

## EDITORIAL

### Allan Kardec: life, ideas, writings and influences<sup>1</sup>

Allan Kardec: vida, ideias, obras e influências

Marcelo Gulão Pimentel\*

Translated by: Brasil Fernandes de Barros \*\*

We are publishing this thematic dossier in the year that marks the 220th anniversary of Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail (1804-1869), known as Allan Kardec. He was the founder of spiritism, which has had a deep influence in his time and today.

Kardec was one of the most widely well-read intellectuals of his time. His main work, *The Spirits' Book*, was published in 1857 and reissued 15 times during his lifetime, reaching its 22nd edition in 1874, when it is believed that there were around 48,000 copies circulating only in French (Monroe, 2008, p. 96). Just for comparison's sake, it took five years for the first edition of Karl Marx's *Capital* (1867) to reach its first thousand copies (Hobsbawm, 2007, p.365). Another classic work, *Du vrai, du beau, du bien* (1858), written by the eclectic philosopher Victor Cousin and released by the same publisher as *The Spirits' Book* (Didier) reached its 22nd edition in 1881 (Monroe, 2008, p. 96-97).

The spiritism has gained great repercussions for its modern proposal of secular spirituality based on empirical observation and rational analysis of

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\* PhD in History from the Graduate Program in History at the State University of Rio de Janeiro - UERJ. Post-doctoral student in History at the Salgado de Oliveira University - UNIVERSO. Country of origin: Brazil. E-mail: marcelogulao@gmail.com.

\*\* PhD and Master's in Religious Studies at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais. Scholarship holder of the Postgraduate Development Program (PDPG) - Strategic Post - Doctorate of CAPES. ORCID: 0000-0002-5285-4871. E-mail: brasil@netinfor.com.br

spiritual manifestations (Sharp, 2006, p. xvi). In Brazil, it has spread mainly as a religion. Currently, the country has the largest number of Spiritists in the world, representing the third largest religious group after Catholics and Evangelicals, with around 4 million followers (Ibge, 2010). Allan Kardec is also one of the most widely read French authors in Brazil. The Brazilian Spiritist Federation (FEB) alone, the main publisher of his works, has produced 13 million copies of his books in the country up to 2020. The understanding of the origins and evolution of Spiritism has a substantial value in academic research. Thus, there is a need to expand research into his life, work and thought, with ever greater rigor and depth.

The aim of this editorial is to analyze the reasons the study of the history of Spiritism is a significant contribution to the human sciences, exploring its origins in the United States, its doctrinal systematization in France, and its insertion into the Brazilian religious context.

Spiritism emerged as a cultural and religious manifestation that accompanied the era of modern spiritualism in the United States in the 19th century. The society of this period was characterized by an intense questioning of traditional beliefs, influenced by scientific, technological, and religious changes.

Allan Kardec says that was the modern spiritualist phenomena that started his interest in investigating the "turning and talking tables" (1868, Chap. 1, item 12). In 1848, the Fox sisters: Leah (1813-1890), Margaretta "Maggie" (1833-1893) and Catherine "Kate" (1837-1892) performed a series of movements and knocks, with no apparent physical cause, acquiring notoriety in the newspapers of the time for having established a code of communication with spirits, compared to the telegraph (Weisberg, 2004, p. 1-8). In a short time, its followers claimed the modern character of the movement, bringing together abolitionist, feminist and pacifist ideals among its causes (Braude, 1989; Sousa, Pimentel, 2021).

In the early 1850s, American newspapers counted about 10,000 followers of Modern Spiritualism. From there, several missions left for Europe to spread the phenomenon of the turning, dancing and talking tables, reaching first England and then several other European countries, becoming the first cross-cultural phenomenon to emerge from a colonized region and spread to the Old

Continent. (Cuchet, 2012).

The analysis of this historical phase allows us to understand how Spiritism positioned itself as an alternative to the prevailing religious orthodoxy, and highlights the importance of contextualizing its origins within the framework of social and intellectual changes.

In France, the study of mediumistic phenomena, so widespread in 1848, was systematized and disseminated by Spiritism in 1857, and became an influential source of explanation for the turning, dancing and talking tables, as announced in the periodicals of the time.

