

Disseminating Spiritism in the United States

Ricardo C. Mastroleo, Ph.D.
Allan Kardec Spiritist Educational Center
Austin, Texas USA
info@aksec.org
www.aksec.org

The spiritist movement in the United States has been experiencing in the past years a significant revitalization thanks to the collaborative effort of so many dedicated people all over the country, who selflessly devote their time and resources to disseminate spiritism, not only at the level of its core concepts and values but, as importantly, by practicing them with a genuinely loving and altruistic commitment to serve their communities. This work has been greatly facilitated through the leadership of the U.S. Spiritist Council (USSC), which has been instrumental in the unification of the movement by promoting and sponsoring national and local events, producing educational materials in English, translating books and texts, broadcasting web-seminars and web-radio programs, and providing the orientation and guidance that enable more spiritist groups to be formed.

However, a closer observation of the various spiritist groups in the United States or the attendees of the local or national spiritist events held in the past years led to the inevitable speculation that the movement was still represented by a vast majority of Brazilian nationals. This speculation, however, could not be more rigorously verified until very recently when the results of the First U.S. Spiritist Census, conducted by USSC and finalized in January of 2011 (<http://www.spiritist.us/from-the-council/2009-us-spiritist-census/>), were made available to its participants. To the question “what language the adult members/attendees in your group prefer to speak in casual conversations?” 88.98% of the respondents answered Portuguese, 8.29% answered English and 2.72% answered Spanish. Considering the fact that people have a natural tendency and preference to speak in their own native tongue, these data clearly confirm the strong presence of Portuguese speakers – most likely Brazilians – in the American spiritist movement, and unequivocally reveals that the movement still has a lot of work to do in order to attract to the spiritist groups more Americans and individuals outside the Brazilian community.

At the same time, the Census results also show that 86.47% of the respondent spiritist organizations have all or some of their meetings conducted in English. This suggests that having spiritist groups offering activities in English, with the aid of books, educational handouts, DVDs, etc., translated to English, is not being enough to engage in greater numbers the English speaking population of our communities. There is no question that an indispensable condition for the dissemination of spiritism in the United States is that the English language be used. However, as the Census data show, this condition, although necessary, is far from being sufficient. Something else must be done to reach out to our brothers and sisters of this land.

Over a year ago, our group decided to address this issue and focus our activities primarily on the dissemination of spiritism among those who were interested in topics or involved in activities related to spirituality. The idea was to take spiritism outside the spiritist center and present it to anyone interested in learning and sharing their views and experiences on how their spiritual nature is perceived and understood. With this in mind we organized monthly meetings through the Meetup social network portal.

The Meetup group is called Spirit-Teachings (<http://www.meetup.com/Spirit-Teachings/>) and its mission is to bring together people with different spiritual perspectives and understanding so that the exchange of knowledge and ideas become the source of an enriching, enlightening and renovating experience for all members.

Each meeting is devoted to a specific topic and the discussions always explore different views including not only the spiritist ones but also those views that represent the schools of thought that are embraced by or which are more familiar to the members of the group. Needless to say that this approach requires us to carry out the study of the subject way beyond the boundaries of spiritism, that, by the way, has been a very educational and rewarding personal experience.

The advantage of this approach is that it gives us a unique opportunity to discuss the work of Allan Kardec in a broader context where we present spiritism not as the only possible and immutable truth but instead, as a different perspective perhaps never seen or heard before by many members of the group. In this approach to disseminate spiritism it is absolutely imperative that we be able to acknowledge somebody else's beliefs, perspectives and experiences, and have a genuine interest in exploring and learning new concepts outside the body of spiritist ideas. This goes far beyond, as it is commonly stated by many spiritists, "respecting other religious beliefs": it is the recognition that we can share information and views with the mutual goal of learning from each other.

