

GIVING UP THE GHOST: THE PARALLEL DEMOTION OF SPIRITS AND SPIRITUALITY

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims to examine the progression of Western attitudes towards ghosts and related concepts from ancient times through Europe's age of Enlightenment. Through a study of folklore, literature, and religious beliefs, a gradual shift becomes evident: from the sincere respect of ancestor veneration, to demonic paranoia in the Middle Ages, to public scorn and private curiosity as Western scientific traditions gained dominance (with this final stage largely persisting to the present day). The author also proposes a parallel between this demotion of spirits and a diminishment in the societal importance of spirituality itself.

Introduction

Human society has vastly altered its opinions on the matter of ghosts over time. They began as a core facet of many (if not most) ancient religions, forming the basis of integral cultural lore and prompting the creation of vast and complicated rituals to appease, dispel, and summon them. In other words, they were – forgive the pun – a deadly serious matter. Fast forward a few thousand years and we find an enormously different scene: most “civilized” populations enjoy ghost stories as an entirely fictitious source of thrills, while those who continue to see them as a very pertinent reality are openly mocked. My opinions on their existence aside, what caused the ghost’s abrupt shift from intensely respected reality to pseudoscientific campfire story, and when did this demotion take place? Further investigation reveals an intriguing parallel: as a civilization distances itself from the notion of ghosts or spirits as a reality, it also becomes distanced from spirituality in general. A society’s popular opinion on the matter of ghosts directly reflects its relationship with noetic, spiritual, and metaphysical matters. Western society specifically has gone from shamanistic respect for the dead, to the Dark Ages’ paranoid fear, to the Enlightenment era’s open scorn and lack of any acknowledgement whatsoever. This journey traces a parallel path to the Western

world’s declining relationship with its own contemplative and spiritual life.

Before properly examining this change through the centuries, it should be clarified that this essay deals with the opinions of Western society at large, rather than attempting to account for the varied beliefs of the myriad sub-cultures within that wider scope. There are always individuals and entire movements that go against the grain of popular opinion, and this subject matter in particular retains a strong following throughout history and into the present day. That, however, is a subject for another essay.

Looking back to the beginnings of human culture and philosophy, the critical role of ghosts is immediately evident around the globe, particularly in the form of shamanistic and tribal ancestor worship. Ancestor worship (or veneration) refers to “a set of religious beliefs and ritual practices that commemorates the continued existence of the deceased ancestor beyond death,” and it involves far more than ritual mournings or burial rites; the practice of venerating the lingering spirits of one’s ancestors is a significant commitment of “cater[ing] to the needs of the deceased” (Zhao, 2006). While this may at first sound like a servile-type situation, this beyond-the-veil relationship is generally a symbiotic one, focused on “the ability of the dead to protect kinsmen in return for worship from them. Reciprocity between the living and

the dead is the key to ancestor worship” (Zhao, 2006). Evidence of this type of respect and harmony between a society and its ghosts can be found all across the early Western world, ranging from ancient North America to the halls of the Roman Empire. Native American religion was (and in some cases is) focused heavily on “contact with the spirit world [and] psychic and paranormal activity” (Chryssides, 2012), while the ancient Romans paid regular honor to their city’s Lares, or ancestral spirits, in the form of “small sacrifices ... at every official Roman banquet,” as well as “festivals dedicated to all of the spirits and ancestors at several different times each year” (Susina, 2011). Ghosts were not just real to these people – they were important, and they were respected.

Earlier cultures’ attitudes towards spirituality as a whole were similarly harmonious. To them, “health” meant more than just bodily wellness; their definition included “a subjective quality of life... the peace and coherence that flows from meaning,” and because of this “the functions of healing were placed in the community’s spiritual leaders” (Marcus, 2004). This more peaceful and cooperative acknowledgement of both ghosts and spirituality began to dissolve, however, as the Dark Ages arrived and started to twist existing traditions into a new atmosphere of suspicion. Take Samhain, for instance; this Celtic ancestor of today’s Halloween was based on the reality of ghosts and spirits walking the night as the darker half of the year began. Kind, ancestral spirits were welcomed, while those that might do harm were kept away by specific rituals and protections. But early Christian missionaries, uncomfortable with this emphasis on the supernatural, began to convince people that these spirits of the dead were agents of the devil, and as a result of these efforts, “the Celtic underworld eventually became associated with the Christian hell, and the concept of honoring the benevolent spirits of the dead gradually gave way to fears about evil spirits and witchcraft” (“Samhain,” 2015). This was the beginning of Western society’s new relationship with both ghosts and its own

spirituality: a relationship based in fear.

