A Study in Spirits

Arthur Conan Doyle’s Linkage of Mormonism, Spiritualism, and the Pursuit of Primitive Christianity During His Second Spiritualist Tour of America

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## Promoting Spiritualism in Salt Lake City:

On May 11 of 1923, Arthur Conan Doyle set foot in Salt Lake City for the first time in his life. He entered the city with the purpose of proselytizing Spiritualism, which he thought to be the “New Revelation” of the twentieth century. While Conan Doyle’s legacy as the creator of Sherlock Holmes often brought recognition and respect to his Spiritualist lectures, Salt Lake City seemed to be the exception. Although he had not visited the city before, Doyle had previously voiced criticisms against the city’s predominantly Mormon population in his first Sherlock Holmes novel, *A Study in Scarlet*. In *A Study*, Doyle participated in a broader culture of Mormon sensationalism in Victorian England, but he also wrote positively of Mormon society, attributing the prosperity of the Mormons to their religious eclecticism and their attempts to restore a primitive form of Christianity. When promoting Spiritualism in Salt Lake City nearly forty years after writing *A Study*, Doyle continued to focus on Mormonism’s eclecticism and belief in Christian restoration, linking these values with the form of Spiritualism that he proselytized. In so doing, Doyle’s Spiritualist rhetoric in Salt Lake City complicates a larger historical narrative which dictates that Spiritualists promoted their beliefs by claiming to reconcile scientific and religious tensions that characterized the turn of the twentieth century. Instead, Doyle’s engagement with a Mormonism shows that he often prioritized stressing Spiritualism’s shared beliefs and values with other American religions, over his attempts to present the religion as scientific and rational.

Many scholars have attributed the rapid spread of Spiritualism throughout the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth century to a cultural reaction to emerging materialistic worldviews and to major world conflicts that caused massive casualties. In these narratives, Spiritualist rhetoric is often presented as emerging in response to scientific materialism and aiming to provide an empirical and rationalist explanation for otherworldly phenomena. [] For instance, in one of the most extensive histories of Spiritualism, *In Search of White Crows*, Robert L. Moore argues that argues that American curiosity in Spiritualism was catalyzed by a yearning for scientific and religious reconciliation:

Over the past 175 years Spiritualism and then psychical research have offered Americans a ‘reasonable’ solution to the problem of how to accommodate religious and scientific interests.

By tracing Spiritualist popularity through its ability to relieve scientific and religious tensions, Moore overlooks other aspects of Spiritualism that resonate with its practitioners. By focusing only on the “rational” element of Spiritualist justification, Moore ignores lived religious practices that have historically informed Spiritualist thought and that have permeated through American religious culture.

Viewing Spiritualism as a reaction to the increasing popularity materialism, to the loses of war, or to disenchantment with modern life has become a pervasive view. Those in favor of this sort of telling of Spiritualist history frequently point to the empirical nature of Spiritualist practices in justifying their view:

Spiritualism represents a concerted, perhaps even a desperate, effort to reconcile science with religion, to supply those suffering from religious skepticism [with] scientific data, [namely] the spirit manifestations, upon which to base their beliefs in an afterlife.[[1]](#footnote-20)

# Works Cited

Bednarowski, Mary Farrell. “Nineteenth-Century American Spiritualism: An Attempt at Scientific Religion.” PhD thesis, University of Minnesota, 1973.

1. Mary Farrell Bednarowski, “Nineteenth-Century American Spiritualism: An Attempt at Scientific Religion” (PhD thesis, University of Minnesota, 1973), 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)