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SPIRITUALISM AND THE LANGUAGE OF UNIVERSAL RELIGION IN NINETEENTH-
CENTURY AMERICA

PH.D DISSERTATION

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INTRODUCTION

Religion: True, Historical, and Utopian

The “term *religion*,” the young “Poughkeepsie Seer” Andrew Jackson Davis informed his listeners from deep within a magnetic trance,

is quite inexpressive, and needs, in order to be understood, a brief definition. The term *ligo* is a Latin word, signifying *to tie* or *bind*. *Re-ligo* is to *re-tie* or *bind over again*, and make still stronger. The *n* being attached, forms the word *religion*, which means to bind and rebind, and make secure. It is well to say that, understood in this sense, it has performed its office most effectually. For the term “religion,” indeed, implies little more than being sacredly bound to *sectarianism*.

The Christian Bible despite its occasional pieces of wisdom, such as the Golden Rule, was lacking such principles in Davis’ estimation. “It does not teach that pure morality which belongs to the nature of man, and which will result from a superior condition of the race,” he argued. “Again: it does not prove *immortality*...Nor does it present one proper conception of the constitution, character, greatness, omnipotence, and majesty of the Divine Mind.” The Bible neither contained “one substantial proof of an unvarying law upon which to found a hope of ever being regenerated...Nor does it teach that holy virtue, morality, and refinement, which should receive the name of religion.”¹ In short, the Bible lacked the true essence of what religion *ought* to be. That is, it failed to foster moral self-culture and elucidate natural laws and the true attributes of the Divine. What had taken the place of “true” religion was instead the petty tribalism and bigotry of the different “historical” religions that had emerged over time.

¹ Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind* 10th ed. (New York: S. S. Lyon, and WM. Fishbough, 1852), 558.

Here Davis was picking up the strands of an ongoing discourse surrounding the nature of religion, which had typically been carried out by wealthy and educated eighteenth-century Deists searching for the fundamentals of the true and natural religion in contrast to the corruptions of historical religion that existed in actuality. This was a discourse continued in the nineteenth century by Transcendentalists and liberal Protestants more broadly. In so doing, they began to treat religion as an abstract category that possessed both an ideal essence, but which also described various systems of belief apart from Christianity. This implied that Christianity in all of its forms was merely another iteration of a universal human impulse, subject to historical forces like any other. Such a framing removed Christianity from its privileged position and made it theoretically equivalent to other religions, even if it retained its status as the religion that came closest to the ideal of what “true” religion was. As Ralph Waldo Emerson announced in his famous 1838 “Divinity School Address,” the historical “Christianity became a Mythos, as the poetic teaching of Greece and of Egypt, before.”²

The opening quotation nicely illustrates three important and distinct facets of Davis’ treatment of religion, an understanding that many other nineteenth-century Spiritualists championed in parallel to their more scholarly counterparts. In one sense of the word, religion had a true “interior” essence, which, for Davis, was the discovery and practical application of natural laws into a system of pure morality—religion was a normative ideal. In the second sense, religion was a universally applicable category, which—divorced from its exclusive identification with Christianity—could be used to conceptualize different outward manifestations of worship in history, all of which supposedly expressed—with varying degrees of perfection—the universal human impulse towards religion. Thus, germs of true religion could transcend apparent sectarian boundaries and find expression in all sorts of ways, from the prophets of the Bible to the Brahmins of India. Lastly, there was the project of sweeping aside the outdated forms, and actually realizing the essence of the eternal and true religion in history. This utopian goal was entertained not only by Davis and his followers, but by Spiritualists more generally. Thus, they believed, the progressive development of humanity, aided by the guidance of spiritual friends, would lead to the general acceptance of true natural principles and help inaugurate a new era of peace and harmony, forever ending

² Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Divinity School Address,” in *The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings*, ed. Lawrence Buell (New York: The Modern Library, 2006), 135.

sectarian bickering. These three distinct, but related, understandings of religion are the subject of this study.

Universalized understandings of religion as a true essence existing within all humans increasingly occupied the minds of many nineteenth-century religious thinkers. Boston intellectuals in the Transcendentalist Club spoke of Christianity as another mythology among the mythologies of the world. They eagerly read newly available eastern texts like the *Bhagavad Gita* for pearls of ancient wisdom and poetic inspiration. Some, particularly the second generation of Transcendentalists and the Free Religious Association, hoped to practically and systematically distill the essence of all religions into a universal religion of the future. The scholarly divines of Harvard Divinity School began academic comparisons of Christianity and the other “great world religions,” analyzing their doctrines and “bibles” side by side. For religiously liberal Americans, the traditions of other nations began to be seen as the various expressions of an innate human propensity for religious belief and, for some, as possible building blocks for an overarching religion of mankind that promised to distil the manifold partial truths into a complete and unifying whole. Perhaps the most visible manifestation of this impulse came with the much-touted 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago.

This study is concerned with Spiritualist engagement with universalized understandings of religion—as a category and as an eternal essence—and their optimism that the fractured course of religious history could be righted and that the true essence of religion might be expressed in all its utopian grandeur. Both as inheritors of older intellectual traditions and as a quintessential outgrowth of the nineteenth-century American religious landscape, Spiritualists diffused such ideas into the American public.

From a present-day perspective, the notion that religion represents a constant cross-cultural phenomenon seems so natural and self-evident as to be unquestioned by most. The equivalence with which contemporary Americans view different religions is evidenced by their readiness to combine them. A 2009 Pew survey found, for instance, that 24% of Americans at least occasionally attend “religious services of a faith different from their own.”

The survey also found that 22% of Christians and 24% of Americans more generally believe in reincarnation. 21% and 23%, respectively, also believe in “Yoga as a spiritual practice.”³

At the risk of stating the obvious, the poll suggests that a significant number of Americans go beyond a mere common acceptance of religion as an overarching category suitable for describing various spiritual traditions and, indeed, see them as interchangeable to some degree: various formal expressions of a greater underlying spirituality shared by all humans. The practice of combining religious traditions, including eastern ones, strongly suggests that they are valid conceptual equivalents and serve similar purposes. As such, they can be tailored to an individual’s personal preferences without undue concern for orthodoxy; timeless truth that has been expressed in different forms can be accessed in different ways. The impulse to treat religion in this manner is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than by those who consider themselves “spiritual” but not “religious”: the former signifies a concern with an individualistic pursuit of the true essence of the divine, whereas the latter is suggestive of the formal structures of organized religion.⁴

Nonetheless, though the historical roots of such thinking can be traced into the eighteenth century and earlier, the view that religion was a universal category for understanding the belief systems of all peoples around the world and throughout history did not spread to everyday Americans until the nineteenth century.⁵ While much good scholarship (overviewed in Chapter One) has sought to trace the origins and development of the modern understanding of religion, it has either been confined to elite contexts, such as eighteenth-century Deism or Transcendentalism, or to new religious movements that emerged in the later nineteenth century, such as New Thought and the Theosophical Society. Spiritualism, despite its close parallels to these other movements and its undeniable cultural impact has been all

³ Luis Lugo et al., “Eastern, New Age Beliefs Widespread: Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths,” Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 9 Dec. 2009. Retrieved 27 Aug. 2018. <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/12/09/many-americans-mix-multiple-faiths/#ghosts-fortunetellers-and-communicating-with-the-dead>.

⁴ John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 119-24; Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 1-23.

⁵ For an emphasis on the nineteenth-century context, see: Christopher A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden, Ma.: Blackwell, 2011), 357-65; or Michael Bergunder, “‘Religion’ and ‘Science’ Within a Global Religious History.” *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 16 (2016): 86-141. For earlier historical roots, see: Peter Harrison, *‘Religion’ and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

but ignored in this regard.⁶ While scholars have noted the universalist tendencies of Spiritualism and their interest in other religions in passing, there has been no thorough study of their approaches to religion or attempt to locate them in the larger historiography surrounding the construction of religion as a universal concept.⁷

This book aims to de-centre this scholarship by proposing that Spiritualism—comparatively broad and democratic, and emerging significantly earlier than either New Thought or Theosophy—was the first exposure that many Americans had to a broad and universal understanding of what constituted religion. These ideas both “trickled down” from the educated elite through overlapping networks—particularly reform—and discourse communities in the form of lecture circuits and periodicals, but they also reflected the fiercely individualistic approach that Spiritualists took to revelation. Spiritualists did not merely copy; they radically transformed understandings of religion in ways that were informed by the religious context of nineteenth-century America. The evangelical style of participatory religion that had been unleashed into the Age of Jackson by the Second Great Awakening found its rationalistic and universalistic counterpart in Spiritualism.

⁶ Most scholarship on how Spiritualism has engaged with other issues, such as the role of Spiritualism in promoting women’s rights, the Spiritualist appropriation of science, or the particulars of Spiritualist practice. For examples, see (respectively) Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

⁷ Historians of Spiritualism have paid only passing notice to their treatment of religion, and historians of “religion” have largely ignored Spiritualists. The best treatment of Spiritualism and the concept of religion is from Ann Taves in her 1999 work *Fits, Trances, & Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James*. In it, she provides a thorough analysis of how understandings of trance states changed over time and provided a model for conceptualizing religious experience as a universal human trait. Spiritualism features prominently in her narrative as a bridge between Mesmerism and the psychological approach of individuals like William James.

David Walker notes that “spiritualism itself became a site on, against, and for which Americans developed theories of religion and projects of comparative religion,” but, focusing as he does on the more phenomenological and ritualistic aspects of Spiritualism, he fails to notice that Spiritualists themselves were active participants in this discourse. David Walker, “The Humbug in American Religion Ritual Theories of Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 23, no. 1 (2013): 35, 53-55.

For other mentions of Spiritualism’s universalist and comparative religion tendencies, see, for example, John Patrick Deveney, “Spiritualism,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, eds. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 1075; John B. Buescher, *The Other Side of Salvation: Spiritualism and the Nineteenth-Century Religious Experience* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2004), xii; Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 314-15; Cathy Gutierrez, “Spiritualism” in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (New York: Routledge, 2015), 197, 205-206.

A Mass Movement

Characterizing Spiritualism as “broad and democratic” naturally raises the question to what degree this is true. Scholars have varied in their assessments. In his influential work *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, Jon Butler suggests a relatively genteel demographic of white, middle- and upper-class Protestants, while still noting an influence of folk magic and popularized occultism—a description Stephen Prothero objects to, claiming instead that it was a broad and democratic movement.⁸ Similar to Butler, Bridget Bennet characterizes Spiritualism as middle-class, but acknowledged that it transcended class.⁹ By contrast, Ann Braude emphasizes that Spiritualism crossed class, race, and gender lines. She labels it a “mass movement” and notes, in particular, the opportunities it provided for marginalized voices, such as women and black Americans, to speak in public forums. In the same vein, R. Laurence Moore emphasizes the movement’s broad appeal in nineteenth-century America, calling it “the quintessential expression of the age of the common man.”¹⁰ Catherine Albanese also characterizes Spiritualism as a “mass-movement” which became part of America’s “vernacular culture,” though she notes demographic differences between mass Spiritualism and the harmonialists who followed Andrew Jackson Davis’ teachings before the movements became difficult to neatly separate.¹¹ It should be noted that the democratic and populist nature of Spiritualism is somewhat particular to the United States. In Britain and Germany—both of which had significant numbers of Spiritualists—Spiritualism was a much more middle- and upper-class phenomenon.¹²

Nonetheless, one can find examples of Spiritualists in the highest and lowest classes of American society alike. Influential individuals within the movement such as Davis or the Fox sisters—Leah, Margaret, and Kate—came from humble, if not downright destitute,

⁸ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (London: Harvard University Press, 1990), 254-55; Stephen Prothero, “From Spiritualism to Theosophy: ‘Uplifting’ a Democratic Tradition,” in *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 3, no. 2 (1993): 199. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1123988>.

⁹ Bridget Bennet, *Transatlantic Spiritualism and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 179.

¹⁰ Moore, *White Crows*, xii-xiv, 110.

¹¹ Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind & Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 215, 222, 235.

¹² Michael Hochgeschwender, “The Religion of the Modern Man: 19th Century Spiritualism in the US and Germany,” in *Religion and the United States*, eds. Jeanne Cortiel et al. (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, winter 2011), 3, 17.

circumstances. Both Davis and the Foxes received little in the way of education and came from families ravaged by the alcoholism of their patriarchs.¹³ At the other end of the social spectrum there were individuals like Judge John W. Edmonds, a justice of the New York Supreme Court, or Dr. Robert Hare, a celebrated chemist who scandalized his colleagues with his high-profile conversion to Spiritualism.¹⁴ Mary Todd Lincoln, grieving for her lost children, invited mediums to the White House to conduct séances.¹⁵ The conversion of Robert Dale Owen, the son of the celebrated socialist reformer Robert Owen, was a further feather in the cap of Spiritualists.¹⁶ As the medium Emma Hardinge boasted in 1870, the vast ranks of Spiritualism included “authors, editors, doctors, lawyers, clergymen, professors of colleges, magistrates on the bench, statesmen, traders, operatives, and mechanics—in a word, all gradations of rank and all classes of thought.”¹⁷

Scholars acknowledge that estimates of the number of American Spiritualists vary wildly and the lack of a unifying doctrine makes it difficult to determine who should be classified as a Spiritualist. Moreover, many individuals participated in séances or took some interest in the movement without closely identifying with it.¹⁸ Many of the estimates of numbers came from Spiritualists themselves and must be viewed with skepticism, not least of all for their wild inconsistency. Charles Partridge and Nathaniel P. Tallmadge, writing a few weeks apart in 1854, differed by almost a million in their estimates—over a million, by Partridge’s reckoning, and two by Tallmadge’s. Other estimates were similarly at variance with each other.¹⁹ Uriah Clark put the number of “decisive” believers at two million and the number of “nominal” ones at five million in 1863.²⁰ In her 1870 believer’s history, *Modern American Spiritualism*, Hardinge claimed eleven million adherents in 1867 on the basis of

¹³ Ernest Isaacs, “The Fox Sisters and American Spiritualism” in *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*, Howard Kerr and Charles L. Crow, eds. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 81-82.

¹⁴ Albanese, *Republic*, 181, 263-64.

¹⁵ Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 295.

¹⁶ Emma Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism: A Twenty Years’ Record of the Communion Between Earth and the World of Spirits* (New York: 1870), 12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁸ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 7-8.

¹⁹ Albanese, *Republic*, 220-21.

²⁰ Uriah Clark, *Plain Guide to Spiritualism. A Hand-Book for Skeptics, Inquirers, Clergymen, Believers, Lecturers, Mediums, Editors, and All Who Need a Thorough Guide to the Phenomena, Science, Philosophy, Religion and Reforms of Modern Spiritualism* (Boston: William White & Co., 1863), 35-36.

statistics from unnamed “opponents” of Spiritualism.²¹ Estimates about the number of active Spiritualist séance circles are similarly difficult to verify. Nonetheless, Nathaniel Parker Willis of the *Home Journal* believed that there were around three hundred circles in New York City in the mid-1850s. A Philadelphia Spiritualist put the number of Philadelphia circles at between fifty to sixty in 1851. Enumerating séance circles is further complicated by the temporary nature of many such gatherings; some ceased operation soon after fulfilling their purpose of either proving or disproving spiritual phenomena to the satisfaction of their members.²²

Like their evangelical counterparts, Spiritualists wholeheartedly embraced the technology of the time and produced an impressive body of widely-circulated and inexpensive periodicals and books. Like itinerant preachers, Spiritualist lecturers also spoke frequently to large audiences on the reform and lyceum circuit, which, according to Clark, consisted of five hundred regular speakers and over a thousand “occasional” ones in 1863. By the same date, he estimated that up until that time there had been around one hundred periodicals “devoted wholly or in part to the propagation and exposition of Spiritualism,” though many, he admitted, had had short runs.²³

Leaving aside the probably inflated numbers of Spiritualism’s proponents, the United States Senate received a petition in 1854 with 13,000 signatures asking that it form a committee to investigate Spiritualist claims. By 1890, several decades after the high point of the movement, 45,000 Americans identified themselves as Spiritualists for the census. Less precisely, the fact that Spiritualism was frequently satirized suggests that it was a culturally significant force during the nineteenth century.²⁴ Whatever the number of actual practitioners, it is evident that until recently, Spiritualism, along with related esoteric beliefs, was more important and needs to be taken more seriously as a cultural force than scholars have previously recognized.²⁵

²¹ Hardinge’s numbers might have come from Archbishop John Hughes of New York who, according to Cora Richmond, believed there to be ten million in 1860—a seemingly hysterical overestimate. Taking the number at face value, Richmond extrapolated that “*pro rata*” there ought to be thirty million at the time of her writing in 1893. Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 13; Harrison D. Barrett, *Life Work of Mrs. Cora L. V. Richmond* (Chicago: Hack & Anderson, 1895), 675; Albanese, *Republic*, 220-21.

²² Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 123-24.

²³ Clark, *Plain Guide*, 35.

²⁴ Bennett, *Transatlantic Spiritualism*, 7, 178.

²⁵ Catherine Albanese prefers the term “metaphysical religion.” Albanese, *Republic*, 4; Arthur Versluis, *The Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 6-7.

Summary

The first chapter of this study provides an overview of the construction of religion as a category and the historiography surrounding it, as well as a brief genealogy of nineteenth-century Spiritualism. The second chapter examines the writings of Andrew Jackson Davis, an uneducated shoemaker's apprentice whose clairvoyant visions provided the most influential cosmological and theological system for Spiritualists, though they by no means had a binding creed upon which they all agreed. Though Davis became disillusioned with mass Spiritualism in later years, Emma Hardinge concluded that Davis was to Spiritualism what John the Baptist was to Christianity.²⁶ Beginning with *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind* in 1847, the young "Poughkeepsie Seer" announced a comprehensive and grandiose vision of the universe, the afterlife, world history, and a formula for a future society based on eternal natural principles. With shades of Deism and a popularized Transcendentalism, Davis understood true religion as the discernment and implementation of natural law in one's own life and society. Reflecting a fiercely democratic ethos, Davis rejected clerical, prophetic, and scriptural authority and declared these laws accessible to all humans in accordance with their degree of spiritual and moral development. The various religions and scriptures of the world were to be understood as particular and partial manifestations of an underlying truth. The progressive development of humanity and expression of natural principles in society would overcome sectarian boundaries, establish true religion on earth, and bring about a spiritual republic of universal happiness and equality.

The third chapter follows the progress of Davis' "Harmonial Philosophy" as his core group of associates attempted to propagate it. The Harmonialists, initially writing through their periodical *The Univercœlum and Spiritual Philosopher*, championed a broad understanding of religion and revelation, which, like Davis, they sought to reconcile with science in order to possess a rational religion in line with natural principles. With the 1848 advent of the famous spirit "rappings" in the Hydesville home of the Fox family, the Harmonial Philosophy soon blended seamlessly with the emerging Spiritualist movement as it became a means whereby to satisfactorily explain the hauntings and spiritual phenomena that spread across the nation. The Harmonial Philosophy gave a language to legitimize

²⁶ Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 27.

spiritual phenomena, while such manifestations provided a compelling demonstration and a practice to what would have otherwise likely remained a small and isolated group of Davis' supporters.²⁷ These early advocates of Davis' philosophy—William Fishbough, Samuel B. Britten, Thomas Lake Harris, J. K. Ingalls, W. M. Fernald, and R. P. Ambler, among others—became prominent Spiritualists, continuing to publish and contribute to early Spiritualist periodicals such as the *Shekinah* and the *Spirit Messenger*.

The fourth and final chapter of this study considers the writings of other prominent Spiritualists. With the Harmonial Philosophy providing the backbone of Spiritualist cosmology and metaphysics, the discourse of religion as an eternal essence manifested in different historical forms carried out by Davis and the Harmonialists found a wider audience. While Spiritualists varied in the degree to which they privileged Christianity over other religions, they agreed on the possibility of ongoing and idiosyncratic revelation.²⁸ Much to the chagrin of Davis and other philosophically minded Spiritualists, the practice of spiritual communication became a defining marker of true religion as Spiritualists read it into different traditions across time and national boundaries. In addition to biblical exegesis which saw spiritualist phenomena in the Old and New Testaments, Spiritualists like James M. Peebles drew comparisons to the supposedly magnetic feats of Hindu priests. Through a shared print culture and lecture circuit, Spiritualists constructed an imagined community of true believers in much the same way that evangelical Christians did. The universality of spiritual phenomena and revelation allowed Spiritualists to imagine that people all around the world and throughout history had partaken in their beliefs to various degrees. The modernizing power of the nineteenth century and a powerful outpouring from the spirit world would bring the truth to ever greater numbers of enlightened believers.

