

# SPIRITUALISM

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## Introduction and Definition of Spiritualism

Spiritualism constitutes a distinct religious, philosophical, and social movement primarily rooted in the belief that the souls of the deceased persist after bodily death and are capable of communicating with the living. This communication is typically facilitated through individuals specially gifted or trained, known as **mediums**. Unlike many traditional organized religions that focus on posthumous judgment or resurrection, Spiritualism emphasizes the immediate and continuous existence of the spirit realm, asserting that interaction between the two worlds is a natural, albeit often overlooked, aspect of reality. The foundational worldview of Spiritualism challenges strict philosophical **materialism**, positing a universe where consciousness and spirit are the primary, enduring realities.

The core tenets of Spiritualism are intrinsically linked to a metaphysical stance that asserts the fundamental reality of the universe is not purely material or mechanistic. This belief system maintains that the physical world is merely one layer of existence, overshadowed and informed by a vast, dynamic spiritual sphere. This spiritual sphere is conceived as a realm of continuous progression, where deceased spirits continue their evolutionary journey, seeking higher states of knowledge and moral refinement. The accessibility of this spirit world to human inquiry is crucial, transforming death from a final cessation into a transitional phase into a more refined state of being.

Historically significant, Spiritualism gained widespread prominence in the mid-nineteenth century, offering solace and perceived certainty regarding life after death during a period of intense scientific and social upheaval. The movement provided a democratic approach to religion, often bypassing traditional ecclesiastical hierarchies by allowing individuals direct, experiential proof of survival through phenomena witnessed during **séances**. A classic articulation of this belief is demonstrated by the statement: "Joe believed in **spiritualism** and that ghosts visited him," highlighting the personal, experiential validation central to the faith, where the boundary between the living and the deceased is perpetually permeable.

## Metaphysical Foundations: Rejection of Materialism

The metaphysical underpinning of Spiritualism rests firmly upon the premise that the fundamental reality of the cosmos is inherently non-material. This perspective stands in direct opposition to ontological materialism, which asserts that only matter and energy exist and that consciousness is merely an epiphenomenon of complex physical processes in the brain. Spiritualists, conversely, argue that spirit, defined as conscious, vital force, precedes and sustains matter. Death is viewed not as the annihilation of the self, but as the liberation of the **spirit body**--a non-physical vehicle of consciousness--from its temporary physical shell.

This dualistic or idealistic outlook dictates that the entire universe is permeated by intelligence and

life force. The spirits of the deceased are not distant entities relegated to an unknowable heaven, but inhabit a sphere immediately adjacent to the physical plane, often described as having varying degrees of density or vibration. The continuous existence is not static; rather, the spirit realm is structured as a hierarchy of development, where spirits advance morally and intellectually over time. This structure provides the ethical impetus for the movement, suggesting that actions taken during earthly life directly impact the starting point and quality of existence in the spirit world, emphasizing personal accountability and moral striving.

Furthermore, the spiritualist understanding of reality necessitates a rethinking of causality. Phenomena observed during séances--such as raps, table movements, or apparitions--are cited as evidence of non-material forces acting upon the physical world. This interaction is key to the movement's validation, providing tangible, sensory proof that **spirit is primary** and capable of independent action. This philosophical commitment to a non-material reality forms the bedrock upon which all doctrines of communication, ethics, and universal progression are built, reinforcing the belief that human existence is part of an eternal, evolving spiritual continuum.

## The Role of the Medium and Communication Mechanics

Central to the practice of Spiritualism is the **medium**, an individual believed to possess the unique sensitivity or capacity to bridge the gap between the material world and the spirit world. Mediumship is not uniform; it manifests in various forms, classified according to the mode of communication achieved. These modes include mental mediumship, where the medium receives information psychically through clairvoyance (seeing), clairaudience (hearing), or clairsentience (feeling); and physical mediumship, which involves the production of observable physical phenomena, such as levitation, materializations, or direct voice communication, where spirits purportedly speak without the medium's vocal cords being used.

