it would be reasonable to expect that the teachings would be something approaching infallibility, or at least consistency, whereas it is admitted by Spiritualists that some spirits are lying spirits; others are misguided spirits who speak believing that what they say is right, yet nevertheless deceive and teach in some things *falsely*; while others *err*, owing to the influence of “brother spirits”, or owing to certain influences concerning earth-life connected directly or indirectly with the sitters present at the *séance* or *their* surroundings. Then whence comes its utility? At the most it does not so much GIVE the power of communication between the living and the dead as to *anticipate* such relationship by a few years; for, *if true*, it is certain that the spirits, after quitting earth-life, will meet and hold communication in the next world, or sphere of existence; and considering that we have *all eternity* before us, the necessity for holding, whilst here, such occasional communication with the departed is hardly apparent, and the mode appears scarcely natural, but rather—to use a Scotch expression—somewhat uncanny.

It might be asked on religious grounds, “Is it *right* that we should anticipate communication with the spheres not of this world but intended for our spirits only, when

divested of this body?" If such communications were necessary to our existence or soul-culture, would we not be able to hold it in a more natural manner than that adopted at *séances*, and without people suffering loss of power or vital force, as is stated to be the case with the medium? I am inclined to believe that, if it were necessary to us, such communications *would* come naturally, and the spirits instead of requiring the aid and assistance of "luminous painted slates" and "light absorbing garments" to show themselves by, would be as visible as the sun and stars. Spirit-life, to me, loses all charm and that halo of reverence and means of aspiration when connected with knocking furniture about, playing musical instruments, grinding up musical boxes, and other indifferent form of manifestation. I for one would prefer the more sublime conception of angels, hitherto taught, than the *knowledge* of a reality so depreciating to the ordinary ideas and belief of spiritual existence. Contrast Longfellow's beautiful ideas in his "Footsteps of Angels" and other like poems with the "fact" of spirits putting iron rings on the mediums' wrists, manufacturing "Manchester goods", manipulating furniture, carrying people and other material bodies in the air, insanely jumping them about; and after having made the comparison let anyone say which is best, the sublime conception of the poet or the "realities" of the phænomena.

However, to return to dry argument. I would ask, "Is it not the fact that Spiritualism is the only branch of science (if such it be) that refuses to be subject to thorough tests, and is not open to investigation, and does not *court* enquiry?" All discoveries have been thrown open to enquiry and subjected to the severest criticism.

This not being the case with Spiritualism excites the *gravest suspicion*, and will ever be the means (I am still assuming that it is true) for the practice of fraud and imposture of the most serious nature. A not unimportant question arises, "How under its present system of practice is it to protect itself against imposition?" It is not open to tests in itself; how then can *real* mediums prove fraud against fraudulent mediums? If tests are to be applied to the fraudulent they must also be adopted to the true, and the latter is not permissible. If tests are denied to the true then the fraudulent can claim the like exemption; and for this reason, that until the tests have been applied



to the manifestations it cannot be discovered which is true and which false.

One of the great objects of all right government should be to close all doors and means for the practice of fraud; and therefore upon this ground it is public policy that the practice of spirit manifestations should be suppressed, it opening so large a field for imposture.

It is claimed by Spiritualists that in the "Home" and "Fletcher" cases genuine mediums were present, and genuine manifestations took place.

If such results as those cases disclosed are the outcome of genuine *séances*, it is manifest how serious might be the evil that would arise by means of fraudulent *séances* where even felons might assemble and take the lead, and obtain the confidence of the many by deceit and fraud, not being liable to discovery and consequent punishment.<sup>1</sup> Upon these premises I argue that Spiritualism is unwholesome, and that its practice should be discouraged. There are further reasons why it ought to be suppressed, the following among others: 1st. The immense power it is possible for one man or a class of men to possess over the minds of others. 2. The loss of independence of mind in the believers, and particularly that class of persons whom I will term "believers on hearsay evidence", those who accept the statements of others without investigating for themselves, like the majority of those who believe in creeds and doctrines of the various churches and sects — such persons who accept the faith upon the word of their teachers and their books, without ever questioning the truth for themselves, at all events in such a manner as they would in searching after worldly truths. Imagine such a class of men at the dictation and following of an unscrupulous medium. A further reason why it should be suppressed is that the practice of mediumistic powers enervates the system of the medium, and uses up his "vital force" to an unnatural extent, so that his constitution becomes weakened, stimulants have to be constantly resorted to, life is shortened, and that which is, perhaps, worse than all, the medium is subject—