²⁷ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 34-35.

²⁸ Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 400n1, 401n3.

CHAPTER ONE - HISTORIOGRAPHY

The Concept of Religion

By now it has been well-established by scholars that our present-day understanding of what “religion” or “a religion” is is a relatively modern one. Wilfred Cantwell Smith influentially argued in his 1963 book *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* that the modern concept of religion—and the individual religions themselves—that we take for granted was an ever-developing construction, and perhaps not a particularly beneficial one. In “a process of reification,” people in “the West” have been “mentally making religion into a thing, [and] gradually coming to conceive it as an objective systematic entity.”¹ Subsequent historians have sought to chart the emergence of the modern usage of religion, by which people tend to mean that there is a universally applicable concept of religion that expresses itself cross-culturally as an essential part of humanity. Depending on one’s point of view, the various forms of this impulse are either false religions or are different manifestations of an underlying truth that have the same essentials. Frequently, the true essence of religion is seen to be something interior, while different religions have outward histories. This understanding of religion is often read uncritically into history and across cultures. Importantly, religion emerged as a concept in opposition to other concepts such as “secularism” or “science,” and is thus bound up in the process of modernization. Religion became something that dealt with aspects of life that were separate from the public sphere and beyond the scope of scientific inquiry.² As such, the eighteenth and especially the

¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 48-51.

² Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 1-6, 19-20, 24. For the construction of religion in contradistinction to science, see: Peter Harrison, “‘Science’ and ‘Religion’: Constructing the Boundaries,” *The Journal of Religion* 86, no. 1 (2006): 86-106 and Bergunder, “‘Religion’ and ‘Science’ Within a Global Religious History,” 86-141.

nineteenth centuries were formative periods in the construction and evolution of religion as an abstract category.

The first part of this chapter will briefly trace the changing meaning of “religion” over time, emphasizing the key moments and movements that historians have identified in the process of negotiating its contemporary meaning. The second part will provide a short introduction to some of the currents that fed into Spiritualism in nineteenth-century America. Importantly for the argument of this book, there is a significant overlap between the two goals of this chapter.

In Antiquity and the Middle Ages

As Smith and others have emphasized, religion as we use it today bears little resemblance to the Latin word *religio* from which it derives. *Religio* was an imprecise term that signified several different things to the ancients, and it has been frequently mistranslated by modern authors thereby causing the concept of religion as we use it to be read backwards into antiquity. In some instances, it meant an obligation to worship, a practice of worship, a rule more generally, or even an “excessive concern about the gods”—as with the Roman poet Lucretius. In other cases, it described one’s attitude or feelings towards the divine, such as in the case of the Roman statesman Cicero. Other times, it signified merely a general obligation or scruples. Despite these different uses, the ancients, including Cicero, did possess the idea that humans had an innate propensity to worship and to recognize the existence of a god.³

In the days of the early Christian Church, the term continued to be used in a diverse manner by the Church Fathers, but could indicate something like the way one worshipped or rites. Such usage could also come with the suggestion that there were right and wrong ways to worship, including the variety of Christian rites, or “religions,” some of which were “true religion” and others which were “false.” False religion could also mean worshipping multiple gods instead of one. In other words, religion could refer to the object of one’s worship. In the fifth century, St. Augustine of Hippo used the word to signify an individual’s relationship to God, a relationship that was mediated by the Church and by Christ. As with previous writers,

³ A similar erroneous conflation with the modern concept of religion have occurred with the Greek word “*thrēskeia*” and the Arabic “*dīn*.” Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 26-28; Smith, *Meaning and End of Religion*, 20-23; James Turner, *Religion Enters the Academy: the Origins of the Scholarly Study of Religion in America* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 13.

he understood the object of worship to be central to what differentiated true religion from false religion.⁴ By the Medieval period, writers tended to use “faith” in this manner instead, and reserved *religio* for describing the various rules and vows of monastic orders, though the previous usages were occasionally present as well, such as in the case of Thomas Aquinas.⁵

The Renaissance and the “Prisca Theologia”

By the fourteenth and fifteenth century, a few individuals began to use religion—or *religio* more accurately—in a more expansive sense that anticipated the modern usage. Central to these Renaissance treatments of *religio* was Neoplatonist philosophy and Hermeticism. Hermetic philosophy—purported to have originated from the fabled sage and father of alchemy Hermes Trismegistus—taught that humanity had fallen away from the perfection of God into a degraded materiality because of the lure of the senses. The spirit sought to return to the Divine through a process of transmutation—tied to alchemical practices—aided by spiritual intermediaries and the discovery of God’s symbolic presence in nature. Hermeticism lent itself well to being combined with Neoplatonism—the name given to the teachings of the third-century philosopher Plotinus. Plotinus believed that there was a unifying and absolute “Good” or “One” that cast off reflections of itself which became increasingly imperfect, with the world of matter being the most imperfect of all. The reflected nature of the world implied, however, that there was a correspondence between our world and higher spiritual planes of existence and that there was a universal harmony in which larger systems were replicated by smaller ones.⁶ Together, these philosophies implied that there was an absolute standard of truth, and that a gradient ascend towards it was possible, if never actually achievable.

Nicholas Cusanus (1401-1464), a German cardinal, for example, wrote in *De pace fidei* (1453) that there was but “one religion in the multiplicity of rites” and believed each individual had a different relationship with God, with “faith” being more important than outward expressions. Since God was infinite and human understanding was finite, it was only possible to know God in relative terms, which made Christian orthodoxy purely speculative.

⁴ Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 28-31; Smith, *Meaning and End of Religion*, 23-32.

⁵ Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 32; Smith, *Meaning and End of Religion*, 31-32.

⁶ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 19-23.

In Neoplatonic fashion, the true religion, “*una religio*,” cast off lesser reflections of itself, which could only be approached by mortals, never reached. The case should not be misread as modern pluralism, however, since Cusanus took for granted that various Christian doctrines, such as the Trinity, were true and would be innately recognized as such.⁷

The influential Italian Renaissance philosopher and founder of the Florentine Academy Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) came to similar conclusions in *De Christiana Religione* (1474). Ficino—notable for his translations of Plato, Plotinus, and the *Corpus Hermeticum* into Latin⁸—saw *religio* as innate to all humans and which took manifold expressions. “The worship of god is as natural to men,” wrote Ficino, “as is neighing to horses or barking to dogs.... All human opinions, all responses, all customs, change—except religion.” Following Plato’s notion of “plentitude,” Ficino speculated that religious “variety of this kind, divinely ordained, decorates the world with a kind of marvellous beauty.” Nonetheless, Christianity was the superior manifestation among this variety. Ficino, furthermore, equated all practices with Christianity to the degree that they were oriented towards God. “Every religion,” Ficino wrote, “has something good in it; as long as it is directed towards God, the creator of all things, it is a true Christian religion.” As Wilfred Cantwell Smith points out, “Christian religion” referred here to worshipping in the manner exemplified by Christ. Thus, one’s worship was pleasing to God to the degree that it conformed to Jesus’ example, but, following Platonic thought, allowed for different degrees of conformity with the absolute ideal.⁹

Ficino, among other Italian Christian Platonists, followed St. Augustine and other early Christian writers in believing that ancient pagans like Hermes Trismegistus had received some portion of the true religion (*vera religio*), foreseeing, for example, the coming of Christ and having some conception of the Trinity—their ubiquity being evidence of their truths (*consensus gentium*). Perceived commonalities between the supposedly ancient traditions of Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, and Jewish Kabbalah fuelled speculation that they had all sprung from a primitive monotheistic source, known as the ancient theology (*prisca*

⁷ Harrison, ‘*Religion*’ and the Religions, 11-12; Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 33.

⁸ The authenticity of the *Corpus Hermeticum* came under serious scrutiny in 1614 when Isaac Casaubon provided evidence that the collection of texts, presented as dialogues between Hermes Trismegistus (“thrice-greatest”) and a pupil, were written much later than originally believed. This challenged the notion that they contained elements of the primitive religion, discussed below. Harrison, ‘*Religion*’ and the Religions, 136.

⁹ Harrison, ‘*Religion*’ and the Religions, 12-13; Smith, *Meaning and End of Religion*, 32-34.

theologia), that prefigured the truths of Christianity. Significantly for later esotericism, Ficino believed that this *prisca theologia* had been transmitted historically in two streams. The first was in secret knowledge—Kabbalah—given to Moses by God alongside the Ten Commandments and guarded by his successors, and the second was esoteric wisdom passed down through a line of Gentile sages: Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus, Aglaophemus, Pythagoras, and, ultimately, Plato. Influential for later Platonists, this view presupposed an unchanging and absolute truth, but also accounted for different outward forms.¹⁰ A separation between inward truth and external forms would be critical for conceiving of “religion” as an eternal essence with the “religions” as its contingent expressions.

The Reformation and Confessional Polemics

The Reformation was also significant for changing understandings of religion. As Peter Harrison emphasizes, it spawned a crisis of religious authority which resulted in bloody wars and political turmoil in Europe. The polemical attacks between Christian confessions, particularly against Catholicism, brought unfavourable comparisons to Islam and paganism to bear on opponents. Martin Luther, for instance, drew parallels between the Catholic Church and Islam, suggesting that they were both products of humanity’s irreparably corrupted “natural reason” following the Fall, as St. Augustine had argued. Though both Luther and Jean Calvin believed that innate knowledge of God could not be suppressed, those outside of Christian church inevitably had a false understanding of him which resulted in corrupt or diabolic religion. The result of Protestant “paganopapism”—the practice of comparing Catholic religion to pagan rites—was that all Christians could be conceivably compared to non-Christian by their confessional enemies. Such polemics opened all forms of Christianity to comparisons with heathen rites, and indeed contributed to the construction of Judaism and Islam (“Mahometism”) in opposition to Christianity. The Church schisms following the

¹⁰ The sixteenth-century Neoplatonist Giordano Bruno (1548?-1600) went further and came to believe that ancient wisdom was in fact superior to Christianity—a heresy that cost him his life when he was burned at the stake. Nongbri, 33, 86-90; Harrison, *‘Religion’ and the Religions*, 9-10, 20; Frank Edward Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), 57; D. P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology: Studies in Christian Platonism from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Duckworth: London, 1972), 1; Michael J.B. Allen, “Ficino, Marsilio” in *Dictionary of Gnosis*, 361-63; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 51-52, 132.

Reformation added the further complication that individuals were presented with the troubling situation of hostile sects all offering the true way to salvation. Thus, religion increasingly came to refer to the creed one professed—the content of one’s beliefs—rather than the rites practiced. Furthermore, in their condemnation of the Church, the reformers placed a heavy emphasis on inward faith and piety rather than sacraments and institutions. Religion therefore became more inwardly focused and “propositional” in that one had to assent to true doctrines.¹¹

The English Enlightenment and Deism

The severe loss of religious authority, brought on by the Reformation, spurred some Christian thinkers of the seventeenth century to try to once more reconcile natural reason with divine revelation as a way to ground true religion. The resurgence of Christian Platonism—particularly at Cambridge—and a turn back to the Italian Renaissance for inspiration was very likely spurred by this impulse. Nonetheless, the most radical attempts of the time to recast religion in natural terms came from English Deists—a phenomenon enabled to a great degree by the relative religious freedom in England. Scholars such as Frank Edward Manuel, David Palin, and Peter Harrison have emphasized the decisive role of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Deists in transforming religion away from its exclusive identification with Christianity. Though not a homogenous group with any sort of an institutional structure or program, the Deists were important figures in influencing Enlightenment thinking about religion. Using borrowed (and reinterpreted) concepts from the ancients, Deists attacked the perceived superstition of Christianity and explained its emergence in the same way that they did other “positive religions” such as Judaism and Islam, as well as the beliefs of the ancients themselves—as deviations from an eternal and static natural theology.¹² That Enlightenment writers were able to access ancient and non-Christian texts—often imperfectly understood or mediated through second or third-hand accounts—reflected the increasing availability of

¹¹ Harrison, *‘Religion’ and the Religions*, 8-10, 63; Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 90-93; Smith, *Meaning and End of Religion*, 35-37.

¹² As Peter Harrison notes, there was the virtually uncontested assumption in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England that knowledge from antiquity was superior. The theories of the Greek sophists and ancient philosophers explaining the manifold rites and forms of piety they encountered were eagerly appropriated from their historical context and employed to explain different “religions”—a concept alien to the ancient world. Harrison, *‘Religion’ and the Religions*, 3, 7, 10, 14-15.

translations of such works. As described later in this chapter, by the nineteenth century, a much greater range of texts beyond Jewish and Muslim ones would also become available through the process of colonialism, broadening the concept of religion to include even more religions.¹³

While orthodox Christians typically accepted nature as a legitimate source of revelation, they insisted on the need for special revelation in the form of the Bible, a necessity Deists rejected. Indeed, some Christian apologists argued in opposition to Deists, nature revealed the goodness of God, which in and of itself made it likely that he would offer the special revelation of Christianity for the benefit of mankind.¹⁴ The Deist concept of what constituted true natural religion typically hinged on identifying fundamental principles that accorded with the Reason of sound minds and that were shared by all of the historical, or positive, religions. The English baron, Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1648), was influential in setting this precedent with his 1624 work *De Veritate*, which contained five “Common Notions” that were supposedly shared by all religions—tenuously understood—and which provided all that was necessary for salvation. Significantly, these “Notions” were completely decontextualized from any sort of external practice, further reinforcing the identification of religion with belief over practice. Herbert’s Common Notions—such as that there was a God who ought to be worshipped and that there was a system of rewards and punishments in the afterlife for one’s virtue and piety in this world—represented the primitive monotheism and parted ways with Christian Platonism in dispensing with the need for the atonement. The emphasis on an unchanging and natural religion reflected the influence of natural philosophy and a concern for essential categories with identifiable members. As Peter Harrison observes, “‘religion’ was constructed along essentially rationalist lines, for it was created in the image of the prevailing rationalist methods of investigation: ‘religion’ was cut to fit the new and much-vaunted scientific method.”¹⁵

Later Deists—such as Matthew Tindal, who accepted Herbert’s Common Notions, John Toland, and Charles Blount—followed the basic logic that there was a natural religion,

¹³ Manuel, *Confronts the Gods*, 7; David A. Palin, *Attitudes to Other Religions: Comparative Religion in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 3, 7, 12, 15-20.

¹⁴ Turner, *Academy*, 13-14; Harrison, ‘*Religion*’ and the Religions, 62.

¹⁵ Herbert is sometimes characterized as a Deist (“the Father of Deism”) or as a proto-Deist. Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 93-96; Walker, *Ancient Theology*, 164, 166-68, 175, 182; Harrison, ‘*Religion*’ and the Religions, 2, 62-72.

but emphasized more strongly the corrupted nature of the historical religions than their commonalities. In a new configuration of the *prisca theologia*, the Deists tended to assume that the natural religion had always been present and it was only through historical and priestly corruption that its universal acceptance had been hindered. Indeed, the fact that the natural religion was not universal was in and of itself evidence that it had been tampered with. As such, there could be no revealed religion, nor could the teachings of Jesus be new. Any difference between religions was of necessity the result of local conditions. As Toland put it in 1718 in *Nazarenus: or Jewish, Gentile and Mahometan Christianity*, “The religion that was true yesterday is not false today, neither can it be false, if it was once true.” Conflating true Christianity with the natural religion, Toland argued that Jesus was in essence trying to revitalize the primitive monotheistic religion which had been degraded by the Mosaic code. All religion that conformed to Jesus’ pure teachings was a form of Christianity, including “Jewish” or “Mahometan” Christianity. In 1730, Matthew Tindal followed a similar logic in *Christianity as Old as the Creation: or the Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature*, which, as the title suggests, argued the Gospels brought nothing new and that the innately understandable natural religion could be found among Jews, Muslims, and ancient pagans.¹⁶

Corruptions of the natural religion could be accounted for in several ways, one of the most common of which was the imposture theory, or priestcraft, a trend Herbert set early and which others followed. Priests, as Herbert put it, “have often been a crafty and deceitful tribe, prone to avarice” and who “corrupted, defiled, and prostituted the pure name of religion.” Supposedly formulated in the fifth century BC by the sophist Critias, imposture theory held that unscrupulous priests and false prophets had used the fear of the gods to control others and corrupt the natural religion. The implication, according to Blount and virtually every other proponent of imposture theory, was that priestcraft was the cause of religious pluralism. If the natural theology could be identified through innate reason, deviations from it could only be accounted for through pernicious meddling. Blount assumed that prior to the corrupting influence of priestly rites and the innovations of polytheism and sacrifices, the ancient philosophers had taught a pious and natural code of ethics. The theory of imposture

¹⁶ In their view of history, most Deists engaged in a historiography similar to that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who, following Aristotle’s division between “accident” and “nature,” believed that there was a natural course of history that would take were it not for the facts. Harrison, *‘Religion’ and the Religions*, 93-94, 146, 160-67; Manual, *Confronts the Gods*, 62-63.

was also used by clerics themselves to attack other faiths, such as in Humphrey Prideaux's *True Nature of Imposture Fully Displayed in the Life of Mahomet*, published in 1697.¹⁷

As clerics, such as Jonathan Swift, engaged with the idea of imposture, the terms of the argument gradually shifted. Rather than maintaining that clergymen were deliberately complicit in corrupting religion, some writers attributed the debasement of the natural theology to hereditary errors. The mistakes and habits of the past were passed uncritically from generation to generation and, thus, maintained. In the words of Charles Blount's brother Sir Thomas, "there's nothing so absurd, to which *education* cannot force our tender Youth: it can turn us into Shapes more Monstrous then [sic] those of *Afrik*... The *Half Moon* or *Cross* is indifferent to us; and with the same ease can we Write on the *Rasa Tabula*, TURK or CHRISTIAN." Similarly, Matthew Tindal observed that "Education is justly esteem'd a second Nature, and its force is so strong, that few can shake off its Prejudices."¹⁸ The influence of one's upbringing had the power to both powerfully shape individual beliefs, as well as allow them to persist. This treatment of prejudice as an unconscious process would continue to appear in the nineteenth century, such as in the writings of Andrew Jackson Davis.

The idea that a false and debased religion could be passed down through history fit neatly with the twofold philosophy, which suggested that throughout the course of history there existed both a "superstitious" and corrupted religion, practised by the masses, and a pure and esoteric religion, practised by the wise and virtuous elite. Versions of the twofold philosophy were espoused by ancient philosophers such as Strabo, Cicero, and Plutarch, as well as by Church Fathers like Origen, Augustine, Clement of Alexandria, and Lactantius. As John Toland described it, there was one form of religion which was "*External* or popular and depraved" and another which was "*Internal*, or pure and genuine."¹⁹ The advantage of such a division was that it could explain away the apparent differences between paganism, Judaism, and Christianity as outward forms. Despite the existence of idolatry and polytheism throughout history, so the theory went, the primitive monotheism had actually been preserved through the secret cults of the most high-minded philosophers. In contrast to the ignorant and superstitious rabble, such men revered the divine "First Cause." For many Deists like Toland,

¹⁷ Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions*, 16, 68, 73-78; Palin, *Attitudes to Other Religions*, 17-18.

¹⁸ Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions*, 81-82.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 85, 92.

the externals of religion were necessary to control the passions of the common man. Unable to appreciate the truths of esoteric and internal religion, most people required superstitions, such as the fear of hell, to keep them in check and thereby maintain an orderly society.

