

THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND AND SPIRITUALISM

The full text of the Majority Report of the Church of England committee appointed by Archbishop Lang and Archbishop Temple to investigate Spiritualism. This Majority Report was signed by seven of the ten members of the Committee. The other three signed a Minority Report

Published by
PSYCHIC PRESS LTD.
2 Tavistock Chambers, Bloomsbury Way,
London WC1A 2SE

* * * * *

WHY THIS REPORT IS PUBLISHED

The Committee appointed in 1937 by the Archbishops to investigate Spiritualism carefully studied the subject for two years and handed in its reports. It was expected by the Committee and by the general public that the guidance contained therein would be made available to the rank and file of the Church of England who, up to then, had been given no official lead whatsoever regarding communication with the dead.

When a decent interval had elapsed and no statement had yet been made, inquiries were instituted and it was learned that the House of Bishops had taken the surprising step of pigeon holing the reports.

-240For nine years the reports were kept secret; then one morning there mysteriously appeared on my office desk what purported to be a typed copy of the Majority Report.

I got in touch with a member of the Committee I knew was in favour of the report being published, though he was bound by his loyalty to the Church to keep its secrets.

“I have a copy of the Majority Report, and I am going to print it,” I told him.” There are one or two phrases that are obscure, because of the careless typing, but I would rather print a slightly inaccurate version than none at all. However, if in the interests of truth you will read what I have and correct it where necessary, then you will be rendering a service to everyone concerned.”

The purported copy was retyped, a reporter was sent with it to the member concerned. What the reporter brought back was a carefully corrected type-script, with every comma marked in, missing lines written in the margins, and complete in every detail.

The report was printed in its entirety in “Psychic News” and with the co-operation of the Press Association extracts from it appeared in newspapers all over the world.

Still the Church preserved a stony silence. Copies of the paper containing the report were sent to all the bishops and the two Archbishops. No comment came except for a protest from the Archbishop of Canterbury.

My printing of the report gave to the rank and file of the Church of England the guidance that had been denied them by the House of Bishops. To Christians all over the world it broke the news that a Committee of influential Churchmen, examining Spiritualism on behalf of the Church and at the request of the Archbishops had found that it was true and could be a valuable addition to the Christian ministry.

A.W. AUSTIN.

* * * * *

THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND AND SPIRITUALISM

Below Is the full text of the Majority Report submitted to the House of Bishops by the committee of Anglicans appointed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York to investigate Spiritualism.

In interpreting our evidence it is important to take into account the theories, prevalent among the more experienced and careful Spiritualists, as to the nature and the value of the alleged messages delivered through the agency of mediums.

It is pointed out, on the evidence of the “communicators” themselves, that the communicators and guides are themselves at very different levels of spiritual development and of very partial knowledge, and that the “controls” of which they make use may often be very undeveloped personalities who are capable of this particular service because they are closely linked with temporarily disassociated portions of the personalities of the mediums concerned.

There are thus at least three factors which would render messages, especially those of a high order of spiritual or metaphysical value, liable to disturbance, and which lead to the difficulties, generally recognised by Spiritualists, which the communicators would in any case find in transmitting messages which do not already lie within the general conditions of our knowledge.

There is, however, nothing inherently contradictory, or necessarily improbable in this account of the conditions involved in such communications. It is, however, no more than an hypothesis, incapable of scientific proof, nor does it assist us in determining the authenticity of the communications themselves.

The verification of these, if it is possible at all, must rest upon ordinary scientific tests. To say this is not, however, to deny that the communications may sometimes be held to be convincing upon other than scientific grounds.

In any case it seems necessary to distinguish between the sense of contact with departed friends or with “guides” and the assurance that messages have necessarily any high values because they come through this unusual channel.

It is perhaps of some importance to notice that there is general agreement in the communications that time has not the same rigid character as a “time series” in the life that lies beyond death. There is in any case probable on the grounds but it is of interest as indicating a possible reason why the communicators are frequently confused or mistaken as to exact indication of time.

This may not be a failure in their own apprehension of the real significance of events so much as in their power of conveying that apprehension in a form which can be adapted to the mentality of the medium and to the understanding of those to whom the message is directed.