The dissemination of spiritism must be a two way educational process where the exchange of different philosophical and religious views, when conducted in a mature and non-judgmental fashion, concentrating always on the commonalities rather than the differences, represents a straight path to the edification of all. The idea behind dissemination must not be to "convert" others to spiritism, but an attempt to add spiritist concepts to their philosophical and religious views. Furthermore, we cannot forget that Modern Spiritualism was born in the United States a decade before The Spirits' Book was first published, meaning that Spiritualism has a strong tradition in this country, which, as a matter of fact, also hosts people with a diverse and rich body of eastern spiritual philosophies and religions. From our experience, these are the people most likely to come to our meetings and to be more open to learn about other schools of thought, including spiritism. Therefore, we cannot expect that they abandon their views in favor of spiritism. Instead, we hope at least to spark their interest in learning more about the work of Allan Kardec and the subsequent teachings brought by the mediumship of Chico Xavier and others, or even to embrace some of spiritism's philosophical or moral foundations.

In this framework our group has been quite successful attracting a group of people with a diverse background in terms of spiritual philosophies and beliefs, who share the same goal of discussing and learning more about our spiritual nature and, consequently, willing to engage in discussions about specific topics like reincarnation, mediumship, healing, etc. The attendance varies depending on the topic, but it typically ranges from 5 to 20 attendees. The discussions are always conducted in an open-minded environment in order to enable and empower everyone to share his/her views and questions, and we always take the opportunity to include the spiritist views in the discussions. After a year of monthly meetings, we can safely say that our goal of educating our members about Allan Kardec and spiritism is being accomplished and these positive results encourage us to move forward on the same path. We even had some of our members to voluntarily start reading books by Kardec.

This experience has also given us some insight as why the traditional format of public study group meetings held at spiritist centers tends to fail to attract individuals with interest in learning more about spirituality but with no or little knowledge about spiritism. The information discussed in these meetings are conveyed in a single direction (as opposed to a two way process, much more conducive to the engagement that leads to learning) where the only focus is the study of spiritism, and therefore, not giving much room for newcomers to have their own views and experiences acknowledged and integrated into the discussion. This sense of disengagement does not encourage newcomers to return¹. Although study groups about spiritism must be an integral part of any spiritist center, for the reason stated above, they are generally not effective as a dissemination tool.

Another factor to be considered is that spiritist groups have a tendency to emphasize the religious aspect of spiritism in their activities, over the philosophical and scientific ones. In principle, this should not be a problem since each group should operate the day-to-day activities according to its own vocation and comfort zone. However, when dissemination is at play, one must ensure that spiritism is always presented with its triple aspects very well balanced. Overemphasizing the philosophical aspect conveys a spiritism detached from the concrete reality of our lives and spiritual needs. Overemphasizing the scientific aspect conveys a mechanical spiritism detached from our hearts. Overemphasizing the religious aspect conveys a stagnant spiritism unable to see anything outside the artificial fence self imposed by an excessive reverence of its concepts. The dissemination of spiritism requires open mindedness, broad knowledge (both inside and outside the realm of spiritism), humility and the capacity and willingness to outreach, and cannot be done from within the restrictive boundaries of that fence.

In conclusion, the dissemination of spiritism is a fundamentally pedagogical undertaking, as much as the codification of spiritism was (no wonder the spirituality's higher spheres chose the progressive and loving educator Hippolyte L. D. Rivail to be its codifier). As such, it does not consist only in the distribution of flyers and emails to announce public meetings and seminars. It is much more than that. It must be an activity on its own (i.e., apart from the regular activities performed by the established members of the spiritist center), that entails an initial effort to understand the cultural, religious and philosophical background of the members of our communities who are willing to learn, and perhaps even embrace, a different spiritual viewpoint. In performing this activity, however, spiritism itself must not be altered in any way, shape or form, in an attempt to conform it to the cultural background of the newcomers (otherwise, it would no longer be spiritism!), but it must be conducted in a context that allows for the integration of its core concepts with their knowledge, beliefs and aspirations. In addition, spiritism must always be presented as a body of knowledge based on the very solid foundations of observation of the facts, faith combined with reason, and the universal law of fraternal love that connect us all together with the Creator, and yet, being flexible enough to adapt itself to the scientific advancements and ethical demands of a changing world.

¹ This sense of disengagement experienced by newcomers can also be enhanced by the observation of members of the group conversing among themselves in a foreign language or the sight of posted signs and books written in a foreign language.