Indeed, Toland, who had once tried to reform and present the inherent reasonableness of Christianity in his 1696 work, *Christianity not Mysterious*, became part of an underground society and a believer in the utility of the twofold philosophy as a way to protect “internal” religion from the vulgar. Other Deists, such as John Trenchard, saw things differently and believed that priestly impostors hoarded the truth for themselves and oppressed the masses with superstition and rites.²⁰

Another widespread theory among eighteenth-century thinkers was Euhemerism, named after the ancient philosopher Euhemerus. In 300 BC, Euhemerus suggested that the Olympian gods were originally mortal heroes of exceptional worth. Their heroic and moral qualities invited the worship of their fellow men, which persisted after death. After Alexander the Great came to be seen as a god, the theory gained credibility; after all, if it had happened in recent memory, it might have happened before. Furthermore, the Church Fathers eagerly embraced this theory as it discredited the pagan gods. Euhemerist theories abounded during the Enlightenment. The Cambridge Platonists, freethinkers, and Christian apologists all made use of the theory. The theory easily lent itself to being combined with the twofold philosophy, such as in the case of the Cambridge Platonists who suggested that hero worship was practised by the “vulgar” who lacked the true ancient theology. Ralph Cudworth argued, for instance, that pagan beliefs first sprang up in Egypt when Noah’s son Ham became known as Ammon, or Hammon. Cudworth further argued that Jupiter and Zeus were also derived from Ammon, and, therefore, Ham. Pagan religions thus represented historical corruptions of the true religion possessed by Noah and his sons. Lord Herbert devoted a chapter of his book *The Antient Religion of the Gentiles* to Euhemerist hero worship and to reducing the number of pagan gods by tracking which ones were really the same god with a different name. Euhemerism was also a popular means by which Protestants could suggest that the Catholic veneration of the saints was equivalent to the worship of pagan gods.²¹

²⁰ Manuel, *Confronts the Gods*, 65-66, 68-71; Harrison, *‘Religion’ and the Religions*, 87-90.

²¹ Orthodox Christians sometimes engaged with this idea too. Johnathan Edwards speculated that some religious traditions, such as those of the Chinese or the ancient Greeks and Romans, were not satanic, rather they were corruptions of the *prisca theologia* that had been the religion of Noah. See Turner, *Academy*, 18-19. Harrison, *‘Religion’ and the Religions*, 17-18, 135-36, 141-43.

Liberal Protestantism and the Religious Academy

Moving into the nineteenth century, many scholars have emphasized the role of liberal Protestantism, increased contact with other traditions through colonialism, and the emerging field of comparative religion in constructing the concept of religion. There is ongoing scholarly debate as to what extent the modern understanding of religion had already been fully articulated in the eighteenth century and to what extent it continued to develop throughout the nineteenth century, particularly in response to colonial exchanges and in opposition to the category of science.²² In any case, it is fair to observe, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith did, that the Deist discourse of the Enlightenment was by necessity an almost exclusively elite one that ordinary people did not partake in in any great measure.²³ The nineteenth century also saw the construction of the various “world religions”—often referred to as “great religious systems,” “ancient religions,” or “Oriental religions”—which expanded the previous four categories of Christian, Jew, Mahometan, and heathen by differentiating between the growing number of “heathens” Europeans encountered. This development was helped in no small part by an increased colonial activity and the unprecedented availability of eastern texts in Europe and North America. These different religions were not, as Brent Nongbri puts it, “simply there” waiting to be classified, but were constructed and selected in the context of complex political and colonial interactions and scholarly studies.²⁴

Many of these early studies of “world religions” came from Unitarians. Towards the beginning of the century, the area surrounding Boston became a hot spot of Unitarianism following William Ellery Channing’s 1819 manifesto and the founding of the American Unitarian Association in 1825. Emerging out of bitter doctrinal controversies within New

²² See Bergunder, “‘Religion’ and ‘Science,’” 86-141 and Guy G. Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (London: Harvard University Press, 2010), vii-viii, 1-13 for examples of the respective arguments.

²³ The term “liberal Christian” was initially applied as a term of abuse before William Ellery Channing co-opted it in 1815. Leigh E. Schmidt, “Liberal Religion and the Enlightenment,” in *The Cambridge History of Religions in America*, ed. Stephen J. Stein, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 489; Smith, *Meaning and End of Religion*, 44-45.

²⁴ Jews and Muslims were sometimes acknowledged to possess religion (in the true sense) insofar as they worshipped the correct one God, but went astray in their failure to recognize Christ’s divinity or in following the “impostor” Mohammed. Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions; Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), xi-xii, 46-50, 72-73; Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 124-25, 131-32.

England Congregationalism, Unitarians hoped for a more rational Christianity that would do away with doctrines such as the Trinity, Calvinist double predestination, or the substitutional atonement of Christ on the cross. Embodying the liberal trend of “the Boston religion”—as the Calvinist Jedediah Morse contemptuously labeled it—the Congregationalist-cum-Unitarian Hannah Adams published the first American treatment of different religions and Christian sects in 1784. While her initial interest mostly centred around divisions in Christianity, with all others being relegated to an appendix, she continued to update the work in later editions. Adams’ work, entitled *An Alphabetical Compendium of the Various Sects Which Have Appeared in the World from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Present Day*, despite its many flaws and limited sources, was notable for her explicit determination to remain impartial so that each denomination and religion could stand or fall on its own merits, in spite of the urging of some of her editors and publishers to provide criticisms. Significantly, Boston was the United States’ major trading port with India, thus fortuitously providing access to eastern texts to the religious liberals most interested in them.²⁵

Particularly notable among liberal Protestant efforts at comparative religion was the Unitarian minister Rev. James Freeman Clarke. Straddling the boundary between Transcendentalism—he was a member of the original Transcendentalist club—and Unitarianism, which he never left, Clarke displayed a lasting interest in different religions, which reached its most thorough expression in his popular 1871 book, *The Ten Great Religions*. Unlike the more firmly Transcendentalist efforts of his contemporary Samuel Johnson (discussed later), Clarke remained committed to Christian superiority. Differentiating between an “ethnic religion,” which was suited to the racial characteristics of a particular nation, and a “catholic religion,” which could appeal to all people, Clarke concluded that the other great religions were merely partial expressions that had contributed one truth to the wealth of human spiritual knowledge, whereas Christianity alone was complete and had the potential to become a universal religion for all mankind by bringing together the partial truths of all the lesser religions. Universal Christianity, Clarke believed, would be defined by five features, suspiciously Unitarian in character: the “*Fatherhood of*

²⁵ Suggestive of changes in how the word “religion” was used, the title of Adams’ work had changed to *A Dictionary of All Religions and Religious Denominations, Jewish, Heathen, Mahometan and Christian, Ancient and Modern* by the fourth edition in 1817. The English Unitarian Joseph Priestly also published a comparative text in 1799 which was available in the United States, entitled *A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with Those of the Hindoos and Other Ancient Nations*. Masuzawa, *World Religions*, 58; Schmidt, “Liberal Religion,” 489, 493-94, 507-508; Turner, *Academy*, 22-36.

God,” the “*Brotherhood of Man,*” “*Leadership of Jesus,*” “*Salvation by Character,*” and the “*Continuity of Human Development.*” Despite lacking the impartiality of Adams, or the sympathy of Samuel Johnson or Thomas Wentworth Higginson (also discussed later), Clarke’s book was the first truly scholarly work in comparative religion in the United States, citing contemporary authorities like the German Orientalist Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900). Indeed, it was Clarke who taught the first courses in comparative religion at Harvard Divinity School in 1854. While it is easy to fault Clarke’s partiality to Christianity, it is important to recognize that he, like many other liberal Protestants, was conceptualizing other religions as entities that had truth and value to them, even if they were underdeveloped as compared to Christianity, properly understood.²⁶

Nor was Clarke alone in the attempt to engage in a scholarly “comparative theology”—a practice that implied a common category between religions. In addition to Harvard, which continued to train ministers in comparative religion, the 1870s saw the rise of *Religionswissenschaft* in Europe, with notable scholars like F. Max Müller and the Dutchman Cornelis Petrus Tiele (1830-1902) attempting a “scientific” study of religion. Similar to Clarke, such scholars categorized different types of religion in taxonomic fashion, frequently relying on terms like “universal” or “world” religions, which—like Clarke’s “catholic religion”—crossed ethnic boundaries, and “national” or “ethnic” religions, which did not. In another category altogether were the so-called “primitive” religions, which lacked the features that were supposedly necessary for a full-fledged religion but were manifestations of an inborn human propensity to worship. European understandings of religion were thus heavily informed by the Christian model. Religions, in order to be considered religions at all, needed to resemble Christianity to some degree. All great religions, for example, were assumed to have a holy text equivalent to the Bible, to have a metaphysical system, to have some sense of belonging to the exclusion of other beliefs, to be separate from other parts of the practitioner’s day to day life, systems of ethics, and to have a founding figure—though

²⁶ Clarke’s work saw thirty editions between 1871 and 1893. Masuzawa, *World Religions*, 74n3, 77-79; Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 291-92; Versluis, *American Transcendentalism*, 6, 242-44; Stephan Buhr, “*Infinite Possibilities*”: *Die Zweite Generation der Transzendentalisten die Idee einer “Universal Religion”* (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2015), 120-35; Turner, *Academy*, 47-57.

they could not be overly reliant on the personal cult of an individual leader. Religions, in this understanding, reflected, too, the character of the people with whom they were associated.²⁷

Global historians such as Christopher Bayly, Jürgen Osterhammel, or Tomoko Masuzawa have emphasized the ways in which colonialism contributed to the formation of different religious identities and hardened the boundaries between them. Western assumptions about religion were both forced onto colonized peoples, but also shaped by contact with them in a two-way exchange, though an admittedly uneven one. European values such as “consistency,” “uniformity,” and “empiricism” had to be adopted by local religious authorities if they were to be taken seriously in the face of rival Christian missionaries, which necessitated things like solidified doctrines, shared scriptural texts, and the appearance of having rational beliefs that were compatible with science. Local groups with similar practices, but who would not have previously considered themselves to be a unified religion—a word that often lacked a local equivalent—were understood to be a single religion by colonial authorities who failed to notice any difference.

The colonized were not passive in this process, but also presented themselves as having a unified and long-standing tradition in order to push back against Christian claims to exclusivity. A notable example of this phenomenon was Hinduism which did not exist as a single religion prior to colonization by the British. The *Vedas*, not previously significant to most Hindus, became their defining scriptural text—a designation both imposed by scholars and adopted by certain Hindus desiring an equivalent to the Bible. Indeed, nineteenth-century advancements in printing technology enabled a never before seen proliferation of religious texts, which fostered uniformity through shared reading communities. Not all groups were content to be claimed under the term Hinduism, such as the Sikhs, who asserted a separate identity. A comparable construction of Buddhism as a single religion also occurred. The formation of uniform religious identities contributed to increasingly centralized religious authority, adoption of previously unknown practices like missionizing, and the identification

²⁷ By the twentieth century, “world religion” had taken on the more general meaning we use it in today. Masuzawa, *World Religions*, 17-29, 107-20, 132-33; Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 875-76; Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 125-27.

of certain religions with national boundaries—the aforementioned “race-religions” or “ethnic” religions.²⁸

In some cases, Christians found their own concepts thoroughly appropriated and turned back on them by the colonized. For example, “Hindu Unitarians” claimed in the language of liberal Protestantism and Deist priestcraft that Hinduism had originally been a monotheistic religion before Brahmin priests had corrupted it. Of these Hindu Unitarians, Rammohan Roy (1772?-1833) was particularly popular in Boston Unitarian circles in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Not only did he claim that Hinduism had been a single religion with one god rather than many cults, but he chided Christians to abandon the Trinity. Such beliefs earned him the respect of Unitarians, who saw his views as comparable with their own. Indeed, as James Turner emphasizes, it was precisely because of these commonalities that Unitarians recognized Roy’s beliefs as “religion.” Another Hindu reformer and the founder of the Aryan Society, Swami Dayananda (1824-1883), claimed that monotheistic Hinduism was the original religion of the world. The truest form of it, he claimed, was preserved in India.²⁹

Transcendentalism

Ideas about the universality of religion have also been well documented as it pertains to the more radical outgrowth of Unitarianism: Transcendentalism. Arthur Versluis has described American Transcendentalism as “the central manifestation in nineteenth-century America of comparative religion as part of a general intellectual movement” and as “‘liberal Christianity’ and comparative religion mixed together.”³⁰ Though by no means a cohesive movement within a rigidly defined program, it incorporated intellectual elements drawn from its Unitarian heritage, Puritanism, and Asian religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as some other miscellaneous western thought. The Transcendentalist conviction that

²⁸ Bayly, *Birth of the Modern World*, 328-59; Osterhammel, *Transformation*, 874-76; Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 125-27; Masuzawa, *World Religions*, 121-38. As Peter Harrison notes, the late-nineteenth-century fracturing of science and religion put pressure on religions to demonstrate their rational basis in the face of Christians who claimed to have the only “rational” religion. Harrison, “‘Science’ and ‘Religion,’” 100-102.

²⁹ Turner, *Academy*, 34-35; Bayly, *Birth of the Modern World*, 328, 342.

³⁰ Versluis, *American Transcendentalism*, 4, 6.

humanity was forever progressing lent it to a belief in universal salvation.³¹ While Transcendentalism represented a very elite discourse, confined in a large part to the clubs of Boston intellectuals and to private addresses, such as Emerson's famous speech at Harvard, the marks of Transcendentalist thought are nonetheless deeply apparent in Spiritualist understandings of religion.

Eastern religions were essential to Transcendentalist thought, especially that of later Transcendentalists, though both of the early giants of Transcendentalism, Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, drew heavily on eastern texts. While Unitarians believed that Jesus was not God, many Transcendentalists went one step further and broke with Christianity and began to study Hinduism and Buddhism. From there, it was possible to accept other traditions as carriers of legitimate revelation. Humans, Transcendentalists felt, had the intrinsic ability to sense truth and distill it from the various religions of the world. In a configuration that continue to be critical for Spiritualists, there was true religious essence, or sentiment—almost entirely conflated with morality, and discoverable in the workings of Nature—which had been expressed in the historical religions, and indeed all inspired human works, with varying degrees perfection. As Emerson famously declared in his 1838 “Divinity School Address,” the religious “sentiment lies at the foundation of society, and successively creates all forms of worship.” It was not confined to “Palestine, where it reached its purest expression, but in Egypt, in Persia, in India, in China.... What these holy bards said, all sane men found agreeable and true.”³²

For the radical Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, there was an absolute religion beneath all outward forms and towards which they all tended—a permanent underneath the transient. “For strictly speaking,” he wrote in 1841, “there is but one kind of religion... though the manifestations of this religion, in forms, doctrines and life, be never so diverse. It is through these, men approximate to the true expression of this religion.” Through “observation and reasoning,” humanity could “gradually... approach to the true system of Nature.”³³ As a result of this innate capacity of “all sane men,” many American Transcendentalists, especially the later generation, felt optimistic that humanity was on the

³¹ Ibid., 3, 305-7.

³² Emerson, “Divinity School Address,” 133.

³³ Note that this was a very similar logic to earlier Deist writers like John Toland and Matthew Tindal, only Parker had a more progressive emphasis befitting the nineteenth century. Theodore Parker. “A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity,” in *American Transcendentalists*, 166-67.

brink of a new era where an understanding of different religions would fuse with scientific progress and bring about a new universal religion.³⁴

The expansive understanding of revelation found in the writings of Emerson and others was essential for understanding Christianity as another “mythos.” The same personal and immediate relation to the Divine that made Jesus, Buddha, and Zoroaster “holy bards” revealing eternal truth, conversely made the true poet like a prophet who expressed to others the beauties of a sacredly inscribed natural world.³⁵ Nonetheless, as Parker emphasized, eternal truths did not require the personal authority men like Jesus to be true.³⁶ The true practice of religion was the individual pursuit of discerning natural principles and personally appropriating these as moral self-culture; the true ethics of the universe was written into its very being.³⁷ Organized religion was fatal to this end. As Parker noted, unlike true Christianity, which “lays no rude hand on the sacred peculiarity of individual genius and character[,]...there is no Christian sect which does not fetter a man.”³⁸

The varying degrees to which this objective had been achieved represented the world’s religions. The universal accessibility of truth, revealed in Nature, implied for Emerson that everything present in the Bible was present in another form in the holy texts of other world religions; all scriptures approached “divine truth” to a certain extent. Biblical authority was no foundation for truth. The relative view of Transcendentalists towards eastern religion made them among the few Americans during the mid-nineteenth century who saw these religions as something worth studying seriously without the purpose of attacking them.³⁹ Nonetheless, practitioners of popular movements like New Thought, Theosophy, and Spiritualism adopted many Transcendentalist beliefs and an interest in eastern religious practices, but in a frequently simplified form. Thus, while Transcendentalism did not survive beyond the late nineteenth century due to its individualistic nature, it did leave its mark on subsequent movements.⁴⁰

³⁴ Versluis, *American Transcendentalism*, 3, 6, 10-11, 13, 305-306

³⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet,” in *American Transcendentalists*, 394-96; Emerson, “Divinity School Address,” 136-37.

³⁶ Parker, “Transient and Permanent,” 170-72.

³⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” in *American Transcendentalists*, 42-53.

³⁸ Parker, “Transient and Permanent,” 174.

³⁹ Turner, *Academy*, 37-39.

⁴⁰ Versluis, *American Transcendentalism*, 312, 314-16.

Second-Generation Transcendentalism

While the first generation of Transcendentalists tended to approach moral, and therefore religious, development on a personal level—though there was an absolute standard, even if unattainable—the second generation of Transcendentalists frequently viewed religious development in more concrete, institutional, and indeed utopian terms as they hoped to establish a universal religion. As Arthur Versluis characterized it, “The second cycle of Transcendentalism in general represented attempts to create a comprehensive view of world religions that conformed to the contemporary philosophy of progress.”⁴¹ In particular, members of the Free Religious Association (FRA)—founded in 1867 at the initiative of disgruntled Unitarian radicals—took expansive Transcendentalist attitudes to religion to their logical conclusion and attempted to distill a universal religion for all mankind from the common elements of the “world religions.” This new religion of the future would be perfectly reconcilable with science and would erase all sectarian boundaries on the premise that all religions had “an equality of origin and purpose.” While free religionists still held that religious progress towards the “absolute religion” was an infinite endeavour, they tended to be more optimistic about the possibilities of institutionalizing, albeit loosely, the next step in religious progress. Thus, the FRA, and the second-generation Transcendentalists who were associated with it, carried on the Transcendentalist understanding of religion as an essence, but one that had expressed itself variously in history. More seriously than Emerson, though he was a member, they systematically tried to achieve the utopian goal of more perfectly realizing the true religious essence. Other prominent members included Lydia Maria Child, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and Octavius Brooks Frothingham.⁴²

Given the looseness of the organization, there was significant variety in the approaches of Free Religionists, with some, like Higginson, embracing a more typically

⁴¹ Arthur Versluis emphasizes the discontinuities between Emerson and later Transcendentalists, portraying the latter as a somewhat degraded version of the former with its emphasis on religious “evolution” and establishing a universal religion rather than self-transcendence. Stephan Buhr disagrees and places a stronger emphasis on the continuities between them, arguing that all Transcendentalism is bound together by the common striving towards an “absolute self,” and that the only real difference is how that self is imagined. See Versluis, *American Transcendentalism*, 235-36; Buhr, *Infinite Possibilities*, 53, 184-90.

⁴² David M. Robinson, “The Free Religion Movement,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*, eds. Joel Myerson et. al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 617-19, 622-25; Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 112-13.

