

Kruger on Sharp (2006)

Sharp, Lynn. L. *Secular Spirituality: Reincarnation and Spiritism in Nineteenth-Century France*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006. Pp. xxiii + 245. ISBN 0-7391-1339-9

Kathryn Brigger Kruger, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Lynn L. Sharp's *Secular Spirituality: Reincarnation and Spiritism in Nineteenth-Century France* takes as its subject the French spiritist movement in the nineteenth century and its tenets of reincarnation and communion with the dead – be it through séances, mediums, or mystical revelation. It is Sharp's overarching aim to situate the French variety of nineteenth-century spiritism as a mediating movement between the religious conservatism of French Catholicism and the empirical secularity of a post-Enlightenment France. Indeed, Sharp seeks to disrupt such binary classifications of either a religious or a rational worldview and instead argues that early forms of French spiritism integrated the two seemingly disparate spheres of religion and reason into a secularized movement of spirituality.

Although not strictly arranged chronologically, the structure of the book is aided by a chronological framework in which Sharp traces the trajectory of French spiritism from its early romantic conceptions at the beginning of the nineteenth century through to its modern identity at the fin de siècle. The seven chapters of the book (including the introduction and conclusion) loosely follow such a timeline as the century progresses and yet are organized thematically as the titles of the chapters suggest.

The first chapter, "Romantic Reincarnation and Social Reform," addresses the romantic underpinnings of the spiritist movement and traces the spiritists' belief in reincarnation to the romantic socialist thought prevalent in the 1830s in France. Sharp suggests that such thinkers and writers as Pierre-Simon Ballanche, Pierre Leroux, and Jean Reynaud served as the main influences on mid-century spiritist belief. Marked by the utopian socialism endorsed by the Saint-Simonianism of the early nineteenth century, Sharp argues that Ballanche, Leroux, and Reynaud merged such romantic social theories with the occult practices of metempsychosis and palingenesis – phenomena that contributed to spiritism's eventual emphasis on reincarnation.

The chapter, "1850–1880: Building a Movement," focuses on the spiritist writer, Allan Kardec, who became a leading figure in the dissemination of spiritist beliefs in France in the early 1850s. Kardec's many publications (including the spiritist journal, *Revue spirite*) reached a wide audience of bourgeois readers and resulted in increasing numbers of practitioners of Kardec's spiritist doctrine. Although Sharp seeks to widen spiritism's influence beyond Kardec's charismatic authority, Kardec's death in 1869 immediately preceded the declaration of the Third Republic in 1870 – a government that was inherently suspicious of any anti- or counter-Catholicism impulses. Hence, spiritism's popularity declined dramatically in the 1870s in the absence of Kardec's leadership and amidst the rise of the Third Republic's government of moral order.

In her third chapter, "Politics of the Séance: Progress, Gender, Equality," Sharp argues that spiritism preceded and influenced feminism in its emphasis on gender equality and social progress. Sharp suggests that women's roles as mediums, translators, and writers of spiritist messages made the séance a site of transgression and reform insofar as women were allowed pivotal positions in the transmission of spiritist messages; moreover, Sharp contends that the ideal of androgyny envisioned in spiritist writings eliminated the power imbalances implicit between men and women in nineteenth-century gender stereotypes. How much influence the spiritist movement had in effecting feminist ideals in the nineteenth century is debatable considering the overall impetus toward gender equality as the century progressed; it is clear, however, that spiritism at the very least attracted feminist voices and often provided the platform and the audience for such spiritist-cum-feminist messages.

Chapter 4, "Struggles for Legitimacy: Science and Religion," addresses the crosscurrents of religion and science in the latter half of the nineteenth century. As Sharp outlines, the rise of psychology as a branch of medicine offered a scientific alternative to the psychosomatic phenomena previously endorsed by the spiritist movement as proof of reincarnation and "life beyond the veil." In the period ranging from 1880 to 1925, occultism as a secular activity came to replace the romantic-socialist conception of spiritism as it occurred at the beginning of the century – a point that Sharp delineates in the final chapter, "Spiritism, Occultism, Science: Meanings of Reincarnation in the Fin de Siècle." As the tension between religion and science continued to escalate, spiritist leaders such as Léon Denis, Gabriel Delanne, and Paul Leymarie emerged as vocal proponents of a new brand of spiritism that joined scientific reasoning with religious belief.

Sharp's *Secular Spirituality* offers a comprehensive survey of the spiritist movement in nineteenth-century France and assembles under one title a vast body of scholarship previously devoted to this topic. Aided by periodicals, pamphlets, popular novels, and other miscellaneous personal writings from this time period, Sharp is able to trace the spiritist trajectory as a

movement away from a strict Catholic religiosity and toward a secular spirituality that, as Sharp contends in her conclusion, ushered in the religio-cultural mores of a twentieth-century France.

Volume: 38

Year:

- 2009