This article examines the position of nineteenth-century French spiritism in relation to the Catholic Church. Spiritism offered an alternative “religion” to French Catholics dissatisfied with the church’s traditionalism in a modernizing world. I begin by describing the spiritists’ position on Catholic dogma and the movement’s place as an urban popular religion. Spiritist critiques of heaven and hell incorporated liberal and republican values, thus making it appealing to these groups who were often hostile to the church. I move next to conflicts between the adversaries. Spiritists, unfettered by dogma or even logic in some cases, freely incorporated the supernatural into the nineteenth-century acceptance of Enlightenment values such as reason and science. The church, unable to deny the reality of supernatural phenomena claimed by the spiritists, limited itself to asserting the devil’s hand in these phenomena. It thus could not fully address the challenge of spiritism. Spiritism as a popular religion complicates the assumption by many folklorists regarding the disappearance of popular beliefs in the face of the modern. The article concludes with a call to modify these theories in order to understand an evolving, often urban, popular culture which integrated “tradition” and “modernity” and continually created new forms of the marvellous.

The spiritist movement, popular in the second half of the nineteenth century in France, professed a belief in moral progress via reincarnation which presented a direct challenge to the Catholic Church. Born of a fashionable vogue for table talking and spirit rapping, spiritism became by 1857 a popular cultural movement. Supported by a central Parisian organization, the Société des études spirites, by the monthly Revue spirite, both founded by spiritist leader Allan Kardec, and by a growing network of spiritist “circles,” spiritism spread throughout the country. Spiritism denied the reality of hell, purgatory, and eternal damnation or salvation, substituting instead a doctrine of metempsychosis or reincarnation. French spiritists believed (unlike Anglo-American spiritualists) that the soul lived a series of lives, making moral, spiritual, and intellectual progress each time around. Mediums provided the contact between follower and spirit; they also usurped the power of priests by interpreting moral messages from the dead. Empirical observations of the spirits gave
followers proof both of the immortality of spirits and claimed a scientific, modern, and rational character for their beliefs. Examining spiritism provides a window into how followers participated in an ongoing cultural conversation about the meaning of reason and of the supernatural.

The Enlightenment critique of Christianity, coupled with revolutionary dechristianization, left French thinkers struggling to define the balance between the rational and the spiritual. Spiritism, like a variety of cultural movements in the nineteenth century, attempted to integrate Enlightenment ideals of reason, science, and progress into a more traditional, religious understanding of the world. These movements, from Saint-Simonian socialism and Fourierism to the “universal religion” of deistic freethinkers in the 1860s, offered alternatives to the materialism and positivism of the secularists and to the increasingly ultramontane position of the Catholic Church. These movements complicate the idea of a separation between the religious and the secular, letting historians instead recognize the complex systems of belief people created to integrate science, reason, and belief.

Spiritists’ appeals to the marvellous challenged both the Catholic Church and, later, a newly triumphant secular authority. These challenges are embedded in the everyday practice of spiritism. French people from all walks of life spoke to the spirits but the movement drew most of its numbers from the petit bourgeois and the working class. While the occasional rural circle brought local bourgeois and peasants together, most circles formed in urban areas and most grouped together members of the same class and community. Although the spiritist bible, the *Spirits’ Book*, offered a general theology, each circle interpreted for itself the messages received from “spirit guides.” The silk workers of Lyon discussed socialist topics with their guides while in Bordeaux the bourgeoisie argued for reforming girls’ education. These practical topics were legitimated and supplemented by the mundane but tangible “miracle” of weekly spirit manifestations and words of advice from spirits as divergent as Saint Louis and someone’s grandma.

I situate spiritism in the creation of alternative spiritualities, a new pluralism in religious choice in nineteenth-century France. Daniel Cottom has argued that “cultural movements that challenge what is taken to be knowledge will be inquiries into the situation, creation, and communication of meaning.” Spiritism contested Catholic and secular meaning in several realms: the doctrinal, the more generally spiritual, and the social. By offering a non-institutional

spiritual middle ground between secular materialism and Catholicism, spiritism maintained “religion” for a range of followers and contributed ultimately to building a French society willing to separate church from state and religion from Catholic institutions. Spiritism created alternative meanings that integrated “tradition” and “modernity” and continually created new forms of the marvellous.

