

In an otherwise comprehensive study, the only disappointment is the relatively scant attention paid to "creation-science." Though not entirely avoided, a fuller treatment of this topic could have illuminated how the terms of debate have shifted over what constituted "true" religion (fundamentalism versus modernism) to contemporary arguments over what

comprises "real" science (creationism versus evolution). Readers of this journal in particular would be interested in such an analysis. Nonetheless, this is only a minor blemish. Anyone interested in the tension created by the interaction of religion, science, and public policy should read this book. The issues it raises are as important today as they were in the 1920s.



Talking to Heaven— Who's Answering?

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Talking to Heaven. By James Van Praagh. Dutton, New York, 1997. ISBN 0-525-94268-8. 194 pp. Hardcover, \$22.95.

Enjoying best-seller status for a time this spring—number one on the *New York Times* booklist—James Van Praagh's *Talking to Heaven* revives an old claim. Van Praagh claims that he and certain other "spiritualists" can communicate with the dead. Unfortunately, the author neglects to mention that the history of modern spiritualism has been a history of deception.

As many skeptics well know, its very founding in 1848 was a fraud. Spiritualism sprang to life in upstate New York with the rappings and alleged spirit contacts of two teenage girls known as the Fox sisters. Soon the young girls' performances captured international attention, prompting similar claims by mediums across the world. Only forty years later, with her sister Katie looking on, did Margaret Fox publicly demonstrate the tricks the schoolgirls had used in pretending to communicate with a ghost.

Despite spiritualism's checkered history of hoaxes and trickery, Van Praagh endorses the genuineness of such phenomena as spirit photography, "apports" (magically appearing items), "ectoplasm" (a substance allegedly exuded

from a medium's bodily orifices), and even luminescent "materializations" of spirit entities. Alas, one must look elsewhere to find evidence of the double-exposed pictures and other tricks, the hiding places where apports were stashed until needed, the evidence that ectoplasm's "gauzelike" quality (as Van Praagh characterizes it) was due to phony mediums using cheesecloth for the purpose, and the reports of those who embraced the "spirits" and discovered them to be living persons in ghostly guise.

The record of such trickery, if not the actual risk of exposure, has caused many spiritualists to avoid physical phenomena. Despite his endorsement of their authenticity, when it comes to his own practice, Van Praagh is strictly a "mental medium," one who uses "psychic ability" that includes alleged clairvoyance (or inner sight) and clairsentience (extrasensory feelings).

Such an approach makes it difficult for an investigator to distinguish between two types of deception: that involving the deliberate hoodwinking of the sitter and that in which the medium and sitter essentially deceive themselves.

Psychologists know, for example, that the "voices" allegedly heard by mediums are invariably their own internal thoughts, that they glean information—innocently or shrewdly—by familiar means. These include reading body language (to sense when one is factually on or off track), providing data in question form (which may, if correct, be considered a "hit," but otherwise will seem an innocent query), and inviting the sitter to interpret the vague statements offered. (Van Praagh often asks, "Do you understand this?" or "Do you know what this means?" or similar questions, inviting the sitter to provide the meaning. If the sitter does not comprehend, the medium will try another tack.)

Van Praagh manages to cast discredited spiritualism in a new light: He utilizes popular belief in every type of alleged ghostly activity (flickering lights, dreams, "meaningful" coincidences, and the like), not just séance phenomena. He takes advantage of New Age popularity to include "chakras" (purported "energy centers"), meditation, psychic phenomena, and so on, but presenting everything in a religious rather than occult context. For example, he equates the old mediumistic "spirit guides" (supposed go-betweens with the "other world") with "guardian angels," thereby tapping into the currently fadish interest in angels.

His major ploy is the book's title, *Talking to Heaven*, which suggests that spirits of the dead exist not in some ethereal dimension, as earlier spiritualism implied, but in a traditional religious domain. Everyone, Van Praagh would say, can talk to Heaven. But one is reminded of the exchange in Shakespeare's *King Henry IV* between Glendower and Hotspur. When the former boasts, "I can call spirits from the vasty deep," the other replies, "Why so can I, or so can any man; But will they come when you do call for them?"



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