

Are Ghosts “Real”?

JOHN WARWICK MONTGOMERY

From Powers and Principalities: A Fascinating Look at the Paranormal, the Supernatural, and the Hidden Things (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1973), pp. 136-37, 140-44, 215-16.

Everyone enjoys a good ghost story. But are ghosts “real”? And if they are, *what* are they and how is their reality to be correlated with established biblical teaching? ... Consider the following multilevel explanatory scheme.

1. Ghosts as telepathic hallucinations arising from the minds of the living. This is the view well expressed by [Frank] Podmore, who attributes the ghost phenomena to “waking dreams.” “Common sense points to its source in the dreams of the living whom we know, rather than in the imagined dreams of the unknown dead.” Podmore’s “common sense” thus leads him to a paranormal explanation; however, it hardly seems to be able to account for the powerfully objective focus of many ghost accounts, particularly when more than one person sees the ghost at the same time, or independently at different times.

2. Ghosts as telepathic hallucinations arising from the minds (brains) of the dead. [Alastair W.] MacLellan argues: “We may regard it possible for the minds of deceased individuals to be active and their brain radiations to be generated when both their respiratory and circulatory processes are inactive.” Thus, “cremation appears obligatory for the damned if they wish to avoid entering Hell”! MacLellan is convinced that the minds of the deceased can be forced into abnormal spectral activity by “agents skilled in magic or sorcery.” Obviously such necromancy must be performed “shortly after the death of the deceased person.” MacLellan’s theory, by its shift of emphasis from the living to the dead, handles problems not covered in 1., but it fails in those cases where the specter represents a person whose brain *has* been cremated (death by fire) or totally destroyed in some other way.

3. Ghosts as residual human aura. The aura is a radiating luminous envelope or cloud projected from and surrounding the body. It is sometimes referred to as the “subtle body” or “etheric body” or (when separated from its body) the “human double.” A tremendous literature exists on this subject, including investigative work attempting, with some success, to render the aura visible by chemical screens. If the aura in fact exists, then it is not unreasonable to suppose that it might remain for a time even after the death of the body, as the glow of an electric bulb can be seen for a few moments after the switch has been turned off. Since the aura is human, not impersonal, it would react as the person had reacted. Most ghostly apparitions involve suicide, passion, violent death, or high emotional tension of some kind; perhaps extraordinary emotion is the trigger that releases the aura to “haunt” for a time the places familiar to the deceased person – and especially those places connected with the emotional trauma. Ghosts generally represent recently – or fairly recently – deceased persons. Since the aura gradually fades away after death, this would serve to explain why few ghosts of Roman soldiers are reported these days! If the more violent the death-trauma or emotional level of the decedent, the longer the “life” of his aura, then castle ghosts could be accounted for, since the stories associated with them almost always involve hideous events of one kind or another. Note that the aura is not the person; thus this explanation says nothing whatever against the immediate arrival of the deceased person at his appropriate eternal habitation, even while his aura continues for a time to walk the earth. Likewise, as in the case of animal ghosts, it does not even require the immortality of the soul for its functioning.

4. Ghosts as the dead themselves, on their way to the reward determined once for all by their relationship or lack of relationship to Christ on earth, but not yet entered fully into that reward. Wrote the great [Johann Heinrich] Jung-Stilling: “Those souls, which are not yet dead to the world, and whose imagination is still occupied with the favourite ideas of their former life, seek to realize these ideas. ... Hence the notorious haunting of old buildings.” It should be emphasized that this is not the Roman Catholic purgatorial concept (there is no hint of expiating one’s own sins in a works-righteous fashion), nor is any necessary violation done to Heb. 9:27 (“it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment”), since no postponement or possible reversal of the judgment at death is suggested. Only the time-lag between death and heaven, or death and hell, is extended to account for ghostly phenomena that show more self-direction than the “human aura” would allow for, and yet do not engage either in angelic or in demonic missions to the living.

5. Ghosts as the damned sent back to haunt the living or as Satanic counterfeits of the dead. Where a person whose earthly relationship to Christ has been so negative that his salvation appears very dubious returns from the dead to do harm to the living, he returns by Satanic influence. If saved persons seem to return from the dead denying the faith or attempting to harm the living, we can conclude that demonic counterfeits are the explanation. If Satan can transform himself into an angel of light (II Cor. 11:14), he can certainly disguise himself as a dead saint. [Note: Whether Samuel really came back, or whether a Satanic personification of Samuel appeared when Saul consulted the witch of Endor depends on whether Samuel’s message on that occasion is regarded as God’s judgment on Saul or an instance of platitudinous false prophesy. I take the former view, and am not troubled by the witch’s success at necromancy. Most sorcerers get more than they bargain for.]

6. Ghosts as the saved sent back to earth by God for a special mission. Elijah and Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration seem to be clear instances of this phenomenon (cf. particularly Mt. 17:3, 8). As a modern example, C. S. Lewis’ appearance to J. B. Phillips...

These six explanatory levels offer the tools for dealing with most attested spectral phenomena. Sometimes one interpretation will best fit the data, sometimes another. An important conclusion follows from this multi-level approach, and it cannot be too strongly emphasized: no apparition offers apodictic proof of survival after death. Why? because one can theoretically appeal to telepathy or the human aura as an explanation. This accounts for the seeming paradox that in spite of the impressive collections of spectral and mediumistic “survival” evidence, some of the most distinguished psychical researchers doubt that man survives death. ... C. D. Broad concluded his Cambridge University Perrott lectures on psychical research with the words: “For my part I should be slightly more annoyed than surprised if I should find myself in some sense persisting immediately after the death of my present body. One can only wait and see, or alternately (which is no less likely) wait and not see.”

This is precisely the sad result when one depends on ESP or ghost hunting to solve the problem of survival after death. And the question is too crucial to “wait and see” – particularly if the Bible is right in setting forth two possible eternal destinies. The solution? Check out the evidence for the one validated instance of the total self-conquest of death (physically and spiritually, not just “spectrally”): the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Over five hundred eyewitnesses to the fact were still alive when in A.D. 56 Paul could write without fear of refutation: “O grave, where is thy victory? Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Cor. 15).

By the same token, even less can be said for reliance upon mediumistic spiritualism. ...the dead should be left alone! The closer one approaches to the throne of the Almighty or to the pit of the Inferno, the more careful one must be. By not recognizing this, spiritualists have fallen into the grossest religious errors. Spiritualism has become quite literally a church (or better, an anti-church), with a creed that eliminates any serious view of sin, Christ’s atoning death, and eternal punishment, and that promises “endless progression” on the basis of moral self-betterment.