Transcendentalist “idealism,” and others, like Frothingham, the first president of the FRA, espousing a “scientific theism.”⁴³ Frothingham—a gifted preacher, who would blend Christian, Arabic, and Indian scriptures together in his sermons—emphasized human potential in his coming “religion of humanity” that would pull together the pure essence of the world’s religious teachings and rationalize them through science.⁴⁴

The second generation of Transcendentalists were active in publishing works on comparative religion and believed there to be a “sympathy” between them. According to Versluis, the second “cycle” of Transcendentalism began with Lydia Maria Child’s 1855 book *The Progress of Religious Ideas Through Successive Ages* in that, as one of the first American works of comparative religion, it established the trend of viewing different religions through the lens of progressive evolution. While Child was progressivist in her orientation—and therefore more critical of ancient religions—she nonetheless tried to treat all religions with an even hand and write about them historically. Indeed, she warned readers in her introduction that “bigoted Christians” and “bigoted infidels” alike would find the book distasteful. Adherents of Christianity, she noted, always refused the “experiment of placing it precisely on the same level with other religions.” She speculated, for example, that future people may well be as contemptuous of the rituals of the Catholic Church as present-day ones were of Egyptians bowing before a golden beetle. Indicative of the Transcendentalist impulse to see a common religious sentiment beneath historical forms, Child read Neoplatonism liberally into various religions, including Hinduism and Buddhism. With their common underpinnings, the differences between religions, Child believed, could be one day overcome. Indicative of her implicitly Christian understanding of religion, James Turner observes that she, like other Transcendentalists, chose only to focus on religions that resembled Christianity in some way. In particular, Child disregarded traditions lacking in an equivalent to the Bible, such as native American tribal practices, and focused on the great “world religions.” Unfortunately, Child’s work sold very poorly and lacked scholarly rigour.⁴⁵

⁴³ Turner, *Academy*, 41-42.

⁴⁴ In much the same way as Andrew Jackson Davis had previously done (see the passage I quoted in the introduction), Frothingham explained that the Latin roots of “religion” signified a repeated process of binding, whereas religion in its true sense must be a process of “emancipating” oneself from sectarian ties and becoming a “seeker” of spiritual truth wherever it may be found. Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 227-28; Versluis, *American Transcendentalism*, 276-78.

⁴⁵ Versluis, *American Transcendentalism*, 236-40; Turner, *Academy*, 43-47.

More scholarly, though no more successful, was Samuel Johnson's *Oriental Religions and Their Relation to Universal Religion*, published in three volumes between 1872-1885. Johnson's approach to religion was highly individualistic, as evidenced by his refusal to become a member of the FRA and by forming a "free church" in Lynn, Massachusetts in 1853—"a man of the desert," as Emerson dubbed him. Nonetheless, like the FRA, Johnson emphasized the evolutionary nature of human religion in that the moral sense evolved along with the mind.⁴⁶ In this regard, his language took on a phrenological quality as he described the Hindu mind as "*cerebral*," while the Chinese one was "*muscular*" and the Persian one "*nervous*." Conceiving of his project as a "Natural History of Religion," Johnson believed that the shared human consciousness of the divine expressed itself in particular cultural contexts, which, revealing the influence of social Darwinism, advanced to ever-higher forms. Like Theodore Parker's "absolute religion," Johnson believed that there was a "Universal Religion" that all religious evolution oriented towards. Unlike Clarke, and more moderate Unitarians, Johnson believed the Universal Religion to be post-Christian and revealed a deep sympathy for Asian religions, generating controversy by declaring Confucius to be Jesus' superior. The coming Universal Religion, Johnson announced, would be to Christianity what Christianity was to Judaism, but on a much grander scale. Nonetheless, as Versluis points out, well-researched though it was, Johnson's project was comparative only insofar as he wanted to demonstrate continuities and patterns between different religions in order to prove his notion that there was a universal absolute underpinning them all.⁴⁷

Among the second-generation Transcendentalists, historian Leigh Eric Schmidt argues that Thomas Wentworth Higginson was of particular influence for the liberal understanding of different religions as various and compatible expressions of a universal truth. Known for his correspondence with Emily Dickinson and for his radical abolitionist activities (he was friends with John Brown, Theodore Parker, and William Lloyd Garrison), which culminated in him commanding an African American regiment during the Civil War, Higginson was ordained as a Unitarian minister, but moved in radical Transcendental directions, becoming an active member of the FRA (and later its president) and even

⁴⁶ Robinson, "Free Religion Movement," 619, 624-25; Thomas A. Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844-1912: Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 21.

⁴⁷ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, 288-92; Versluis, *American Transcendentalism*, 254-69; Tweed, *Buddhism*, 21-23.

professing to Spiritualism during the 1850s. In 1871, he published an essay in the *Radical*, entitled “The Sympathy of Religions,” to great acclaim from second-generation Transcendentalists such as Frothingham, the Spiritualist *Banner of Light*, and the FRA, which made the essay a charter document of the organization.⁴⁸

In it, Higginson confidently declared, “Every year brings new knowledge of the religions of the world, and every step in knowledge brings out the sympathy between them.” Despite outward appearances, the commonalities between the world’s religions clearly showed that “there is but one religion under many forms, whose essential creed is the Fatherhood of God, and the Brotherhood of Man.” All else was merely incidental. Thus, Higginson wrote, “For Zoroaster read Christ, and you have Christianity; read Buddha, and you have Buddhism; read Mohammed, and you have Mohammedanism. Each of these, in short, is Natural Religion *plus* an individual name. It is by insisting on that *plus* that each religion stops short of being universal.” Exclusiveness was to Higginson an “unpardonable sin” and Christianity was no better than any other religion. “I do not wish to belong to a religion only,” Higginson declared, “but to *the* religion; it must not include less than the piety of the world.”⁴⁹ Nonetheless, despite Higginson’s eclecticism and appreciation of minority traditions such as African American spirituality, his framework followed the common pattern of implicitly making Christianity the standard for what constituted a religion; a religious tradition lacking a founding prophet was invisible under such a configuration.

The World’s Parliament of Religions

An event scholars, such as Richard Hughes Seager, have considered to be a crowning moment in the history of universalized understandings religion was the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions held during the World Fair in Chicago. Over the course of the conference, delegates from a multitude of different faiths and denominations came together to showcase their own religions and discuss their respective visions for religious pluralism, including the millennial hopes for a universal religion composed of the best parts of all of the

⁴⁸ Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 106-36; Moore, *White Crows*, 33; Turner, *Academy*, 41-42, 54. Less “sympathetic” than Schmidt, James Turner calls Higginson’s essay a “Slipshod tract,” albeit one that “opened the door for serious scholarship on the subject.”

⁴⁹ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “The Sympathy of Religions (1871)” in *American Transcendentalists*, 183-87.

world's major systems. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these goals were marred by ethnocentrism, racism, the particular agendas of some participants, and the implicitly liberal Protestant premise of the event. The attendees came from many backgrounds, although the overwhelming majority were representatives of the ten "great religions of the world," thus excluding smaller and more recent faiths, such as Sikhism and Tibetan Buddhism, not to mention the so-called "primitive religions" of Africans and Native Americans, which, if included at all, were represented by anthropologists. Yet, in spite of the shortcomings of the conference, it played an important role in fostering a spirit of ecumenicalism, helped boost the fledgling field of comparative religion, and publicized eastern religions to westerners who may have had only limited exposure to them. Seager calls it "a harbinger of the rise of the idea of religious pluralism," though it would seem in light of this present study and others that the Parliament was more an expression of such an impulse than a cause.⁵⁰

Nonetheless, a notable feature of the Parliament was the way in which representatives of Asian religions, such as the much-vaunted Swami Vivekananda, appropriated the language of universalism and modernity to promote their own traditions to an American audience. Reflecting his Neo-Vedantist theology, Vivekananda—a charismatic Bengali monk with a western education—presented Hinduism as an inherently inclusive, progressive, and scientific religion with an ancient heritage and a scriptural text (the *Vedas*) that transcended the Bible in scope. In his presentation of Hinduism, the multitude of gods, so distasteful to western audiences, had been replaced by one supreme God who was immanent in, and co-eternal with, the universe. Compatible with the largely optimistic and liberal sympathies of the Parliament, Vivekananda portrayed the Hindu conception of humans as beings in the process of becoming divine. Appropriating the hierarchical view of the world's religions as varying expressions of a common impulse, he declared that Hindus believed that "all religions from the lowest fetichism to the highest absolutism mean so many attempts of the human soul to grasp and realize the Infinite, determined by the conditions of its birth and association." Portrayals of eastern religions, such as from Vivekananda, employed liberal and universalistic language in a way that simultaneously made their own religions seem

⁵⁰ Diana L. Eck, forward to *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism: Voices from the World's Parliament of Religions, 1893*, ed. Richard Hughes Seager (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing Company, 1993), xiii-xiv; Seager, introduction to *Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 6-10; Richard Hughes Seager, *The World's Parliament of Religions: the East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), xxxviii-xxxix, 44-49, 169.

compatible with, or even superior to, western values, and also helped them push nationalist modernizing and revitalization agendas in their home countries.⁵¹

New Thought and Theosophy

New religious movements apart from Spiritualism have also been studied as popularizers of broad understandings of religion. Leigh Eric Schmidt, for example, prominently features New Thought writers in his history of “seeker spirituality”—what he characterizes as “an artifact of religious liberalism” in which individuals engage in an eclectic mix of spiritual practices. New Thought, or Mind Cure, is the name given to an exceedingly broad movement emerging from the magnetic healing movement, particularly from the teachings of Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802-1866). Emphasizing the powers of mind over matter, New Thought practitioners—such as Ralph Waldo Trine, Warren Felt Evans, Horatio Dresser, and Henry Wood—like the Spiritualists who influenced them, put Transcendentalist ideas into practice by drawing from an impressive range of religious sources, both eastern and western, and appropriating practices of meditation.⁵²

A similarly eclectic movement that overlapped with both Spiritualism and New Thought was the Theosophical Society, founded in 1875 by Madame Helena Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott. Moving in more occult directions, and with a pronounced interest in Asian spirituality, Theosophists emphasized the commonalities between all religions—including the possibility of reconciling them with science—and sought the wisdom of eastern masters, or mahatmas, such as Jesus or Buddha. Theosophists, who prolifically travelled and opened societies in colonized countries like India, were crucial in introducing practices like meditation and yoga to Americans, albeit read through a western esoteric lens.⁵³ Thomas Tweed observes, for example, that a significant number of Theosophists could be counted among his “esoteric type” of American Buddhist—despite doctrines that some felt were difficult to reconcile with Theosophy—and that the Theosophical Society was significant for its contacts with Buddhist organizations.⁵⁴ Michael

⁵¹ Seager, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 111-12, 168-72.

⁵² Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 6, 17, 148-57. See also Albanese, *Republic*, 300-29.

⁵³ Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 158-79; Albanese, *Republic*, 270-83, 334-88.

⁵⁴ Tweed, *Buddhism*, 50-60.

Bergunder, however, notes that exchange was not unidirectional and points to the complex entanglement between east and west in understanding categories such as “religion.” As a case study, he points to Mohandas Gandhi’s involvement with the Theosophical Society and the Esoteric Christian Union as a young man. While Gandhi portrayed his belief in a universal truth as the product of a natural Hindu tendency towards inclusivity, both the similarity of Gandhi’s language and ideas to those of Theosophists suggest that his association with these societies left a mark on his thinking.⁵⁵

“Spider Upon Spider”: Spiritualist Genealogy

Spiritualists themselves—and some historians—dated the beginning of their movement to Hydesville, New York, in 1848, when two young girls, Margaret and Kate Fox, claimed to hear rapping sounds in the family home. The family arrived at the conclusion that the sounds were produced by an intelligent source, which they determined to be a murdered peddler, supposedly buried in the cellar. Startled, the Foxes called neighbours over to witness the rappings, and the spirit, through a system of coded raps, was able to accurately tell them their ages and answer test questions. Before long, great crowds started to arrive and the family was forced to relocate in order to escape the chaos. Nonetheless, the rapping followed the young sisters to Rochester, fuelling speculation that they were “mediums” for the spirit to communicate through. The Hicksite Quaker abolitionists, Amy and Isaac Post—family friends with whom the sisters were staying—soon became convinced of the reality of the communications and word spread to other investigators. With Eliab Capron—a newly-convinced believer—and Leah Fish—Margaret and Kate’s older sister who also claimed powers as a medium—promoting them, the sisters were soon performing regular séances and public demonstrations, reportedly earning one hundred dollars per day. News spread fast through Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune* and similar claims proliferated. The same

⁵⁵ Michael Bergunder, “Experiments with Theosophical Truth: Gandhi, Esotericism, and Global Religious History,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82, no. 2 (2014): 399-402, 403-404, 415.

“burned-over district” that had birthed other new religious movements like Mormonism now launched another mass movement amid widespread controversy and accusations of fraud.⁵⁶

Despite the attractiveness and cleanliness of this narrative of Spiritualism’s genesis, Spiritualism was fed by a wide array of intellectual and religious streams that gave the movement a momentum that differentiated it from the many other hauntings previously existing in European folklore.⁵⁷ Identifying these many streams is no simple task for the historian. As Robert S. Cox wryly commented, “Trying to determine the origins of Spiritualist thought is like trying to determine on which leg a spider stands, only with Spiritualism it is spider upon spider all the way down.”⁵⁸ In addition to an American “vernacular” culture thoroughly steeped in folk magic and popular Hermeticism ever since the colonial era, the “legs” included the rationalist tradition of American Deism, Swedenborgianism, Mesmerism, Transcendentalism, and Liberal Protestantism—currents that meshed well with a valorization of popular science and empiricism, but also a Romantic and modern emphasis on individualism and subjective experience.⁵⁹ Significantly, as overviewed in this chapter, many of the key movements that contributed to the development of Spiritualism, also contributed to the construction of religion as an abstract category. Probably the most prominent and thorough blending of these ideas could be found in the Harmonial Philosophy of Andrew Jackson Davis—the subject of the next chapter—which

⁵⁶ Albanese, *Republic*, 180-81, 222-23; Moore, *White Crows*, 7-8; Slater Brown, *The Heyday of Spiritualism* (New York: Pocket Books, 1972), 111-40; Isaacs, “The Fox Sisters and American Spiritualism,” 80, 82-96. For the first-hand testimonies of the Hydesville rappings, see E. E. Lewis, *A Report of the Mysterious Noises Heard in the House of Mr. John D. Fox, in Hydesville, Arcadia, Wayne County, Authenticated by the Certificates, and Confirmed by the Statements of the Citizens of that Place and Vicinity* (Canandaigua, NY: E. E. Lewis, 1848). For an early believer’s history, see Eliab W. Capron and Henry D. Barron, *Singular Revelations. Explanation and History of the Mysterious Communion with Spirits, Concerning the Rise and Progress of the Mysterious Noises in Western New York, Generally Received as Spiritual Communications* (Auburn, NY: Finn & Rockwell, 1850).

⁵⁷ The “Cock Lane Ghost” of West Smithfield, London in 1762 was a high-profile example of a poltergeist who claimed by means of rapping that he had been murdered in the house. Despite Methodist interest, no new religious was launched. Paul Kléber Monod, *Solomon’s Secret Arts: The Occult in the Age of Enlightenment* (London: Yale University Press, 2013), 238.

⁵⁸ Robert S. Cox, *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 5.

⁵⁹ Historians of American religion have attempted to correct for a previous scholarly neglect of occult and magic practices by noting the widespread interest in mysticism, alchemy, almanacs, “cunning” (witchcraft), and divination in colonial America, both among the Puritans and radical Pietist groups. These practices persisted well into the nineteenth-century and were picked up by new religious movements like Mormonism and Spiritualism. Jon Butler argues that there was a “folklorization” of the occult as it faded among elites, but persisted among the common people. Catherine Albanese argues that Butler overestimates the degree to which such practices vanished. Albanese, *Republic*, 2-4, 67-82, 233; Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 68-97, 228-55.

was quickly merged with the nascent Spiritualist movement by Davis and his followers—a process covered in Chapter Three.

American Deism

The Deist conceptualization of religion in England had its American counterpart. Notably, there were Deists among the American founding fathers—Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and James Madison all engaged with Deist ideas to one degree or another—which proved important for the disestablishment of religion in the United States, albeit within certain limits. Enlightenment attitudes towards religion also set the stage for the rise of “liberal” Christianity in the nineteenth century. Significantly, these liberal Christians, such as Universalists and Unitarians, are who scholars normally associate with universal religion and with an openness to other religions.⁶⁰ While Unitarianism with its complex and rationalistic theology held little sway among ordinary Americans beyond the Boston elite, Spiritualism presented similar ideas to the public in a more digestible format, and was correspondingly more popular.⁶¹

Prominent American Deists like Ethan Allen, Thomas Paine, and Elihu Palmer, while a minority, championed the supremacy of innate human Reason as the standard for determining true religion in the face of the superstitious and priestly corruptions of historical, or “revealed” religion. In his 1784 work *Reason, the Only Oracle of Man*—a nod to Charles Blount’s *The Oracles of Reason*—Allen, a hero of the Revolutionary War, argued that “Reason... must be the standard by which we determine the respective claims of revelation.” If “reason rejects the whole of those revelations, we ought to return to the religion of nature and reason.”⁶²

Similarly, Thomas Paine, the celebrated author of *Common Sense*, framed the task of the Deist in *The Age of Reason; Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology* (1794) as consisting “in contemplating the power, wisdom, and benignity of the Deity in his works, and in endeavouring to imitate him in every thing moral, scientific, and

⁶⁰ Schmidt, “Liberal Religion,” 489-90, 508.

⁶¹ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 44.

⁶² Ethan Allen, *Reason, the Only Oracle of Man; or a Compendious System of Natural Religion* (Boston: J. P. Mendum, Cornhill, 1854), 170.

mechanical.” Indeed, Paine suggested, “natural philosophy, embracing the whole circle of science, . . . is the study of the works of God and the power and wisdom of God in his works, and is the true theology.” Rejecting the already-appearing fracture between religion and sciences, or natural philosophy, Paine observed that “It is an inconsistency scarcely possible to be credited, that any thing should exist under the name of a *religion*, that held it to be *irreligious* to study and contemplate the structure of the universe God had made.”⁶³ Conversely, Paine believed, “All national institutions of churches . . . whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.”⁶⁴ Understanding true religious practice as the discernment of natural law through one’s innate sense of Reason and the implementation of these laws in the world would become a familiar feature of later Transcendentalism, as well as Spiritualism.

Elihu Palmer—a lesser-known friend of Paine and an important proponent of Deist ideas through the Deistical Society (founded 1797) and its publishing organ the *Temple of Reason*⁶⁵—was more antagonistic, provocatively declaring in his 1801 work, *The Principles of Nature, or A Development of the Moral Causes of Happiness and Misery among the Human Species*, “The principle and the practice of immortal virtue will long remain after the plundering and bloody theology of Moses, Jesus, and Mahomet, has ceased to afflict the human race. The essential principles of morality are founded in the nature of man, they cannot be annihilated, they are as indestructible as human existence itself.”⁶⁶ In all three cases, the truth was something eternal and which transcended the accidents of history, filled as it was with violent imposture and priestcraft.

These American Deists shared an optimism that the reasonableness of the age would wipe away the superstitions of the historical religions and see a return to the natural theology.

⁶³ Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason. Being an Investigation of True and of Fabulous Theology* (Boston: Thomas Hall, 1794), 31, 38, 42.

⁶⁴ Thomas Paine, quoted in Schmidt, “Liberal Religion,” 495.

⁶⁵ G. Adolf Koch, *Religion of the American Enlightenment: How the Spread of Deism and Free Thought After the Revolution Linked the Early American Period With the Great Flowering of New England Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1968), 77-80, 143. The *Temple of Reason* ran from 1800 to 1803 before being sunk by financial problems on account of its subscribers not paying their dues. Palmer and his wife followed it up with *Prospect, or View of the Moral World*, which lasted until 1805 before suffering the same fate.

⁶⁶ Elihu Palmer, *Principles of Nature; or, a Development of the Moral Causes of Happiness and Misery among the Human Species*, 3rd ed. (London: Re-printed and published by John Cahuac, 1819), 136.