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<sup>1</sup> What an opportunity for the pickpockets—at a dark *séance* with wealthy sitters. These people could first steal money, etc., and afterwards make believe that the "spirits" had done the business.

according to the character or nature of the circle—to be made the subject or active instrument of “Evil departed spirits” whose vices and close association with the medium tend to debilitate his mind, and affect his judgment, so that he loses all individuality for the time being. It is stated as a fact in Spiritualistic circles that the spirits of jockeys, betting men, women of ill-fame, and other indifferent persons, no longer of this world, have at times taken possession of the medium, to the encouragement of the habits which they practised when in earth-life. So far as the jockey was concerned, it is stated that by giving hints and tips to the circle as to the result of certain pending races, he, through the medium, enabled persons frequenting the *séance* to win money, and the medium has been *wholly unconscious* during the time. I ask here, Is a system that renders such a state of things possible one that should be encouraged or even tolerated?

A cause is good or bad according to the results attained to the largest number of people, and Spiritualism must, like all other matters, be judged by its results. Up to the present, what can it boast of in the way of good results? It is claimed by its members to have made great strides the past ten or twelve years, and that those who believe therein can be counted by millions. One phase of Spiritualism is what is termed Healing mediumship, that is, that a number of mediums are gifted, either by the spirits or by other means, with marvellous powers to cure the sick, in fact, to effect cures in cases which would be otherwise hopeless—in cases where all the science of medicine and surgery would be of no avail. Yet Spiritualists cannot point to any hospital or institution supported by themselves, or arising out of the cause, for the benefit of their fellow-creatures. One would think, possessing such wonderful powers, that in common humanity they would be utilised for the benefit of those requiring their aid, and particularly the deserving poor. Here is a field of usefulness wholly neglected, or strictly limited to the “few who pay”. And this neglect of the “good they might do here” is suffered by those who claim to have the highest knowledge of religion and duties here, assisted as they also claim to be by the spirits that have “gone before”.

Of the *millions* of believers Spiritualism can boast of no

church or public (or private) place of instruction. No schools; no benevolent institutions of any kind. They do not even support their leaders and mediums, but leave them to rely entirely upon the fees payable at each *séance* by the sitters, so that it becomes not a question with them as to what class of manifestation they can produce, so much as what is the state and condition of the pockets of the sitters. This must be demoralising in itself, and is a reproach upon the system. Nothing can be witnessed or done without a fee is expected. Can any system boasting of its millions of believers show more barren results? results absolutely nil, rendering the cause worthless, judged by its own standpoint, and on its own merits.

It is, I have always considered, necessary for a healthy mind to possess a sound healthy body. The man who possesses a vigorous system has a mind capable of development, and is one better able to learn truths and instruct others in the duties of life here than the emaciated or debilitated individual who is constantly hired out at a small fee, and using up all his vital force by what is—at least to himself—unwholesome practices.<sup>1</sup> A man has no right to ruin his health and strength and debilitate his mind, whether by the excessive use of drugs and stimulants, giving way to inordinate desires and passions, or to the repeated loss of individuality by excessive sleep, or trance mediumship, or by allowing departed spirits to turn out the man-spirit, or soul, and themselves to take possession of his body, or by permitting the breaking up of his body for the purpose of allowing such spirits to “materialise”. If the result be bad, the system that produces such result must be bad likewise.

I do not believe that our national system of religion is the correct one; but whatever be its faults, a thousand times would I prefer it to Spiritualism. The present clergy are a race of fine manly fellows, and would contrast most favorably with a race of gaunt, debilitated, emaciated mediums. If it be necessary to have teachers (and undoubtedly it is) then give me the former to the latter, for although they err, yet the error is *nothing* to what is

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<sup>1</sup> It is stated by Spiritualists that the practice of mediumistic powers seriously affect the health of the medium, making him subject to paralysis and debility.

possible to result from a system the *modus operandi* of which partakes of the character of the illusionist's and conjurer's entertainments, with the absence of tests, the cover of darkness, and generally what many would consider "a hole-in-the-corner kind of business".

