

Psychics

By James K. Walker

Famous Psychics: Madame Blavatsky, Arthur Ford, Jeanne Dixon, Uri Geller.

Other Names: Mediums, Necromancers, Spiritualists.

Associated Practices: Divination (Astrology, Tarot, *I Ching*, Palmistry, Mind Reading, telepathy, etc.), Necromancy (Séance, Channeling, Ouija Board, etc.), and telekinesis (moving objects mentally or spiritually such as table-tilting, levitation).

INTRODUCTION

On January 25, 1997, America's most famous psychic, Jeanne Dixon died. During her lifetime, America experienced unparalleled growth in the interest and acceptance of psychics and paranormal phenomena. According to Larry Rosen, president of NetLive Communications, over her celebrated 50 year career Dixon was advisor to world leaders including US presidents and wrote eight books including *Reincarnation and Prayers to Live By* and *The Call to Glory*. At the time of her death, Dixon syndicated columns were featured in over 800 daily newspapers worldwide.¹

Shortly before her death, Dixon announced plans to join the popular and profitable 900 psychic telephone network industry with her own Jeanne Dixon's Psychic Network. She was unable to see her plans fulfilled as she died shortly after the network was announced and before it could be launched. Two months after her death, however, Watchman Fellowship received an email purportedly from Dixon herself stating, "Hello, I'm Jeanne Dixon a psychic, medium, healer, spiritualist, clairvoyant & astrologer. . . I can predict your future. . . Please call me right now!"² The message provided both a 24 hour "900" number and an "800" number to use with credit cards. The message was not, of course, some weak attempt to demonstrate communication with the dead through the Internet. It did, however, demonstrate Netlive Communications' dogged determination to continue with the Jeanne Dixon Psychic Network despite her unanticipated death. The network features several \$3.99 per minute "900" lines ending in "J-E-A-N-E" and the first live, video conferenced psychic, tarot card and astrological guidance service over the Internet.³

Dixon's death will apparently not dampen the success of her psychic network or the psychic industry as a whole. Dionne Warwick's Psychic Friends Network employs approximately 1,500 psychics logging an estimated 3 million minutes a month at about \$4 per minute according to Baltimore-based Inphomation Communications, Inc.⁴ According to those estimates, Warwick's service alone would gross \$144 million annually. In addition to Warwick and Dixon, Mark Plakias, managing director of Strategic Telemedia, a New York research firm estimated nearly half of the 200,000 pay-per-call entertainment services in America are psychic hotlines.⁵

Richard Dworman, editor of the *Infomercial Marketing Report*, estimates Psychic Friends Network's gross annual income at a more conservative \$100 million. Still, this is remarkable for an organization that started just seven years ago and is receiving between 7,500 to 10,000 paying calls each day. "The thing took off like a rocket, it was at the right place at the right time," said Dworman.⁶ The second and third largest psychic networks,

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Psychic Readers Network and Your Psychic Experience, annually take in about \$50 million and \$35-\$40 million, respectively.⁷

Psychic hotlines are just one aspect of America's growing psychic industry. Psychic fairs are commonplace in many US cities. Dallas-based Creative Organization has sponsored monthly psychic fairs held for the past fifteen years featuring crystal balls, astrology, palmistry, clairvoyants, seers, tarot cards, and rune stones.⁸ Metaphysical and New Age book stores can be found easily in the Yellow Pages of many American cities, and the Internet is facilitating a cottage industry of "cyberpsychics." One psychic entrepreneur, Jonathan Katz of Encino, Calif., boasts of up to 250,000 tarot, *I Ching* or bioreadings a month through his web sites.⁹ Yahoo, a popular web index, lists 363 on-line psychic services in five categories.¹⁰

HISTORY

While modern technology such as 900 numbers and the Internet may be partially responsible for fueling their recent popularity, psychics and mediums are not new. A simple definition of *psychic* is "A person who is either born with or develops many gifts or talents in the area of ESP, clairvoyance, communication with the spirit world, abilities to read the human aura and uses these special skills as a healer or reader."¹¹ Defined this broadly, the history of psychics may be traced back thousands of years ago to the seers, shamans, and soothsayers of ancient pagan religions and occult practices. Yet in North America the popularity of the psychic arts is something relatively new. What are the roots of the modern psychic revival in America?