This article examines the position of spiritism in relation to Catholicism. I begin by analysing the spiritists’ position on Catholic dogma, then move on to conflicts between spiritists and the Catholic Church. Finally, I argue that spiritism should be seen as an urban popular religion. Historians, anthropologists, and ethnologists have recently highlighted the continuing importance of popular Catholicism in the late nineteenth century, particularly pilgrimages and apparitions of the Virgin. This article extends this line of analysis to a popular but non-Catholic religion in an attempt to better understand what features of popular religion continue to remain important. Spiritism as a popular religion complicates the assumption by many folklorists regarding the disappearance of popular beliefs in the face of the modern. I conclude the article with a call to modify these theories in order to understand an evolving, often urban, popular religion and the role it continued to play in nineteenth-century French culture.

Hippolyte-Léon-Denis Rivail, known to the world as Allan Kardec, led the spiritist movement from its inception until his death in 1869. Kardec set the tone for the movement, publishing the *Revue spirite* and “codifying” the teachings of the spirits into the *Livre des esprits* (Spirit’s Book.) Kardec, a reformer from the Pestalozzi school, held an inclusive vision of society. His position on religion remained neutral; he claimed that spiritism, a philosophy rather than a religion, encompassed and was compatible with all religions.


Although Allan Kardec attempted to maintain neutrality toward the church, much of the spiritist relationship to the church was from the outset adversarial. Spiritists denied heaven, hell, and purgatory; they were anticlerical and anti-sacramental, often avoiding the parish church. Marion Aubrée and François Laplantine argue that spiritism became more anticlerical during and after the 1880s and that Léon Denis, a popular spiritist leader at the end of the century, epitomizes spiritist anti-clericalism. Yet anticlerical writings surfaced among spiritists long before this time and in some areas were so widespread as to be the rule. I would argue that spiritism became more, rather than less, religious (although not Catholic) toward the end of the century, losing some of its anti-clericalism and tending toward a new mysticism probably connected to the increasing popularity of occultism.

Anti-clericalism did not mean followers rejected Christianity. Though many followers refused the trappings of the church, others retained a loose connection, promoting a belief that can be broadly termed Christian, calling for prayer and asserting that moral authority came from Christ and his teachings. Others argued for generally Christian values without mentioning the Bible or Christ. The very looseness of doctrine, and the encouragement of individuals to interpret the spirits’ messages, meant that spiritism could not confine its followers to one position vis-à-vis the church.

The spiritist position toward Catholicism echoed that of early socialists such as Pierre Leroux and Jean Reynaud or Etienne Cabet. These writers accepted the morality of Christianity but argued that Catholicism had corrupted the values of Christ. After the failure of socialism in 1848, spiritism carried this strain of dilute Christianity to many who would never have been exposed to or interested in socialist teachings, including urban women and petty bourgeois, as well as some sections of the peasantry. The *Écho d’outre tombe*, a Marseille spiritist journal published in 1865, and *La Vérité*, a Lyon weekly published in 1863, show that religion remained a concern and clerical abuses were perceived as a problem. Both papers are filled with articles about the church, religion in general, or the clergy. *La Vérité* kept track of any clerical abuse or support while the *Écho d’outre tombe* devoted at least one article per issue to discussing how spiritism and religious dogmas meshed. Most of these teachings took a broadly pro-Christ, anti-church tone. Although they published articles reciting various parables of Christ as guides to live by and claimed that spiritism was hostile to no religion, the editors showed a fair amount of hostility to the Catholic Church. Priests were painted as “little Gods” who led their parishioners into “stupidity and degradation.”

8. Sharp, 39–44.
10. *Écho d’outre tombe* (Marseille, 1865). See issues 13, 14, 16, 21, 11, among others.
a critique of church power, the Toulousain *Medium évangélique* ran a feuilleton featuring a repentant pope giving the wealth of the church to the poor and thus freeing himself to become truly the servant of the servants of Christ.\(^{11}\) The story implied that spiritists, with their emphasis on charity, were better Christians, more “Christ-like” than the pope himself.

