

Biography of Allan Kardec (1804-1869)

In 1854, at the age of 50, Hippolyte Léon Dénizarth Rivail, a French educator and philosopher, began investigating mediumship. He adopted the *nom de plume* of Allan Kardec when he began writing about his findings. (He is hereinafter referred to as Kardec.)

The spiritualism epidemic ignited by the so-called “Rochester Knockings” in the United States during March 1848 had reached France in 1850. According to French historian Ernest Bersot, people sat around tables for hours in anxious expectation of hearing from the spirits. During the winter, there was no other social occupation or topic. The Catholic Church condemned it, but few paid attention.

Born in Lyons to a distinguished family, Kardec was educated at the Institute of Pestalozzi at Yverdun. He had intended to enter the legal profession, as had his father and grandfather, but in 1828 he purchased a school for boys and devoted himself to education. In 1830, at age 25, he began giving gratuitous lectures to the public on chemistry, physics, comparative anatomy, and astronomy. Under his given name, he authored a number of works aimed at improving education in the public school of France, including *A Plan for the Improvement of Public Instruction* (1828) and *A Classical Grammar of the French Tongue* (1831). Besides French, he was fluent in German, English, Dutch, Greek, and Latin.

“Foreseeing the vast importance to science and religion of such an extension of the field of human observation, he entered at once upon a careful investigation of the phenomena,” Anna Blackwell, who translated Kardec’s works from French to English, explained Kardec’s interest in mediumship in the preface to *Le Livre des Esprits* (*The Spirits’ Book*), published in 1857.¹



Blackwell, who lived in England, further explained that a friend of Kardec’s had two teen-aged daughters who were mediums. Most of the messages coming through the two young ladies, the Boudin sisters, Caroline, 16, and Julie, 14, were frivolous or mundane, but when Kardec was present the messages became serious and profound. When Kardec inquired as to the cause of the change in disposition, he was informed that “spirits of a much higher order than those who habitually communicated through the two young mediums came expressly for him, and would continue to do so, in order to enable him to fulfill an important religious mission.” Although he received much evidential communication, most of the information coming through the young girls had to do with the meaning of life and the nature of the afterlife. According to Blackwell, the information re-

ceived by Kardec was well beyond the comprehension of the two mediums and “they were as little capable of appreciating it as of inventing [it].”²

Kardec would meet with one or both of the mediums a couple of evenings every week and put questions to the spirits. Among the enlightened spirits purportedly communicating with Kardec were John the Evangelist, St. Augustine, St. Vincent De Paul, St. Louis, “The Spirit of Truth,” Socrates, Plato, Fénelon, Franklin, and Swedenborg. They answered questions on every conceivable subject, including God, pantheism, universal space, biblical accounts of creation, reincarnation, relationships beyond the grave, possession, spirit influence, war, capital punishment, slavery, free will, suicide, and fear of death, to name just some. As an example, Kardec asked if spirits ever take part in our occupations and pleasures. “Commonplace spirits, as you call them, do so,” was the response. “They are incessantly about you, and take, in all you do, a part which is sometimes a very active one, according to their nature; and it is necessary that they should do so, in order to push men on in the different walks of life, and to excite or moderate their passions.”³

When Kardec asked how the grief of survivors affects spirits, the reply came: “A spirit is touched by the remembrance and regrets of those he has loved, but a persistent and unreasonable sorrow affects him painfully, because he sees, in this excessive grief, a want of faith in the future and confidence in God, and, consequently, an obstacle to the advancement of the mourner, and, perhaps to their reunion.”⁴

Kardec was curious as to how spirits travel. “As spirits transport themselves from point to point with the rapidity of thought, they may be said to see everywhere at the same time,” the reply came. “A spirit’s thought may radiate at the same moment on many different points, but this faculty depends on his purity. The more impure the spirit, the narrower is his range of sight. It is only the higher spirits who can take in a whole at a single glance.”⁵

Kardec wondered how he could know if low-level spirits were attempting to deceive him with false information. “The purest light is that which is not obscured by any cloud; the most precious diamond is the one without any flaw,” came the response from the spirit claiming to be St. Augustine. “Judge the communications of spirits in like manner, by the purity of their teachings. Do not forget that there are, among spirits, many who have not yet freed themselves from their earthly ideas. Learn to distinguish them by their language; judge them by the sum of what they tell you; see whether there is logical sequence in the ideas they suggest, whether there is, in their statements, nothing that betrays ignorance, pride or malevolence; in a word, whether their communications always bear the stamp of wisdom that attests to true superiority.” He went on to say that if our world were inaccessible to error, it would be perfect, which it is far from being.⁶

Kardec approached his investigation scientifically, searching for mechanistic explanations. He explained that the earliest manifestations of intelligence were made by the legs of tables moving up and down a given number of times to reply “yes” or “no” to questions asked. Fuller replies were later obtained by a number of tilts or raps corresponding to the number of each letter of the alphabet, so that words and sentences began to be produced in reply to questions. But more rapid responses were later received with the planchette, a basket with a pencil centered in and moved by the same occult power that moved the tables and gave the raps. It was a form of “direct writing,” the spirits delivering messages by means of the pencil with no human hand holding the instrument.

The sessions with the Boudin sisters went on for nearly two years before Kardec decided to put the messages in book form. His spirit instructors sanctioned the publication and Kardec was told by them that he should adopt the name Allan Kardec. There are two theories as to the name: it was an old British name in his mother’s family and

it was his name in a past life. It may be that both are true.

The first publication of *The Spirits' Book* contained only information gleaned from the spirits communicating through the two sisters, but a revised edition, the one remaining in circulation, includes messages from other spirits through other mediums. According to Blackwell, the book "sold with great rapidity, making converts not in France only, but all over the Continent, and rendering the name of Allan Kardec a household word..."

Kardec called the philosophy coming from the spirits *Spiritism*. While the body of knowledge Kardec was developing was similar to what in England and the United States was developing as *Spiritualism*, Spiritism was more unified, and, unlike much of Spiritualism, embraced reincarnation. Its basic tenet is that we are immortal souls continually evolving through higher and higher realms of existence.

"The situation of spirits and their way of looking at things are infinitely varied, according to their various degrees of moral and intellectual development," Kardec wrote. "Spirits of a high order generally make but short sojourns upon the earth; all that goes on here is so paltry in comparison with the grandeurs of infinity, the matters to which men attribute most importance appear to them so puerile, that they things of this earth have very little interest for them, unless they have been sent to it for the purpose of quickening progress of its people."⁷

Kardec continued communicating with spirits until his death at age 64. He also wrote, *Christian Spiritism, The Gospel – Explained by the Spiritist Doctrine, The Medium's Book, Heaven and Hell, and Genesis*.



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¹ Kardec, Allan, *The Spirits' Book*, AMAPSE Society Mexico, (original published in 1857), p. 11.

² _____, p. 11.

³ _____, p. 256.

⁴ _____, p. 373.

⁵ _____, p. 155.

⁶ _____, p. 423.

⁷ _____, p. 179.