

SPIRITUALISM AS A BASIS FOR THE CURRENT PORTRAYAL OF CHIROPRACTIC

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ABSTRACT

The founder of chiropractic, DD Palmer, claimed that he had received the message of chiropractic from a deceased spirit-being from the other world known to him as 'Dr Jim Atkinson'. As a result of Palmer's description, and his association with Spiritualism, current scientific writers have labelled the chiropractic profession as pseudoscience and quackery. This paper argues that, in examining Palmer's writings, a lack of consideration has been given to the context in which these claims were originally made and that this failure has led to many of the criticisms being overstated and misguided.

Keywords: Spiritualism, Pseudoscience, Beliefs, Chiropractic

BACKGROUND

Since its inception in 1895, critics have referred to the practice of chiropractic as 'pseudoscience' (1) 'ghost-based', (2,3) 'occult', (4) 'metaphysical', (5) 'magical', (6) and 'bogus' (7). Some of these criticisms rely on the connection the founder of Chiropractic, DD Palmer, had with Spiritualism, a movement that promoted communication with the spirits of the dead. (8) This was particularly pertinent in relation to Palmer's claim that he had conversations about the principles of chiropractic with 'Dr Jim Atkinson', a person he believed was a deceased spirit-being from the other world. (9) This article looks at the basis of those criticisms and argues that due consideration has not been given to the context in which Palmer made the claim.

Consideration of context

When studying accounts of past events, it is important to consider the context in which the events occurred. (10, 11) Failing to adequately do this can result in judgments based on 'presentism' (using contemporary standards to give meaning to historical events), a method that gives rise to inappropriate interpretations and conclusions. (12, 13) In regard to Palmer, it is appropriate to consider the religious milieu that existed in America in the latter half of the 19th century, as it would have influenced him as he was developing his theory of chiropractic.

This milieu was the product of separate but inter-connected elements that arose during the American Civil War (1861-1865) and the period that followed: the Postbellum Period (1865-1915). Prior to the start of the Civil War, the religious landscape in America was "tainted by sectarianism ... pride and vanity." (14) The country was experiencing a series of evangelical

revivals - the so-called 'Second Great Awakening,' resulting in new found freedom from traditional religious dogma. (15) Unorthodox or 'heterodox' philosophies such as Spiritualism, gained in popularity as people looked for ways to explain the world they were living and dying in.

By the mid-19th century, Americans had begun to view dying as an 'art' and were promoting the concept of a 'good death' as the quintessential goal of life. (16) This stance relied on the belief that family members should witness a loved one's death and hear their last testament because death epitomised the life already led and predicted the quality of the 'after-life'. (17) With the frequently unnoticed deaths of soldiers during the Civil War, these beliefs were denied to thousands of families. Despite the efforts of religious bodies to manage the issue, only Spiritualism offered a 'realistic' practical solution by creating the possibility for families to re-establish a link with the deceased allowing for the necessary rites essential for a good death to be performed. This in part explains why Spiritualism experienced a surge in popularity during the latter part of the Civil War. (18)

The Postbellum Period saw America undergo profound social change, especially in the area of religion. The religious atmosphere during this period became complex due to the splintering of sects and an increase in social and geographic mobility that occurred after the War. Immigrant groups were espousing different social and religious values with traditional principles and long-established customs and beliefs being questioned. A sense of bold individualism arose offering little moral guidance, while empowering the public to question traditional orthodoxy. (18) This left society marked by a 'strange formlessness' and religious disquiet which only served to increase the popularity of beliefs such as Spiritualism. (19)

Spiritualism

By the latter half of the 19th century, a substantial body of literature about spirit voices and apparitions was readily available to the general public. (20-21) Supporters of Spiritualism included Louis Pasteur, the proponent of germ theory, (22-24) Thomas Edison, the inventor (25), and John Ashburner, the well-respected medical physician and member of the Royal College of Surgeons and the Royal Irish Academy. (26, 27) Ashburner went so far as to claim that Spiritualism, or 'Animal Magnetism' as it was also referred to, was a phenomenon that could underpin a 'new medical science founded on the power of invisible healing forces', (28) a belief that had the support of other well-respected American physicians of the time. (29)

