RB4003: Contemporary Spirituality

2020

Assessment Cover Sheet for the Essay

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Please complete the following

I confirm that this assignment which I have submitted is all my own work and the source of any information or material I have used (including the internet) has been fully identified and properly acknowledged as required in the school guidelines I have received.

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What are the links between the historical background of spiritualism and the contemporary social context of religion and spirituality?

Introduction

With church attendance in the UK taking dramatic reductions over the last twenty years (Sherwood, 2018), the contemporary context for religiosity and spirituality would seem to be in a dire state. However, exploring beyond the surface level of church attendance, we come to discover a significant diversification of both religious practice and spiritual belief that is navigating a rapidly changing world and a world in which moral values have shifted in the opposite direction to Church dogma. Spiritualism, and its many facets, is a key player in this "spiritual shift" towards less organised forms of religion, the consequences of which will dramatically impact the British religious landscape of the 21st century.

This "spiritual shift" is characterised by a wide set of alternative beliefs that hold long histories of persecution at the hands of the Church. Furthermore, demographers are challenged to try and quantify the deep complexities of people's beliefs that are not accurately grasped through each decade's general census. Despite how a person may identify themselves in the census, this tragically misses out the complexity of religious belief and attitudes regarding more specific questions and therefore tells demographers very little about the true religious landscape. Accepting these shortcomings of modern demographic data on religiosity, demonstrates that the data we have likely represents only a narrow understanding of the reality of religious and spiritual life. This understanding has not been helped by the diversification and individualisation of religious beliefs (Wilke, 2015, p263-276) as well as the fast-changing nature of digital religion (Campbell, 2012, p1-6).

In this essay, the historical background and present-day role of spiritualism in British society will be investigated with the central aim of taking an in-depth look at the social context of spiritualism's presence in Britain, the commercialisation of spiritualism and how both technology and changes in social values are being navigated by spiritualists. This analysis will particularly focus on the role of women in spiritualism and the rise in acceptance of LGBTQ groups in society as important factors effecting not only the rise of spiritualism, but the British religious landscape as a whole. Firstly, it is important to consider where spiritualism originated in order to understand its contemporary presence.

The History of Spiritualism

Spiritualism emerged as a new religious movement and quickly grew to peak membership in the space of 100 years between the early 1800s and the early 1900s (Frisk, 2019, p324-327). Spiritualism, before resembling a more organised religion in recent years, as seen by the rise of Spiritualist churches (Spiritualist.tv, 2020; The Spiritualists' National Union, 2020), started out as dispersed informal gatherings with séances occurring often in people's own homes, or at the home of a spiritualist.

It is a religious movement based on two fundamental notions; the first, that spirits of the dead exist and the second, that these spirits have both the ability and the propensity to communicate with the living (McCarthy, 2012). Beyond these, a belief structure developed around the idea that the spirit world is not a static place, but is instead a place where spirits continue evolving and that these evolving spirits were advancing in such a way that they were deemed worthy of dispensing knowledge and morals. As a result, it was towards spirits that people began looking to seek moral and theological guidance. These concepts, which notably represented an alternative to traditional Christian belief structures, fascinated the middle and upper classes of North American and European societies in the middle of the 19th century (Brandon, 1983, p42-76). This tells us that the middle and upper classes of Western societies must have felt dissatisfied with the traditional Christian belief system, so much so that they ventured into alternative beliefs to fulfil their spiritual

needs. This is arguably what is in occurrence once again in Western civilisation, albeit in more contemporary times, this dissatisfaction with the Christian belief system has spread to all levels of society unlike in the 19th century. However, before spiritualism made its way to American high society, it has its origins in a fringe Christian denomination in England.

Some scholars consider Swedeborgianism to be the first spiritualist church, having been established in the 1700s, but one that still remained entangled in a Christian belief structure (Swedenborg Project, 2007). The Americanisation of this newfound spiritualist movement was likely the cause of its initial popularity amongst the middle and upper classes before its eventual introduction to the lower classes (Clarke et al., 1988, p913). Essentially, what spiritualism offered those upper class Americans was something new; a way of interacting with their spirituality through an unorthodox avenue, as particularly enticed by the possibility of communicating with passed loved ones. It could be argued that it is in this spiritualist movement that we see the first inklings of religious diversification in Western society that lead to the spiritual diversity of contemporary times.

