

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle: Spiritualism and “New Religions”

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IT HAS BEEN OBSERVED THAT “many who look to Sherlock Holmes as the supreme literary spokesman for rationalism feel dismay and bewilderment about his creator having become a leading champion of a doctrine that seems at odds with his education and literary ideals” (Lellenberg 1987, 11). Yet Arthur Conan Doyle was both the creator of Sherlock Holmes and a believer in, and proselyter for, spiritualism. How, many have asked, could Conan Doyle’s most famous detective have expressed disbelief in ghosts while his creator later became convinced that he could speak with spirits?

Many who are confused by this seeming inconsistency do not realize that Conan Doyle was raised a Roman Catholic, a religious orientation that accepted the possibility of earthly apparitions—including the Madonna and other saints. Even after rejecting the religion of his family, he yearned for a new faith. Years before he invented Sherlock Holmes, he investigated at least two “new religions”—Mormonism and spiritualism—which, like the Roman Catholic Church, taught that spirits who had formerly lived on the earth could appear to believers. In addition, most readers of Arthur Conan Doyle do not realize that he saw no inconsistency between his acceptance of spiritualism and Sherlock Holmes’s rationalism and, in fact, believed that his ability to

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reason had led him to the true religion. In this article I will use Conan Doyle's recollections and autobiographical works of fiction to examine his migration from Roman Catholicism to spiritualism.

CONAN DOYLE AND ROMAN CATHOLICISM

Conan Doyle was born in 1859 in Edinburgh, Scotland, in a very strict Roman Catholic family.¹ He grew up during the pontificate of Pius IX, when papal authority was strengthened, unique Catholic doctrines such as the Immaculate Conception were being re-emphasized, and the Virgin Mary revealed herself at Lourdes. From the age of eight, he was tutored by priests and continued to study in Jesuit schools in the United Kingdom and Austria until he was seventeen. Although he was apparently attracted by the mystical, sacramental, and eucharistic aspects of Catholicism (Lellenberg 1987, 194-96), he first began to doubt his faith during his years in the Jesuit schools.

By his own account, two separate problems with Roman Catholicism brought on his religious crisis. First, he believed that the "extreme doctrines of papal infallibility and Immaculate Conception," introduced by the Jesuits, "made it . . . difficult for the man with scientific desire for truth or with intellectual self-respect to keep within the Church" (1924a, 14). Second, he resented the church's teaching, which he had first heard from the fierce Irish priest, Father Murphy, "that there was sure damnation for everyone outside the Church." Upon hearing this statement, Conan Doyle "looked upon him with horror, and to that moment," he later said, "I trace the first rift which has grown into such a chasm between me and those who were my guides" (Doyle 1924a, 14).

When Conan Doyle entered the University of Edinburgh at age seventeen, he was, by his own account, a nonbeliever. "I found that the foundations not only of Roman Catholicism but of the whole Christian faith, as presented to me in nineteenth century theology, were so weak that my mind could not build upon them" (Doyle 1924a, 26).

¹ The most authoritative biographies written about Sir Arthur Conan Doyle are *Arthur Conan Doyle, A Memoir* by John Lamond (London: John Murray, 1931); *Conan Doyle, His Life and Art* by Hesketh Pearson (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1943); *The True Conan Doyle* by Adrian Conan Doyle (London: John Murray, 1945); *The Life of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* by John Dickson Carr (London: John Murray, 1945); *The Man Who Was Sherlock Holmes* by Michael and Mollie Hardwick (London: John Murray, 1964); *Conan Doyle* by Pierre Nordon (London: John Murray, 1966); *The Adventures of Conan Doyle, The Life of the Creator of Sherlock Holmes* by Charles Higham (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1976); and *Conan Doyle, A Biographical Solution* by Ronald Pearsall (New York: St. Martins Press, 1977).

These conditions had, according to Conan Doyle, "driven me to agnosticism" (Doyle 1924a, 27). During his university years he came under the influence of materialists such as Joseph Bell, his self-proclaimed prototype for Sherlock Holmes, who taught his students deductive reasoning through observing material phenomenon.

As a result of this training, Conan Doyle became convinced that observation and deductive reasoning could solve every mystery of life. Yet despite this training, his previous rejection of Catholicism, and his self-professed agnosticism, he continued to investigate religions to fill a void he felt without a religious foundation. However, he refused to accept any religion that required "blind faith." Instead, Conan Doyle insisted, "I must have definite demonstration, for if it were to be a matter of faith then I might as well go back to the faith of my fathers. 'Never will I accept anything which cannot be proved to me. The evils of religion have all come from accepting things which cannot be proved.' So I said at the time [he left the Catholic Church], and I have been true to my resolve" (Doyle 1924a, 27).

Conan Doyle found himself caught in the conflict of science and religion: the Roman Catholic in him needed to know that life continued after death; the scientist in him refused to believe without definite proof. Thus, appealing to both religion and science, Conan Doyle recorded in his private journal that his goal was to "break down the barrier of death, to found the grand religion of the future" (in Pearsall 1977, 24).

CONAN DOYLE AND MORMONISM

Mormon Presence in Great Britain

Although Conan Doyle claimed in his autobiography that he remained an agnostic from the time he received his medical degree in 1881 until his conversion to spiritualism in 1916, this appears to conflict with his short stories and correspondence.² It is well known that even while attending medical school, he actively investigated "new religions" in an effort to fill the void created when he left the Roman

² See, for example, correspondence contained in *Letters to the Press*, edited by John M. Gibson and Richard L. Green (1986). Among Doyle's most prominent short stories with spiritualist themes written between 1880 and 1916 are "The American's Tale" (1880), "The Captain of the Polestar" (1883), "J. Habakuk Jephson's Statement" (1884), "John Barrington Cowles" (1884), "The Great Keinplatz Experiment" (1885), "Cyprian Overbeck Wells" (1886), "The Los Amigos Fiasco" (1892), "The Brown Hand" (1899), "The Leather Funnel" (1903), "The Silver Mirror" (1908), and "The Terror of Blue John Gap" (1910).