Spiritism’s open position on the church gave followers free rein to create their own religious experiences. A Lyon worker group calling themselves “Groupe Saint” established, through a series of spirit communications with Jesus Christ, a vision of “the city of Jésus-Marie,” a utopian society in which the pope would throw off his evil counsellors and come to France, and “Capital” would be brought under control. The group claimed membership in the “culte catholique, apostolique et chrétien spiritique” and hoped to offer Napoleon III advice on everything from their city of Jésus-Marie to the principal local monuments to the uses of alchemy.\(^{12}\) The group did not set out to challenge either secular or Catholic authorities but their free interpretation of dogma and politics implicitly did so. Via their spiritist group these workers reinterpreted both official Catholic religion and spiritist teachings to create a religion that better fit their daily lives and their practical (and not so practical) hopes.

II

Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang argue that a “modern” conception of heaven was born with Swedenborg in the late eighteenth century. This heaven, material and sensual, would be popularized by spiritists and Protestants throughout the nineteenth century. In contrast, the Catholic heaven remained that of sixteenth-century reformers, one of contemplation carried out in the sight of God, up until the late twentieth century.\(^{13}\)

Spiritism incorporated a material, Swedenborgian heaven, including reunions with beloved family members and teaching heaven as an active place, where all experience sensual fulfilment and spiritual progress.\(^{14}\) The modern heaven began immediately after death and continued an existence similar to the previous, earthly one.

In contrast, Spiritism painted a vivid and unflattering picture of the Catholic heaven. The *Revue spirite* even blamed the Catholic heaven as one reason people feared death. Heaven, it said, was “this eternal uselessness, doubtless preferable to nothingness, [but] which is nothing less than a fastidious monotony.” The angels themselves (as shown in paintings of heaven), “breathe boredom rather than true happiness.”\(^{15}\)

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The spiritist alternative heaven offers a view of ways in which Catholic traditions failed to mesh with current bourgeois ideals of work and merit, and with the spiritist ideal of equality. The true heaven meant not "contemplative idleness," or more pejoratively, "fastidious uselessness." "Spiritual life is, on the contrary, one of constant activity, but an activity free from fatigue." Allan Kardec described the worlds where advanced souls lived, to which spirits would progress, as more pleasant versions of life on Earth. "Life in the superior worlds is already a recompense, because there one is exempt from the evils and vicissitudes of which one is the butt here below. The body, less material, almost fluid, is not subject to illnesses or infirmities, nor to the same needs."16 This is a most material and productive heaven, where individuals progress past the petty egotism that causes "evils and vicissitudes" and toward the equality that Kardec wanted to see instituted in this world.

Spiritist values also entailed a critique of eternal damnation, emphasizing merit over punishment. Spiritists argued from the basis of a just God. Not all people had an equal opportunity to grow morally, due to inequalities of wealth and station. "Does not reason itself tell you that it would be unjust to inflict an eternal privation of happiness on those who have not had the opportunity of improving themselves?"17 Justice did not deny earthly inequality; it did, however, deny the permanence of that inequality. Spiritists assumed that inequalities of status meant an inability to improve morally. They equated moral progress with social status. Here again they emphasize material conditions. Spiritists sought a way to justify the gross inequality they saw around them. They did so by positing a future equality that would be attained by all. They vacillated between social Darwinist and liberal views of the poor: accusing the poor of being less moral yet refusing to blame them for it. Yet the overall position was liberal: hell was rejected on the basis that the world must progress toward equality.

Spiritist rejection of hell came at a time when hell had already fallen into disrepute. Philippe Ariès argues that "by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the debate in Catholic and puritan cultures was over; belief in hell had disappeared."18 Although spiritism claimed to challenge the church on this issue, it actually paralleled a wider religious change. By the 1860s fiery preaching about the torments of hell had greatly declined, rarely found even in the countryside.19 What spiritism did was offer a replacement: a progressive, egalitarian, and especially useful series of afterlives to replace the useless idea of eternal damnation. The spiritist version expressed bourgeois values of work, merit, and progress. The movement integrated values commonly associated with "modernity" and "rationalism" into the "superstitious" religious practice of speaking to the spirits.

The Catholic Church remained mute before the first turning of tables in France. However, as soon as those tables began to “speak,” and to do so in the voices of the dead, the church moved quickly to investigate and then condemn the practice. As early as November 1853, only six months after the practice began in Paris, Monsignor Guibert, bishop of Viviers, sent a *Lettre circulaire* to his clergy warning them against the dangers of the talking tables. The bishop’s communique illustrates the need the church felt to clarify for the priesthood the dangers of discussions with the spirits. Guibert reminds his clergy that Moses first gave the command not to speak to the dead. “Moses declares that *God holds in abomination those who ask the truth of the dead*.”