Key figures in the spiritualist movement were the Fox sisters in New York State as well as Paschal Beverly Randolph and Emma Hardinge Britten (Brandon, 1983, p1-41). Looking at these early figures in the spiritualist movement also signals an important connection to the present day face of spiritualism as being a largely women-led movement (Shreve, 2018). It was individuals like the Fox sisters who became the face of the movement, perhaps owing to their own disenfranchisement from traditional religion (Abbott, 2012). Spiritualism, precisely due to its non-institutionalised nature, allowed for women to take on leadership roles, a rare phenomena in traditional religions and a factor that likely attracted women to explore their spirituality through spiritualism (Grossman, 2019, p151-163; Haywood, 1983, p157-166). Essentially, spiritualism represented an avenue for women to achieve freedom from institutional religious constraints, particularly due to the top-down structure that institutionalised religions tended to represent and for the most part, continue to do so through to contemporary times (King, 2015).

Shortly following the initial rise in spiritualism's popularity, a branch of spiritualism with its own particular beliefs and practices arose in the 1850s and became known as spiritism or French spiritualism (Moreira-Almeida, 2020). Founded and lead for the first decade of its existence by Allan Kardec through his authorship of the Spiritist Codification, Spiritism expanded on the fundamental ideas of spiritualism regarding the "nature, origin and destiny of spirits" (Moreira-Almeida, 2008). Spiritism's main teaching is that humans are immortal spirits that temporarily inhabit physical bodies for several necessary incarnations. This is so as to achieve ethical and intellectual advancements, but spirits are believed to harbour both beneficent and malevolent impacts on the corporeal world (Miller, 2019). Again, like wider spiritualism, spiritism represented a heterodoxy; a divergence from the then still dominant Christianity. As such, both spiritualism and spiritism embodied the individualisation of religion and undermined the organised Churches, perhaps having been somewhat influenced by the Enlightenment era of the prior century as spiritualism represented a search for meaning that wasn't boxed in by Christian doctrine.

In 1853, David Richmond founded the first modern spiritualist church in the UK with the fashionability of spiritualism rising concurrently in England as it did in continental Europe and in the United States. Until 1898, the spiritualist movement had not received any official response from the Catholic Church on its beliefs, but in that year, the Church did publish a formal condemnation of spiritualism (BBC, 2009). This condemnation finally signalled the true role of spiritualism as being a divergence from the Christian doctrine that had dominated for centuries prior and as representing a true heterodoxy. The very fact that the Catholic Church was acknowledging spiritualism proves the movement's rapid growth and influence during the 19th century. Although the Catholic Church's condemnation of spiritualism likely had a damaging effect on spiritualism's popularity in the early 20th century, the fact that such a condemnation remains in place to the present day affirms spiritualism as a movement representing fundamental change in the way people interact with their spirituality. In the contemporary context, this ironically only strengthens its distinct identity as resembling a force against traditional religions which are themselves seeing a decline in their social relevance in contemporary Western society (Cornwell, 2019; Possamai, 2019). Having now

understood the background to spiritualism, we can explore the implications of these historical events on contemporary spirituality and approaches to religion in the 21st century by first focusing on the business of spiritualism.

The Business of Contacting the Spirit Realm

Mediumship is the communication between spirits of the dead and living human beings. Although there are indirect references to mediumship prior to the 19th century, it is only after the rise of spiritualism that mediumship itself saw widespread popularity as a fundamental practice of the movement. It is predicated on the notion that a select group of individuals, known as mediums, hold the ability to channel spirits, often through séance tables or ouija board (O'Keeffe & Wiseman, 2005, p165-179). This special ability of mediums presents an esoteric dimension to spiritualism by the notion that only a small group of individuals have the capacity to communicate with spirits. As such, spiritualism itself focuses in on the medium as the leader, but with no overarching organisation with authority to regulate, this leaves individual spiritualist groups vulnerable to cultic tendencies (Herrington, 2014). However, spiritualism did not discriminate between genders, hence the opportunity for women to participate as mediums (King, 2005, p93-128). Furthermore, it was perhaps the very fact that women were mainly leading spiritualist sessions that was indeed the unique draw for many people; women being able to take on leadership roles in spiritualism demonstrated a significant break from patriarchal religious history.