Catholic Church. He attended his first séance in 1880, and many of his short stories published in the 1880s reflect his interest in, and growing acceptance of, spiritualism. It is less well known that Conan Doyle read many books about Mormonism before the middle of that decade.³ By the 1880s, Mormon missionaries had been proselyting in the United Kingdom for more than forty years, and English converts had accounted for more than 50 percent of the Church's members in the United States since the settlement of Utah Territory (Taylor 1964, 19–20; Thorp 1977, 51).

Politicians, newspapers, and journalists paid considerable attention to the movement, and some even traveled to Utah to observe the sect firsthand.⁴ Much published about Mormonism during this period—particularly that written by ex-Mormons—was sensationalist and emphasized the aspect of Mormonism certain to shock most English Victorians—plural marriage.⁵ Nevertheless, there were evenhanded and fair accounts of Mormonism, including *The City of the Saints* by Sir Richard Burton (1861), which spoke admiringly of the Mormons' industriousness, doctrines, and practices and recounted the story of Joseph Smith. Many investigators in Great Britain were attracted by the Church's claim of continuing revelation and a return to primitive Christianity, in spite of the practice of polygamy and rumors that the Church employed assassins—the Danites or Avenging Angels—to enforce polygamy and other Church doctrines in Utah.

The Mormon belief that God had restored his Church to its primitive condition and continued to reveal truths to his prophets would certainly have appealed to Doyle, since such doctrines were similar to the claims of spiritualism. In addition, Mormonism claimed many “tangible proofs” that life continued after death: visits from extra-terrestrial beings to the Prophet Joseph; gold plates; and witnesses, besides Smith, who saw it all. Thus, it is probable that Conan Doyle's investigation of the Mormon Church was not simply intellectual, but spiritually motivated also.

³ For a discussion of the writings Doyle consulted on Mormonism and possible sources for *A Study in Scarlet*, see: *Conan Doyle and the Latter-day Saints* by Jack Tracy; “Perpetuation of a Myth: Mormon Danites in Five Western Novels, 1840–1890” by Rebecca Foster Cornwall and Leonard T. Arrington; and “Recent Psychic Evidence: The Visit of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to Utah in 1923” by Michael W. Homer. Doyle evidently consulted both sensationalist and more objective accounts of Mormonism.

⁴ See Stansbury 1852; Ferris 1854; Gunnison 1856; Chandlees 1857; Carvalho 1858; Remy and Brenchley 1861; Burton 1861; Bowles 1865; Greeley and Codman 1874.

⁵ See Stenhouse 1875; Beadle 1870; Jarman 1884; Mayhew 1851; Lyford 1886.

A Study in Scarlet

It is also not surprising that Conan Doyle's first published novel, *A Study in Scarlet* (also his first Sherlock Holmes story), written shortly after his investigation of Mormonism, was about Mormonism (1894). Here Conan Doyle used the vast knowledge of Mormon history and doctrine he had gleaned from his investigation into the Church and, through the story's characters, expressed his own reaction to its teachings. He drew the historical details of the story mainly from accounts written by Fanny Stenhouse (1875), Eliza Young (1876), Mary Ettie Smith (in Green 1858), John Hyde (1857), John Beadle (1870), William Jarman (1884), and other sensationalist authors whose works were available to Conan Doyle in Great Britain.⁶ In addition, he drew heavily from the plot of an 1885 Robert Louis Stevenson short story entitled "Story of the Destroying Angel." He may also have been influenced by other works of fiction, such as Mark Twain's *Roughing It*. His view of Mormon history and culture was tainted by these sensationalist authors and other English sources of the period—especially their condemnations of polygamy, autocratic leadership, and the activities of avenging angels.⁷ Even though Doyle probably consulted more objective accounts such as Burton, Remy, Chandless, and others (which criticized the same church practices in a less lurid manner), he chose to sensationalize his story of the Mormons.

Several factors may explain his decision. First, in the late 1880s Mormonism was popular in the British "yellow press"; it could attract readers and generate income for Conan Doyle's more serious literary pursuits. Second, Conan Doyle genuinely opposed what Victorian society deemed "aberrations in morality" and, according to one author, "must have been very much against the Mormons in their search for moral freedom" (Higham 1976, 74).⁸ Third, he was apparently convinced that the types of things he wrote about had actually occurred; sensationalist material critical of Mormonism written by persons who claimed to have lived in or visited Utah was abundant. Finally,

⁶ Doyle's reference to Heber C. Kimball alluding to his wives as "heifers" is from Young's book (1876, 292) and Browne's book (1865, 60). Mark Twain also had several characters in *Roughing It* refer to women as heifers (Clemens 1872, 35, 288), and in the Bible Sampson referred to his wife the same way (Judges 14:18).

⁷ Other writers who may have influenced Conan Doyle's view of Mormonism are Beadle, Jarman, Mayhew, and Lyford. (See Footnote 5.)

⁸ Conan Doyle expressed his disapproval of polygamy in at least three of his books, including *A Study in Scarlet*, *Our Second American Adventure*, and *A Duet with an Occasional Chorus*.

Conan Doyle had, as has previously been observed, investigated the Mormon message and was ready by the time he wrote *A Study in Scarlet* to expose it to other investigators and to dispose of it in his own mind.

A Study in Scarlet tells of a man named John Ferrier and a young girl named Lucy who are stranded in the desert of western America and have abandoned all hope of survival when they are found by Brigham Young and other Saints on their way to Utah. Ferrier adopts Lucy, and both join the Mormon church and become very prosperous in Utah. Doyle's descriptions of the Mormons show he admired their industriousness and perseverance. Furthermore, John Ferrier, one of the heroes of the book, accepts all the religious tenets of Mormonism except polygamy. Brigham Young gives him an ultimatum that his adopted daughter must marry within thirty days either Enoch Drebbler or Joseph Stangerson, both practicing polygamists and the sons of two members of the Council of the Sacred Four (a mythical leading council of the Church), a situation strikingly similar to the accounts of Fanny Stenhouse and John Hyde, who claim that Brigham Young gave ultimatums to parents that their daughters marry Joseph W. Young. Ferrier delays responding to Young, but "he has always determined, deep down in his resolute heart, that nothing would ever induce him to allow his daughter to wed a Mormon" because of the practice of polygamy (1894, 148-49).