Guibert did not admit the reality of the spirits. Instead he argued that they were most likely the products of experimenters’ imaginations. Imaginary or not, however, the phenomena were dangerous. “But, if we have little faith in the presence of these spirits that are evoked by means of tables, we are no less deeply convinced that these experiments are one of Satan’s thousand ruses to ruin souls.”

Not everyone in the church wanted to dismiss the turning, talking tables as springing from fevered imaginations. The church had to tread a thin line between denial and celebration of a supernatural world that continually threatened to escape its control. In the nineteenth century, Catholicism struggled to find a working relationship with the supernatural. Enlightenment teachings had rejected the supernatural as co-equal with the superstitious. Post-Tridentine Christianity had striven to enforce an urban, elite religion on a rural, uneducated population. This meant rejecting all superstitions and conforming to the outward expressions of Catholicism, including and especially confession. In the nineteenth century the church reversed this trend somewhat by trying to recuperate the supernatural in specific, controlled forms. The religious revival of the period 1830 to 1850 expressed a romantic Christianity. After the coup d’état of 1851 it became increasingly identified with the reins of repressive power, increasingly on the defensive. In the face of the mid-century emphasis on rationality and faith in positive science many Catholics reasserted a faith in the supernatural. This was expressed most strongly, of course, in the Marian visions of mid-century, but it also appeared in pilgrimages to sacred places, especially springs that offered healing and rejuvenation. The church hierarchy remained sensitive to critiques of superstition; it accepted these new appearances of faith in the supernatural, but only when it could direct and control them.

from limited acceptance to an attempt to direct misguided followers to outright condemnation.

Monsignor Bouvier, the bishop of Le Mans, represented the difficulties of the church facing modern reforming rationalism. In his 1854 *Lettre circulaire* on spiritism, Bouvier observed among Catholics a diminished faith in the “intervention of spirits in the things of this world.” He feared for his faithful who, “by levity or indifference seem to share in this practice of disbelief . . .” even to the point of inviting demons in the form of spirits into their homes.24 No reactionary, Bouvier tried to integrate modernity into the lives of the faithful. An ultramontanist who ultimately helped define the doctrine of the immaculate conception, he nonetheless supported modern education and “celebrated the conquests of science.”25 Yet in religion he remained traditional; in spiritism he saw the proof of the daily workings of the devil, evidence of the supernatural but hardly of progress.

Catholic observers could not simply deny and ignore the spiritual side of spiritist phenomena, as did most scientific observers. Instead most insisted on the supernatural quality of manifestations, and their origin in the “beyond” and not simply in the imagination of the participants. Renewed proof of the supernatural world and of survival of the soul would, the church believed, promote belief in God and adherence to the church. Yet, paradoxically, the doctrines accompanying spiritist belief challenged Catholic teaching. To have one without the other, Catholic writers had to denounce the authors of these messages as either Satan himself or members of his host of demonic assistants. By doing so, they reduced the discussion to a polemic, and limited their means of responding to the criticisms spiritism offered.

In the early years of great spiritist growth, the church worked actively to get the word out against the movement. In 1863 sermons were preached in Bordeaux, Lyon, the Aisne, at Metz. In Bordeaux, a visiting priest spoke on four consecutive weekends at the church of Villenave-de-Rions; he accused spiritism of being the devil in disguise and of leading people into crime and irreligion.26 In Lyon, the priest Marie Bernard spoke more than once against spiritism. He even invoked civil aid, calling for the magistrate to condemn spiritists as “profaners of the dead, slanderers and perverters [of truth]” of a new kind, just as guilty as common criminals.27 In Chauny (Aisne), the visiting abbé took a gentler approach. He cautioned against raising too high the veil which covered the mysteries of the beyond; most important, he said, was to believe in God.28

Bishops added the authority of the hierarchy to condemnations of spiritism. In 1864, the bishops of Strasbourg, Algiers, Reims, Langres, and Barcelona

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all spoke out against spiritism. The bishop of Algiers gave the first official ordinance to completely forbid the practice. He instructed his priests to refuse absolution to any who participated in or even witnessed a spiritist event.

