

Spiritualism is a religious movement based on the belief that the spirits of the dead exist and have both the ability and the inclination to communicate with the living. The afterlife, or the "spirit world", is seen by spiritualists, not as a static place, but as one in which spirits continue to evolve. These two beliefs—that contact with spirits is possible, and that spirits are more advanced than humans—lead spiritualists to a third belief: that spirits are capable of providing useful knowledge about moral and ethical issues, as well as about the nature of God. Some spiritualists will speak of a concept which they refer to as "spirit guides"—specific spirits, often contacted, who are relied upon for spiritual guidance. Spiritism, a branch of spiritualism developed by Allan Kardec and today practiced mostly in Continental Europe and Latin America, especially in Brazil, emphasizes reincarnation.

Spiritualism developed and reached its peak growth in membership from the 1840s to the 1920s, especially in English-speaking countries. By 1897, spiritualism was said to have more than eight million followers in the United States and Europe mostly drawn from the middle and upper classes.

Spiritualism flourished for a half century without canonical texts or formal organization, attaining cohesion through periodicals, tours by trance lecturers, camp meetings, and the missionary activities of accomplished mediums. Many prominent spiritualists were women, and like most spiritualists, supported causes such as the abolition of slavery and women's suffrage. By the late 1880s the credibility of the informal movement had weakened due to accusations of fraud perpetrated by mediums, and formal spiritualist organizations began to appear. Spiritualism is currently practiced primarily through various denominational spiritualist churches in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom.

Despite numerous instances of chicanery, the appeal of Spiritualism was strong. Prominent in the ranks of its adherents were those grieving the death of a loved one. Many families during the time of the American Civil War had seen their men go off and never return, and images of the battlefield, produced through the new medium of photography, demonstrated that their loved ones had not only died in overwhelmingly huge numbers, but horribly as well. One well known case is that of Mary Todd Lincoln who, grieving the loss of her son, organized séances in the White House which were attended by her husband, President Abraham Lincoln. The surge of Spiritualism during this time, and later during World War I, was a direct response to those massive battlefield casualties.