Ferrier does not immediately respond to Young's request but instead contacts Jefferson Hope, a non-Mormon miner who works in Nevada and California, who has previously fallen in love with Lucy and was planning to marry her before Brigham Young's next visit. Hope returns to Utah the night before Ferrier must "voluntarily" release Lucy to marry one of the two Mormon elders and attempts to help Lucy and her father escape from Utah. But the Avenging Angels, who according to the book are enforcers of polygamy for the Church hierarchy, prevent their escape. Lucy's father dies in the escape attempt, and Lucy meets the same end several days later of a broken heart, but only after she is forced to marry Drebbler. Hope escapes and pledges vengeance upon the murderers, Drebbler and Stangerson. Twenty years later, he tracks them down in London and kills them. Sherlock Holmes, in his first published case, is called upon to solve the mystery.

A Study in Scarlet indicates that the aspects of Mormonism that appealed to Conan Doyle, including the belief in continuing revelation and the return to primitive Christianity, were outweighed in his mind by one glaring defect, polygamy. This distaste was revealed by Ferrier's acceptance of all tenets of Mormonism except polygamy and by the polygamist Drebbler's disgustingly free and familiar attitude toward

women. With Drebber's body is found a pocket edition of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, a book that contains many stories of sexual debauchery.

This same attitude toward polygamy is confirmed in Conan Doyle's non-fiction writing about Mormonism wherein he noted that although he found "many passages [in the Book of Mormon] which seem to me to be true, as they coincide with the spirit-information which we have ourselves received" (1924b, 102), he believed that Joseph Smith became misguided, swayed by those around him. "For want of this, some of the early spiritualists received counsel as to free love which cast a deserved slur upon the growing movement. So it was with Smith. He had revelations which could have come from no high source" (1924b, 102). He therefore concluded that his own observations concerning Mormonism should "serve as a warning against the indiscriminate adoption of supposed revelations, which, in the case of polygamy, have done so much to harm the movement" (1924b, 104).

Conan Doyle also rejected Mormonism for the same reason he claimed he had rejected Roman Catholicism: because the Church began to set up a special priestly caste and claimed to be the only true church. In *A Study in Scarlet*, Conan Doyle noted that obedience was paramount, inasmuch as Young spoke with the voice of Joseph Smith, which was the voice of God. Many years later, he noted that "instead of being a message of hope and knowledge for the whole human race such as we bring by Spiritualism, it is tending towards the discredited and old-world idea of a special priestly caste, of formal sacraments, and of a new sect, complete in itself and antagonistic to other sects" (1924b, 97).

In his story, Conan Doyle used the Danites, who harassed backsliders and enforced the doctrine of polygamy, as evidence of Mormonism's antagonism toward nonbelievers. In *A Study in Scarlet*, he observed that the Mormons, who had once been the victims of persecution, were now the persecutors and compared their tactics to those employed during the Inquisition of Seville and by the Secret Societies of Italy. Some years later, Conan Doyle returned to this theme in a book about his conversion to spiritualism wherein he wrote that the "murderous impulses" of the "early Mormons in Utah" had been "fortified" by reliance upon the "unholy source" of the Old Testament (1919c, 18).

CONAN DOYLE AND SPIRITUALISM

Conan Doyle's First Conversion to Spiritualism

It is apparent that although many things about Mormonism appealed to Conan Doyle, he rejected the faith because of polygamy and

because of reasons much like those that had caused him to reject Catholicism: the existence of a priestly caste, the belief in only one true religion, and intolerance for nonbelievers. Furthermore, he was aware of the competing claims of spiritualism and was already converted to it by the time he wrote *A Study in Scarlet*. In fact, the concluding pages of that book contain evidence of his growing commitment to spiritualism. When Jefferson Hope confessed to Sherlock Holmes that he killed Enoch Drebbler, he claimed that the images of Lucy and John Ferrier appeared to him before the murder, apparently to express their satisfaction that he would avenge their deaths. Thus, when Conan Doyle's hero—named Hope—kills off the Mormons [and Conan Doyle's investigation of the Mormon Church], the spirits of Hope's loved ones appeared to him to reveal the "true" religion. Such symbolism underlies Conan Doyle's acceptance of spiritualism over Mormonism.

Given this perspective and his allusions to spiritualism in *A Study in Scarlet*, it is not surprising that a short time later, 2 July 1888, he wrote a letter to *Light*, a spiritualist newspaper, relating the events leading to his conversion to spiritualism (in Gibson and Green 1986, 25–27). According to this letter, Conan Doyle became converted to spiritualism after reading books by John W. Edmonds, Alfred R. Wallace, and General Drayson. To put their writing to the test, he and six other interested people met at his house nine or ten times and with the help of several novice mediums, received various messages delivered by table tilts and controlled writing. However, their efforts were inconclusive until Conan Doyle invited an experienced medium with "considerable mediumistic power" to interact with the group. The medium, writing under control, directed Doyle not to read a book by Leigh Hunt. Conan Doyle was finally convinced of the truth of spiritualism because neither the medium nor any of his group knew he was debating in his mind whether or not to read the book. As a result of this experience, Conan Doyle wrote:

[T]he incident . . . after many months of inquiry, showed me at last that it was absolutely certain that intelligence could exist apart from the body. . . . After weighing the evidence, I could no more doubt the existence of the phenomena than I could doubt the existence of lions in Africa, though I have been to that continent and have never chanced to see one. . . . Let me conclude by exhorting any other searcher never to despair of receiving personal testimony but to persevere through any number of failures until at last conviction comes to him, as, it will. (in Gibson and Green 1986, 25–27)

Conan Doyle had finally received the "definite demonstration" he had indicated would be necessary before he would embrace any new religion. He felt he had found evidence that life continues after death,

and that miracles consistent with primitive Christianity continued to take place.