The Holy See said relatively little about spiritism, although it certainly did not approve. In 1856, Pius IX issued a “condemnation of the abuse of magnetism” which church thinkers later applied to spiritism as well. In 1864 the Congregation at Rome condemned spiritist doctrine by adding spiritist works to the Index. It was not until 1898 that Pope Leo XIII finally condemned the practice and threatened to excommunicate anyone who acted as a medium or participated in spiritism. By that time, the condemnation seems to have made little stir, either in Catholic or spiritist circles. The majority of battles between the two groups had already been fought.

One reason for the hesitancy on the part of the papacy may have been a reluctance to alienate Catholics who had found spiritism exciting, consoling, or simply an extension of the Catholic faith. The likelihood that preaching against spiritism might spread the belief rather than stamp it out is borne out by Monsignor Guibert’s insistence that his parish priests read his circular letter condemning spiritism only in the regions which had already experienced the new belief. “Our Letter is not destined to be read out loud from the pulpit. The evil that we point out is not known by the people of our countryside; it is fitting to leave them ignorant of it.”

To combat this problem, many Catholic treatments of spiritism retained a teaching quality. Their purpose remained primarily to retrieve the faithful who had fallen into spiritist hands. The best example is the work of Père Ambroise Matignon, *Les Morts et les vivants; entretiens sur les communications d’outre tombe* (1862). Matignon’s work was commissioned by several bishops, who looked for a “short, substantial, and easily understood” work to “popularize the solution” to an increasingly thorny problem. The text took the form of a catechism. Through a series of conversations between a gentle, trusted theologian and a good Christian who had, unfortunately, “lost hold of himself in his great enthusiasm for the evocations,” Matignon taught his readers what the Church wanted them to think about spiritism.

Matignon put his most forceful arguments into convincing Catholic spiritists that their practice was both superstitious and wrong. Scripture expressly forbade contact with the dead. Anyone who called up spirits then, whether they meant to or not, called upon the devil and his dark forces for aid. Matignon quoted the prestigious archbishop of Reims as authority. “It is superstition,
Spiritists and Catholics

Matignon looked to Gousset, a well-known advocate of the more moderate, emotionally tolerant Liguorism, to find arguments to bring strayed Catholics back into the fold. Claude Langlois has recently argued that Gousset’s *Théologie morale* (1844) attempted to “depenalize” superstition, arguing that superstition, even acts of divination such as spiritism practised, constituted an “excess of religion” rather than a grave sin. Matignon accepted the idea that spiritism might not be a grave sin. However, he apparently backed away from Gousset’s argument that most magic and divination could be explained by natural, rather than supernatural causes, as he maintained that only the devil could fulfill the desires of the spiritists. As Langlois points out, many Catholics at the time felt it impossible to attribute all things to natural causes and continued to argue that superstition interfered with and undermined true faith. “Can you progressively eliminate the role of the devil and maintain intact the power of the Virgin and the Saint? Evidently not.” Instead, Langlois provocatively suggests that “the definition of the Immaculate Conception calls for a modernization of the devil, not his disappearance.”

One Catholic critique of spiritism did attempt to modernize the devil. In his Easter pastoral letter of 1875 the archbishop of Toulouse, Monsignor Desprez, accused spiritism of breaking up the family, of holding life cheaply, thus encouraging suicide and abortion, and, implicitly, of denying French people their very “Frenchness,” all through the doctrine of reincarnation. Reincarnation undermined French pride in their family: a daughter might once have been Herodias, a son Cain, and a father, once dead, might “be resuscitated in the body of a German general.” Reincarnation thus threatened the basis of French society, the family. The bishop sought to demonize the movement, but his demons this time were secular demons. In 1875, after France’s ignominious defeat in the Franco-Prussian war, there could be no worse hell than to imagine yourself or your kin as a German general (or a German spy, as the Dreyfus affair would soon illustrate).