Colonel Allen expressed his optimism that the “improvement of succeeding generations, in the knowledge of nature and science, will exalt the reason of mankind, above the tricks and impostures of priests, and bring them back to the religion of nature and truth.” In a configuration that would be a familiar feature of both Transcendentalism and Spiritualism, Allen emphasized the use of the true and natural religion; it would bring a naturalized millennium where human flourishing followed obedience to natural law. Its benefits were “cultivating concord, and mutual love in society, and of extending charity, and good will to all.” Foreshadowing the Spiritualist emphasis on empirical proof, the true religion would “exalt the divine character, and lay a permanent foundation for truth and reliance on providence; establish our hopes and prospects of immortality.”⁶⁷

Paine, like Tindal who saw true “Christianity” as whatever accorded with the primitive monotheism, emphasized the unchanging quality of the true theology, noting that “if ever an universal religion should prevail, it will not be believing any thing new, but in getting rid of redundancies, and believing as men believed at first. Adam, if ever there was such a man, was created a Deist.”⁶⁸ Like a sort of rationalist restorationism, the true essence of religion could be recovered by stripping away the calcifications of history. With the zeal of a former Presbyterian minister, Palmer was unusual among Deists for his efforts to rile up the common people and evangelize Deism through his Deistical Society and the press.⁶⁹ Writing of the utopian era with a distinct emphasis on progress and the future, Palmer predicted the downfall of the historical religions and the establishment of the true religion of science: “Reason anticipates a progress, which all the powers of superstition can never arrest,” he wrote. “Let reason then perform her faithful duty, and ignorance, fanaticism, and misery, will be banished from the earth. A new age, the true millennium will then commence; the standard of truth and of science will then be erected among the nations of the world,” resulting in “the universal improvement and happiness of the human race.”⁷⁰

While radical free-thinkers like Allen, Paine, and Palmer were not representative of American religious sentiments at large, Deism nonetheless was significant enough a cultural force that it generated considerable controversy and had a lasting influence. Paine, for

⁶⁷ Allen, *Oracle of Man*, 162-63.

⁶⁸ Paine, *Age of Reason*, 58.

⁶⁹ Koch, *Deism*, 59, 74, 80-82, 185.

⁷⁰ Palmer, *Principles of Nature*, 177.

instance, found his credentials as a hero of the Revolution were not enough to prevent him from being ostracized and being greeted by jeering mobs after his return from France in 1802, nor were they enough to prevent Thomas Jefferson from distancing him for political reasons. Antipathy towards Paine reached its peak with a failed assassination attempt. Palmer had similar run ins with angry mobs and was driven out of Philadelphia in 1791 for denying the divinity of Christ.⁷¹ Nonetheless, Paine's cultural significance was great enough for John Adams to retroactively wonder "whether any man in the world has had more influence on its inhabitants and affairs for the last thirty years than Tom Paine.... Call it then the Age of Paine."⁷² Palmer, for his part, declared Paine "probably the most useful man that ever existed upon the face of the earth," whose "beneficial influence... will be felt through all succeeding ages."⁷³

Similar rationalist controversies over salvation and the Trinity existed within the New England Congregationalist churches, with the main difference between men like Palmer and liberal clergymen often being more social status than anything else. While radical Deists like Palmer attacked Christian doctrines from outside of the church establishment, liberal theology spread from within, such as with the Boston divine Charles Chauncy, who anonymously published a tract in 1784 professing the doctrine of universal salvation. In particular, Harvard College seemed rife with deistic influence to the eyes of orthodox Christians, with liberal graduates such as Chauncy, Johnathan Mayhew, Ebenezer Gay, James Freeman, and William Bentley. During the 1790s, deistic ideas were widespread enough as to spark panic amongst the orthodox Christian establishment and a fierce polemic response. The wholesale attacks on Christianity and revealed religion in general were far more threatening than previous doctrinal and creedal disputes. In an 1801 sermon, for instance, Reverend Robert Hall lamented, "Infidelity has grown condescending" and now "boldly ventures to challenge the suffrages of the people, solicits the acquaintance of peasants and mechanics, and seeks to draw whole nations to its standard."⁷⁴ Hall may well have had cause for concern for the years to come. In the mid-1830s, Rochester—a later hot-spot of Spiritualism in the burned-over district of New York state—had a free-thought paper which promoted the labour

⁷¹ Koch, *Deism*, 130-37, 144.

⁷² Mark Philp, *Thomas Paine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), viii.

⁷³ Palmer, *Principles of Nature*, 95.

⁷⁴ Koch, *Deism*, 15-16, 45, 75, 184-87, 191-93, 221, 269.

movement alongside attacks on evangelicals and proofs disproving the existence of God; amongst local workers, Thomas Paine's birthday was an occasion for celebration.⁷⁵

Swedenborgianism

One of the major taproots of nineteenth-century Spiritualism was the teachings of the eighteenth-century Swedish mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg. Born in 1688 to a noble family, Swedenborg was a talented and highly respected scientist, who pursued a variety of interests, including currency reform, mining, mechanical endeavours, and natural philosophy. At the age of fifty-four in 1743, his interests shifted dramatically after he began to experience visions and angel visitations. Having received a mission from God to expound the "spiritual sense" of Scripture, Swedenborg began to write prodigiously—and with the dry precision of an Enlightenment naturalist—on the inner meaning of the Word, his conversations with angels and spirits, and his visions of heaven and hell.⁷⁶

Swedenborg's cosmology was heavily indebted to Neoplatonism, in particular, the idea of correspondence, which held that everything material was the reflection of a higher spiritual world: as above, so below. Because of the correspondence between higher and lower forms, an understanding the minutiae of creation gave one insight into the larger principles of the universe.⁷⁷ Following this logic, "the Word" was a manifestation of God on earth in the Bible. "God himself," Swedenborg wrote, was "in the inmost of the Word."⁷⁸ By means of an illuminated reading of the Bible, Swedenborg could identify the Word in the various books of the Bible and explicate their inner meaning, or arcana, through a complex system of symbolic correspondences, an ability that he claimed exclusively by special permission from God.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 120-21.

⁷⁶ Alfred J. Gabay, *The Covert Enlightenment: Eighteenth-Century Counterculture and its Aftermath* (West Chester, PA.: Swedenborg Foundation Publishing, 2005), 5-7.

⁷⁷ Jane Williams-Hogan, "Swedenborg, Emanuel" in *Dictionary of Gnosis*, 1098; Goodrick-Clarke, *Western Esoteric Traditions*, 155-56, 162-63.

⁷⁸ Emanuel Swedenborg, *The True Christian Religion: Containing the Universal Theology of the New Church Foretold by the Lord in Daniel VII. 13, 14, and in Revelation XXI. 1, 2* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1873), §6.

⁷⁹ Marguerite Beck Block, *The New Church in the New World: A Study of Swedenborgianism in America* (New York: Swedenborg Publishing Association, 1984), 24-27; Gabay, *Covert Enlightenment*, 17.

Far more than his attempts to reform the true Christian Church, the Swedish seer's descriptions of heaven and hell proved to be one of his most influential legacies, especially among the educated, who compared his visions to Hermetic and occult knowledge.⁸⁰ The rational and observational quality of his "testimonies" made them particularly attractive to nineteenth-century Americans who desired a scientific reconciliation with the spiritual.⁸¹ Swedenborg divided the afterlife into concentric spheres of existence: three heavenly spheres of heaven, three infernal spheres, and an intermediary spiritual realm. In the limbo-like middle realm, souls resided for an indeterminate amount of time: perhaps a few weeks, perhaps thirty years. In this place, the exterior of a person was stripped away, leaving only their true nature, the interior, behind. The three heavens were "distinguished into two kingdoms, one of which is called the *Celestial kingdom*, the other the *Spiritual kingdom*." The angels of the celestial heaven received "the Divine that proceeds from the Lord more interiorly" than the spiritual angels. The intermediate angels fostered communication between the celestial and the spiritual angels. Following the principle of correspondence, the three heavenly spheres were manifestations of God's goodness and reflected the body of a single Divine Man.⁸²

Swedenborg's vision of heaven was unusual for its worldliness, a feature that later Spiritualists would adopt. Reflecting the principle of correspondence, society in heaven was similar to society on earth. There were marriages in heaven, which brought the male attribute of "understanding" together with the female "will" into a single mind "so two consorts in heaven are not called two, but one angel."⁸³ Furthermore, individuals had occupations, such as the instruction of children or those who still required spiritual development. While no one wanted for anything in the heavens, spirits still desired work so as to be useful. The angels of each of the three heavens organized themselves into societies according to the amount of love and faith they possessed.⁸⁴ Swedenborg explained that "Those who are in similar good form one society....They are far apart who differ much, and they but little apart who differ little.

⁸⁰ Gabay, *Covert Enlightenment*, 13-16.

⁸¹ Goodrick-Clarke, *Western Esoteric Tradition*, 167.

⁸² Block, *New Church*, 32-34; Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell; also the World of Spirits or Intermediate State From Things Heard and Seen* (Boston: Swedenborg Printing Bureau, 1907), §7, §29-30.

⁸³ Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, §367.

⁸⁴ Block, *New Church*, 35; Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, §387-94.

Being alike causes them to be near together.”⁸⁵ Like the overall composition of the three heavens, these societies reflected the human form. The same structure was also reflected in the hells and there was the same number of societies in hell as in heaven.⁸⁶

Swedenborg engaged to some degree with emerging views that religion could be found historically and cross-culturally, making his teachings potentially attractive to nineteenth-century religious liberals. Though Swedenborg did not espouse a doctrine of universal salvation, both children and non-Christians could potentially be saved. No one was damned for failure to adhere to the proper confession. Thus, salvation was potentially available to all, albeit from a Christian perspective.⁸⁷ All that was necessary for salvation was to do good and reject evil. Nonetheless, all good flowed from God, thereby acknowledging his sovereignty.⁸⁸

Echoing notions of natural religion and a primitive monotheism, Swedenborg believed that there were certain fundamentals that all religions possessed, though these fundamentals were normatively Christian. Thus, he wrote, all “nations in the world” who possess “religion and sound reason, agree in acknowledging that God is one.” As such, “all the Mahometans in their several empires; the Africans in many kingdoms of their continent; and also the Asiatics in many of theirs; and moreover the Jews at this day,” could all, by virtue of their natural reason, independently receive religious truth from the divine influx from God. Like Renaissance or Deist proponents of a *prisca theologia*, Swedenborg wrote, “The most ancient people in the golden age, such as had any religion, worshipped one God, whom they called Jehovah.” The same was true of the “the ancient people in the following age” before “worldly and at length corporeal loves began to close up the superior parts of their understanding.”⁸⁹ True theology had been expressed in a multitude of different religions, though corruption had inevitably followed.

While Swedenborg never intended to create a new denomination, but rather wanted to regenerate Christianity, a new sect sprung up in England after his death, called the Church of the New Jerusalem, or the New Church. While some followers of Swedenborgian teachings

⁸⁵ Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, §41.

⁸⁶ Block, *New Church*, 35; Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, §541-42.

⁸⁷ Jane Williams-Hogan, “Swedenborgian Traces in Modern Religious Movements Old and New,” in *Croyances et Sociétés*, eds. Bertrand Ouellet and Richard Bergeron (Montréal: Fider, 1998), 288-91, 294.

⁸⁸ Block, *New Church*, 41-45.

⁸⁹ Swedenborg, *True Christian Religion*, §9.

sought to remain in their own churches and incorporate the “heavenly doctrines,” others believed that it was essential to form a separate New Church on earth.⁹⁰ From Britain, Swedenborgianism spread to the United States in 1784 when the Scotsman James Glen gave lectures on Swedenborg in Boston and Philadelphia and sold translations of Swedenborg’s books. He managed to generate enough interest that both cities became hubs of the New Church.⁹¹ By 1810, Swedenborgian societies had spread as far as Cincinnati. In 1787, Francis Bailey printed *Summary View of the Heavenly Doctrines*, the first of Swedenborg’s works to be published in the United States, and distributed copies to interested individuals, including the Rev. Ezra Stiles. John Chapman (1775-1843), of “Johnny Appleseed” fame, handed out Swedenborgian tracts to settlers in the Ohio Valley as he planted apple trees.⁹²

In New England, Swedenborgian doctrines were propagated in large part by Sampson Reed in the 1820s. Reed, a student of Harvard College, was acquainted with Ralph Waldo Emerson and impressed the latter with a commencement address at the Cambridge Divinity School in 1827. Reed was also a contributor to the *New Jerusalem Magazine* and produced an 1826 pamphlet entitled *Observations on the Growth of the Mind*, which spurred interest in Swedenborgian-inspired theories of language and mind among young Unitarians, not to mention Emerson. Though Transcendentalists found themselves at odds with the orthodoxies of the New Church, Swedenborgian ideas had found their way into the New England Unitarian vocabulary.⁹³

Swedenborgian churches were, however, never particularly widespread or large in number. The greatest historical significance of Swedenborgianism was to be found in its marriage to the occult and to Mesmerism. This synthesis happened primarily in masonic and quasi-masonic societies during the eighteenth century. While the Enlightenment is usually characterized as a period when rationalism and empiricism gained ascendancy over the supernatural, one ought to be careful not to ignore the religious motives that existed, often in

⁹⁰ Clarke Garrett, “Swedenborg and the Mystical Enlightenment in Late Eighteenth-Century England,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (1984), 80-81.

⁹¹ Williams-Hogan, “Traces,” 291-92.

⁹² Gabay, *Covert Enlightenment*, 149, 152.

⁹³ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, 60-63.

tandem, with these other ideals.⁹⁴ Even a man such as Sir Isaac Newton, a quintessential Enlightenment empiricist, had an interest in alchemy and biblical prophecy. Alfred Gabay suggests that this parallel and “covert Enlightenment” possessed three main goals, all of which were furthered by Swedenborgianism and Mesmerism. These were a desire to reclaim lost knowledge from the ancient world, the attainment of the Millennium, and communing with a “higher reality.” The theology of Swedenborg provided a model for this higher reality, while Mesmerism provided a concrete method for attaining new states of consciousness, as Swedenborg had done. Bridging the two was but a very small leap. This leap was made both in the secret societies of the eighteenth century, as well as by nineteenth-century Spiritualist mediums and clairvoyants.⁹⁵

Mesmerism

Mesmerism, or Animal Magnetism, was the name given to the German physician Franz Anton Mesmer’s theory of a universal magnetic fluid and the healing practices he derived from it. Mesmer postulated that everything was permeated by an extremely rarified fluid, which could be used to explain gravity, magnetism, electricity, heat, and light.⁹⁶ Mesmer’s theories received a boost in 1774 when he treated an Austrian hysteria patient, Fräulein Francisca Österline by having her swallow a concoction with iron fillings in it and attached magnets to her. The treatment was apparently successful, and during its course, Österline could feel the movement of a fluid throughout her body. Mesmer ultimately arrived at the conclusion that the fluid was a result of his own personal “animal magnetism” restoring equilibrium to the patient and that the ferromagnets were not essential to administering a cure.⁹⁷ In keeping with the eighteenth-century penchant for looking to the ancient world, Mesmer characterized his discoveries as “the remnant of a primitively recognized truth.”

⁹⁴ Swedenborgian influence was not only found among the elite but also made its way (along with the influence of Böhme and the legacies of the Camisards and Philadelphians) into radical millenarian movements of the English working class, such as the Buchanites and the Shakers. These millenarians found their way to the new world where their ideas were diffused into the American religious landscape, along with other more generalized folk magic beliefs. Their influence can be seen in the Millerite movement, and the Shakers had significant overlap with Spiritualism and were a possible influence. Gabay, *Covert Enlightenment*, 67, 106-108, 112-13; Albanese, *Republic*, 182-87.

⁹⁵ Gabay, *Covert Enlightenment*, xvi, 43, 83.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁹⁷ Albanese, *Republic*, 190-93.

Plutarch, for instance, recorded that Pyrrhus of Epirus (318-272 BCE) could heal people by touching them with his big toe. The Renaissance physician Paracelsus employed magnets as a means to heal and influence the “cosmic fluid” within his patients.⁹⁸

Despite massive controversy—including two unfavourable commissions from the medical community, one headed by Ben Franklin—Mesmer enjoyed a period of immense popularity in Paris, the height of which was during 1783. Large group healing sessions, known as *séances*, would see many patients magnetized at once. Mesmer’s ideas were spread through Harmonial Societies, where students, for a steep fee, could be trained in Mesmer’s techniques. Despite being discredited amongst the medical and scientific communities, Mesmer’s ideas continued to hold sway with those with a more mystical persuasion, a testament to their compatibility with Hermetic notions of universal harmony. It was to such pupils that Mesmer lost control of his ideas and saw them taken in esoteric directions he did not approve of.⁹⁹

One of Mesmer’s followers, Armand Marie Jacques de Chastenet, the Marquis de Puységur, was particularly important in this regard. Puységur became interested in the somnambular trance that would sometimes occur with magnetized patients instead of a moment of crisis. Mesmer considered such trances an insignificant side effect. Puységur, however, wondered if the unconscious might instead be the location of the soul. Departing from Mesmer’s theory that the physician drew from a surplus of his own magnetic fluid, Puységur emphasized the will of the magnetizer; the fluids of the patient and magnetizer swirled together and gave the latter’s mind control over the former’s body. It was therefore the will of the magnetizer, not the transfer of his fluid, that effected the cure. Remarkably, Puységur found that some individuals experiencing “artificial somnambulism” could perform strange feats, such as clairvoyance, spirit communication, medical diagnosis, mind reading, and precognition. In Strasbourg, Puységur’s *Société des Amis Réunis* became increasingly involved with spirit communication. By the end of the eighteenth century, Mesmerists who followed Mesmer’s fluid theory declined in the face of “spiritists” and “vitalists.”¹⁰⁰ It was Puységur’s version of Mesmerism that would later become popular in the United States and

⁹⁸ Gabay, *Covert Enlightenment*, 19, 34.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 24-26, 28, 30, 33-34, 40.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 27, 37-39, 46-47, 54.

that would also become an important forerunner to psychological theories of the subconscious.¹⁰¹

Significantly for nineteenth-century Spiritualism and its broad conception of revelation, Albert Gabay has demonstrated the deep entanglement between Mesmerist Harmonial Societies and the slew of initiatory masonic-like societies popular in Europe, especially in Paris. Such societies frequently blended Kabbalah, occult magic and alchemy, Catholic mysticism, Mesmerism, and the mysticism of Jakob Böhme and Swedenborg. The eclectic practices of occult societies lent them a tendency to see an underlying esoteric truth in different traditions and to believe in the coming of a worldwide religion based on the primitive monotheism. These frequently millennialist lodges shared a considerable overlap in membership with each other and maintained frequent correspondence, both with each other, but also with Swedenborgian societies. Of particular interest were the claims of some secret societies of angel and spirit communication while in somnambulant trances, which were debated in the epistolary exchanges. As Gabay argues, the “alternate-reality paradigm” of Swedenborg’s cosmology blended in these societies with the “alternate-consciousness paradigm” of the magnetic trance. In other words, Swedenborg’s visions provided a compelling spiritual geography and cosmology, while the clairvoyance supposedly endowed by the trance provided a means to access it. Many of the practices of eighteenth-century secret societies like Jean-Baptiste Willermoz’s *Loge Élué et Chérie* (the Lodge of the Elect and Beloved) would be familiar features of nineteenth-century Spiritualists. These included the use of mediums, automatic writing, diagnosing illness by seeing the internal organs of the patient, prophecy, and retrocognition. While the French Revolution wiped out most of these, predominantly aristocratic, societies, animal magnetism experienced a resurgence in popularity after the fall of the First Republic, and during the Romantic period more generally.¹⁰²

Of particular importance for later Spiritualism, both American and English, was the pronounced interest in magnetism in German romantic circles, which frequently tended towards the mystical. Key philosophical and theological figures such as Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Friedrich Schleiermacher were magnetized. In his 1808 work, *Theorie der*

¹⁰¹ Robert C. Fuller, *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 10.

¹⁰² Gabay, *Covert Enlightenment*, xvii, 48-56, 83-84, 88-92.