It was no accident that Conan Doyle's "personal testimony" came so soon after he completed *A Study in Scarlet*. In the book, Watson, impressed with Holmes's deductive powers, observes that Holmes had "brought detection as near an exact science as it ever will be brought in this world" (1894, 58). Several years later, in "The Adventure of the Naval Treaty," Holmes explains: "There is nothing in which deduction is so necessary as in religion. . . . [I]t can be brought up as an exact science by the reasoner" (1893a, 392-403).

Some believe these observations on deductive reasoning indicate Holmes's sarcasm and disdain for religion. While Conan Doyle was always bewildered by the reading public's worship of his Sherlock Holmes stories (which he described in the 11 May 1923 *Deseret News* as "rather childish things") and was sometimes bitter at the lack of appreciation for his more "serious" literary efforts, he did observe:

I presume that since I am the only begetter of that over-rated character, I must have some strain of my nature which corresponds with him. Let me assume this. In that case, I would say (and you may file the same for reference) that of all the facts of clear thinking which Holmes ever performed, by far the greatest was when he saw that a despised and ridiculed subject was in very truth a great new revelation and an epic-making event in the world's history. (in Gibson and Green 1986, 312-14)

Thus, Conan Doyle's own observations enabled him (and the Holmes within him) to personally testify to the truth of spiritualism, including its belief that the spirit continues to live after the body dies. As he later wrote in his *History of Spiritualism*, "It [spiritualism] founds our belief in life after death not upon ancient tradition or upon vague intuitions, but upon proven facts, so that a science of religion may be built up" (Doyle 1926a, 2:247). Thus, spiritualism offered him what he had been seeking since he had lost faith in traditional Christianity and since the materialism of his medical training had eliminated the possibility of proving that there was life after death.

The Origins and Doctrines of Spiritualism

Although Conan Doyle chose spiritualism over Mormonism, he also recognized many similarities between these two "new religions." Both originated in the burned-over district of upstate New York within twenty years of each other (Cross 1950, 138-50; Doyle 1926a, 1:42). Both taught that mortals could speak and communicate with spirits, and both claimed to be most like primitive Christianity.

After Conan Doyle's first mention of Mormonism in *A Study in Scarlet*, he continued to mention it in both his books of fiction (1899b, 1926b) and nonfiction (1902, 1919, 1924b, 1926a, 1930) and recognized the similarities between the two religions: "I think that if the Mormons understood the philosophy of Spiritualism, and if they considered the possibility of Smith, their founder, being a strong medium, they would be able to get a connected and reasonable explanation of all that occurred, which would in no way detract from its dignity or other-world origin" (1924b, 87-88).

He also admitted that he believed Joseph Smith was sincere and honest in claiming to have received revelations but that "he was not aware of the strange way in which things are done from beyond" (1924b, 91). He observed that the message of Mormonism was essentially the same as spiritualism:

It was really the same which we have got ourselves, but which we have been able to interpret more fully because we have had a far wider experience, and have been able to systematize and compare many examples of what to Smith was an isolated miracle. The message was that the Christian creeds had wandered very far away from primitive spiritual truths . . . [and] that ritual and forms have completely driven out that direct spirit—communion and power which are the real living core of religion. (1924b, 92)

Conan Doyle's spiritualist movement originated in Hydesville, New York, in March 1848, at the farmhouse of John D. Fox. Fox and his family were disturbed for some time by unexplained raps at night. His youngest daughter, Kate, successfully initiated contact with the originator of the rappings who identified himself, in code, as a spirit who had been murdered five years earlier and buried in the basement of the Fox home. Many residents in the neighborhood confirmed the raps, and two of the Fox daughters, Kate and Margaret, were soon organizing sittings, as mediums, for communication with spirits. Many other mediums also organized sittings, and the movement spread throughout England and the United States.

By the 1880s, spiritualism reached the height of its popularity in Great Britain and offered facts, observable by all investigators, which would prove the existence of life after death, rather than relying on faith or the teachings of traditional Christianity. These "facts" were ostensible messages from departed spirits delivered through mediums, the materialization of parts of a spirit through a medium, and the presence of spirits in photographs taken of living persons on previously unexposed film (Doyle 1926a). Although Conan Doyle was aware of these "facts," he was also aware that the Fox sisters were attacked as frauds and that Margaret had denounced spiritualism and admitted that she was a fraud (Doyle 1930). Such information may have

convinced Conan Doyle to proceed cautiously in his investigations of spiritualism.

The Interlude before "The Revelation"

From 1888 to 1916 Conan Doyle was actively involved in the spiritualist movement. In 1891, he joined the Society for Psychical Research (Doyle 1918, 31) and, during the same decade, contributed generously to *Light* (Brandon 1983, 191). He did not proselyte the cause of spiritualism, as he later would, but instead continued to attend séances and study psychic phenomena as part of his own search for truth.

His writings during this period, both fiction and letters to the press, demonstrate his growing interest in the hereafter. His second published novel, *The Mystery of Cloomber* (1888), has been described as "almost embarrassingly pro-spiritualist" (Lellenberg 1987, 188). Many of his short stories published before 1916 also portrayed spiritualist ideas and concepts in a favorable light (Pearsall 1977, 24).

Conan Doyle also wrote three books during this period which his biographers have described as autobiographical: *Beyond the City* in 1893, *The Stark Munro Letters* in 1895, and *A Duet With an Occasional Chorus* in 1899. In the most important of these works, *The Stark Munro Letters*, Conan Doyle's hero, Stark Munro (who is really Doyle himself), reveals that he has only the "vague idea as to whence I have come from, whither I am going, or what I am here for. It is not for want of inquiry, or from indifference. I have mastered the principles of several religions. They have all shocked me by the violence which I should have to do to my reason to accept the dogmas of any one of them. . . . I see so clearly that faith is not a virtue, but a vice. It is a goat which has been herded with the sheep" (1895, 16-17). And yet, Conan Doyle, through Munro, also admits that his loss of faith has been traumatic: "When first I came out of the faith in which I had been reared, I certainly did feel for a time as if my life-belt had burst. I won't exaggerate and say that I was miserable and plunged in utter spiritual darkness" (1895, 45). And yet Munro also reflected Conan Doyle's optimism for the future of religions: "The forms of religion will be abandoned, but the essence will be maintained; so that one universal creed will embrace the whole civilized earth" (1895, 295).