As the Dark Ages settled over Western culture, the ghost made its first lurching shift in status. These are no longer ancestral spirits to be respected and cooperated with; “now when they confront the living, ghosts are more tangible, and often feared. They may demand, even threaten. They can be dangerous [and] malevolent” (Finucane, 1996). A well-read piece of literature from this era, *The Awntyrs of Arthure*, features the disgusting and horrifying spirit of Guinevere’s mother; one scholar describes this apparition as looking as though “a candle in a hollow skull were glowing balefully through the eye-sockets,” pointing out that “the suggestion is that it is an infernal or subterranean fire from ... the habitat of the ghost ... that is burning in those hollow eyes” (Speirs, 1971). It is undeniable that the popular opinion of ghosts shifted to a vastly different tone in this darker age of Western society.

Turning to the medieval world’s attitudes on spirituality, we find that a similar shift in perspective has once again shoved common consensus from a place of respect to a place of fear. People grew more and more concerned with their own ghosts – their souls – as “the spiritual atmosphere grew thick, cloyed with anxiety, fear, and uncertainty” (Finucane, 1996). This attitude is hardly surprising – they were called the “Dark” Ages for a reason. Plague, famine, and constant warfare left many individuals relying on the doctrines of Christianity for some glimmer of hope, but hellfire and original sin are hardly comforting concepts. Judging by the literature of that time, “among the images which haunted the medieval mind,” one of the “most persistent” was the bleak and alarming view of “human life in its earthly state as a castle besieged” (Speirs, 1971); likewise, views of the afterlife and metaphysical matters in general became similarly terrifying. As the medieval era drew to a close and the Enlightenment swelled, one of the primary concerns of the general populace was shaking off the pallid mantle of fear that a religion-dominated society had thrown over much of the Western world. In doing so, however, the entire realm of

spirituality was thrown out with the bathwater, and ghosts – our unfortunate indicator species – suffered mightily as a result.

In the Middle Ages, ghosts had been feared, but they were at least still acknowledged and treated with a great deal of respect. This all changed in the time of the Enlightenment and into the Scientific Revolution, when a new religion took hold of the reins of Western culture: science. The imminent Immanuel Kant dismissively referred to spirituality and metaphysics as a “magic lantern of brain phantoms” (Kant, 1788), while Oscar Wilde published a scathing parody of a ghost story called “The Canterville Ghost.” In this disparaging tale, an American family takes up residence in a haunted house and, “with the sturdy rationalism of the New World, turn[s] the tables on the ghost” by mocking and dismissing it until it becomes “exhausted by its impotence” and “agrees to its own exorcism,” leaving the smug family “in possession of a stately home now without its supernatural tenant” (Robbins, 2016). This popular piece of literature is a perfect example of Western society’s attitude towards ghosts during this period in history, and the unfortunate phantoms were not the only victims of rationality’s merciless takeover; spirituality at large suffered heavily in the public eye as well.

The Enlightenment has been well-established as “the prototypical era in which scientific and instrumental reason became a defining characteristic of modern culture,” leaving little to no room for such silly and irrational things as the human soul and other metaphysical notions (Reill, 2003). The new paradigm of science was determined to shake off all the old trappings of religion and spirituality in general: “the daunting ‘fully satisfactory’ penances of the early Middle Ages (designed to expunge entirely the stain of sin) were seen as increasingly impractical by men and women who lacked the capacity to perform them” (Watkins, 2002). There is no real room for spirituality in a public mind determined to shrug off what was once overwhelmingly significant as something too “impractical” to be of worth – and in many ways, our culture’s opinion has not

changed since then.

Nowadays, this mocking, short-sighted skepticism towards all things “unscientific” leaves precious little room for new discoveries from those who still take seriously the reality of a spiritual world – and its spiritual residents. A society that ignores its ghosts ignores its nature as something beyond the purely material, and this compulsive blindness can only lead to decline. On this matter, Western popular culture can perhaps take a cue from the academic Franco Ferrarotti, who describes in the abstract of his publication “The Paradox of the Sacred” his vision for the future: “a rational but also reasonable human being, driven by logic but also checked by wisdom... who accepts himself as a spirit but also as flesh and blood: this is the post-Enlightenment and post-Christian individual, the human type, who most closely resembles the ideal of a complete human being” (Ferrarotti, 1984).

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