The genealogy of the modern psychic movement can be found in certain aspects of the mesmeric and Spiritualist movements. These practices spread through Europe and America in the early and middle 19th century after followers of the controversial Austrian doctor, Franz Antoine Mesmer (1766-1815), reported "thought transference, of clairvoyance and 'eyeless vision'" in addition to other psychic phenomena in "mesmerized" subjects.¹²

The popularity of mesmerism and especially its alleged healing properties, along with the celebrated "rappings" of the Fox sisters of Hydesville, New York, led directly to the sweeping acceptance of the Spiritualist movement of the latter half of the 19th century. "It accustomed the public to the idea that certain especially gifted persons might, when in a state of trance, exercise clairvoyant and other paranormal faculties, and even to the idea that some mesmeric subjects might become aware of, and perhaps communicate with, the spirits of departed persons. The mesmeric trance developed, by an easy and natural transition, into the mediumistic trance. . .".¹³ Thus, by the turn of the 20th century, the general public's perception of psychic manifestation was largely limited to the infamous Spiritualist churches. These featured necromancy (communication with the dead) along with an assortment of other manifestations. Critics and paranormal debunkers like famous illusionist and escape artist Harry Houdini claimed they were little more than fakery and parlor tricks.¹⁴

There were, however, efforts to distance Spiritualism from a purely religious arena by attempting to explore, research and categorize psychic phenomena as a science. In 1882 the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was founded by Sir William Barrett (1844-1925), Cambridge professor Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900), and F. W. H. Meyers (1843-1901). Prominent early members included Edmund Gurney (1847-1888) and "the St. Paul of Spiritualism," Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1858-1930), author of the Sherlock Holmes stories.¹⁵

Spiritualists attempted to collaborate with scholars to scientifically measure and prove psychic phenomena. Areas of study included thought transference and other types of telepathy, hypnotism or mesmeric trance, haunted houses, the "causes" or "laws" of Spiritualism, and the history of such manifestations. Despite their intentions, the controls and tests administered by the SPR did more to expose fraud than to prove psychic

manifestations. Colin Wilson who is personally sympathetic to psychic phenomenon notes, “The results were disappointing. Gurney committed suicide in a Brighton hotel in 1888 when he discovered that certain trusted mediums were tricksters. And although the S.P.R. has had many eminent adherents . . . it has failed to make any general impact.”¹⁶

For example, SPR had intended to publish a favorable report on the famous medium, psychic and spiritualist, Madame Blavatsky (1831-1891), who founded the Theosophical Society. But Blavatsky’s housekeeper, Emma Cutting-Coulomb, “blabbed” some of the psychic’s techniques of fakery to the *Christian College Magazine* whose story was immediately picked up by the London *Times*. The reports of fraud were then confirmed by the SPR researcher in India when he was allowed to inspect Blavatsky’s cedar wood “shrine” in which letters from the spirit world would magically appear. “For some faithful disciple, wishing to demonstrate that fraud was impossible, had slapped the rear wall of the shrine saying, ‘You see, it’s perfectly solid,’ when, to his dismay, a panel had shot open, revealing another panel in the wall of [Blavatsky’s] boudoir.”¹⁷

In addition to fraud, public acceptance of the SPR specifically and psychic manifestations in general were hampered by sexual scandals. Houdini reported that female mediums “often” offered him sexual favors in exchange for collusion during his investigations. Speaking of the SPR’s co-founder, Colin comments, “Myers’s dubious character in matters of sex or other people’s correspondence does not prove that he would be capable of faking the results of a séance; but . . . his motives in forming the S.P.R. may have been highly charged and emotional rather than purely scientific.”¹⁸

Failed attempts to “prove” psychic phenomena in the 19th and early 20th century did little to dampen the psychic revival of the last few decades. Waning interest in psychics was boosted in the mid 20th century by Disciples of Christ minister, Arthur Ford (1897-1971), who functioned as a medium for the spirit “Flecher.” Ford founded the Spiritual Frontiers Fellowship (SFF) in 1955 and received national prominence in 1967 when he allegedly contacted the dead son of Bishop James Pike on network television through trance mediumship.¹⁹ Despite occasional interest, no one, including the psychics themselves, may have been able to predict the degree of popularity of the current psychic revival.

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

Much of the mystique and lure of modern psychics is the “proof” of their claims and information through various alleged supernatural manifestations. People often trust psychics because of their persuasive demonstrations. The history of psychics is littered with cases of proven fraud. Faked psychic phenomena may involve stage magic or “sleight-of-hand.” It is possible that Pharaoh’s magicians used common magic tricks to “duplicate” the first three plagues God gave as signs through Moses (Exodus 7-8).