Conan Doyle also revealed his attitude toward organized religion in his letters to the press. In correspondence dated 16 October 1900, he wrote, "I regard hard-and-fast dogma of every kind as an unjustifiable and essentially irreligious thing putting assertion in the place of reason, and giving rise to more contention, bitterness and want of charity than any other influence in human affairs" (in Gibson and

Green 1986, 67–68). Six years later, on 11 August 1906, the supposedly agnostic Conan Doyle also wrote:

I am a believer in the Christian system in its simplest and least dogmatic form. . . . I do not believe that the Divine Message to the human race was delivered once and for all 2,000 years ago, but I hold that every piece of prose and verse which has in it anything which is helpful to the individual soul is, in some sense, a message from beyond—a message which grows and expands as all vital things must do. (in Gibson and Green 1986, 121–22)

Of course, Conan Doyle's own prose and verse, which contained many stories of spirits returning and revealing themselves, was the type of literature he would have believed contained portions of the Divine Message.

During this interlude, Doyle also drowned Sherlock Holmes in Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland so that he could concentrate on more serious literary efforts in his studies of spiritualism (Doyle 1893). Ironically, Holmes was resurrected, or at least “born again” from the waters of Reichenbach in 1905 to help supplement Doyle's income.⁹ Sherlock Holmes books published in 1915, 1917, and 1927 enabled Conan Doyle to actively pursue his missionary efforts on behalf of spiritualism.

Conan Doyle's Second Conversion

While it is certain that Conan Doyle believed in spiritualism as early as the late 1880s, it is also true that he did not actively proselyte the spiritualist movement until 1916. It was the First World War that finally convinced him to more fully embrace the movement. “I might have drifted on for my whole life as a psychical Researcher,” he wrote, “but the War came, and . . . it brought earnestness into all our souls and made us look more closely at our own beliefs and reassess our values” (1918, 38–39). As a result of this “earnestness,” he suddenly saw that “this subject with which I had so long dallied was not merely a study of a force outside the rules of science, but that it was really something tremendous, a breaking down of the walls between two worlds, a direct undeniable message from beyond, a call of hope and of guidance to the human race at the time of its deepest affliction” (1918, 39).

Conan Doyle also realized, apparently for the first time, that “the physical phenomena . . . are really of no account, and that their real

⁹ Although he wrote *The Hound of the Baskervilles* in 1902, Doyle did not actually bring Holmes back to life until 1905 in *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*.

value consists in the fact that they . . . make religion a very real thing, no longer a matter of faith, but a matter of actual experience and fact" (1918, 39). He now turned with great zeal from the objective mode of spiritualism to its religious side. Shortly after his second "conversion," he wrote two books, *The New Revelation* (1918) and *The Vital Message* (1919), in which he related his personal belief in the movement. In addition, he wrote numerous letters to the press about spiritualism, summarizing the beliefs and practices of spiritualists and asserting that he could not "recall any miracle in the New Testament which has not been claimed, upon good authority, as having occurred in the experience of spiritualists" (in Gibson and Green 1986, 275); that spiritualism is nothing more than what one would find going "back nineteen hundred years and studying the Christianity of Christ" (in Gibson and Green 1986, 278-80); that the date spiritualism was organized in upstate New York in 1848 "is in truth the greatest date in human history since the great revelation of two thousand years ago" (1986, 301); and that no faith is necessary to come to a realization that spiritualism is true (1986, 302-4).

Conan Doyle also wrote a two-volume work on the history of spiritualism, which even today is considered an authoritative source on the subject (1926a). In it, he complained about spiritualism's critics, in particular, those who considered themselves scientists: "What is really not science is the laying down of the law on matters which you have not studied. It is talk of that sort which has brought me to the edge of spiritualism, when I compare this dogmatic ignorance with the earnest search for truth conducted by the great spiritualists" (1926b).

Conan Doyle could not understand the scientific community's total rejection of spiritualism, particularly when he believed that it could be proven by "experimental methods" (1986, 302-4). He was particularly outraged by what he perceived as the scientific community's persecution of spiritualism: "[I]t may be said that the attitude of organised science during these thirty years was as unreasonable and unscientific as that of Galileo's cardinals, and that if there had been a Scientific Inquisition, it would have brought its terrors to bear upon the new knowledge" (1926a, 182).

He also observed that traditional churches felt threatened by spiritualism and that "religion so-called and science so-called united for once in an unholy attempt to misrepresent and persecute the new truth and its supporters" (1926a, 137). He claimed that "the 'religious' people, furious at being shaken out of their time-honored ruts, were ready, like savages, to ascribe any new thing to the devil. Roman Catholics and the Evangelical sects, alike, found themselves for once

united in their opposition" (1926a, 182-83). Ultimately, however, Conan Doyle claimed, "Powerful as it is, [the Roman Catholic Church] will find in time that it has encountered something stronger than itself" (1926a, 189).

Conan Doyle's Worldwide Crusade

Because of this perceived persecution and his newly found missionary zeal, Conan Doyle wrote thirteen books on spiritualism, spent great sums of money, and traveled thousands of miles to proselyte spiritualism across four continents, including the countries of Australia and New Zealand (Doyle 1921b), America and Canada (1923b, 1924b), South Africa and Kenya (1929b), and places closer to home. He also served as president of three psychic societies, founded a psychic bookstore and museum, and wrote hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles.

