

THE SUPERSTITION CALLED SPIRITISM

(By C. P. BRUEHL, in America.)

The existence of superstition bears eloquent testimony to the ineradicable religious instinct implanted in the soul of man. Wherever this instinct is denied legitimate satisfaction, it crops out in practices which, according to the peculiar trend of the times, assume various forms. Superstition is an aberration from the virtue of religion by way of excess. It consists in attributing to creatures what belongs to God, thus defrauding the Creator of honor that is His unique privilege. Its source is ignorance in religious matters. Naturally, it will flourish among those whose religious instruction has been neglected. The guilt of superstition is very great, because God is extremely jealous of His honor. This, of course, applies to the objective sinfulness involved in superstitious practices; subjective factors may reduce the individual guilt almost to the vanishing point. Credulity lies at the root of all superstition; but, if one were to conclude from this fact, that it is only found among the unlettered, he would be greatly mistaken. The most enlightened in a worldly sense are not exempt from grossly superstitious beliefs and practices. Only sound religious knowledge makes one immune against the subtle influence of this insidious perversion of the religious sense.

Our own age, though it boasts of its enlightenment, witnesses a recrudescence of superstition in the form of Spiritism. It is remarkable that, whereas formerly men practised the occult arts in a rather shamefaced manner, Spiritism, the lineal descendant of these arts, is quite openly indulged in and has become fashionable in the very best circles. Reputable scientists sponsor it, and men of all ranks proclaim themselves its ardent adherents and staunch champions. We would like to read the comment of future historians on this mental epidemic of our generation. Their verdict might not be very flattering to our vanity. Possibly, they may put us in a class with the benighted peoples of what we contemptuously style the Dark Ages. This, indeed, would be the irony of history and a well-deserved nemesis. But history sometimes has its little jokes and humorous retributions.

The specific form of superstition represented by Spiritism is technically known as divination. By this we understand the endeavor to extract from creatures, particularly from the inhabitants of the spirit world, knowledge of things which God, in His ordinary economy, screens from mortal eyes. Man's curiosity has at all times prompted him to lift the veil interposed between his vision and the secrets of Divine Providence. As no good spirits would lend their assistance to efforts contrary to the intentions of God, communications obtained in this manner by divinatory imprecations have always been attributed to diabolical agencies, though they profess to emanate from other sources. Few would deliberately seek intercourse with the evil spirits, and, hence, explicit evocation of demons for the purpose of obtaining hidden truth is a rare occurrence. Subjectively, therefore, the extreme malice, inherent in divination as a recourse to infernal powers, would be absent in most cases. To approach the spirits of those with whom we have familiarly conversed in the flesh seems much less repulsive and formidable. It is this form of divination, called necromancy, and consisting in the evocation of the souls of the departed, that has been the more popular. Spiritism is a modern revival of necromancy. They are alike as two peas in a pod and they both come under the same moral condemnation.

We say then that Spiritism is superstitious and, on that account, morally reprehensible. And we take Spiritism at its own evaluation, putting upon it no worse construction than the claims made by its adherents warrant. Now it is a cardinal point of the creed of Spiritists that they are in actual communication with the souls of the dead and that from this source they receive important information concerning conditions of existence in the next world. We are not now concerned with the objective interpretation of Spiritist phenomena, but with the subjective attitude of the Spiritists towards them. Their firm conviction is that the messages which come to them as an answer to their inquiries are derived from discarnate souls. This is equally true of the casual inquirer who consults a Spiritist medium. The avowed purpose in such a case is to be put in touch with dead friends and to learn something about their fate in the next world.

According to the teaching of the Church, the other world is to us a sealed book which is not opened to mortal gaze. Nor does the book of life lie open for human inspection. No means are at our disposal by which we can extort the zealously guarded secrets of the silent beyond. At times God may see fit to make certain disclosures;

but this is not done at the bidding of man or in response to idle questionings. All attempts, therefore, to establish communications with those that have passed away from this world are futile and opposed to the Divine will. If we believe in the efficacy of the devices employed to bring the dead into our presence and to induce them to answer our inquiries, we are guilty of gross superstition; for these means are utterly inadequate to obtain the desired effect.

Whatever is expedient for us to know aent the life after death, has been revealed to us by Our Lord Himself. To seek confirmation of His teaching from the disembodied spirits would be impious and derogatory to His dignity. It is useless to approach the souls of the departed in quest of new revelations. God has made ample provision for our instruction by the institution of the Church. As to the individual fate of our dear ones, faith and hope give us sufficient reassurance. We know that their destiny lies with God and that His dealings with them are merciful. Moreover we can come to their assistance by prayer. Prayer will give us more consolation and comfort than supposed spirit-messages could give us. It is a Catholic doctrine, that on our part we can do nothing to invite communications from those that have passed away. That settles the case of Spiritism for us: there is no need for revelations from the beyond nor is there any efficacious means to procure such revelations. Any efforts in this direction are both unavailing and unlawful. Father Palmieri, S.J., sums up the matter in these words: "God, as faith teaches us, does not will that the souls of the departed should be subject to evocation by men nor that the latter at their pleasure should establish intercourse with the former. And He wills this in such a way that evocation of this kind not only is illicit but also inefficacious." Thus Spiritism stands condemned as superstition on the basis of its own claims.

The Church's stand with regard to Spiritism is plain, unequivocal, and perfectly consistent. As the guardian of the true religion she cannot tolerate superstition and, therefore, condemns Spiritist practices. She forbids the faithful to take part in Spiritist seances where intercourse between the living and the dead is said to take place and where alleged spirit-messages are received. Even passive presence at such seances is prohibited, because it encourages superstition, confirms others in their errors, scandalizes the weak and the undiscerning in faith, and involves the danger of religious perversion. Psychic research, which is not identical with Spiritistic experiments, and the scientific investigation of the processes of the subliminal soul-life do not come under this ban. But Spiritistic practices of whatever kind, consultations of Spiritistic mediums or any attempts to get in touch with the spirit world certainly fall under this prohibition. The Church in this case acts as a kind mother; she wishes to protect her children against deception and unscrupulous exploitation. Likewise is she anxious to guard the purity of the Faith, for the content of the pretended spirit communications frequently is in contradiction with revealed truth and subversive of ecclesiastical authority. Reason enough why the Church should set her face sternly against Spiritism and all that is connected with it. Surely, she would be remiss in her duty if she allowed Spiritist pretensions to mislead the faithful and to entrap the unwary. The lure of this latest fad is great, and nothing but a categorical prohibition can save the thoughtless and the curious from its fatal attraction. The duty of the Catholic in the matter is unmistakable. The Church is the Divinely accredited teacher of truth. From this fountain the faithful can draw all truth that is salutary and profitable: they need not go to suspected and tainted sources.

In this argument we have abstracted entirely from the ulterior possibilities that lie behind Spiritism and which are calculated to arouse alarm and serious apprehension. There is a strong presumption that some of the phenomena, apparently inexplicable on the level of natural causation, must be attributed to diabolical agencies. This complicates and aggravates the case against Spiritism. No doubt, the Church has this possibility, if it should not rather be called a probability, in view when she solemnly warns the faithful against any participation in Spiritist practices, however innocent they may seem to be on the surface. This underlying possibility should give us pause. It is a hazardous thing to open the gates for the infernal hosts. Even a remote danger of this kind should fill us with misgivings and deter us from tampering with the unseen world. We do not know who the guests are that we invite. They may be such as we have not bargained for. In the light of this possibility, the prohibition of the Church assumes a new significance and an added importance.

Spiritism, from whatever point of view we may con-