It is often urged as of great significance that Spiritualism in many respects re-affirms the highest convictions of religious people that it has brought many to a new assurance of the truth of teaching which has ceased to have any meaning at all.

This is a point of some difficulty since assurance seems to come along different and even conflicting lines. We cannot ignore the fact that at least one considerable Spiritualist organisation is definitely anti-Christian in

THE SIGNATORIES

Dr. Francis Underhill

Bishop of Bath and Wells.

Dr. W. R. Matthews

Dean of St. Paul's.

Canon Harold Anson

Master of the Temple.

Canon L. W. Grensted

Nolloth Professor of the
Christian Religion at Oxford.

Dr. William Brown

Celebrated Harley Street
Psychologist.

Mr. P. E. Sandlands, Q.C.

Barrister-at-Law.

Lady (Gwendolen)

Stephenson

character. The divergence of testimony is explained by Spiritualists as due to the continuance of spirits, at least for a period, within the system of beliefs which they have held in this life.

It is held that even though the whole development of the personality is being raised from level to level the attitudes to truth and goodness taken up in this life persist in the next and that this somewhat divergent testimony to the truth of Christianity must be explained in this way.

We should add that whatever be the value of this supposed confirmation of the truth of religion, Spiritualism does not seem to have added anything except perhaps a practical emphasis to our understanding of those truths.

Many alleged communicators seem, indeed, to fall below the highest Christian standards of understanding and spiritual insight, and indeed below the level of spiritual insight and mental capacity shown by the communicators while still in this life.

While there is insistence upon the supremacy of love comparable with the New Testament assertion that "God is love," the accounts sometimes given of the mediatorial work of Christ frequently fall very far below the full teaching of the Christian Gospel seeming to depend rather upon some power of working a miracle of materialisation (in the Resurrection appearance) that upon a radical and final acceptance of the burden of guilt of man's sin, and a victory for us upon the cross.

Nevertheless it is clearly true that the recognition of the nearness of our friends who have died, and of their progress in the spiritual life, and of their continuing concern for us, cannot do otherwise for those who have experienced it, than add a new immediacy and richness to their belief in the Communion of Saints.

There seems to be no reason at all why the Church should regard this vital and personal enrichment of one of her central doctrines with disfavour, so long as it does not distract Christians from their fundamental gladness that they may come, when they will, into the presence of their Lord and Master, Jesus Christ Himself, or weaken their sense that their fellowship is fellowship in Him.

It is claimed by Spiritualists that the character of many events in the Christian revelation, as recorded in the Gospels, is precisely that of psychic phenomena, and that the evidence for the paranormal occurrences which Spiritualism has adduced strongly confirms the historicity of the Gospel records, in the sense that they also are records of paranormal occurrences, including for example, of clairvoyance (in the story of Nathaniel) and of the materialisation (in the feeding of the five thousand and above all in the narrative of the Resurrection appearances).

The miracles of healing are claimed as closely parallel to the healings performed through mediums. It is strongly urged that if we do not accept the evidence for modern psychical happenings, we should not, apart from long tradition, accept the Gospel records either.

It is certainly true that there are quite clear parallels between the miraculous events recorded in the Gospel and the modern phenomena attested by Spiritualists. And if we assert that the latter must be doubted because they have not yet been proved capable of scientific statement and verification, we must add that the miracles and the Resurrection itself, are not capable of such verification either.

We must therefore ask what the proper Christian grounds of belief in these central truths of Christianity are.

The answer to this question is clearly that we believe upon a basis of faith and not demonstrable scientific knowledge.

Our grounds for this faith are to be found either in a direct mystical assurance that Jesus of Nazareth, as we have received Him, is indeed God's word to us, more broadly in the apprehension of ethical and spiritual values.

We do not accept the Gospels because they record wonders, but because they ring true to the deepest powers of spiritual apprehension which we possess.

But if this is so, we must clearly apply similar criteria to the claim of Spiritualists, and this means that while we regard some part of these claims as matter proper to the scientists, we regard some other parts of these claims as not properly capable of scientific verification or dispute, but, at the same time, as deserving the consideration of Christians upon grounds of another kind.