Desprez’s strategy attempted to convince by appealing to current social mores about the family. By the 1870s, the fears of the French government and populace were turning toward the problem of the declining birthrate,
particularly in relation to Germany. Victor Tournier, spiritist and leftist writer, quickly rebutted Desprez, arguing that spiritism was better for the family than Catholicism. He mocked the Catholics, using anticlerical stereotypes current at the time to attempt to discredit the church. “Is it meet that the Catholic church who in its priests offers us a model of celibacy, . . . who exalts virginity at the expense of maternity, accuses Spiritism of threatening the bond of the family?”42 Both Desprez and Tournier used the standards of the primary secular issue of the nation to measure the respective value of Catholicism and spiritism as religious systems.

Beneath the family argument lies an implicit appeal to women. As the keepers of religion, women were extremely important to continuing belief in any faith. Catholicism offered the traditional role of mother. Spiritism too celebrated motherhood, but added teachings on companionate marriage between educated individuals, anticipating the ideal which republicans would promote after the Ferry laws of 1880 and the Naquet law on divorce in 1884. The spiritists, rather than the church, succeeded in identifying themselves with the nineteenth-century evolution toward a more modern view of women and an increasingly secular state that continually diminished church control over the family.

Catholic critiques of spiritism remained based on spiritual and social arguments throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. Although new works against spiritism were published, old ones were also repeated. Lecanu’s *Histoire de Satan* was popular enough, or necessary enough, to be republished in 1882. Père Matignon’s catechism against spiritism reappeared as late as 1902; and Père Bonniot’s *Le Miracle et ses contrefaçons* went through at least three editions: 1887, 1888, and 1895.

In the pamphlet wars between spiritists and Catholics even as late as 1914, the church could be found backing the satanist explanation, saying there were, in fact, no scientific explanations for spiritist phenomena.43 This is especially interesting in light of increasing numbers of scientific studies in the 1880s and 1890s which explained spirit visions in terms of hallucination. Despite the popular power of scientific arguments, church thinkers rarely attributed spiritist events to mental illness or an overactive imagination. The Catholic Church, since at least the Syllabus of Errors in 1864, had chosen a strategy that rejected an alliance with scientific knowledge. Pius IX, in outlining the errors of modernity and in asserting his infallibility, had claimed there is knowledge, supernatural and religious, that cannot be known by material means. Catholic dealings with spiritism illustrate the church’s attempt to maintain control over the supernatural in the face of the materialist challenge of science as well as the spiritist challenge. Catholics chose to identify spirits with demons, a traditionalist explanation, but one that supported belief in the

42. Tournier, 20.
43. *Le Spiritisme et ses détracteurs, réponse d’un vieux spirite à un “docteur en lettres” de Lyon* (Paris and Lyon, 1914). This brochure was written by a spiritist in answer to a Catholic brochure that purported to be authorized by the cardinal-archbishop of Lyon.
spiritists and catholics

supernatural, rather than to risk denial of the supernatural by explaining spirit phenomena in material, physiological terms. Yet their inability to “modernize” their demons left openings for alternative beliefs such as spiritism to attract a modernizing, increasingly urban population.

IV

Spiritism reflected folk concerns as well as bourgeois ideas. Thomas Kselman describes folk beliefs about the dead that share much with spiritist beliefs. The dead are seen as leading a life just like that of people on earth.44 In folk tales, punishment after death fits crimes committed in life. “Peasants suspected of moving boundary markers in order to expand their property, for example, were said to be forced after death to carry these stones from place to place.” In spiritism, disincarnate spirits also suffer punishments fitting material crimes or sins. The difference is that spirits choose to do a fitting punishment. The punishment (or moral lesson to be learned) usually takes place in the next life, although some discussions with spirits involve humans explaining to not very advanced spirits why they are suffering in the afterlife.45 Folk tales also emphasize the dead as integrated into family and village; the dead can stop carrying stones when some living person tells them to “put it back where you got it.”46 This personal interaction and harmony between the living and the dead is exactly the one spiritists created in their conversations with the spirits. Spiritism integrated peasant beliefs, contributing to translating these traditions in a modern context.