Although he had criticized Mormon leaders, history, and institutions in his first Sherlock Holmes detective story published thirty-five years earlier and reiterated those criticisms several years before his visit, he even took his spiritualist crusade to Utah in 1923. By that time, he was an experienced proselyter. Spiritualism was not unknown to Utah residents. Mormon leaders and the local press were aware of and had criticized the claims of spiritualism shortly after its initial appearance in upstate New York (Bitton 1974, 39-50). Parley P. Pratt and Jedediah M. Grant spoke about the subject in the Salt Lake Tabernacle during the 1850s (Pratt 1853, 43-46). During the same decade, both the *Deseret News* and the *Millennial Star* denounced spiritualism. Despite these denunciations, and perhaps in part because of them, some dissatisfied Latter-day Saints were attracted to spiritualism beginning in the late 1860s, including William S. Godbe, E. L. T. Harrison, and a former LDS apostle, Amasa Lyman.¹⁰

¹⁰ Mormon leaders continued to denounce not only the Godbeites but also spiritualism in general. In a 31 January 1869 address, George Q. Cannon distinguished between the "true" church in which a person is "satisfied with the truth or with the testimony of the servants of God . . . [and] . . . [the] heavenly influence of the spirit of God which rests down upon those who receive the truth in honesty" and the person who rejects such "truth" because he "wants a sign; he wants to hear somebody speak in tongues, or to see the eyes of the blind opened, or the deaf made to hear, the dumb to speak, the lame to walk, or the dead raised to life. Something of this kind he must have; the testimony of the truth, though borne with angel's power, has no effect on such a heart. He wants something to convince his outward senses." He then lamented that some were convinced by such mundane proofs as "something that could tip a table or give some other singular manifestation of power, such as feeling invisible

The Godbeite movement, guided by the principles and teachings of spiritualism, continued "for more than a decade as an important community force" (Walker 1982, 1977, 1974). Not only did the Utah spiritualists preach and conduct séances, "they spawned a rival church organization, the first successful anti-LDS newspaper, a seminal historical survey of Mormonism, and an unprecedented public forum that featured a stream of internationally renowned radical itinerants" (Walker 1982, 306). These itinerants, who were not allowed to speak to Mormon congregations, spoke from the pulpit of a newly constructed Liberal Institute in Salt Lake and were, according to some observers, more popular than speakers at the Tabernacle (Walker 1982, 312).

Part of spiritualism's appeal for these disaffected Latter-day Saints was its similarities to Mormonism (see Walker 1974, 227-28; 1982, 315). Spiritualism's beliefs in "the existence and life of the spirit apart from and independent of the material organism, and in the reality and value of intelligent intercourse between spirits embodied and spirits' discarnate" (Doyle 1926a, 262) were similar to Mormon beliefs in life after death and personal revelation. In fact, some Utah spiritualists claimed to have talked in séances with early Church leaders, including Joseph Smith, whom they recognized as an unsophisticated medium who had misinterpreted his "revelations" (Walker 1977, 78; 1974, 230; 1982, 315).

Although Utah spiritualism did not threaten the stability of Mormonism, its similarities troubled some Saints, who explained their spiritual manifestations away, calling them fraudulent or if legitimate, originating with inferior spirits (Bitton 1974, 46-49). By the turn of the century, James E. Talmage's *Articles of Faith* asserted that "the restoration of the priesthood to earth in this age of the world, was followed by a phenomenal growth of the vagaries of spiritualism, whereby many have been led to put their trust in Satan's counterfeit of God's eternal power" (Talmage 1899, 236). Spiritualism, in the Mormon view, had become a tool of the devil.

This view was still prevalent several years before Doyle's visit. In a November 1920 article in the *Improvement Era*, Joseph West argued that the spiritualism espoused by Doyle in his two recently published works, *The New Revelation* and *The Vital Message*, was very different "from true

hands laid upon them, or hearing music played by invisible performers" (JD 12:368-71).

On 19 December 1869, Apostle Orson Pratt claimed that many early Saints who left the church in Nauvoo and Kirtland had fled to the eastern United States and became affiliated with spiritualism (JD 13: 70-74).

inspiration or revelation from God!" (1920, 6-13). While noting the similarities between Mormon and spiritualist belief concerning the spirit world, West reiterated Talmage's view that spiritualism was a counterfeit form of Mormonism: "It is hard to get away from the conviction that Mr. Doyle found much of the truthful portion of his statements and descriptions of the spirit world in the doctrines of the 'Mormon' Church" (1920, 11). West also asserted that even though "the Lord permits loved ones who have gone before to bring comforting messages to the living[,] . . . in all such cases, the communication is directly with the person for whom [it] is intended, and not through a third, irresponsible person" (1920, 13).

Whether or not Conan Doyle was aware of Mormon feelings about spiritualism in general and his own works in particular, he was probably apprehensive about coming to Utah. Yet, rank and file Saints were not as aware of these fine distinctions as their leaders may have hoped. In fact, some Latter-day Saints were curious about ideas and experiences similar to those claimed by spiritualists. Not only is Mormonism premised on a belief in supernatural experiences, but Mormon folklore is replete with stories of supernatural events experienced by lay members—stories about the Three Nephites, persons returning from the dead, and visions of deceased family members (Bitton 1974, 50; Fife and Fife 1956).

By the 1920s, Salt Lake City also had a sizable non-Mormon population. The devastation and death of the First World War had undoubtedly interested some of these people—searching for consolation and hope—in the resurgence of spiritualism. In fact, in an 11 May 1923 article in the Salt Lake *Telegram* Conan Doyle expressed his belief that the war had been fought to produce precisely this result. This universal curiosity about the supernatural and life beyond death must have been a strong drawing card for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who came to Salt Lake City to recount his research into spiritual phenomena.

Although it was Conan Doyle's first trip to the western United States, he had long been interested in the area. The evening of his arrival, he spoke about "Recent Psychic Evidence" to five thousand people in the Salt Lake Tabernacle, site of previous denunciations of spiritualism and the Godbeites in the nineteenth century.

All three local newspapers, the Salt Lake *Telegram*, the Salt Lake *Tribune*, and the *Deseret News*, carried 12 May 1923 articles about the address and give us a good indication of Conan Doyle's proselyting activities from 1921 to 1930. After first thanking the Church for its "open-mindedness" in allowing him to speak in the Tabernacle, he

began his discourse, which was essentially the same one he had delivered throughout the world. He presented "tangible proofs" of communication with the dead, including his own psychic experiences and others recorded on "spirit photographs." His own experiences included messages from his departed brother, mother, and son through mediums he claimed had no means of knowing the facts revealed.