The role played by Allan Kardec cannot be underestimated. This key moment in the history of Spiritism is characterized by the application of rational and systematic methods that gave the doctrine a coherent and scientific character (Lachapelle, 2012). An examination of Kardec's contributions illustrates the intersection between philosophical rationalism and spiritual beliefs. The existence of an invisible world, previously delegated to religious or metaphysical speculation, would have become susceptible to an empirical approach. To achieve this, he devised a method of investigation that was sophisticated for its time: seeking information from various mediums unknown to each other; asking the same question of different mediums; having a large number of correspondents from different places; visiting places where mediumistic manifestations occurred; comparing the phenomena observed with reported historical examples; founding the *Parisian Society for Spiritist Studies and the Spiritist Journal: Journal of Psychological Studies* to exchange experiences and deepen knowledge among its members and subscribers; seeking the consilience of inductions for the constitution of theoretical essays and for the validation of messages received through mediums (Pimentel, 2014).

The Spiritist movement was very influential in French society and culture at that time. According to French historian Nicole Edelman, it was after Kardec's work that, from 1869 onwards, the term *medium* took on a new meaning in French dictionaries (1995, pp. 10-11), close to that defined in *The Mediums' Book* (1861): "a person accessible to the influence of spirits and more or less endowed

with the faculty of receiving and transmitting their communications" (p. 40). Kardec can also be considered one pioneer in the psychic's field research, participating in a broad debate that involved some of the leading researchers of the time (Pimentel, Alberto, Moreira-Almeida, 2016). The French physiologist Charles Richet, who won the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1913, stated that "Allan Kardec is certainly the man who, in the period between 1847 and 1871, exerted the most intense influence and opened a deep cut in metapsychic science" (Richet, 1922, p. 63).

In the sciences of the mind, such as psychology and psychiatry, Allan Kardec's research into mediumistic phenomena did not go unnoticed by French psychiatrist Pierre Janet (1872) and Swiss psychologist Theodore Flournoy (1911), who made important contributions to the construction of the idea of the unconscious that revolutionized what was known about the human mind until the end of the 19th century. Allan Kardec and spiritism were also involved in a wide-ranging medical debate about the deleterious effects that mediumistic practice represented, contributing to it being considered a pathology (Almeida, Pimentel, 2021; Le Maléfan, 1999).

He was convinced that he was facing an unexplored phenomenon that was a revolution in the sciences known until then, and he developed a comprehensive theory that would result from observing the manifestations, comparing them, deducing the consequences and reassembling the causes, seeking to identify natural laws that would govern spiritual experiences (1890, p. 208-210). For him, mediums would be privileged objects for the investigation of the spiritual world, in the same way that microscopes revealed the microscopic world and telescopes unveiled the stars invisible to the naked eye (Kardec, 1860, p. 326). The scientific approach to spiritual manifestations moved many renowned scientists of the time who established research societies such as the *Society for Psychical Research* (SPR) e o *Institute de Métapsychique Internationale* (IMI).

These investigations led him to develop a "spiritualist philosophy" (the term appeared on the title page of his first work "The Spirits' Book"), and he called it spiritism (Kardec, 1857, p. 1).

Kardec developed a rational philosophy open to new hypotheses and theories, as opposed to the hermeticism characteristic of many philosophical systems. Besides developing the scientific aspects of spiritism, the proposed philosophy also aimed to derive the moral consequences of studying the spiritual world. (Chibeni, 2003).

The Spiritist philosophy emerged as an alternative to the conflict between science and religion resulting from the Enlightenment and the revolutionary waves that shook Europe between 1789 and 1848 (Fernandes de Barros, 2019). The break with the dominant religions, the secularization of society and scientific advancement promoted different currents of thought. On the one hand, a new form of religiosity adapted to modern values and scientific progress. These included natural theologians, social reformers, idealists and supporters of philosophical romanticism. On the other side were anti-metaphysical positivists, nihilists and materialists, among others (Coelho, 2022; 2019). As a result, Spiritism adopted several progressive social ideas into its philosophical body, such as abolitionism, equal rights for men and women, the search for social equality through the improvement of the individual and, consequently, of society (Sharp, 2006).