It has been seen, in the account of the evidence submitted to our Committee, that so far as rigid scientific tests are concerned very little if anything remains both verifiable and inexplicable out of the whole mass of paranormal phenomena.

Modern psychological knowledge has revealed a wide range of powers and of possible sources of misunderstanding in our subconscious or unconscious mind. When these are combined with the possibility of thought-transference, of telepathy, many communications delivered through mediums seem capable of explanation.

We have to notice that no good evidence for telepathy itself is yet forthcoming, but probably a majority of scientists would accept it as a fact without pretending to offer an explanation of it. If telepathy is denied, the evidence that these communications do come from discarnate spirits is greatly strengthened on the scientific side.

But the tests applied by scientists as such are in their vary nature experimental, objective and impersonal. It is necessary to ask whether such tests do not in themselves invalidate an inquiry into values which are in essence personal and spiritual.

The experiences which many people have found most convincing are of a kind which could hardly occur in the atmosphere of scientific investigation. They are sporadic, occasional and highly individual. They could not possibly be repeated or submitted to statistical analysis.

It is worthwhile to notice in this connection that in the ordinary affairs and beliefs of human life we do not ask for scientific verification of this kind. We accept many things as certain in the realm of personal relationships upon the basis of direct insight.

When we say that we know our friends, we mean something very different from saying that we can give a scientific and verifiable account of them. But we are none the less sure of our knowledge. Similar certainties are to be found in the sphere of mystical experience.

It may well be that in this matter of the evidence of the survival of the human personality after death, we are dependent exactly upon this same kind of insight, and that a scientific verification though valuable where it can be obtained, is of secondary importance, and only partially relevant.

And this is precisely the situation in which we find ourselves in our assurances of Christianity itself. "We walk by faith, and not by sight."

It is thus a weakness, rather than a strength, in the Spiritualist position that it has been represented as resting upon scientific verification. If rigid scientific methods are applied it is possible that verification will never be attained. We may sum up the position from the point of view of science as follows:

There is no satisfactory scientific evidence in favour of any paranormal physical phenomena (materialisation, apports, telekinesis, etc.) All the available scientific evidence is against the occurrence of such phenomena.

Further, the hypothesis of unconscious mental activity in the mind of the medium or sensitive is a strong alternative hypothesis to that of the action of a discarnate entity in cases of mental mediumship.

Thus the strictly scientific verdict on the matter of personal survival can only be one of non-proven. Again, the whole question of extra sensory perception is still a matter of scientific subjudice.

On the other hand certain outstanding experiences of individuals, including certain experiences with mediums, make a strong prima facie case for survival and for the possibility of spirit communications while philosophical, ethical and religious considerations may be held to weight heavily on the same side.

When every possible explanation of these communications has been given, and all doubtful evidence set aside, it is very generally agreed that there remains some element as yet unexplained. We think that it is probable that the hypothesis that they proceed in some cases from discarnate spirits is the true one.

That so much can be said, even in so cautious a form, involves very important consequences, and makes necessary certain warnings.

It is abundantly clear, as Spiritualists themselves admit, that an easy credulity in these matters opens the door to self-deception and to a very great amount of fraud. We are greatly impressed by the evidence of this which we received, and desire to place on record a most emphatic warning to those who might become interested in Spiritualism from motives of mere curiosity or as a way of escaping from the responsibility of making their own decisions as Christians under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

It is legitimate for Christians who are scientifically qualified to make these matters a subject of scientific enquiry, though, as we have already said, such an enquiry has its necessary limitations.

But it is not legitimate, and it is questionably dangerous, to allow an interest in Spiritualism, at a low level of spiritual value, to replace that deeper religion which rests fundamentally upon the right relation of the soul to God himself.

It is necessary to keep clearly in mind that none of the fundamental Christian obligations or values is in any way changed by our acceptance of the possibility of communication with discarnate spirits.

Where these essential principles are borne in mind, those who have the assurance that they have been in touch with their departed friends may rightly accept the sense of enlargement and of unbroken friendship which it brings.