Followers of Spiritualism were claiming it was the only way to overcome the 'greatest curse of modern times – deadly materialism.' (30) It is not surprising then that by the 1890s, Spiritualism was no longer considered offensive to public opinion. (31) Traditional religious leaders however, were not supporters of this view describing Spiritualism as 'blasphemy,' 'evil,' 'witchcraft' and 'of the devil' because it sought to establish communication between the living and the dead through physical phenomena such as abnormal mental states, personal encounters, and trances. (8, 32, 33)

Although the concepts of 'spirit-friend' and 'spirit-world' may be unfamiliar to many modern-day readers, those concepts were commonplace in 19th century America with spirits giving guidance on all manner of topics from health to religion, morals and politics. (34-36) By disassociating itself from the 'occult' traditions and rejecting the mysterious rites of initiation and esoteric formulae found in alchemy and other forms of mysticism, many believed that Spiritualism satisfied the observable and verifiable objectives of empirical science. (37)

Palmer's early life experiences

Palmer's early life-experiences with Spiritualism appear to have had a pronounced influence on his views in later life. In 1871, Palmer married Abba Lord, a self-declared 'Dr' who described herself as a clairvoyant physician, business medium, psychometrist (fortune teller) and psychic healer. (38, 39) It appears highly likely that Lord introduced her husband to the practice of Spiritualism, as there are no reports suggesting that Palmer used spiritualist practices prior to this. Palmer discovered that he could place Lord into a magnetic trance, claiming that he was able to send her spirit to 'distant places,' (40, 41) places that were 'in direct relation to another world.' (42, 43) These experiences appear to have led Palmer further into the world of Spiritualism.

'Dr' Jim Atkinson

According to Palmer, Dr Jim Atkinson was a 'doctor' who disseminated principles analogous to chiropractic to the residents of Davenport, Iowa, some fifty years prior to Palmer commencing his chiropractic practice there in 1895. (9, 44) Palmer claimed Atkinson was an 'intelligent spirit being' from the 'other world' who frequently conversed with him on a range of matters including chiropractic. (11) However, no consensus has been reached on how Palmer and Atkinson 'communicated.' Palmer claimed that he 'conversed' with Atkinson through 'inspiration' or 'spiritual promptings,' (41) a method referred to by other 19th century spiritualists and medico-religious writers of the time. (45, 46) Others claim the communication occurred in spiritualist séances, but these claims are based on secondary sources and should not be relied on as being accurate. (47-51)

Some question whether Atkinson existed at all, suggesting that Palmer may have invented the Atkinson experience in order to add an appealing air of mystery to his early writings on chiropractic. (52) What is clear is that Palmer would have considered his conversations with the spirit of Jim Atkinson as simply a progression in his journey along a spiritualist pathway. The most plausible explanation, therefore, is that Palmer genuinely believed that a 'spirit' had spoken to him, an explanation consistent with spiritualist beliefs at the time. (53-56)

DISCUSSION

Against a background of popular belief, Palmer had no need to hide his spiritualist beliefs, simply declaring that a deceased spirit had spoken to him about a new approach to treating disease. Palmer named this new treatment 'chiropractic.' Linking the origins of chiropractic with Spiritualism would have made the new treatment more acceptable to the multitude of American spiritualists during that period. As a spiritualist, Palmer would have believed that good and bad health were transferred with the person into the spirit-world at the time of 'passing over.' (57) By curing individuals in this world, Palmer claimed to be saving them from another life of disease, an approach that could be interpreted as being either a true act of altruism or a stroke of entrepreneurial genius.

If Palmer's spiritualistic beliefs are justification for the criticisms about chiropractic, it could justifiably be argued that society should similarly be encouraged to rethink its support for germ theory or the use of telephones, as Pasteur and Edison were keen proponents of Spiritualism. In a similar vein, critics of Osteopathy would be justified in questioning its effectiveness based on AT Still's beliefs about 'psychic' powers and 'personal communications with deceased spirits.' (58, 59) Essentially, labelling chiropractic as pseudoscience and quackery based on Palmer's association with Spiritualism is an intentional attempt to unfairly marginalise the profession and reinforce the impression of it as a pseudo-science.

CONCLUSION

DD Palmer's beliefs about Spiritualism have been used to ridicule and marginalise chiropractic since its inception. In so doing, critics have failed to consider the context in which these claims were held and made. This failure has resulted in misguided interpretations and conclusions about Palmer and his theory of chiropractic. Any future discussions on the link between Palmer and Spiritualism and its relevance to modern chiropractic should be conducted with a more informed view of the context in which the original claims were made.

DECLARATIONS

Competing Interests

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