

The Secularization of the Soul: Psychical Research in Modern Britain. J. Cerullo. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1982, 194 pages, \$18.50.

Reviewed by Terence M. Hines, Pace University

Cerullo has written a fascinating account of the first 25 to 30 years of psychic research in Great Britain. The book concentrates not just on who did what and when, but ties the rise of interest in spiritualism and the scientific study of psychic phenomena to social trends of the times.

During this period the move toward scientific explanations of all phenomena was a strong one. This included attempts to explain phenomena previously left to churches in scientific terms and to the study of these scientifically. The spiritualists generally denied any religious content to their beliefs (and hence were not popular with church officials), and those who felt that ghosts and other manifestations of the spirit world could and should be explained scientifically found natural allies in the spiritualist movement. The soul was being secularized.

But the alliance between the spiritualists and the scientific psychic investigators was not to last. Investigators like Gurney and Myers developed a view of telepathy that threatened to explain spiritualist phenomena without recourse to any life after death. To quote Cerullo: "The telepathic mind, however wonderous, was (as, indeed, its discoverers had intended it to be) entirely a fact of this world, our organisms, earthly life. But the spiritualists, for all their empiricism, had always held an essentially traditional view of the spirit and the soul. To them the soul was more than a fact of our organisms and earthly life" (p. 79).

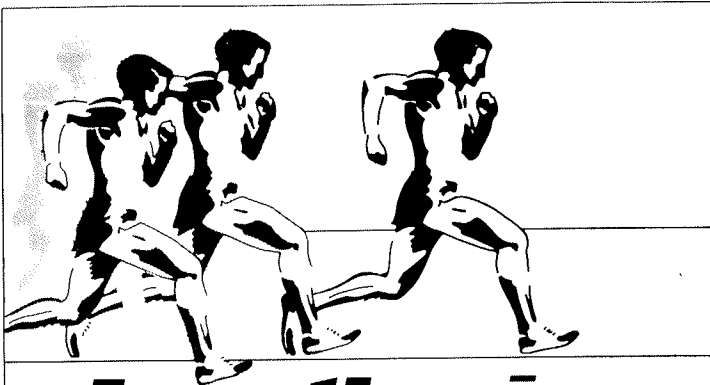
In addition, serious psychic investigators were greatly disturbed by the numerous instances of fraud perpetrated by mediums, even the most famous and respected ones.

The process of secularizing the soul did not stop with psychic research. It continued with the continuation coming from a source that would leave psychic research behind. This source was Freudian psychoanalytic thought. It continued to secularize the soul, in a framework more acceptable to the popular and scientific community.

When Cerullo is describing the history of the development and decline of psychic research, and the reasons for it, he is at his best. The analysis is well written and convincing. One 50 page chapter, titled "The Constituency for Psychical Research," however, is the book's weakest section. Here the author provides short biographies of seven members and supporters of the Society for Psychical Research and attempts to draw from these stories some idea of why people in general were attracted to psychical research. While the biographies are often extremely interesting, they offer few insights into the broader reasons for the rise in popularity of psychical research during the period in question.

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One real strength of the book is that it is impossible to ascertain Cerullo's own position regarding the validity of psychical research. Skeptics will, for example, probably take him to task for not dwelling at greater length on the fraud found in both spiritualist practice and psychic investigation. On the other hand, believers will fault him for mentioning that such fraud existed at all. But whether or not psychic phenomena really exist is not the point of this fine book. Many people in the 1800s clearly believed that psychic phenomena did exist and the book is properly limited to a discussion of the broader societal influences of this belief.



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