Geister-Kunde, J. H. Jung-Stilling, a professor of political economy at the University of Marburg and Heidelberg University, revealed a Swedenborgian influence when he argued that somnambulists existed in both the physical and the spiritual world simultaneously. Famously, Justinus Kerner, a romantic poet and physician, began mesmerizing Frederica Hauffe, the “Seeress of Prevorst,” in 1826. Despite the mockery he received from professors at Heidelberg for his work, Kerner believed that Hauffe displayed exceptional powers. He recorded that she was able to communicate with the spirit world, possessed powers of prescience and far-seeing, and could also create physical disruptions around her. According to her revelations, humans had a body, soul, and a spirit. The soul could leave the body and was sustained by an “ethereal” body, which she called the *Nervengeist*.¹⁰³ The English translation of his findings was very popular in both England and the United States.¹⁰⁴

Marie Joseph Paul, the Marquis de Lafayette, first attempted to bring Mesmerism to the United States in 1784, the same year that James Glen introduced Swedenborgianism. It failed to gain much traction, however, despite Lafayette’s attempts to convince George Washington.¹⁰⁵ Limited success came in 1829 for Joseph du Commun, an instructor at West Point who tried to promote the science. But, by 1836, when Charles Poyen, a disciple of Puységur, lectured in New England, conditions were ripe for the spread of Mesmerism. Poyen, who died in 1844, left behind a considerable number of disciples. Joseph Philippe François Deleuze’s *Instruction pratique sur le magnétisme animal*, which was translated into English in 1837, also helped fuel American debate, controversy, and interest in animal magnetism.¹⁰⁶ With the help of his assistant Cynthia Gleason, Poyen travelled like an itinerant preacher and lectured extensively. Newspapers frequently reported on his demonstrations meaning that the majority of New England’s readership was familiar with him. Many amateurs attempted to replicate his experiments.¹⁰⁷ Poyen’s demonstrations attracted large crowds, not to mention the scorn of the scientific community, who came for the spectacle. Poyen, who had previously lectured as an abolitionist and had written Christian pamphlets, was a powerful orator. During his demonstrations, he would magnetize an

¹⁰³ Ibid., 70-79.

¹⁰⁴ Albanese, *Republic*, 199.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 194.

¹⁰⁶ Gabay, *Covert Enlightenment*, 158.

¹⁰⁷ Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 121.

assistant, as well as members of the audience, many of whom claimed to be cured of their various ailments. In addition, certain select individuals displayed a particular sensitivity to Mesmerism and performed strange feats like telepathy and clairvoyance.¹⁰⁸

During the 1830s and early 40s, Mesmerism created a sensation in the United States. According to the magnetizer K. Dickerson in 1843, the number of people who “successfully magnetize in the United States are so numerous that their names would fill a volume.” An English Mesmerist Robert Collyer lamented the “hundreds of ignorant mechanics, carpenters, painters, furriers, scavengers, barbers, and other ‘unlettered cubs’” in the United States who had begun to experiment with the science and make “a pretty mess” of it. *The Magnet*, the only Mesmerist periodical in the United States, edited by the former Methodist preacher and later Spiritualist La Roy Sunderland, was instrumental in disseminating information about animal magnetism. Sunderland espoused a version of animal magnetism which followed Puysegur’s rapport-based understanding of the process and was active in republishing Mesmerist writings from England and France.¹⁰⁹

In many ways, the itinerant Mesmerists like Poyen resembled the revivalist preachers of the Second Great Awakening, with whom they were contemporary. Similar to evangelical Christians, Mesmerists held out the possibility of a personal regeneration and contact with a higher order. The baser and animal tendencies in mankind could be conquered by the spiritual side.¹¹⁰ In the United States, this hope for self-improvement readily lent itself to pairing Mesmerism with the new science of phrenology, the theory of a German doctor named Franz Joseph Gall. Gall’s theory postulated that various regions of the brain contained different human characteristics or “faculties.” The contours and shape of the skull revealed the respective development of each of these faculties, which could be affected through massages intended to manipulate the shape of the skull.¹¹¹

The parallels between animal magnetism and revival phenomena did not go unnoticed. Sunderland asserted that he had been unknowingly conducting magnetic experiments during the 1820s as a Methodist revival preacher. The sympathetic rapport generated between the preacher and the faithful was responsible for ensuing fits of ecstasy.

¹⁰⁸ Fuller, *Mesmerism*, 17-21.

¹⁰⁹ Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 130, 136, 146.

¹¹⁰ Fuller, *Mesmerism*, 73-79.

¹¹¹ Albanese, *Republic*, 195.

Drawing parallels between different religious traditions, Sunderland proposed that mesmeric rapport explained “those curious *sympathetic imitative* results produced among the *Hindoos, Mohammedans, Anabaptists, French Prophets, Roman Catholics, Shaking Quakers, Mormons, Methodists*, and other *sects*, which have by ignorant fanatics been thought superhuman or miraculous.” As a magnetic lecturer, Sunderland retained elements of the camp meeting. Unlike other itinerant Mesmerists, Sunderland did not bring along his own subject or engage in magnetic “passes.” Instead, he would attempt to bring the entire audience into rapport with him. Affected individuals would then come up onto the stage like sinners answering Christ’s call. Often the accompanying effects of the magnetism carried evangelical overtones. In one instance, a pair of women who had the magnetic state induced in them had visions of heaven, angels, and Christ and sang revival songs together. Opponents of revivalism such as the New Hampshire Congregationalist minister Grant Powers seized upon the opportunity to use Mesmerism to discredit the enthusiasms of the camp meetings. Many members of the Protestant elite considered susceptibility to magnetic and revival phenomena alike as being indicative of weak nerves.

The Universalist minister and Mesmerist John Bovee Dods cast revival phenomena in a more positive light. Referring to Methodists, he wrote, “Ever since that class of Christians had a religious existence in the United States, persons have fallen down in a species of trance” which was neither “delusion” nor “deception,” but rather “the magnetic state—or more properly...the spiritual state.” Nonetheless, it was popular culture that was generally more inclined to embrace Mesmerism as a positive influence and as a way to both explain and produce religious experiences. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the trance was increasingly understood as a special state of consciousness, as opposed to the product of enthusiasm and wild imaginations as the educated classes had often held it.

As Ann Taves has argued, such magnetic interpretations of religious phenomena were an important step in trying to study seemingly universal presence of religious experience in humans—an endeavour exemplified by the psychological approach of William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. While they did not necessarily accept the phenomena as “legitimate,” rather the product of suggestion or weak nerves, mesmeric models of religion did assume that religious experience was cross-cultural. Critically for Spiritualism, she notes, Mesmerism was appropriated as a means of naturalizing and explaining religious experience,

but that Spiritualists “embraced” Mesmerism rather than using it to discredit illegitimate experiences. It provided a framework for interpreting the Bible and explaining different religions, as we will see in later chapters. Spiritualists themselves, such as the medium Emma Hardinge, understood themselves to be an outgrowth of their Mesmerist forerunners.¹¹² The Spiritualist reliance on Animal Magnetism—combined with a great enthusiasm for the new science of electricity—for a rational explanation of religious experience reflected their broader efforts to reconcile science and religion and to co-opt the considerable authority of the scientific method in nineteenth-century America.¹¹³

Transcendentalism and Liberal Protestantism

Spiritualism also drew heavily from the aforementioned liberal Protestant tradition, Unitarianism and especially Universalism, and its more radical post-Christian cousin, Transcendentalism. As early as the psychological researcher and early historian of Spiritualism Frank Podmore’s 1902 study, *Modern Spiritualism*, scholars have remarked on the large numbers of Universalists, including ministers, who converted to Spiritualism and who were prominent early in the movement—Unitarians, Quakers, and Swedenborgians also supplied many early converts. Podmore noted that Spiritualism provided attractive answers to the controversies surrounding the state of the soul at death that divided the Universalist Church in the early nineteenth century United States.¹¹⁴ Even before Spiritualism took off in the late 1840s and 50s, many Universalists took an active interest in Mesmerism, Fourierist socialism, and Swedenborg—interests brought together by Spiritualists later.¹¹⁵

As Ann Braude emphasizes, while the Universalist Church shared many doctrines with the Unitarians, it was twice as large a denomination, was not as confined to urban areas,

¹¹² Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 121-48, 165, 167-68. R. Laurence Moore draws similar conclusions. See Moore, *White Crows*, 133-68. For Spiritualist understandings of Mesmerism, see Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 22-23; Albanese, *Republic*, 190-206.

¹¹³ Moore, *White Crows*, 19-39.

¹¹⁴ Podmore also connects the doctrine of universal salvation in America to the mysticism of the radical Reformation tradition, specifically communitarians like the Rappites and the Dunkers at Ephrata. Frank Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism: A History and a Criticism*, vol. 1 (London: Methuen & Co., 1902), 217-20. Later historians have concurred with Podmore on the disproportionate number of Universalists among Spiritualists. See Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 46-48; Buescher, *Other Side of Salvation*, xi-xii, 39-42; Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 167.

¹¹⁵ Albanese, *Republic*, 156.

attracted a more middle-class membership, had more converts to Spiritualism than the Unitarians, and was more likely to tolerate belief in spiritual communication without excommunicating its members. Diffused from an elite context, partially by way of Universalism, Braude suggests, “In Spiritualism, doctrines that Unitarianism offered to the few became available to the many.” It is likely no coincidence that the “burned-over district” of western New York state that had both seen great waves of revivalism during the Second Great Awakening and had birthed mass Spiritualism in Rochester was also home to a large concentration of Universalists. Indeed, through its emphasis on human agency and universal salvation, Spiritualism can be seen as taking the Arminian rejection of Calvinist predestination that characterized Evangelicalism to its furthest extremes. In many ways, Spiritualism responded to the same anxieties and cultural conditions that drove revivalism—questions of salvation, concern about religious pluralism, immediate experience of the divine, and clerical and scriptural authority—but with a rationalist and ultra-liberal inflection.¹¹⁶

In many cases, Spiritualist theology was sufficiently radical that it was virtually indistinguishable from Transcendentalism, with the exception of the former’s emphasis on spirit communication and scientific models of revelation, though the emphasis on science and evolution was one shared with many later Transcendentalists. Scholars have been quick to note the unmistakable marks of Transcendentalist thinking on Spiritualism—particularly a metaphysics that rejected supernaturalism and infused Nature with the Divine—with Ann Taves calling it “the Transcendentalism of the ‘common man.’” Or, as Ann Braude suggested, arguing for Spiritualism’s broad social reach, “Spiritualism’s concreteness liberated many of Emerson’s ideas from their class-bound character by making them accessible to those without the intellectual bent to grasp their subtler implications.” Her point is well-taken in light of her further observation that “The birth of Spiritualism coincided almost exactly with the death of Transcendentalism as a social movement.”¹¹⁷

While Spiritualists eagerly attended Emerson’s lectures and reprinted Theodore Parker’s sermons, the Transcendentalist reception was mixed at best.¹¹⁸ Ralph Waldo

¹¹⁶ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 44-49.

¹¹⁷ Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 198. See also Moore, *White Crows*, 25; Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 45-46; Albanese, *Republic*, 233.

¹¹⁸ In 1895, one Spiritualist, Harrison D. Barrett, went so far as to claim Emerson as a one of the “prominent speakers upon the Spiritualistic platform.” Barrett, *Life Work of Mrs. Cora L. V. Richmond*, xv; Albanese, *Republic*, 215; Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 45, 75.

Emerson contemptuously dismissed Spiritualist séances as “the rat hole of revelation” in reference to the rapping sounds some ghostly visitors were claimed to make, and in an 1859 lecture expressed his contempt for the “shallow Americanism” that desired “knowledge by raps on midnight tables.”¹¹⁹ Thoreau was harsher yet, writing that “Concord is just as idiotic as ever in relation to the spirits and their knockings.”¹²⁰ Sneering at the quality of spirit communications—to which “The hooting of owls—the croaking of frogs—is celestial wisdom in comparison”—he quipped that if such communications were anything to go by, he would “exchange [his] immortality for a glass of cold beer.”¹²¹

While Emerson and Thoreau might have been critical of Spiritualism, some other Transcendentalists, especially the later ones, were more willing to legitimize it. Theodore Parker, while no Spiritualist, allowed a medium to remain his congregation, and, could at least appreciate the progressive ethos of Spiritualism, noting that “Spiritualists are the only sect that looks forward, and has new fire on its hearth; they alone emancipate themselves from the Bible and the theology of the church, while they also seek to keep the precious truths of the Bible and all the good things of the church.” Nonetheless, he remained critical of their emphasis on “listening for ghosts” and “seeking God and God’s truth *beyond* human nature, not *in* human nature.”¹²²

Amos Bronson Alcott was initially receptive to Spiritualism before eventually denouncing it. Alcott made the acquaintance of several Spiritualists and found their ideas compatible with his own. In 1856, he visited and dined with the Spiritualist seer Andrew Jackson Davis and his wife on multiple occasions, and the two men spoke of Spiritualism, Fourierism, and the like. On the borders of Unitarianism and Transcendentalism, James Freeman Clarke was well-disposed toward Spiritualism and attended séances.¹²³ As previously mentioned, Thomas Wentworth Higginson was excited about the transformative potential of Spiritualism on America’s religious landscape.¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ Moore, *White Crows*, 25; Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 44.

¹²⁰ Albanese, *Republic*, 179.

¹²¹ Albert J. von Frank, “Religion,” in *Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*, 129; Moore, *White Crows*, 38.

¹²² Theodore Parker, *The Revival of Religion which we need. A Sermon, Delivered at Music Hall, Boston, on Sunday, April 11, 1858* (Boston: W. L. Kent & Company, 1858), 1; Buescher, *Other Side of Salvation*, 140; Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 49.

¹²³ Albanese, *Republic*, 179-80.

¹²⁴ Butler, *Sea of Faith*, 255; Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 111.

CHAPTER TWO - ANDREW JACKSON DAVIS

The Seer of Poughkeepsie

In a small home of “conspicuous humility” and “blistered glass” windows tucked away in the “rugged landscape” and snake-inhabited “semi-civilization” of Blooming-Grove, Orange County, New York, the Davis family gathered together to name their four-day old baby boy, born on August 11, 1826. The impromptu naming had been precipitated by the boisterous arrival of a drunken neighbour, “Uncle Thomas Maffet.” The father, also reeking of the “pestilential miasm” of “whiskey-breath,” had acquiesced to Uncle Thomas’ request to name the child, and the five other children of the impoverished “half-weaver and half-shoemaker” eagerly awaited the pronouncement. Mrs. Davis, sickly and exhausted, expressed her indifference so long as Thomas did not drop the baby in his inebriated state. Taking the baby in one arm and a glass of brandy in the other, Thomas, his speech punctuated by hiccups, announced to the waiting family that as he was “a-goin’ to vote for ‘Old Hickory,’ the hero of New Orleans—the greatest man a-livin’ in the world,” in the upcoming presidential election, it was only fitting that “this ‘ere boy...bear that ‘are great man’s name—ANDREW JACKSON!” Prophesying that the child would grow up to be a young Hickory, Thomas was overcome by “the spell of a serious and religious temper” and seemed to immediately sober up. He conferred his blessing on the family and went home, sealing his prophesy with his own sudden death a few days later.¹

So—according to his autobiographical account—was born Andrew Jackson Davis, the man who would come to be known as the Poughkeepsie Seer and who exemplified, in a spiritual sense, the democratic and populist ethos of his namesake. By his own description,

¹ Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Magic Staff; an Autobiography of Andrew Jackson Davis*, 8th edition (Boston: Bella Marsh, 1867), 24-33.

and that of his associates, Davis was a simple, sickly, and altogether unremarkable youth, lacking all but the most rudimentary education—a total of six weeks by his own reckoning.² Yet, through the purported powers of Mesmerism, Davis unlocked latent clairvoyant abilities and achieved considerable fame, becoming, in the words of Ann Braude, the “philosopher of a mass movement.”³ Rising as he did from lowly origins to a position of cultural influence, Davis can be read as something of a “spiritual self-made man.”⁴ With his emphasis on direct, personal revelation, unmediated by any form of clerical or scriptural authority, Davis represents a radical, free-thought extension of the democratization impulse that Nathan Hatch famously saw in nineteenth-century American Christianity.⁵ If Spiritualism was “the quintessential expression of the age of the common man,”⁶ Davis was undoubtedly its Jackson.

Indeed, the contours of his autobiography suggest his self-understanding was one of progressive ascent from nothing—a personal journey through a series of valleys and over mountain summits of ever-greater heights.⁷ Mary Fenn Davis, his second wife, joined in framing her husband’s talents in just such optimistic and democratic terms, observing that the “diverse situations, the temptations, the trials, the discouragements, and the triumphs, that have marked his past career...will awaken courage and inspire aspiration in the souls of the most despised and desponding.” Like a spiritual rags to riches story, Mrs. Davis marvelled, “that he has reached this glorious eminence, in spite of organizational faults and discouraging conditions...is a fact in human development full of promise, even to the lowliest and loneliest child of God!”⁸ Commenting in 1859 on the social character of Spiritualism, Davis chided those who held it in contempt because “it hath not a rich and magnificent origin.” It was nothing more than a “sickly pride that despises humbleness of origin, for the divinest plans

² William Fishbough, introduction to *Principles of Nature*, vi-x; Davis, *Magic Staff*, 123-28, 153-55, 171-73, 202-203.

³ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 35.

⁴ Thank you to Jan Stievermann for suggesting the phrase.

⁵ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 1, 9-11; Cox, *Body and Soul*, 8.

⁶ Moore, *White Crows*, xii-xiv, 110.

⁷ See Davis, *Magic Staff*, 527 for a visual representation.

⁸ Mary Fenn Davis, “Initial Considerations by the Author’s Companion,” in *Magic Staff*, 18.

were laid in a manger.”⁹ The comparison of Spiritualism to Christ in the manger was a favourite among Spiritualists more broadly.

Though he retrospectively claimed foreshadows of his visionary powers,¹⁰ the decisive moment in Davis’ life came when he witnessed an 1843 demonstration from the prominent mesmerist and phrenologist Dr. J. Stanley Grimes in Poughkeepsie, New York, where the Davis family had previously moved. Grimes, looking for a suitable test-subject for his demonstration, attempted to mesmerize young “Jackson,” now a shoemaker’s apprentice, though with contested results. In the excitement following Grimes’ visit, a local tailor began to experiment with Mesmerism after hours in his shop, repeatedly throwing the youth into an “abnormal state” of trance. Once in this state, Davis’ clairvoyant powers were dramatically unleashed as he underwent out-of-body experiences and was enabled to discern the true “interior” essences of the natural world in a vivid and fiery range of colours, an ability that allowed Davis to diagnose illness by seeing through the skin of his patients. Tellingly, Davis echoed the language of the evangelical Christianity that had swept the nearby “burned-over district” a decade before and described the experience as being “completely ‘born again’—being in the spirit.”

In March of 1844, life took another turn for Davis as he lapsed into a trance without the aid of his operator and with feet “like wings” that “clung to nothing” supposedly travelled forty miles into the Catskill mountains in a single night and without fatigue. A series of visions culminated in a graveyard with the appearance of the spirits of the Greek physician Galen and Emanuel Swedenborg. Galen imparted his healing system to Davis, while Swedenborg explained Davis’ divine mission to deliver important spiritual truths to humankind. On November 28th, 1845, Davis—having chosen Dr. S. S. Lyon as his new mesmeric operator and Rev. William Fishbough to transcribe whatever Davis dictated in the trance—began a series of one hundred and fifty-seven lectures in New York which would

⁹ Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Great Harmonia: Being a Progressive Revelation of the Eternal Principles Which Inspire Mind and Govern Matter: The Thinker*, vol. 5 (New York: A. J. Davis & Co., 1860), 239, 243, 245.