It is important to distinguish between assurances of this personal contact and assurances of the accuracy and authority of the messages received. As we have seen, and as many Spiritualists admit, there is every probability that even authentic messages would be liable to distortion.

There is a very great danger of misdirection if such messages are accepted as giving authoritative guidance unless they are checked by our own human reason under the guidance of the Holy Spirit received through prayer. But there is no reason why we should not accept gladly the assurance that we are still in closest contact with those who have been dear to us in this life, who are going forward, as we seek to do ourselves, in the understanding and fulfilment of the purpose of God.

We cannot avoid the impression that a great deal of Spiritualism as organised has its centre in man rather than in God, and is, indeed materialistic in character. To this extent it is a substitute for religion and is not in itself religious at all.

We were impressed by the unsatisfactory answers from practising Spiritualists to such questions as, "Has your prayer life, your sense of God, been strengthened by your Spiritualistic experiences?" This explains in great part the hesitancy of many Christians to have anything to do with it.

But if Spiritualism does, in fact, make so strong an appeal to some, it is at least in part because the Church has not proclaimed and practised its faith with sufficient conviction.

There is frequently little real fellowship even between the living, and the full intimate reality of the Communion of saints is often a dead letter. Spiritualism claims, in fact, to be making accessible a reality which the Church has proclaimed but of which it has seemed only to offer a shadow. This is, of course, only part of the truth.

For many the appeal of Spiritualism rests upon much lower motives. It may stimulate curiosity in the bizarre. It may offer consolation upon terms which are too easy. It may afford men the opportunity of escaping the challenge of faith which, when truly proclaimed, makes so absolute a claim upon Men's lives that they will not face it but turn aside to some easier way.

It is often held that the practice of Spiritualism is dangerous to the mental balance as well as to the spiritual condition, of those who take part in it, and it clearly true that there are some cases where it has become obsessional in character.

But it is very difficult to judge in these cases whether the uncritical and unwise types of temperament which does undoubtedly show itself in certain Spiritualists is a result or cause of the addiction to these practices.

Psychologically it is probable that persons in the condition of mental disturbance, or lack of balance, would very naturally use the obvious opportunities afforded by Spiritualism as a means of expressing the repressed emotions which have caused their distortion.

This indeed is true of Christianity itself, which frequently becomes the outlet, not only for cranks, but for persons who are definitely of unstable mentality.

It should be noticed that Spiritualists themselves are very much alive to the danger to those who are already unstable, and even to those who are stable, where the motives are wrong and the precautions as to sincerity inadequate.

Whatever else is clear in a matter where the evidence is difficult to interpret, it is certain that Spiritualism has every need of the high standards of Christianity and of its witness to a life which rests by faith upon God, and which is thereby freed from the conflicts of desire and of purpose to which all lives not so grounded are liable.

The view has been held with some degrees of Church authority, that psychic phenomena are real but that they proceed from evil spirits. The possibility that spirits of a low order may seek to influence us in this way cannot be excluded as inherently illogical or absurd, but it would extremely unlikely if there were not also the possibility of contact with good spirits.

The belief on Angelic guardians or guides has been very general in Christianity. But in any case the Christian life is grounded upon God, and its fundamental activities are prayer and worship, which issue in loving worship of mankind. A life so grounded has nothing to fear from evil influences or powers of any kind.

The Church of England, for reasons of past controversy, has been altogether too cautious in its references to the departed. Anglican prayers for the departed do not satisfy peoples needs, because the prayers are so careful in their language that it is not always evident that the departed are being prayed for, as contrasted with the living.

In general we need much more freedom in our recognition of the living unity of the whole Church, in this world and in that which lies beyond death. But detailed suggestions on this point should be matters of dispute, and lie beyond the main purpose of this report.

If Spiritualism, with all the aberrations set aside and with every care taken to present it humbly and accurately, contains a truth, it is important to see that truth not as a new religion, but only as filling up certain gaps in our knowledge, so that where we already walked by faith, we may now have some measure of sight as well.

It is, in our opinion, important that representatives of the Church should keep in touch with groups of intelligent persons who believe in Spiritualism. We must leave practical guidance in this matter to the Church itself.