Professional magician James Randi, whose stage name is “The Amazing Randi,” has publicly exposed a number of psychics, spiritualists, channelers, and charlatans. One of Randi’s first targets was Israeli psychic Uri Geller, tested by Stanford Research Institute (now SRI International) for his powers to bend spoons and levitate objects. Randi successfully demonstrated “The tricks were very simple. . . . There was nothing you couldn’t get off the back of a cornflakes box so to speak.”²⁰ Dan Korem, a Christian illusionist, has also used his talents in stage magic to debunk a number of fake psychics.²¹ The likelihood of fraud and fakery is one reason the Bible warns against relying on “signs and wonders” as evidence for truth-claims or proof of supernatural powers. Also, Satan can work through “all power and signs and lying wonders” (2 Thessalonians 2:9). Jesus warned, “For false Christs and false prophets shall rise, and shall shew signs and wonders, to seduce, if it were possible, even the elect” (Mark 13:22).

Some psychics will claim that their powers are consistent with the Bible and come from God, even offering convincing demonstrations as proof of their supernatural abilities. Jesus, however, warned his followers not to seek signs, explaining that His resurrection,

the “sign of Jonah,” would be the only verifying miracle upon which believers can rely (Matthew 12:39-40).

For proof that their “gift” is of God, some psychics may point to colorful examples of accurate predictions. Much of the accuracy of psychics may be attributed to their use of the law of averages, “cold reading” techniques, and even the use of private investigators. Rather than celebrated random examples of *some* accurate predictions, the biblical requirement for a prophecy is 100% accuracy (Deuteronomy 18: 20-22). The Bible also condemns necromancy (communication with the dead) which is the *modus operandi* of many psychics and spiritualists. Deuteronomy 18: 10-12 states, “There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. . .”

Christians also recognize that even *real* examples of spiritual manifestations would not prove the phenomena is harmless or from God. The Bible warns of demons, “seducing spirits” and “doctrines of devils” (I Timothy 4:1). Believers are warned, “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). Faith in psychics can be not only spiritually but emotionally dangerous as well. Followers can become totally dependent on their psychics for making even simple decisions. Psychics, in turn, can easily use their influence to control and take advantage of their clients.²²

RECOMMENDED READING

Powers: Testing the Psychic & Supernatural by Dan Korem. A professional stage illusionist and popular Christian speaker, Korem exposes the fraudulent techniques used by many psychics. Included are sections on alleged telekinesis, psychic crime solving, and the art of “cold reading.” Korem includes a biblical perspective of psychics and a section discussing why the resurrection of Christ was not a magic illusion. 232 pages.

Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs by John Ankerberg and John Weldon. This comprehensive work on New Age spirituality includes sections on psychic phenomena such as spirit communication (channeling and mediums), divination (astrology, palm reading, etc.), psychic healing, etc. Extensive biblical response also included. 670 pages.

Notes

¹ *Business Wire*, January 28, 1997.

² The e-mail dated March 21, 1997, was from jeanne.dixon@psychics.net.

³ *Business Wire*, January 28, 1997; December 16, 1996.

⁴ “Who could’ve foretold psychic spree?” *Dallas Morning News*, March 19, 1996, 1-C, 6-C.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1-C.

⁶ “Seeking your fortune can cost one,” *The Philadelphia Daily News*, March 19, 1997, C-1.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ “Mediumcool,” *The Dallas Morning News*, March 29, 1996, *Guide*, 30.

⁹ *The Dallas Morning News*, March 19, 1996, 6-C.

¹⁰ www.yahoo.com.

¹¹ *The New Age A to Z*, 120.

¹² “Psychical Research,” *Man, Myth, and Magic*, Vol. 17, p. 2273.

¹³ *Ibid.*, see also, “Fox Sisters,” *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology*, Vol. 1, pp. 345-49.

¹⁴ “Houdini, Harry,” *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology*, Vol. 1, 440-41.

¹⁵ “Spiritualism,” *An Encyclopaedia of Occultism*, 384; “Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan,” *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology*, Vol. 1, 261.

¹⁶ Wilson, Colin, *The Occult*, 493.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 336.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 494.

¹⁹ “Ford, Arthur A.,” *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology*, Vol. 1, 341.

²⁰ *Time*, June 13, 1988, 72.

²¹ See: *Powers: Testing the Psychic & Supernatural*.

²² See: *Powers*, 25-29.



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