

Spiritualism – A Brief history and overview

Spiritualism and spirituality mean different things to different people and have been acknowledged and practised in many different ways for thousands of years.

Many ancient civilisations including the Incas, Egyptians, Greeks, Celts and Vikings as well as Eastern and North American natives and Pagans held strong beliefs in the power and influence of their ancestors who had passed and based many rituals and festivals around the celebration of nature and spiritual influences.

In some countries, particularly in the United States, Spiritualism is considered to be a branch of the Christian faith due to an essentially Christian moral system, a perceived belief in the Judeo-Christian God and an afterlife similar to the concept of Heaven. Christian Spiritualism is however only one form of spiritual belief. In the United Kingdom there are many Spiritualist Churches that are non-denominational and welcome anyone from any religion and as well as those who do not belong to any religion or who take elements from a number of different faith systems, acknowledging the influence and teachings of the prophets and teachers from more than one including Islam (Sufi), Judaism (Kabbalah) and Buddhism,. Others observe their spirituality with no framework whatsoever, simply enjoying their personal connection to spirit, viewing it not as a religion but as a way of life.. Others link their spirituality to New Age lifestyles and festivals

One of the attractions of Spiritualism is the absence of dogma or set structures People holding spiritual beliefs are free to establish their own understanding and connection without any pre-determined requirements. This means that the breadth of belief within the spiritualist movement is extremely wide.

While there is a general universal belief in the perpetuity of the soul, beliefs vary in terms of how this happens. Some, especially Christian Spiritualists believe that after passing, a soul dwells forever in Heaven, while others take a more "cosmic" approach, believing that the soul returns to our natural home in the universe, remaining there for eternity. Once there, some believe that the soul remains as an entity in its own right while others hold that spirits mingle and merge to form one huge cosmic influence. Others say that the spirit does not remain in the universe but merely stays there for a short time to take stock before once again filling an earthly body to continue its journey of learning. Therefore the issue of re-incarnation is one of keen debate among spiritualists.

One element of spirituality which is extremely commonplace in the practice of meditation for the purposes of spiritual growth, connection, emotional and physical well-being. Some do this in solitude, others in circle with like-minded soul mates.

Spiritualists believe in the possibility of communicating with the spirits of those who have lived on earth but have now passed to spirit. A secondary belief is that spirits themselves are capable of growth and perfection, progressing through successively higher spheres or planes. The afterlife is therefore not a static place, but one in which spirits continue to evolve. The two beliefs: that contact with spirits is possible, and that spirits may lie on a higher plane, lead to a third belief, spirit guides help us live a more fulfilled life with a deeper understanding of ourselves and our fellow man as well as helping us make everyday decisions. The guides are not necessarily angels though sometimes angels may be consulted. Generally the guide is believed to be someone that was once human at least once and is now on the other side.

Spiritualism in its modern sense or more precisely, the Spiritualist movement started in earnest the mid-19th century in Hydesville, New York in the United States with the Fox Sisters and rapidly spread across America and then the UK although a number of leading writers and philosophers had been writing about spiritual issues for some time before that.

The writings of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) and the teachings of Franz Mesmer (1734-1815) provided an example for those seeking direct personal knowledge of the afterlife. Swedenborg, who claimed to communicate with spirits while fully awake, described in his writings, the structure of the spirit world. Two features of his view particularly resonated with the early spiritualists: first, that there is not a single hell and a single heaven, but rather a series of higher and lower heavens and hells; second, that spirits are intermediates between God and humans, so that the Divine sometimes uses them as a means of communication. Although Swedenborg warned against seeking out spirit contact, his works seem to have inspired in others the desire to do so.

Mesmer did not contribute religious beliefs, but he brought a technique, later known as hypnotism, that it was claimed could induce trances and cause subjects to report contact with supernatural beings. There was a great deal of professional showmanship inherent to demonstrations of Mesmerism, and the practitioners who lectured in mid-19th-century North America sought to entertain their audiences as well as to demonstrate methods for personal contact with the divine.

Perhaps the best known of those who combined Swedenborg and Mesmer in a peculiarly North American synthesis was Andrew Jackson Davis, who called his system the Harmonial Philosophy. Davis, together with the Fox Sisters and their respective experiences on 31st March 1848 are generally regarded as the official beginning of the modern Spiritualist movement. See our document on some of the key figures in the spiritualist movement to discover more.