The process of communication is often explained in terms of energy transfer and vibrational resonance. Spirits, existing at a higher, finer rate of vibration, require the medium's physical and mental resources to lower their vibrational frequency enough to interact with the earthly plane. During a séance, the medium often enters a trance state, allowing the spirit entity--sometimes a specific guide or control spirit--to use the medium's body or energy field. Automatic writing, where the medium's hand writes messages without conscious control, and **trance speaking**, where the medium speaks in a voice or language not their own, are common manifestations of this purported energetic exchange.

The efficacy of mediumship is often measured by the quality and specificity of the messages received, particularly those providing verifiable information (known as **evidentiary mediumship**) that was unknown to the medium or the sitters. However, the reliance on mediums has historically been a point of vulnerability for the movement, leading to accusations of fraud and psychological

manipulation. Despite this criticism, the belief remains strong that the medium acts as a vital channel, offering empirical proof that individual consciousness survives the demise of the physical body, thus fulfilling the movement's primary objective of demonstrating spiritual survival.

## Historical Context and the Rise of the Movement

Spiritualism as an organized movement traces its generally accepted origin to the events of 1848 in Hydesville, New York, involving the **Fox Sisters**, Maggie and Kate. These young girls reported experiencing mysterious rapping sounds that they attributed to the spirit of a deceased peddler. By establishing a code system based on these raps, they purportedly engaged in dialogues with the spirit, attracting national attention and rapidly popularizing the idea of spirit communication. This event served as a powerful catalyst, tapping into a pre-existing climate of religious inquiry and fascination with mesmerism and various forms of psychic phenomena prevalent in the mid-nineteenth century.

The movement rapidly expanded across the United States and Europe, drawing adherents from diverse social strata, including prominent intellectuals, scientists, and political reformers. Spiritualism offered a compelling alternative to increasingly rigid or dogmatic religious institutions, promising direct, personal revelation rather than relying solely on ancient scriptures or ecclesiastical authority. Its democratic nature appealed particularly to women, who often found agency and leadership roles as powerful mediums, positions that were largely unavailable to them in traditional religious and secular society.

The Victorian era, marked by high mortality rates, particularly among children, provided fertile ground for Spiritualism's growth. The promise of contact with lost loved ones offered profound emotional solace, transforming the experience of grief from permanent separation into temporary absence. By the late 19th century, large organizations were formed, and publications dedicated to **psychical research** and spiritualist philosophy flourished, cementing its status not just as a passing fad, but as a serious, albeit controversial, religious and philosophical force.

## Core Tenets and Ethical Code

While Spiritualism lacks a single, centralized theological authority, its adherents generally subscribe to a unified set of principles, formalized by organizations such as the National Spiritualist Association of Churches (NSAC). These principles outline the movement's ethical, theological, and philosophical framework, emphasizing moral responsibility, continuous self-improvement, and the brotherhood of humanity. The core ethical code is fundamentally progressive and humanistic, stressing that individuals are responsible for their own spiritual progress both on Earth and in the afterlife.

The movement's theological stance is often described as **deistic** or panentheistic, recognizing an

Infinite Intelligence or God, often referred to as the Great Spirit, as the source of all existence, operating through immutable natural laws. Spiritualists generally reject the concept of eternal damnation, believing instead in continuous, evolutionary progress for all souls. Suffering and hardship are viewed as educational tools necessary for spiritual maturation, rather than punitive measures.

The most widely accepted formal summary of the faith is encapsulated in the following fundamental propositions, which guide both religious practice and ethical behavior:

The Fatherhood of God.

The Brotherhood of Man.

The Immortality of the Soul and Continuous Existence of Human Personality.

Personal Responsibility for Individual Actions and Consequences.

Communication between Spirits and Mortals is Possible and Natural.

The Golden Rule is the Supreme Moral Law.

The Door to Redemption is Always Open, and Progress is Eternal.

## Spiritualism, Psychology, and Psychical Research

The rise of Spiritualism coincided directly with the emergence of psychology as an empirical science, leading to significant early cross-pollination. Many founding figures of modern psychology and philosophy, including **William James**, were deeply interested in spiritualist phenomena, not necessarily to confirm the existence of spirits, but to study the psychological mechanisms underlying trance states, dissociation, and belief formation. The Society for Psychical Research (SPR), established in 1882, was founded specifically to apply scientific methods to investigate phenomena such as telepathy, clairvoyance, and mediumship, positioning these experiences at the boundary of known psychological capabilities.