The impact of Spiritist ideas went beyond France and the French-speaking regions. In 1869, some of Allan Kardec's books had versions in English, German, Polish, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Modern Greek, Croatian and Russian (Kardec, 1869, p. 1-2). But it was in Brazil that Spiritism established itself as the world's leading Spiritist nation.

Among Kardec's correspondents since the launch of his first works, Brazilians and French people living in Brazil were the pioneers of a movement that made Allan Kardec probably one of the most influential thinkers in the country (Isaia, 2008). The Brazilian spiritist movement grew up marked by a significant social commitment, and handled the creation of a vast network of philanthropic works, such as the distribution of food, clothing, medicines, nurseries, kindergartens, schools, asylums, general hospitals and psychiatric institutions, among other establishments aimed especially at assisting socially vulnerable people (Aubrée, Laplantine, 2009, p. 239).

However, the institutionalization process of spiritism in Brazil did not happen without suffering countless resistances, especially between the last decade of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century: The criminalization of spiritist healing practices by the penal code of 1890 (Gomes, 2020); The actions of a part of the medical profession, mainly psychiatrists, who criticized the spiritist view of some diseases and mental disorders as a superstitious step backwards in the evolution's face of medical and scientific knowledge (Almeida, 2021); Conservative Catholics groups who published several books and articles in mass-circulation newspapers accusing spiritism of heresy and mediumistic practices of demonic activities (Giumbelli, 1997). Although the spiritist movement remained cohesive, seeking to legitimize itself through the republican law that guaranteed religious freedom, it was with the rise of the works of Francisco Cândido Xavier (1910-2002), a medium from Minas Gerais, that spiritism got a major springboard for propagation in Brazil.

The books written by Chico Xavier became a publishing phenomenon, helping to establish Spiritism as a religion in the country (Cunha, 2018). Chico Xavier's work is understood by a large part of the Spiritist movement as a continuation of the studies begun by Kardec.

In Brazil, the entry and subsequent consolidation of Spiritism uncover a process of restructuring pre-existing religious peculiarities. The interaction between Spiritism and Brazilian religious traditions provides a starting point for investigating how religious circularity shapes spiritual expressions. The resilience shown by Spiritism amid religious and political persecution reveals its ability to take root and evolve, defying adversity and emerging as an influential force on the national religious scene.

Faced with such a relevant trajectory, what could have led Allan Kardec to be an obscure figure among academic researchers? The answer lies because a large part of the research conducts anthropological, sociological and historical approaches to the Brazilian spiritist movement and little approaches spiritism from the perspective of its founder.

Starting in September 2020, the Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora

(UFJF), in association with AKOL (Allan Kardec Online Museum) and FEAL (André Luiz Spiritist Foundation), began hosting Allan Kardec's correspondence and other documents. On the site can be found the original documents digitized, transcribed and translated into Portuguese and English, offering many unpublished sources, open and free, to any researcher. This has renewed the study of this field in various ways. In just over three years of existence, there have been over 14,000 accesses from various countries on all continents, demonstrating the interest in the subject. At the end of 2023, FAPEMIG - Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de Minas Gerais (Process No.: APQ-04113-23) awarded the project Allan Kardec: vida, obra e influências (Allan Kardec: life, work and influences) with funds that will research and disseminate these unpublished documents, expanding digitizing, transcribing and translating them, as well as deepening the information got through publications in journals of recognized quality and academic scope such as *Horizonte: revista de estudos de teologia e ciências da religião* (*Horizonte: journal of theology and religion studies*).

The study of the history of Spiritism provides fertile ground for interdisciplinary research in the human sciences, beyond history. Researchers in the fields of philosophy, sociology, anthropology and psychology can use contextualized analyzes of spiritism. The nature of spiritist beliefs, their interaction with social and political structures, as well as their impact on individual and collective perceptions make up fruitful areas of exploration.

In studies related to the history of Spiritism, we can ensure that there is a rich and multifaceted panorama for academia, especially when there is a dialogue that can cover the various disciplines of the Human Sciences. From its origins in the United States, to its systematization by Allan Kardec in France, to the insertion of Spiritism in Brazil, we highlight its importance in understanding social, philosophical and religious transformations. This doctrine, rooted in a specific historical and cultural context, transcends disciplinary boundaries, providing a lens through which the complexities of human beliefs and practices can be examined in all their scope.



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