Conan Doyle also showed two types of "spirit photographs" on a large screen erected on the Tabernacle stage. The first type purported to be photographs of materialized spiritual forms taken at séances. Spiritualists believed that during the visitation of some spirits a gelatinous material called ectoplasm "oozed from the medium's mouth, ears, eyes and skin" and formed around the spirit to give it a visible, three-dimensional shape (Doyle 1926a, 109). The second type of "spirit photograph" Conan Doyle exhibited was photos taken in daylight which, when developed, showed spirits that had mysteriously appeared on the negatives. One such photograph, reported the *Tribune*, showed war dead in London with a cloud of spirit faces, thirty of which the speaker "affirmed . . . had been positively recognized by relatives and friends."

In addition to these "tangible proofs," Conan Doyle spent a portion of his two-hour lecture explaining the doctrines of spiritualism, some of which were similar to Mormon beliefs. In particular, he described the spiritualist's concept of heaven as a "land of realized ideals" where spirits go after death and continue, according to the *Telegram* article, in "artistic, literary or other enjoyable pursuits," including "missionary duties which consisted in descending to a lower plane to instruct others." He assured his audience that this view was corroborated by messages from the spirit world. He also argued, according to the *Tribune*, that "one finds really but little of pure evil in the world," that "as a rule humanity deserved compensation, not punishment," and that even though the "spirits that are evil will be retarded . . . they, too, will have opportunity to go on as they grow into love." Like the Godbeites fifty years before, Conan Doyle believed that Joseph Smith was a medium who had misinterpreted his messages, but there is no evidence he communicated this belief to his Utah audience (Doyle 1924b, 91-102).

Such optimistic ideals were evidently well received by the audience. The *Salt Lake Telegram* reported that Conan Doyle "held his audience fascinated, proving beyond question the intense interest in his subject." Furthermore, as he finished "it seemed as though his audience was loath to leave . . . [after being] . . . so enthralled by this striking message Sir Arthur delivered." However, the *Telegram* also

noted that "when he grew argumentative . . . his logic at times appeared to be far from invulnerable." The *Tribune* thought that Conan Doyle by "self-evident sincerity and earnestness . . . sought by logic, patent facts and plain deduction" to deliver a message full "of cheer and uplift, calculated to inspire and help" and that such message was received by a strictly "attentive audience." Even the Mormon *Deseret News*, which did not devote as much space to his visit as the other two dailies, wrote that Doyle had delivered an "optimistic lecture" with "an unusual earnestness."

Conan Doyle's previous uncomplimentary characterization of Mormonism appears to have been largely forgotten during this visit, even though he had resurrected it himself in his 1919 *The Vital Message*, where he referred to the "murderous impulses" of the "early Mormons in Utah" (p. 18).

A non-Mormon doctor named G. Hodgson Higgins did write to Conan Doyle while he was staying at the Hotel Utah, telling the English author that his first impressions of Mormonism had been tainted because "the book [probably *A Study in Scarlet*] gave one the impression that murder was a common practice among them." Higgins asked Conan Doyle to "express his regret at having propagated falsehoods about the Mormon church and people" (Higgins 1923). Conan Doyle reassured Higgins that in his future memoirs he would write of the Latter-day Saints as he found them on his visit. However, he indicated that "all I said about the Danite Band and the murders is historical so I cannot withdraw that tho it is likely that in a work of fiction it is stated more luridly than in a work of history. It's best to let the matter rest" (Doyle 1923b).

True to his word, Conan Doyle spoke favorably of the Mormons in his memoirs and even mentioned the Higgins letter. He also indicated that *A Study in Scarlet* was "a rather sensational and over colored picture of the Danite Episodes which formed a passing stain in the early history of Utah" (1924b, 87). Before he left Utah, the 13 May Salt Lake *Tribune* reported his eloquent tribute to the Utah pioneers, whom he compared to the settlers of South Africa he had met during the Boer War (see also Doyle 1902, 13). He did, however, refuse to give a public apology because "the facts were true enough, though there were many reasons which might extenuate them." Although Conan Doyle's initial contact with Mormons left him with a favorable impression, he remained convinced that his description of nineteenth-century Mormonism, patterned after sensationalist and lurid accounts, was accurate and historical. Perhaps his desire to be regarded as an author of historical novels required him to hold his view.

Conan Doyle's Continuing Literary Efforts

Even after Conan Doyle took up the torch for spiritualism, he continued to write to earn money for his proselyting activities. As already noted, he wrote two Sherlock Holmes books after 1916, and in the last series of stories, *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes* (1927), Sherlock Holmes, the pre-eminent rationalist, seemed to actually believe in spirits (see Edwards 1981, 1-8).

Conan Doyle's favorite character from this period was Professor Challenger, created in *The Lost World*, published in 1912. Challenger travels to South America and discovers a lost world where dinosaurs still live and successfully transports specimens back to England. Conan Doyle wrote two subsequent books about Challenger — *The Poison Belt* in 1913 and *The Land of Mist* in 1926 — and two short stories in 1929 — "When the World Screamed" and "The Disintegration Machine" (both in Doyle 1929a). Challenger ultimately provided Conan Doyle the chance to write "a big psychic novel . . . which shall deal realistically with every place of the question, pro and con" (Green and Gibson 1983, 197). Thus, in *The Land of Mist*, Professor Challenger is converted to spiritualism and explains to his critics how a reputable scientist can believe in a religious movement that teaches about a spiritual realm. Thus, Challenger became Conan Doyle rather than Holmes, who became convinced of the reality of spirits but was never converted to spiritualism.

The Cottingley Photographs

During this same period, Conan Doyle, who considered himself an expert on photography, became interested in photographs of fairies taken by two girls in Yorkshire. He had the negatives examined for evidence of double exposure, and when none was detected, he wrote letters to the press (Gibson and Green 1986, 291, 310), articles in *Strand Magazine* (1920; 1921a), and even a small book (1922) arguing strenuously that the photographs were not only genuine but also revealed new forms of life. As this stance became more and more controversial, he tried to separate his advocacy of the photographs from his proselytism of spiritualism: "Of course," he was quoted as saying in the 9 December 1925 *Daily News*, "[fairy photographs have] nothing to do with spiritualism, which is concerned wholly with destiny of the human soul" (in Gibson and Green 1986, 310).

