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**Lynn L. Sharp**, *Secular Spirituality: Reincarnation and Spiritism in Nineteenth-Century France*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2006. xxiii + 245 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-7391-1338-0; \$28.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-7391-1339-9.

Review by David Allen Harvey, New College of Florida.

In this monograph, adapted from her doctoral dissertation at the University of California at Irvine, Lynn L. Sharp traces the development of the French spiritist movement from its origins to the First World War. Arguing that spiritism was “both central and marginal” (p. xvi) to nineteenth-century French society and culture, Sharp seeks to rescue the spiritists from what E. P. Thompson called “the enormous condescension of posterity” (not to mention that of many nineteenth-century contemporaries), arguing that spiritism was not the product of benighted ignorance or puerile credulity, but was rather a creative response to many of the central philosophical debates of its times, which thousands of French men and women of all social classes and educational levels found compelling.

The origins of spiritism are well known. The spiritualist movement, as it is most often known in the English-speaking world, began in 1848 in the “burned over district” of upstate New York, when the Fox sisters established communication with a spirit in their home, who responded to simple questions through a system of knocks. A spiritist fad soon ensued, marked both by increasingly sophisticated means of communicating with the spirits (of which the Ouija board is the best known, but which also included “automatic writing,” in which a pen in a medium’s hand was made to write out often detailed messages from the afterlife), and physical manifestations of the presence of spirits, such as the famous “turning tables.” Spiritism crossed the Atlantic in the first years of the Second Empire to become a widespread popular success in France.

Spiritism might have come and gone as a fad had it not been for a former schoolteacher, Hippolyte-Leon Rivail, better known by his pen-name Allan Kardec, who became convinced of the veracity of the spirit phenomena and in 1857 published *Le livre des esprits* [1], a sweeping metaphysical treatise consisting of a series of dialogues between the questioner and the spirits of great men of the past, including Plato and Saint Augustine. The book became a best-seller and placed Rivail/Kardec at the head of the French spiritist movement, which he directed until his death in 1869. After a period of drifting and division following Kardec’s death, the movement regained popularity in the 1880s, and remained a central presence in French cultural life up to the First World War and beyond.

Kardec’s *Le livre des esprits* offered a fascinating synthesis between rationalized Christianity, Enlightenment philosophy, and selective borrowings both from eastern religions and from western esotericism. Spiritism taught that the individual did not live a single life, passing after death to heaven, hell, or purgatory; rather, he or she passed through a series of existences, on the earth and on a variety of other planets. These reincarnations were directed by a karmic principle, in which suffering was a trial to perfect the spirit, and one’s good or evil actions had repercussions in the next incarnation. Unlike many eastern religions, however, spiritism maintained that spirits could only advance or remain stagnant, not backslide to a lower level of existence, nor could they transmigrate between humans and animals.

Sharp advances several key arguments in this work. First, she makes the case for continuity and

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transmission of ideas from the Saint-Simonian, Mesmerist, and romantic socialist movements of Restoration and July Monarchy France to the spiritists of the Second Empire and Third Republic, thereby dispelling the notion that French spiritism was merely a transplanted variant of American spiritualism. Second, she argues that spiritualism should be understood as an “urban popular religion,” complicating a familiar picture in which urban France was largely secularized, while popular religion was a rural phenomenon, declining alongside the peasantry that still clung to it. Finally, she demonstrates that the decline of traditional Catholicism, particularly within urban popular milieux, did not necessarily imply the acceptance of a “disenchanted,” rationalist worldview; on the contrary, alternative forms of religiosity, such as the “secular spirituality” offered by spiritism, thrived in these circles in the latter decades of the nineteenth century and beyond.

Sharp is not the first historian to study nineteenth-century French spiritism, or to trace its connections to Mesmerism and “somnambulisme;” Nicole Edelman’s 1995 study demonstrated that genealogy in convincing fashion. [2] The topic has come into vogue in recent years, and Sharp has benefited from collaboration with other junior scholars with similar interests, such as Naomi Andrews and John Warne Monroe (I presume to hope that my own work on French occultism has also been of use to her). [3] Nevertheless, Sharp manages to shed new light on a topic which remains largely unfamiliar to nonspecialists.