¹⁰ Davis claimed to have been born with a veil (a caul) over his eyes—a folklore portent of a future seer. He claimed too that his mother had second-sight and described several instances of visionary experience, somnambulism, hearing disembodied voices and music during his own childhood and adolescence. See Davis, *Magic Staff*, 66, 91-102, 162-70, 181-87, 198-99.

make up his first book¹¹ *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind*.¹²

In this sprawling tome, just short of eight hundred pages in length, Davis covered a wide range of subjects and attempted to synthesize them in one Harmonial Philosophy. The first section, “The Key,” outlined Davis’ methodology, including explanations of magnetism, electrical phenomena, spirits, and other laws of nature. The second and largest part, “The Revelation,” described the manifold truths that had been revealed to Davis in his trances. They varied wildly in content, including an account of the beginning of the earth, descriptions of the cosmos and the occupants of the solar system, reinterpretations of the Bible, and an outline of the spiritual spheres that man’s soul passes through. Lastly, “The Application” was an overview of how the previous revelations ought to inform the transformation of society and a series of concrete plans for reform, based heavily on the popular theories of the French socialist Charles Fourier, likely mediated through Albert Brisbane, author of *Social Destiny of Man* (1840) and a regular attendee at Davis’ lectures.¹³

Opinions on the work were mixed, with some, like the Fourierist Parke Godwin and the Transcendentalist George Ripley providing very favourable reviews, with Ripley calling it “the most surpassing prodigy of literary history” in the pages of the *Harbinger*. George Bush, a Swedenborgian Professor of Hebrew at New York University, was initially an influential promotor of Davis, helping lend his testimony and good name to the young seer, but soon changed his mind amid a flurry of controversy from the New Church.¹⁴ Bush’s colleague, Dr. Taylor Lewis, was quick to criticize Bush for his endorsement and attacked

¹¹ Davis previously published a pamphlet in 1845 with Gibson Smith entitled *Lectures on Clairmativeness* that took a somewhat more favourable view of Christianity than Davis’ later works. He subsequently disavowed it and appears to have tried to suppress it. See Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, vol. 1, 167; and Albanese, *Republic*, 207.

¹² Fishbough, introduction to *Principles of Nature*, x-xvi; Davis, *Magic Staff*, 201-12 (Grimes), 213-24 (the vision), 225-45 (the journey), 303-12 (lectures). Interestingly, Davis’ vision closely parallels that of the German mystic Jacob Böhme. See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co., 1960), 396-97. There are also parallels to Swedenborg’s descriptions of his visionary experiences. See Gabay, *Covert Enlightenment*, 15.

¹³ Fourier supposed that humans naturally conformed to the harmonic series found everywhere in nature and that a social organization that reflected this would allow society to flourish. To accomplish this end, he proposed that people organize into self-sufficient “phalanxes”—farming communes where workers performed labour according to their inclinations and were organized into “series” of groups based on mutual affinity. Significantly, many observers, such as Parke Godwin and William Henry Channing, saw a compatibility between Fourier’s theory of universal analogy in nature and Swedenborgian correspondence. Albanese, *Republic*, 208-209, 213; Gabay, *Covert Enlightenment*, 171-82; Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, vol. 1, 166.

¹⁴ Albanese, *Republic*, 208-209; Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, vol. 1, 159-60.

Davis' book in the press, calling it "the lowest and most ribald infidelity of the school of Tom Paine."¹⁵

The Universalist church was similarly divided over the book and whether or not it supported or undermined their doctrines.¹⁶ Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* was cautiously skeptical, despite Greeley's own later conversion to Spiritualism. The *Sunday Dispatch*, also of New York, was unrestrained in its praise, anticipating a "revolution in the civilized world." By the time of Davis' death in 1910, the *Boston Globe* noted in his eulogy that a copy of *Principles of Nature* was to be found on almost every Spiritualist bookshelf.¹⁷ Indeed, at least one Spiritualist circle assigned the book exclusive scriptural status at the behest of the spirits themselves.¹⁸ While devotion to scripture, even the Bible, was not typical of Spiritualists, *Principles of Nature* enjoyed near Bible-like authority for many.¹⁹ As evidence of its popularity, scholars have noted that it went through thirty-four editions in thirty years, though the number appears to be inflated based on a publishing error; the actual number is likely half that. Nonetheless, the book ran through its first four editions in a single year.²⁰

Principles of Nature was but the first of over thirty books that Davis authored,²¹ though it was the only one produced in a trance; Davis subsequently asserted the ability to enter the "super condition" of clairvoyance without the help of a magnetic operator.²² In addition to being extraordinarily prolific, Davis was a popular lecturer and was frequently involved in Spiritualist organizations, such as Dodsworth Academy, the New York Spiritualist Association, or the American Association of Spiritualists. His presence at the 1858 Rutland Free Convention drew so many attendees that extra trains had to be put into service to

¹⁵ Brown, *Heyday of Spiritualism*, 101.

¹⁶ Buescher, *Other Side of Salvation*, 37-39. One correspondent to the *Univercælum* (the periodical for the Harmonial Philosophy) worried that the new movement was being hijacked by Universalists and would simply become a faction within their church. See Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, vol. 1, 218.

¹⁷ Robert W. Delp, "Andrew Jackson Davis: Prophet of American Spiritualism," *The Journal of American History* 54, no. 1 (1967): 45, 55.

¹⁸ Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 139.

¹⁹ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 35; Gabay, *Covert Enlightenment*, 232; Brown, *Heyday of Spiritualism*, 84-85.

²⁰ Brown, *Heyday of Spiritualism*, 96-97.

²¹ Albanese, *Republic*, 218.

²² Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Great Harmonia: Being a Philosophical Revelation of the Natural, Spiritual, & Celestial Universe: The Physician*, vol. 1, 4th ed. (New York: J. S. Redfield; Fowlers & Wells, 1850), 200-204; Davis, *Magic Staff*, 346-47.

accommodate them all.²³ Robert S. Cox suggested that Davis “lent an inertial center and measure of coherence to the movement during the 1850s, and variations on his themes spread throughout the writings and lectures of R. P. Ambler, S. B. Brittan, Allen Putnam, Herman Snow, John Worth Edmonds, James Peebles, Robert Hare, and Hudson Tuttle, of Achsa Sprague, Cora Hatch, and Emma Hardinge, and of the editors of the *Spiritual Telegraph*, the *Banner of Light*, *Shekinah*, and the *Spirit Messenger*.”²⁴ As Catherine Albanese put it, “Davis’s pronouncements found echoes seemingly everywhere with the huge spiritualist community.”²⁵ The shoemaker’s apprentice from Poughkeepsie cast a long shadow over nineteenth-century Spiritualism.

Identifying Davis’ source material is a notoriously difficult endeavour, which generated controversy even among contemporaries. Despite evidence to the contrary, Davis repeatedly claimed to have been a poor reader and to have had little interest in books, asserting instead that he received all of his knowledge through clairvoyant inspiration.²⁶ In addition to being more versed in books than he let on, Davis was also accused of being a regular reader of digests and periodicals.²⁷ Davis’ acquaintance with several Universalist ministers, including Fishbough, and other other religious liberals, like the Swedenborgian George Bush, did little to quell doubts that *Principles of Nature* was nothing but plagiarism.²⁸ Critics balked at his pretensions to clairvoyance and suggested that Davis had done nothing more than regurgitate Fourierism and Swedenborgianism back at his audience.²⁹ Others were more charitable and thought that he might have read the minds of his audience and been influenced by their views. As such, Professor Bush’s Swedenborgian beliefs allegedly

²³ Robert W. Delp, “Andrew Jackson Davis and Spiritualism” in *Pseudo-Science & Society in 19th-Century America*, Arthur Wrobel, ed. (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1987), 102, 105-107.

²⁴ Cox, *Body and Soul*, 10.

²⁵ Albanese, *Republic*, 260.

²⁶ See the testimony of A. R. Bartlett in Davis, *Principles of Nature*, x; Albanese, *Republic*, 209; Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, vol. 1, 165; Davis, *Magic Staff*, 186.

²⁷ To those who accused him of reading in his spare time, Davis offered the following alibi: “I purchased a two-dollar accordion. The inconsiderate enemies of clairvoyant revealments have asserted that my spare time was devoted to studying books. But I think the unfriendly neighbors who, day after day, heard the *drawling discordances* of my accordion, would be willing to take a solemn oath to the contrary!” Davis, *Magic Staff*, 272-73; Brown, *Heyday of Spiritualism*, 100-101; Albanese, *Republic*, 209.

²⁸ Buescher, *Other Side of Salvation*, 37; Gabay, *Covert Enlightenment*, 194, 217-20, 225-28.

²⁹ Such was the opinion of a reviewer in the *Christian Examiner* who observed that merely reading the *Harbinger* would be enough to achieve enough familiarity with Swedenborg and Fourier to write Davis’ book. W—S., “Notices of Recent Publication,” *The Christian Examiner & Religious Miscellany* 43 (Nov. 1, 1847): 453.

affected the content of the lectures where he was present. Likewise, Albert Brisbane's presence caused those particular lectures to tend towards Fourierism.³⁰

The early historian and member of the Society for Psychical Research, Frank Podmore, speculated in 1902 that Davis may have been reproducing the contents of his prodigious memory while in the trance state.³¹ In addition to Swedenborgianism, the unsympathetic Universalist Rev. Sylvanus Cobb saw the marks of Transcendentalism on Davis' philosophy.³² Davis was also accused of plagiarizing the British naturalist Robert Chambers' anonymous 1844 work, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, a charge which Davis specifically denied.³³ The influence of Deism, general Enlightenment rationalism and natural history, and even the German Romanticism of Fichte and Schelling has been posited by scholars.³⁴ Important for Davis' understanding of trance states as a method of accessing the spiritual world were the theories of Franz Anton Mesmer.³⁵ As Catherine Albanese noted, Davis—and Spiritualists more generally—seemed to have one foot firmly planted in the Enlightenment rationalism of the eighteenth century and the other in the Romantic sensibilities of the nineteenth.³⁶

Whatever its sources, *Principles of Nature* and Davis' other writings revealed a deep disdain for narrow and exclusive views of religion and revelation. The Bible deserved no privileged status and Christianity was but another historical religion among many that spread its divisive and dangerous influence. Like all other religions, it fell short of the true religion, which was derived from an "interior" understanding of natural laws and their implementation in one's life and in society. Thus, Davis partook in a discourse that constructed the meaning of religion and ascribed its attributes to non-Christian traditions. True ethics, metaphysics, revelation, and (usually) scripture were all implicitly understood to be components of religion

³⁰ Albanese, *Republic*, 209.

³¹ Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, vol. 1, 165-66.

³² Buescher, *Other Side of Salvation*, 40.

³³ The *Christian Examiner* also made this accusation. "Notices of Recent Publication," 453-54; Albanese, *Republic*, 208; Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, vol. 1, 166; Davis, *Magic Staff*, 322-23.

³⁴ Brown, *Heyday of Spiritualism*, 96-97; Albanese, *Republic*, 208; Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, vol. 1, 160.

³⁵ Versluis, *Esoteric Origins*, 59; Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 168-72.

³⁶ Albanese, *Republic*, 182, 208, 210. Suggestive of the influence of American Deism is the shared title of Davis' first book with the Deist Elihu Palmer's 1801 book also called *Principles of Nature*. I have not found any definitive evidence that Davis ever read or had heard of it, but the strong parallels between the two books make the possibility enticing.

in Davis' view, and he conceptualized other traditions as "religions" insofar as they could be placed into this framework.

As explored in the first section, true religion, as Davis understood it, was unchanging and accessible to all by means of an innate religious sense; revelation existed everywhere to the extent that different individuals accessed the unchanging principles of nature. Historical religions, discussed second, reflected the manifold and partial ways that revelations were expressed, and were part of an elaborate chain of historical processes. They were ever twisted and warped by cultural context, differing levels of human development, distorted through transmission, and contained elements of outright deception. Like earlier Deists, Davis revived theories of imposture and priestcraft, and married them to nineteenth-century popular psychology that provided rational explanations for cross-cultural religious experience. Following a similar logic, the scriptures of these manifold religions were also subject to historical forces and cultural context. They influenced each other's development and became distorted over time by translation and decisions of canonicity. While an individual might find many true and enlightening fragments of wisdom in the pages of allegedly holy texts, none of them, not even the Bible, could claim to be infallible; all of them had to be evaluated on their own respective merits. Davis' views on the "bibles" of the world will be addressed in the third section of this chapter.

Despite his attempts to universalize religion beyond Christianity, Davis did not escape his cultural context any more than did the various prophets of which he spoke. Even as he attacked and reinterpreted orthodox Christian doctrines and religious concepts, he borrowed heavily from them and read them into other religions. Paradoxically, as he relativized Christianity, he made it the implicit standard for comparison. As Peter Harrison observed, "Christianity is the paradigmatic religion because the 'other religions' were constructed in its image."³⁷ The moment was fast arriving, Davis believed, when all of the divisive sectarian religions would be overcome and a great harmonial brotherhood of man would be united in embracing the true universal religion of Nature.

³⁷ Harrison, "'Science' and 'Religion,'" 98.

The Essence of Religion

Interior Religion

No friend of what we might call organized religion, Davis did not see truth as the exclusive purview of scriptural revelations or clerical authorities. Rather, it was the interior essence of all things: the divine animating principle of the universe. As such, it was discoverable within each individual through an innate sense that Davis identified as Reason—suggestive both of Deist influence and that of Emerson, who derived the notion from Samuel Taylor Coleridge.³⁸ Indeed, Davis' philosophy closely paralleled the Transcendentalist emphasis on the potential divinity of all humans and their ability to discern truth through an inborn moral sense.³⁹ In particular, Davis' concerns about the essence of religion had a more scholarly counterpart in the Free Religious Association, formed in 1865 by radical Unitarians desiring to follow in the footsteps of the Transcendentalists. Conceptualizing religion as inward—rather than institutional—and revelation as ongoing, they sought to reconcile religion with science and synthesize the religions of the world into a post-Christian global religion.⁴⁰ In an 1851 lecture, reprinted in his five-volume “encyclopedia” the *Great Harmonia*, Davis informed his audience, “He who consults his intuitive powers obtains a conviction of something like the existence of God; he learns this Truth from the operations of his own mind; from the very nature of man.”⁴¹ The true religion consisted of discovering universal natural principles that transcended all religions and then living by these laws, both on a personal and on a societal level.⁴²

Central to Davis' understanding of religion was the doctrine of correspondence. While the notion that the natural world was merely an outward reflection of higher spiritual causes went back to the ancient world, Davis expressed it anew in *Principles of Nature*. Though he

³⁸ von Frank, “Religion,” 128.

³⁹ Moore, *White Crows*, 12; Versluis, *American Transcendentalism*, 12, 306.

⁴⁰ Robinson, “Free Religion Movement,” 617, 622-25.

⁴¹ Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Great Harmonia: Concerning the Seven Mental States: The Seer*, vol. 3 (Boston: Sanborn, Carter & Bazin, 1855), 366.

⁴² Beyond the parallel to Transcendentalism, this understanding of religion is evocative of Elihu Palmer, who wrote, “This religion is the religion of nature, it is the practice of justice, it consists in acts of extensive beneficence, it is not confined to any age or country, it is established over the face of the whole earth, it is complete and universal, it is comprehensible by every mind, it is useful to every creature, it is the indestructible cement of intelligent nature in every part of the universe.” Palmer, *Principles of Nature*, 131-32.

denied having ever read any of his writings, Davis likely derived many of his ideas about correspondence from Swedenborg.⁴³ As Slater Brown notes, certain passages in *Principles of Nature* closely paralleled Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell*. In particular, both works contained a description of an individual surprised to find himself in the afterlife. In addition, Davis' visionary journey to the other planets of the solar system were similar to Swedenborg's in *Earths of this Universe*, even to the point of agreeing on the particulars of what various extraterrestrial fauna looked like. English translations of Swedenborg's books were available in the United States, making it plausible that Davis had read them, or, at least, read treatments of them in daily newspapers and journals as the president of Oberlin College, Asa Mahan, charged.⁴⁴ Notably, given the unmistakable marks of Emersonian thinking on Davis' Harmonial Philosophy, Emerson had also taken an interest in the Swedish seer's writings on the correspondence and analogy between the natural and the spiritual.⁴⁵

Invoking correspondence, Davis argued that the external world which was detectable by conventional means was merely the visible effect of an underlying spiritual cause: the outward manifestation of interior principles. As such, the invisible cause was the higher reality, not the corresponding effect it produced. The failure of the world to understand real truth was a product of searching the external world for evidence instead of looking interiorly. In order to approach truth, Davis wrote, people must "*prove the visible by the invisible.*"⁴⁶ To focus merely on externals was to become mired in the minutiae of "particulars," blinding oneself to the grand general principles that underpinned such specific instances. This was one of the faults of the science of the day; it had "a tendency to attract the mind from the *beginning principles* of Nature, and from all the qualities universally pervading her composition, and to enable it merely to conceive of the shadows or sheathings of truth."⁴⁷

The source of all causes and interior principle of all things was the Deity, whom Davis often referred to as the "Great Positive Mind," in a reference to the physical laws of

⁴³ Catherine L. Albanese, "On the Matter of Spirit: Andrew Jackson Davis and the Marriage of God and Nature," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 60, no. 1 (1992): 5-7. Swedenborg's own emphasis on a division between interiority and the external world suggests the influence of German Pietism. See: Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 37; Goodrick-Clarke, *Western Esoteric Traditions*, 159.

⁴⁴ Brown, *Heyday of Spiritualism*, 100-101.

⁴⁵ Goodrick-Clarke, *Western Esoteric Traditions*, 162, 169; Arthur Versluis, *Magic and Mysticism: An Introduction to Western Esotericism* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 148-50; Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, 60-61.

⁴⁶ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 28-29.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 295.

electricity and magnetism, which Davis applied to spirit.⁴⁸ The universe, or Univerccœlum as he referred to the entirety of creation, was born from a crucible of liquid fire, eternal and infinite in its expanse. The fiery vortex existed without any particles; it was one coherent mass possessing the qualities of both Matter and Power. Matter was the substance from which the material universe was derived, and Power was the motive force of the Great Positive Mind. This fountain of primordial flame possessed the “*power* of progression, but had not progressed.” As the fire exploded into six concentric rings of suns, the universe inherited the undeveloped principles existing innately within the Deity.⁴⁹ This model of creation echoed both Swedenborg, who wrote that the universe was born from a great spiritual sun from which all things emanated,⁵⁰ and Robert Chambers, the British naturalist who described the birth of the universe in a fire mist in his 1844 work *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*.⁵¹

As the primordial principle, the Divine Mind was reflected in all of creation. Of the Creator, Davis proclaimed, “He has revealed his character in every particle, leaf, flower, and tree, and arched the heavens with his glory.” Nature was nothing less than a direct expression of divine will, and everything in it corresponded to underlying principles. “*Every atom* in existence has *precisely the same constituents* as had the undeveloped WORLD of unparticled matter,” he declared. “One eternal and immutable Law pervades all matter in existence.” Even a single atom represented the universe in microcosm. In the same way, “each human form is thus a congregation of all subordinate ones, . . . and a *microcosm* in which the Universe is seen in miniature.” As such, everything, humanity included, necessarily corresponded to the will of the Deity. “Thus,” Davis asserted, “man is a child of Nature, as Nature is a child of the Deity. He is governed by her principles; for they run into and constitute his being.”⁵² Davis’ conviction that all nature represented a physical manifestation of the will of the Deity meant that his attributes were discoverable in the working of natural laws.

⁴⁸ Albanese, “On the Matter of Spirit,” 7.

⁴⁹ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 121-23, 130.

⁵⁰ Albanese, *Republic*, 211; Emanuel Swedenborg, *Angelic Wisdom Concerning the Divine Love and the Divine Wisdom* (New York: American Swedenborg Printing and Publishing Society, 1872), §151-54.

⁵¹ Brown, *Heyday of Spiritualism*, 100; Robert Chambers, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (London: John Churchill, 1844), 30.

⁵² Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 612, 730, 782.