From a psychological perspective, many spiritualist phenomena have been re-evaluated through the lens of suggestion, expectation, and fraud. The trance state of the medium, for instance, is often analyzed as a form of **dissociative state** or self-hypnosis, where messages attributed to external spirits may originate from the medium's subconscious mind. Furthermore, the effectiveness of mediums in delivering comforting or accurate information is frequently explained by techniques such as cold reading--the systematic use of general statements and observation to appear specific--or the powerful psychological effect of grief and the desperate need for closure among sitters.

Despite the scientific skepticism regarding the supernatural claims, the psychological study of Spiritualism remains valuable for understanding the human capacity for belief, the formation of religious experience, and the role of social context in validating anomalous experiences. The psychological appeal lies in its ability to manage existential anxiety by providing a tangible structure for life after death, offering a sense of order and purpose in a universe often perceived as chaotic or indifferent. The interaction between psychology and Spiritualism highlights the persistent tension between subjective, deeply felt experience and the requirements of objective, empirical verification.

## The Universal Soul and Connection to Panpsychism

A crucial metaphysical aspect of Spiritualism, often overlooked in discussions focused solely on communication, is the belief that all humans and animals possess a soul that is intrinsically part of a larger, cosmic consciousness or energy field. This concept aligns Spiritualist thought with philosophical traditions that reject strict dualism in favor of an integrated spiritual universe. The individual human spirit is not a segregated entity but a localized expression of the universal life force, destined ultimately to merge back into the greater spiritual continuum after reaching a certain point of evolution.

This notion bears a conceptual resemblance to **panpsychism**, the philosophical view that mind, or a mind-like quality, is a fundamental and ubiquitous feature of the universe, existing even in the most basic forms of matter. While Spiritualism is generally focused on communicating with individualized post-mortem entities, its broader understanding of the soul as a fragment of an Infinite Intelligence suggests that consciousness is not an emergent property exclusive to complex biological life, but an inherent quality woven into the fabric of existence itself. This explains the Spiritualist belief that animals, and sometimes even plants, possess souls or spirit essences capable of survival and communication.

The interconnectedness implied by the universal soul theory provides the foundation for the ethical requirement of brotherhood and universal love. If every individual spirit is a part of the same divine whole, then harm inflicted upon one is harm inflicted upon the universal consciousness. This metaphysical framework reinforces the moral imperative for continuous self-improvement and altruism, ensuring that the individual's spiritual progress contributes positively to the collective evolution of the spirit realm and the cosmos itself.

## Modern Manifestations and Scientific Critique

Contemporary Spiritualism continues to thrive globally, maintaining its traditional practices of séances, healing, and trance services, often adapting them to modern contexts. Organizations like the NSAC continue to license and regulate mediums, attempting to maintain standards of ethical

practice and fidelity to the founding principles. Modern adherents often emphasize the healing aspects of the faith--both spiritual and physical--believing that positive spiritual energy and guidance from the spirit world can influence health and well-being.

However, Spiritualism remains a significant subject of scientific and skeptical critique. The primary challenge lies in the lack of replicable, verifiable evidence for spirit communication under controlled laboratory conditions. Critics argue that the phenomena observed in séances are consistently explained by naturalistic causes, including psychological factors (gullibility, selective memory), theatrical tricks, and outright fraud, which historically plagued the movement. The absence of a physical, measurable mechanism for spirit energy or the soul makes its claims difficult to integrate within standard scientific paradigms.

Despite these ongoing criticisms, Spiritualism endures because of its deep emotional appeal and its ability to provide meaning and certainty regarding life's ultimate questions. For believers, the experience of purported communication serves as an unassailable confirmation of their worldview, transcending the need for external scientific validation. The commitment to demonstrating the survival of consciousness remains the defining mission of the movement, offering a unique philosophical perspective on the nature of reality and the eternal journey of the soul.