Yet both of these beliefs were really premised upon a belief in the revelation of extraterrestrial forms to human beings. Doyle died believ-

ing in the fairy photographs, but both girls later admitted that they had deceived him by photographing cardboard forms taken from a child's book of poetry. Nevertheless, one of them insisted that she had really seen fairies, but that she had falsified the photographs to create a false proof for a true story (Shepard 1984).¹¹

Pheneas Speaks

Perhaps the most ironic development in Conan Doyle's quest for a new religion occurred when he began to see himself "increasingly, as a prophet of the future of the whole world" (Brandon 1983, 226). He began to premise his belief in the hereafter on communications he received through his wife, Jean, from Pheneas, an Arabian spirit who was the guide through this uncertain future (Doyle 1927b). About the specific messages from Pheneas he said, "I have not only received . . . prophecies [concerning the end of the world] in a very consistent and detailed form, but also so large a number of independent corroborations that it is difficult for me to doubt that there lies some solid truth at the back of these" (in Gibson and Green 1986, 318). Conan Doyle also predicted that an impending crisis "would be soon, it would take the form of political and natural convulsions, and its effect would be absolutely shattering" (1928, 40).

Although he was spared the personal embarrassment of finding out that the fairy photographs had been "faked," he was severely disappointed when the prophecies and revelations concerning the end of the earth, given to him by Pheneas, were not fulfilled. He began to feel that he and his wife, Jean, may have become "victims of some extraordinary prank played upon the human race from the other side" (Brandon 1983, 227).

Although Pheneas's prophecies were not fulfilled, Conan Doyle remained a dedicated spiritualist until his death in 1930. Communications from deceased family members who had assured him that they lived in the spirit world had convinced him that life continued after death. These communications remained the "definite demonstration" which he had sought since his days at the University of Edinburgh. He believed that these apparitions and other evidences of spiritualism

¹¹ Several books concerning the Cottingley Fairy incident have been published in the past decade. See, Geoffrey Crawley, "That Astonishing Affair of the Cottingley Fairies," *British Journal of Photography*, 24 December 1982-8 April 1983; Kevin I. Jones, *Conan Doyle and the Spirits: The Spiritualist Career of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* (Welling-Borough: The Antiquarian Press, 1989); Joe Cooper, *The Case of the Cottingley Fairies* (London: Robert Hale, 1990).

were facts upon which he could deduce, in the same manner that Sherlock Holmes would have deduced, that life continues after death and that spiritualism was "a great new revelation and an epic-making event in the world's history" (in Gibson and Green 1986, 312).

CONCLUSION

Inasmuch as Conan Doyle's insistence upon a "definite demonstration" was, in part, a reaction to what he perceived as the Roman Catholic reliance upon unprovable dogma, it is ironic that he was accused of accepting, with little or no challenge, the representations of mediums who claimed to communicate messages from beyond. Although he recognized that many mediums were nothing more than conjurors looking for notoriety and economic gain, he believed that he could discern between true mediums and conjurors. Yet, he was fooled by the fairy photographs and apparently by Pheneas as well. In fact, throughout his life Conan Doyle demonstrated a need, apparently brought with him from his Catholic background, to believe in the supernatural. On the other hand, his medical training taught him to demand proof. After he finally received his "definite demonstration" in 1916, he refused to concern himself with the objective proofs of spiritualism and instead concentrated on its message and substance. Perhaps this is why he was taken in by some "conjurors."

In *A Study in Scarlet*, Sherlock Holmes told Watson that he would not reveal his deductive methods since "a conjuror gets no credit once he has explained his trick" (1894, 58). Perhaps this allusion moved G. K. Chesterton, a Catholic and contemporary writer of detective fiction in Great Britain,¹² whose main character was the Catholic priest Father Brown, to write in 1914 a short story entitled "The Absence of Mr. Glass," in which a Sherlock Holmes-type character, Dr. Hood, is fooled by a conjuror.¹³

It is not unlikely that Chesterton's short story was not only a spoof of Sherlock Holmes but, in addition, of the very method by which Conan Doyle claimed to have found spiritualism. Like Conan Doyle, Dr. Hood criticized those who accepted Roman Catholicism on "faith"

¹² Chesterton was an Anglo-Catholic during most of his life but converted to Roman Catholicism in 1922 largely due to the efforts of Father John O'Conner, after whom he had patterned his Father Brown character (Gardner 1987, 11).

¹³ It has been argued that Holmes appeared in at least one other Father Brown story—"The Man with Two Bears" which appeared in *The Secret of Father Brown*—and that Father Brown appeared in at least one Sherlock Holmes story, "The Adventure of the Six Napoleons" (Gardner 1987, 197-98, n2).

and "superstition." In addition, Hood, like Conan Doyle, relied on observed "facts"—"voices" through mediums, "spirits" in photographs, and fulfilled prophecies—and deduced from these facts that an extraterrestrial world existed and that he had spoken with some of its inhabitants. In doing so Hood, like Doyle, claimed that he could rely on facts, rather than on the superstitions of his former religion, to know that life continued after death. Father Brown would have seen the facts differently. To him the medium would be nothing more than a ventriloquist when he speaks in the voice of the spirit, a conjuror when he moves tables, and a magician when spirits show up on photographs. Father Brown would say that Doyle, like Dr. Watson, failed to ascertain the conjuror's tricks and was therefore overly impressed by the medium's claims.

Perhaps the lesson of Chesterton's story and of Conan Doyle's life is that one who seeks God should not expect proof of his existence but should instead be satisfied to rely on faith and the testimonies of others. Conan Doyle was fooled because he refused to accept the necessity of faith in religious matters, just as he had claimed Roman Catholics were fooled by dogma and tradition and Joseph Smith was misguided by his messengers.

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