To the historian of modern France, spiritism is of interest not only in its own right, but for the unexpected light it sheds on a number of broader issues, particularly the ongoing feud between science and religion in post-Revolutionary French society. From its origins, spiritism presented itself as both science and religion, thereby transcending what had already become a bitter divide. Like religion, spiritism promised answers to moral and metaphysical questions, from the meaning of human suffering to the question of life after death. Like science, spiritism claimed to be empirically verifiable; in fact, it was the promise of providing scientific proof of the supernatural that drew many French intellectuals, notably Victor Hugo, to dabble in spiritist séances. Ultimately, however, the growing chasm between science and religion in fin de siècle France proved too great even for spiritism to bridge, and the movement began to diverge, with one faction, led by Gabriel Delanne, seeking scientific respectability, and another, Léon Denis, becoming increasingly mystical. Nevertheless, Sharp argues that spiritism had grown “closer to the philosophical center of French society” (p. 193) by the end of the nineteenth century, as Positivist faith in reason and science gave way to an irrationalist cult of *élan vital*, and rival esoteric movements such as Theosophy and Martinist occultism enjoyed a brief heyday in the 1880s and 1890s.

Sharp does a particularly good job of developing the connections between the spiritists and their broader milieu, demonstrating how changes in French political regimes and intellectual trends led to changes in the spiritist movement. She observes that spiritism descended from earlier progressive movements, and that the Christian mystic Pierre-Simon Ballanche and the romantic socialists Pierre Leroux and Jean Reynaud anticipated the spiritist theme of the individual and collective regeneration of the post-Revolutionary French. Following the failure of the Second Republic, the spiritist movement, which came to prominence in the early years of the Second Empire, served as a refuge for progressives of a variety of stripes. In this regard, Sharp connects her discussion of the “democratic play” and “alternative worlds” of spiritism (pp. 92-93) to Philip Nord’s argument in his *The Republican Moment* [4]; spiritism thus appears, alongside Freemasonry, the artistic avant-garde, and associations of free professionals, as a venue for the emergence and formation of republican values and practices under the Second Empire. After the consolidation of the Third Republic, which at last established stable democratic institutions in France, but rejected the utopian dreams of 1848 and continued to exclude large groups (women most notably) from the full rights of citizenship, spiritism continued to offer an organizational model of a different kind of community-egalitarian, participatory, and encompassing both women and men.

Sharp's analysis of the gender dynamics at work in the spiritist movement is particularly interesting. Spiritism, as formulated by Kardec and his successors, made no distinctions in gender, arguing that all spirits pass successively through both male and female incarnations, thereby affirming the essential androgyny of all humanity—a theme which Sharp correctly links to the romantic socialist tradition. On the other hand, spiritists maintained that each incarnation implied a unique set of trials and tests that had to be endured with resignation, and thus largely pushed the practical realization of equality from this world to those to come. Similar positions with regard to differences of race and class led to a central contradiction within the movement, which both affirmed universal equality and preached quiescence and acceptance of social inequality as tests which the spirit had to endure. On the whole, however, Sharp considers spiritism to have been a progressive movement, which modeled an alternative social order, allowed all people to participate equally in séances without regard to gender or class, and preached that humanity was inexorably marching toward a more perfect future.

Spiritism has an interesting story, and Sharp tells it in a clear and engaging narrative. I did note one minor error, of trivial importance to Sharp's larger argument; she states that the esoteric Freemason Jean-Baptiste Willermoz, who died in 1824, led a magnetic somnambulist circle in Lyon in the 1830s (p. 75)—though for spiritists and *somnambules*, death might not be an insurmountable obstacle to participation! *Secular Spirituality* offers an insightful and readable survey of a cultural movement which was far more prominent in the second half of the nineteenth century in France than most general surveys of the period acknowledge, and also sheds new light on familiar topics such as the secularization of French society, the culture wars over science and religion, and the roots of democratic practice and the struggle for both gender and class equality. Hopefully Sharp's work will contribute to bringing the study of French spiritism, like the movement itself a century earlier, from the margins to the center of historical study.

## NOTES

[1] Allan Kardec (Hippolyte-Léon Rivail), *Le Livre des esprits* (Paris, 1857).

[2] Nicole Edelman, *Voyantes, guérisseuses, et visionnaires en France, 1785-1914* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995).

[3] Naomi J. Andrews, *Socialism's Muse: Gender in the Intellectual Landscape of French Romantic Socialism* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2006); John Warne Monroe, *Evidence of Things Not Seen: Spiritism, Occultism, and the Search for a Modern Faith in France, 1853-1925* (Yale University Dissertation, 2002); David Allen Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment: Occultism and Politics in Modern France* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005).

[4] Philip G. Nord, *The Republican Moment: Struggles for Democracy in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995).

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