In addition, a principal draw for people to spiritualism was likely due to the claim of mediums being able to communicate with the deceased, meaning passed loved ones and this has today developed into a full scale industry that branches off in many directions (Held, 2019; Meder, 2016). This blatant commercialisation of spiritualism from the outset demonstrates an important connection to the modern and increasingly commercialised religious landscape (Grim, 2017; Spratt, 2019). As such, it can be argued that mediums of spiritualism and their American capitalistic tendencies, were some of the first post-Industrial figures to predicate a religion on commercialism.

The commercialisation of religion is a topic of contention and the encroachment of religious marketing's importance is something that all faith organisations are currently grappling with (Castle, 2015). Psychics, mediums and clairvoyance have taken full advantage of digital technologies to promote and conduct their services in new, digitised ways. One example of this is the rise in popularity of Lillyanne the Psychic Medium in the UK who regularly holds live séances and mediumship sessions on her Facebook page (Lillyanne Psychic Medium, 2020) and another is the psychic celebrity Mystic Meg who is known for her work in astrology (Mortimer, 2015). Whether you believe or otherwise agree with how these successful figures — notably, both of whom are women — have made their money, it cannot be disputed that both have managed to create thriving online businesses from mediumship, which not only owes to the religious open marketplace of the 21st century, but also to the long history of commercialisation within the tradition of spiritualism.

Many psychics have also taken advantage of online advertising to boost promotion for their business (See Figure 1 as an example of psychics advertising in Google Search Engine). However, this highlights a point of contention that mediums and psychics have conflated business with religious beliefs. Many of these psychics see what they do as a business yet they continue to use the cover of religion and spirituality in an effort to remain unchallenged by regulators (Advertising Standards Authority, 2016), thus leading to misconceptions and issues of false advertising with potential negative consequences for consumers (O'Regan, 2020). As such, regulations regarding mediumship, psychics, and astrology remain convoluted and the practical application of such regulations is questionable exactly for the reason that this industry deals with spiritual and religious belief, a category of identity protected in law (Committee of Advertising Practice, 2020). Having understood the modern day business of spiritualism, now comes the time to culminate the discussion by focusing on spiritualism's role in the contemporary social context. This means building on the history of spiritualism's relationship with gender and translating this into the landscape of changing social values, the dominance of technology, and the individualisation of religion.

Contemporary Social Context

The rise of mass digital technology since the turn of the millennium has held considerable implications for religion. Spiritualists, alongside traditional religions, have been somewhat forced to become digitised for the sake of their survival, particularly to influence new generations, in a social media dominated world. With the advent of social networking sites, particularly online groups specifically focused on the discussion of religion, people are able to voice their opinions, beliefs and concerns with others from around the world. This has given rise to greater criticism of religion from ordinary individuals who wouldn't ever have had such a global platform to voice their thoughts prior to the invention of the internet, but this has equally given the opportunity for religious apologists to defend their faith through online forums like Reddit (2020) and others (DC&R, 2020; Religious Forums, 2020).

Social networking sites have become the new arenas for religious and philosophical debate and one's engagement in these online debates can be considered as engaging with their faith without necessarily entering a religious building or conducting a traditional religious act. In another example, people can now watch Catholic Mass services through their local parish's website, an example of which was recently seen in the Pope's virtual Easter service due to the Coronavirus pandemic (Farrer, 2020). Traditional religions are having to embrace technology because they understand that their continued survival and societal relevance is dependent upon their engagements online. As seen in our discussion of the business of spiritualism, psychics and mediums have long embraced all digital platforms to spread their messages. In turn, the better a religion's ability to handle technology, the wider their message will spread, but technology isn't the only factor impacting contemporary religion.