Although I have made enquiry I have not discovered the name of one medium who has obtained a high and exalted position, and to whom the believers in the cause can point as an example of what a man should be. This is not the case with the Church or with Freethinkers, or other fearless followers of what they believe to be the truth. The Church can boast of its martyrs, whereas the believer in Spiritualism, firm and confident though he be of its truth, *shuns exposure*, and does not brave the light of day. Notwithstanding their professed devotion to their cause and faith in its certainty, Spiritualists appear timid to brave a few months' imprisonment, where martyrs to faith have braved and suffered torture and death.

In concluding these remarks I crave permission to quote a passage from a sermon preached by the Rev. Chas. Voysey at the Theistic Church on the 11th July, 1886, which contains to my mind the strongest argument of any adverse to Spiritualism, and which is as follows:

"Then it will be asked, if this hypothesis (that of the future existence) be true why does not God reveal it? Think what years of miserable fear and hours of intense mental agony men and women have endured because the canopy of heaven is never opened and no voice has ever reached us from beyond the grave. Even here also I believe God is more than justified. The pains men have suffered through uncertainty and suspense are a trifle light as air compared with the horrors we might suffer if once the veil that hides the future were riven.

"No one I presume to say will deny the overwhelming advantages that we derive from having the future events ON EARTH almost entirely concealed from us. In the chequered course of life we are ever being made glad with pleasant surprises or made sad by unexpected calamity. To know beforehand all our joy would leave us without a vestige of appetite and destroy all the pleasures of hope. To know beforehand all our sorrows would extinguish all our present joy, the shadow of the coming gloom would darken the bright sunshine of present happiness. Nay,

more, would it not so paralyse exertion and enterprise as to frustrate all the merciful designs of our discipline and completely overturn the present order of things? Our ignorance of the future, our utter darkness as to our successes and failures, throws us back upon the hard but safe lines of duty. Not knowing what is before us, we bend all our strength to do the right thing at the right moment, and leave the issues in the hands of the righteous ruler of our destinies. It is by this uncertainty that we are governed and guided and sometimes driven into the narrow path of duty from which the knowledge of what is to happen would perpetually allure us. It is not too much to say that what we thus gain by our ignorance of the future would be wholly lost if the future could be revealed to us.

“But if this be true of the foreknowledge of events in our earthly life, how much more true it is of the foreknowledge of what may come beyond the tomb! We have already seen the ill effects which have followed even from an absorbing anticipation of a future life, from a pretended knowledge of its conditions; how men and women have neglected and forgotten the pressing obligations of the life in order to intoxicate their souls by visions of bliss in the world to come; how they have been driven to madness by expectation of a horrible doom. Ten thousand times worse evils would ensue were the vision to become an actual certainty and were we permitted to open our eyes upon the scenes of glory and felicity that may await us. Distraction in its most vitiated degree would divert us from the tremendous responsibilities of life, and few indeed would be the heroes whose moral courage was great enough to bear patiently the troubles of this life and to keep them from rushing headlong into the Stygian pool. The world would be soon depopulated by universal Euthanasia. Moral culture would be no longer possible. For moral culture depends on the discharge of duty from disinterested motives regardless of bribes and scornful of threats. Draw the veil which hides the unseen world, and men’s eyes might be so dazzled with the spectacle as to become blind henceforth to all that constitutes real virtue—all this on the hypothesis of bliss in store. On the other hand if that hypothesis be false, equally just and righteous is the Lord in hiding the cer-

tainty of annihilation from us, since the revelation of the horror would bear worse fruits still. Our perplexity in trying to reconcile the righteousness of God with the present order of the world would be then aggravated beyond remedy, and the name of God would no longer be heard on the lips of men but in tones of futile and despairing blasphemy."

The foregoing extract disposes of any question of necessity for spirit manifestations, and is a conclusive answer in itself to the claims made by Spiritualists.

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