This is the case Daniel Fabre describes in Languedoc for the traditional “messagers des âmes,” or armiers. These rural wise-men and -women had been visited by the dead demanding masses since at least the thirteenth century. As spiritism infiltrated the region in the 1870s and 1880s, the armiers began to call themselves mediums and to initiate contact with spirits. The mediums’ purpose remained the same: to ease the changes that souls go through after death, but the trappings became spiritist rather than Catholic.47

Spiritism grafted onto this traditional practice; Fabre does not see that it changed it significantly. Yet he also notes that the church began to oppose the armière after she became spiritist and defended itself against the “anti-clericals” who spread spiritist beliefs. Valentin Tournier and Timoléon Jaubert were the spiritist leaders in this region; they were among the most fervently republican of spiritist leaders in all France. The change here is a subtle one. The supernatural moves further and further away from what little control the priest had

44. Kselman, Death and the Afterlife, 58.
45. For a detailed, although nominally fictional, example of sitters instructing spirits, see Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Land of Mist,” When the World Screamed and Other Stories (San Francisco: Chronicle, 1990), 149–58.
46. Kselman, Death and the Afterlife, 63.
gained over it, becoming more (or again) the province of the people and, in this case, the Republic.

Spiritist journals commonly repeated tales they had gotten from other sheets, to which they then added a spiritist explanation. They insisted that “miraculous” events, as reported in these various papers, continued to happen in order to draw scientists and doctors to study the new sciences, spiritism among them, and thus to explain what had previously seemed mysterious. Spiritism not only reported “miraculous” and marvellous events, it created them on a regular basis in its seances. The curious spectator who rushed to see any miraculous happening reported by the papers, to gawk, to wonder, to be amazed, could also be found in spiritist meetings and reading spiritist journals’ reports of the marvels experienced by other followers. Although spiritism brought these phenomena into daily life, made them more accessible and less rare, it did little to make them less wondrous or strange. People found in them proof of marvellous wonders beyond human knowledge, proof of survival of the soul, and an explanation for miracles. A contemporary observer described the spiritists’ goal as “habitual miracles.” Rather than disperse the realm of the miraculous with “reason,” spiritists brought the “magic” within the reach of all. These characteristics helped popularize the movement and led to its spread as a religion.

Ethnologists and anthropologists have concentrated on popular religion as leftover pagan remnants that survived the church’s attempt to stamp them out. Conversely, cities and their bourgeois inhabitants have been cast as centres of enlightenment, casting out the shadows of superstition. The popular and the bourgeois are presumed to be antithetical one to the other. “Modern [bourgeois] culture has always displayed a marked scorn with regard to popular culture and, worse yet, it tends today to spread to the whole of society, constantly further reducing the space occupied by popular culture.” Spiritism contradicted these assumptions, because it appealed to both the lower classes and the bourgeois and created an innovative combination of “superstition” and science.

If popular religion is only the diminishing remnants of pagan belief, then we have created an ahistorical, unchanging, ideal type of popular religion which is useless for addressing changing relationships between popular and “savant” religion, between official and non-official religion. However, if we see popular religion as retaining the magical in a form that is not “backward,

48. Revue spirite (1873), 139–44.
49. Alexandre Erdan, La France mystique [sic] (Paris, 1855), 51.
51. Lapointe, 115.
52. Lapointe, 28–48, describes popular religion as civil religion practised by the “inferior classes.” It is lived, emotive, amateur, communal, traditional, oral, and exoteric. It often exists side by side with “popularized” religion, religion accepted by the people but taught to them from outside. Savant religion is all things opposite. Instead of lived, it is ordered or planned; instead of integrated into a whole life, it is differentiated, with separate parts. Michel Meslin adds that popular religion is anti-intellectualist and pragmatic while savant religion is intellectualist and ideological. See Lapointe, 47, for summary.
Spiritism adapted popular traditions to changing cultural values, creating a new set of definitions and explanations for the world, life, and death. These resonated especially with the urban population, which had been exposed to a more “rational” world. The spiritist spoke in terms of reason and of progress but thought in what have been seen (both then and now) as superstitions. This mentality is contradictory only if one insists that superstitions be traditional. Superstition, here used broadly and neutrally to include belief in supernatural intervention, easily changed and adapted to fit contemporary cultural values and even to incorporate a version of scientific knowledge.

Spiritism pioneered in the ability to maintain a “superstitious” or supernaturally oriented mentality while accepting and even seeking out the latest scientific knowledge. Science is easily accepted when religion is differentiated from life, as it is for most people today and was beginning to be in the nineteenth century. The difference in spiritism was that it allowed believers to perform this integration of reputedly incompatible forms into their daily life. In this sense, spiritism exemplified a new mentality, a mentality that adapted traditional beliefs to a modern, secularizing age.