The individualisation of religion means that religious beliefs have not only turned more private rather than communal, but also more individual and personal in their nature rather than shared and expressed, perhaps as a result of widespread secularisation throughout Western countries (Fuchs et al., 2020, p7-20). One example of this individualisation is the continued popularity of praying (TearFund, 2018) amongst UK adults despite the fact that church attendance over the last two decades has dramatically declined (Serafino, 2020). This trend epitomises the state of contemporary religiosity as being personal rather than communal and also suggests that although religious identification to Christianity is on the decline (Swerling, 2019), that the British public remain in touch with their spirituality. As such, people are retaining their religious beliefs, but they are expressing those beliefs in different ways; namely, in privacy and through the anonymity of the internet; both are trends which remain much harder to quantify for demographers.

Applying this to the context of spiritualism, a 2014 report by YouGov suggested that one in three Britons believed in the existence of ghosts with 9% saying they had communicated with the dead (Dahlgreen, 2014), a central element of spiritualism. This was itself followed up by additional reports years later re-affirming similar tendencies towards belief in spirit communication amongst Britons (Dagnall et al., 2017; Dahlgreen, 2016). Although this data does not definitively prove that Britons identify with spiritualism as their religion, it does suggest that a sizeable proportion of Britons believe in some central tenets of spiritualism. In turn, this clear movement away from the traditional Christian belief structure towards the embracement of spiritualistic beliefs signifies the influence of the individualisation of religion manifested through the turn away from institutionalised forms of religion. The personalism that is involved with spiritualistic practices like communicating with passed loved ones is a definitive example of how spiritualism caters to contemporary needs for spirituality without dictating moral precepts.

Due to the fact that spiritualism can be understood as an engagement with spirituality rather than a religion (Flanagan & Jupp, 2007, p232), it needn't convey dogmatic moral precepts that alienate now widely accepted community, such as the LGBTQ community. This is a community whose disapprobation from most religions is likely a driving factor for youth dissociation from such religions due to the higher levels of acceptance of LGBTQ amongst young people (Sherwood,

2018). This acceptance has translated to the political realm with the legalisation of same-sex marriage occurring in the UK in 2013, thus erupting debates regarding the validity of the Church of England's relationship with the state (Kettell, 2019, p361-380; Smith, 2019, p153-178). Besides the force of technology and the changing form of religion towards individuality in recent years, perhaps most monumental for the religious landscape has been this shift in values, particularly towards women and the LGBTQ community.

The diversification of religious identity in Britain that has emerged as a result of the liberalisation of adherents, is directly relatable to the struggles and concerns of the LGBTQ community (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005, p121). For example, the Roman Catholic Church's continued stance against homosexuality is likely to have made LGBTQ people feel ostracised by the Church and other traditional religions and so, as a result, this community is inclined to searching for and fulfil their spiritual needs from more accepting forms of religion. LGBTQ people have just as much a yearning for spiritual fulfilment and an interest in the topics concerning religion as much as a heterosexual person. Their ostracism from mainstream traditional religions demonstrates not only a growth area for spiritualism, but indeed an opportunity to explore LGBTQ approaches to religiosity more generally. In all, the heterodoxy of spiritualism suits the modern secular values of Western society as spiritualism remains an un-politicised form of spiritual engagement that ironically caters to materialism through its commercialisation.

Finally, linking these dramatic changes in religious identity to gender reveals some important considerations, the first of which is the rise of stereotypes attached to mediums, one of which is women becoming almost synonymous with mediumship (Emmons & Emmons, 2003, p45-86; Kalvig, 2016, p47-64). Secondly, the unorganised nature of spiritualism as certainly offering women the chance to act as spiritual leaders for one of the first times in the history of religion. Thirdly, that this afforded women with the opportunity to gain equality with men in the context of religion as the ability of mediumship was not restricted to any particular sex (Skultans, 2019, p3-12).

Conclusion

To conclude, religion certainly isn't dead, nor dying. In fact, it is changing; it is diversifying, and spiritualism is at the forefront of that change. The modern commercialisation of spiritualism is part of a movement towards the wider commercialisation of religion that has taken hold particularly in the last decade. With our specific focus on women in spiritualism as well as LGBTQ issues in relation to religion and the resulting political implications, the contemporary social context no doubt favours spiritualism. This is mainly because spiritualism exists as an engagement with the supernatural without entanglements in moral precepts considered outdated or unprogressive. This favoured status is further manifested through the changing needs for spirituality amongst Britons, particularly demonstrated by the movement towards individualism rather than communalism, as well as the postmodern search for self-understanding through spiritual engagement (Morris, 2016, p395). Finally, spiritualism is playing a role in that reshaping of British religiosity through the use of technology, particularly the use of social media in spreading messages and offering psychic services, a form of online spiritual service that is likely to help mediums survive the current social distancing rules forced upon Britain and the whole world by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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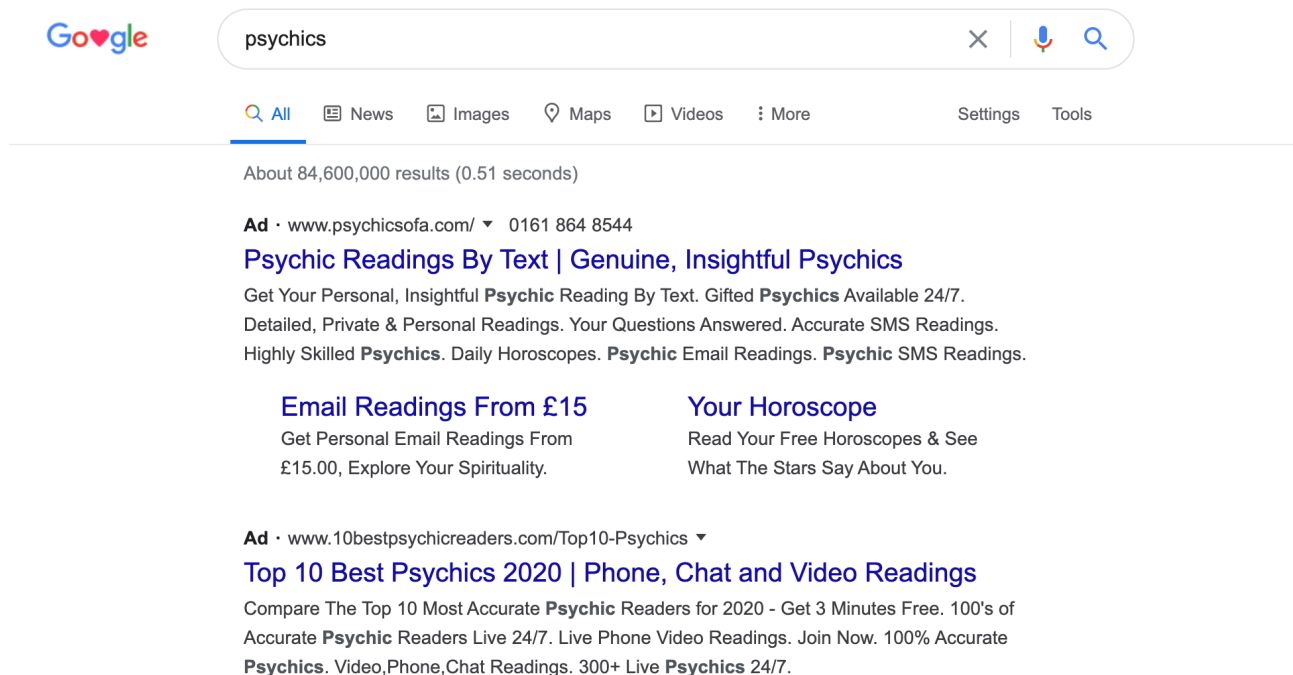
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Figure 1