In grand style, Davis repeatedly emphasized the unchanging nature of truth and asserted the human potential to access it through the powers of the mind, which, described in phrenological terms, housed a moral sense like that posited by the Transcendentalists.⁵³ In evaluating his claims in *Principles of Nature*, Davis encouraged readers in words almost identical to Thomas Paine's to "Exercise your choicest gift, which is *Reason*."⁵⁴ Nonetheless, truth persisted whether understood or not, for "no truth is lessened by disbelief," Davis wrote, and "no error is made true by belief." Fortunately, the eternal nature of truth meant that it would prevail over human error, for, as he put it, "Error is mortal and can not live, and Truth is immortal and can not die!"⁵⁵ Indeed, he wrote in 1852, "if a doctrine is eternally true, it depends no more upon the existence of Moses or Jesus than the Law of gravitation depends upon the existence of Isaac Newton." Moreover, he wrote, the "Truth is always simple," whereas "error is forever dark, complicated, and mysterious."⁵⁶ "Reject the miracle as the foundation of your faith, and take the principle," Davis urged readers of the *Principles of Nature*.⁵⁷

Thus, truth was available to any free thinker who would seek it and investigate it with an open mind. At the 1853 Hartford Bible Convention—a four-day event organized by Davis to debate scriptural authority with other radicals such as William Lloyd Garrison, Henry C. Wright, Ernestine Rose, and Stephen and Abby Kelley Foster⁵⁸—Davis repeated his motto: "Any theory, hypothesis, philosophy, sect, creed, or institution, *that fears investigation*, openly manifests its own error."⁵⁹ Because of the monolithic nature of truth, permeating the very nature of matter itself, there could be "no division between science, philosophy, metaphysics, and religion." Science was the foundation for philosophy, which, in turn, "typified" metaphysics. True religion was the ultimate synthesis of these other forms of

⁵³ Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Great Harmonia; Concerning Physiological Vices and Virtues, and the Seven Phases of Marriage: The Reformer*, vol. 4 (Boston: Sanborn, Carter, & Bazin, 1856), 26-34.

⁵⁴ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 1; for comparison, see Paine, *Age of Reason*, 25.

⁵⁵ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 1.

⁵⁶ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 3, 365, 372.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 374.

⁵⁸ The event generated mass controversy in the press and had to be shut down early after the appearance of an incensed mob. Robert W. Delp, "A Spiritualist in Connecticut: Andrew Jackson Davis, the Hartford Years, 1850-1854," *The New England Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (1980): 357-58.

⁵⁹ Andrew Jackson Davis, *Free Thoughts Concerning Religion; or, Nature versus Theology* (Boston: William White & Co., 1870), 8.

knowledge and brought higher understanding.⁶⁰ Local contingencies, or particulars, ought to be thought of as facts, Davis argued in 1852. For example, saying that “yesterday was cold” was “true only in certain localities.” Truths, by contrast, “have a broad, unchangeable and universal application.” They were higher, “superior to every thing, but God.” The definition of truth Davis offered was simple: “Truth is the universal relationship of things as they are; error, is the interpretation of things as they are not.”⁶¹ Significantly, truth was always practical and useful.

The ubiquity of certain doctrines across revelations was evidence of their inherent truth. For example, Davis believed that all faiths possessed an idea equivalent to the Christian Millennium. In his 1851 work *The Philosophy of Spiritual Intercourse*, he wrote that all “sects and systems of faith” had “a conception of heavenly happiness or millennial harmony” in the future. Nonetheless, they all had “*partial* and in many respects *incorrect* conceptions of that period, as each does also of God, of Immortality, and of that future Happiness to which mankind individually aspire.” Despite the errors of each, “the very existence of such a conception...*proves* that the elements and causes of that conception are eternal in Man and in Nature, and, therefore, homogeneous with the constitution and design of the Divine Mind.”⁶² Whether known as the Millennium, Elysium, New Atlantis, New Jerusalem, or whichever of the many forms it had taken, the general notion was truth and would naturally emerge cross-culturally and globally through the human “affinity” for truth, which was necessarily eternal. In the same way, the Golden Rule had been articulated by Confucius long before Jesus, and Zoroaster had conceived of a physical and general resurrection, albeit with errors.⁶³

Writing in 1859 and sounding rather Emersonian, Davis explained that “the same great Ideas are innate and common to all men; therefore, that no one man can ever be an originator of new ideas: yet some one mind may be organized and inspired to give to one principle the best and most useful expression.”⁶⁴ And yet, despite the supposed ubiquity of great ideas, Christianity remained the implicit standard for conceptualizing other religions. The Millennium and the general resurrection, distinctly Christian doctrines, were read across

⁶⁰ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 340.

⁶¹ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 3, 373.

⁶² Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Philosophy of Spiritual Intercourse: Being an Explanation of Modern Mysteries* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1868), 3-4.

⁶³ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 502, 519-20.

⁶⁴ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 5, 271.

religious boundaries as universal truths. In a somewhat circular manner, a truth could be identified as universal when it could be found everywhere. Various religions, rather than being altogether wrong, were merely partial.

In an 1851 example that laid bare the distinction between true interior religion and the hollowness of outward forms of worship, Davis posed the hypothetical question to himself: “*What church do you attend? Who do you hear preach?*” In answer, he provided an extended metaphorical description of his “church,” in which the altar was “Justice,” his preacher was “Reason,” and his sacred scripture was “a universal compend of Art, Science, Philosophy, Theology, and of the architectural principles upon which my church was built.” Summarizing his position in shades of Thomas Paine, he declared: “In truth, I attend no church but my Mind; I listen to no preacher but Reason; I read no book so studiously as Nature; I love no sermon so well as a ‘well-ordered life’; and believe and dream of no higher, or more glorious Heaven, in this or any other sphere, than the harmonious adaptation of one Spirit to another, and *all* to the Great Spirit Father!”⁶⁵ This was the natural form of worship. It consisted of using one’s own interior Reason, learning the laws of Nature, and living the life of a moral reformer in unity with one’s fellow man.⁶⁶

Indeed, expressing natural law in society through reform was essential to the practice of true religion. True religion was known by its fruits, since, Davis felt, “any system of religion has the *same* Origin with these laws [of Nature], then will its effects be as pure[,] as unfailing, and as universal.”⁶⁷ As with the Unitarians and Transcendentalists, an emphasis on moral self-culture was a central component of true religion.⁶⁸ It was not enough to discover

⁶⁵ Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Great Harmonia; Being a Philosophical Revelation of the Natural, Spiritual, and Celestial Universe: The Teacher*, vol. 2 (Boston: Benjamin B. Mussey & Co., 1851), 65, 67, 71. Square brackets are in the original quotation.; Paine writes “My own mind is my own church” in *Age of Reason*, 4.

⁶⁶ Davis invoked the church metaphor again in 1873, claiming to be a member of the Church of Arabula, a church “adapted to meet the wants of the twelve hundred millions now inhabiting the earth” and which recognized “no worldly distinctions, no sex, no race, no poverty, no riches.” In “seeming paradox,” Davis wrote, “this Church is not broad, because it is absolutely universal; it is exclusive, because it is boundlessly inclusive; it is dogmatic, because it is opulent with real knowledge; it is close communion, overflowing with charity and tenderness because its principles commune with ever thing that lives anywhere in the universe.” The articles of his church required the pursuit of truth, the rejection of error, the cultivation of morality and health, and charity and love towards others and the universe. Failure to make these natural laws the “guides and masters” one’s “whole soul and heart and life” was to be “excommunicated” from Truth. Indeed, Davis confessed to have rarely been a member “in good and regular standing” due to the lofty standards of this “Church of the Spirit.” Andrew Jackson Davis, *A Sacred Book, Containing Old and New Gospels: Derived and Translated from the Inspirations of Original Saints* (Boston: William White & Co., 1873), 73-77.

⁶⁷ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 491.

⁶⁸ Albanese, *Republic*, 161.

natural laws, rather they needed to be lived by and implemented in society. Once sectarianism had been done away with, Davis wrote, “man will manifest his true nature and dignity” and “be actuated by the great moral principles which were designed to govern his being.”⁶⁹ Once everyone had been “developed to the *fulness of the structure of the perfect man*,” with “the kingdom of Justice and Freedom within each soul and family—then you will see a manifestation of TRUE RELIGION.”⁷⁰

True religion was lived religion, the cultivation of natural ethics within the individual and the realization of these within society. As he affirmed in the *Great Harmonia* in an appropriation of the evangelical language of personal holiness, “The true believer is sanctified by his belief, and will exhibit the same in his life when less trammelled in the sphere of circumstances. He must, of necessity, be a friend of every man!” The fruits of true belief would lead a person to combat vice, drunkenness, poverty, and crime wherever they may be and to “be a friend of every philanthropic institution” that took up these noble causes.⁷¹ A saving faith was of necessity a lived faith.

As Davis explained in the pages of the Harmonialist periodical the *Univercœlum and Spiritual Philosopher*, the true moral nature of religion was, following the logic of correspondence, hinted at by the harmony apparent in the relations of atoms and the order of the solar system. One can see, Davis wrote, “that the same principle which unites any two atoms, and produces right relations everywhere in the physical world, constitutes the religion of the soul.” “Religion is the principle of righteousness,” he continued. “It is the moral and just relationship universally existing between all men, spirits, angels, worlds and the Deity. In a word, it is *Universal Justice*.”⁷² Indeed, Davis felt, “*an injustice done to one man—anywhere, by anybody—is an injustice and a dishonor to the whole brotherhood everywhere distributed*.”⁷³ As he explained in the *Great Harmonia*, moral self-culture was the foundation upon which the world’s harmony was built: “INDIVIDUAL HARMONY is essential to family harmony,” upon which social, national, and universal harmony were progressively built. “The

⁶⁹ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 11.

⁷⁰ Davis, *Free Thoughts Concerning Religion*, 37-38.

⁷¹ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 5, 254.

⁷² Andrew Jackson Davis, “The True but Unloved Religion,” *Univercœlum and Spiritual Philosopher* 1, no. 3 (Dec. 18, 1847): 33-34.

⁷³ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 5, 257.

whole proceeds from, and depends upon the soul, and perfection of the individual.”⁷⁴

Emphasizing self-development and moral relations to God and the world, Davis summarized true religion as follows: “First, then, ‘know thyself;’ secondly ‘love thy neighbor;’ thirdly, ‘be good, be truthful, be just, love God, and be happy.’ We know this to be the true but unloved religion.”⁷⁵

Revelation

Davis’ conceptualization of all truth, whether scientific or religious, as a unity, combined with humanity’s innate ability to receive it, lent itself to a broad understanding of revelation. Man was in communion with the Divine because the human mind was made out of a more “refined” material than the rest of the body, and therefore strained with magnetic attraction towards higher spiritual spheres in accordance with Davis’ law of association, which stated simply that “like attracts like” and that everything in the universe was attracted to its proper place. It was via clairvoyance, enabled through the principles of Mesmerism, that Davis was able to associate with the higher spiritual spheres and thus glean knowledge of the lower ones.⁷⁶

Mesmerism provided a supposedly scientific and natural model for revelation and the miraculous. Following earlier Mesmerists, both in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century continental Europe and nineteenth-century America, Davis moved in circles that conceived of the magnetic trance state as a potential explanation for religious experience throughout history⁷⁷ or as a method whereby one could access higher realities.⁷⁸ Indeed, even though the Transcendentalist concern for ongoing revelation tended to dwell less on the mechanics of how such revelation could occur, they were not insulated from broader American cultural currents. Both Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller took an interest in the potential

⁷⁴ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 2, 123.

⁷⁵ Davis, “The True but Unloved Religion,” 36; also, Davis, *Spiritual Intercourse*, 174.

⁷⁶ The law of association is reminiscent of Charles Fourier’s harmonial series or Swedenborg’s view that groups of similarly developed angels clustered together in heaven. Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 74, 142, 734.

⁷⁷ See Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 119-65.

⁷⁸ See Gabay, *Covert Enlightenment*, 43-79.

power of Mesmerism with the latter being particularly intrigued by its clairvoyant possibilities, such as those demonstrated by the famous Seeress of Prevorst.⁷⁹

Mesmerism gave Davis and his associates a powerful language to legitimize his revelations and imbue them with authority. Paradoxically, his lack of education and alleged simplicity lent credibility to the assertion that he received his impression from a spiritual source, a dynamic that would be repeated on a much larger scale with the many female mediums of mass Spiritualism.⁸⁰ Thus, William Fishbough, Davis' Universalist scribe and associate, emphasized the young seer's ignorance in the introduction to the *Principles of Nature*. He described the method of channelling "Nature's Divine Revelations" as one in which Davis would enter into a sympathetic state with the magnetic operator, Dr. Lyon, and become catatonic, a "condition...correspond[ing] almost precisely to that of *physical death*." Kept alive by his connection to the magnetizer, Davis' mind was "freed from the sphere of the body" and all "preconceived ideas." Out of body, he was free to "associate" with knowledge from the higher spiritual spheres.⁸¹

Subsequently asserting his independence from magnetic operators, Davis claimed to be able to enter a clairvoyant trance state on his own at any time while retaining memories of everything he learned there⁸² and increasingly differentiated between mediums, as mere instruments for facilitating spiritual communication, and clairvoyants like himself, who had the ability to directly receive superior knowledge.⁸³ As Albert Gabay noted, Davis was significant for shifting the emphasis of Mesmerism from the therapeutic to the revelatory. Davis was the "fulcrum of the new practice of mediumship, the moment when magnetism yields to spiritualism."⁸⁴ Or, as Robert C. Fuller put it, "Mesmerism had unwittingly played midwife to trance mediumship."⁸⁵

⁷⁹ von Frank, "Religion," 127.

⁸⁰ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 83.

⁸¹ Fishbough, introduction to *Principles of Nature*, xvii; Davis provides more detailed explanations on pages 30-56.

⁸² Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 1, 204-205.

⁸³ Albanese, *Republic*, 223, 225-26.

⁸⁴ Gabay, *Covert Enlightenment*, 228-30.

⁸⁵ Fuller, *Mesmerism*, 98.

Revelation was also derived from a divine influx of truth, reminiscent of Swedenborg's doctrines.⁸⁶ Nature, Davis declared in *Principles of Nature*, had made man a "receptacle" for the "breathings of the Great Positive Mind."⁸⁷ Similarly, in Hartford, he affirmed that "God speaks in the sanctuary of the living soul! He writes his religion upon the everlasting hills. It is simple, grand, universal. It never changes." Like Emerson's famous call in *Nature* for men to see God face-to-face, Davis demanded, "Is there no inexhaustible fountain from whose flowing rivets each soul may freely drink?"⁸⁸ Humans, being "celestial" by nature, had a natural tendency to associate with divine principles. Davis was "impressed to affirm" in the *Great Harmonia*, "that the deepest source of Truth is Intuition." This intuition was an "innate power of feeling a Truth" and "the genius of the soul." Trust in the power of individual reason and cultivating interior intuition was central to Davis' project of overcoming sectarian division and ushering in universal harmony. "I venture to say," he assured his listeners, "that you all can, if you will but open you [sic] minds to the full penetration of thought, feel what truth is. Forget your sectarian thoughts, and you can easily see, what is Truth? Try it." "There is nothing more true," he advised, "than that no man can enter into the kingdom of Truth and happiness, unless he becomes simple-minded, and as a little child." This did not mean "weakness or imbecility," Davis was quick to point out. Namely, it was "an honest, guileless, uncalculating, truth-loving state—a state which, in the past and present conditions of human society, is about as frequently developed as a Christ is born." Jesus, not the son of God, but a highly-developed individual, was rare, but not unique, in his spiritual attainments. Nonetheless, the truth was accessible to all, within limits. "By willing strongly to see and feel Truth," Davis promised, "irrespective of any creed, men, books, or systems, you are certain to get it; or, at least, you will get all you can possibly employ to any advantage."⁸⁹ Revelation, progressive like all other things, was always tailored to the particular needs of the age in which it arrived.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Swedenborg believed that there was flow of good from God, through the heavens, and onto earth, as well as an opposing infernal influx from the hells. Receiving these flows drew one either towards good or evil. Similarly, the angels could breathe inspiration into individuals with whom they had an affinity. See Block, *New Church*, 41-45; Gabay, *Covert Enlightenment*, 11.

⁸⁷ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 328.

⁸⁸ Davis, *Free Thoughts Concerning Religion*, 10-11, 38.

⁸⁹ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 3, 372-74.

⁹⁰ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 589.

The advancement of living things opened up their awareness to higher truths. As Davis informed readers in *Principles of Nature* on the basis of his clairvoyant visions, reminiscent of Swedenborg's planetary travels, the people of Saturn—the most developed society in the solar system—effortlessly received interior impressions which we could not. Described in phrenological terms, with “very high and long” heads, the cerebral makeup of the people of Saturn permitted them to have revelations which were currently beyond our grasp and communicate with the second spiritual sphere.⁹¹ Beyond straightforward communication, the inhabitants of higher spheres could merge their thoughts with lower inhabitants, creating prophetic dreams. Foreshadowing séance Spiritualism, which would explode onto the American scene with the Hydesville rappings one year later in 1848, Davis announced that this “truth will ere long present itself in the form of a living demonstration. And the world will delight the ushering in of that era when the interiors of men will be opened, and the spiritual communication will be established such as is now being enjoyed by the inhabitants of Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, because of their superior refinement.”⁹² As discussed in the next chapter, Davis' timely prophecy would quickly come to lend legitimacy to the marriage of the Harmonial Philosophy to the phenomena of the séance.

By the same token, however, the humans of earth were open to truths which our earlier ancestors and animals could not access. Because of Davis' law of association, where like things attracted, more refined matter was drawn to interior truth. This explained why different prophets throughout time had only received partial measures of the truth; they were all at different stages of development and therefore were enlightened to different interior principles. Moreover, the world as a whole was not always ready to receive a given revelation. Ancient prophets, whose teachings had been recorded in the Old Testament, caught glimpses of a time when there would be harmony and global happiness. These prophets, Davis asserted, also predicted that Jesus would necessarily come as a “great Exemplar” of the qualities that every single human on earth would one day possess. However, these early prophets did not receive any revelations about the existence of spiritual spheres because the world was not sufficiently advanced. It was not until Swedenborg that

⁹¹ Ibid., 180-83.

⁹² Ibid., 675-76.

the world received that wisdom. Some revelations from Swedenborg and others, such as the Revelation of St. John, were still beyond us until we ascended to higher spheres.⁹³

Davis' understanding of who constituted a prophet was thus informed by his notions of interiority. Those whom history called prophets were merely individuals who had reached a stage of development where they were particularly in tune with natural principles. Revelations could be found in writings that went beyond the traditional understanding of what constituted scriptures. For instance, Davis considered ancient philosophers, such as Galen, Plato, and Socrates, to be prophets whose writings contained important principles, albeit with considerable flaws. The socialist theorist Charles Fourier, whose ideas influenced Davis' utopian plans for social reorganization, was also a prophet who "systematized" the "pure principles" of Jesus. Nodding to the mesmeric clairvoyance that had launched his own career, Davis also noted the valuable revelations of the Seeress of Prevorst.⁹⁴ As Davis later stated, with the passage of time "the world will progressively learn to highly respect all prophets, and seers, and religious chieftains; not with that unnatural and unhealthy veneration whereby men are converted and deified into Gods, but with that sound and healthy deference which is due to all our brothers who stand, or have stood, before the world in the pure character of philanthropists or moral reformers."⁹⁵

Like the Transcendentalists who looked to "Representative Men" to drive history forward, Davis believed that progress was aided by the inward revelations of a "TRUE REFORMER," who combined "the qualities of the Patriot, the Hero, the Legislator, the Poet, the Artist, the Philosopher, and the Theologian, with a Universal Love and a desire for Universal Harmony."⁹⁶ As he explained in an 1855 issue of William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator*, "The truth is this: some theological hero or Napoleon in religious reform—a Luther, a Calvin, a Wesley, a Swedenborg—strikes the plow deep into a luxurious soil of spirituality, turns up a new stratum of thought, capable of yielding a still richer harvest, with a new conception of God."⁹⁷ Such a reformer, by virtue of being more developed than his peers, would present to them new truths, notably encompassing areas beyond the scope of

⁹³ Ibid., 427-28, 548, 589, 591, 734-36.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 584-85, 590.

⁹⁵ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 3, 155.

⁹⁶ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 2, 95.

⁹⁷ Andrew Jackson Davis, "The Gods of Religious Sects," *The Liberator* 25, no. 23 (Sept. 7, 1855): 144.

what would traditionally constitute revelation, for example, art. “The true REFORMER is necessarily superior to his age,” Davis wrote. “His value to his age and the world consists in his superiority to them.” Regrettably, however, Davis noted that “in proportion as he is superior to the received and established laws and doctrines of the day, will his position be misunderstood, his motives misapprehended, his teachings misrepresented, and his intrinsic worth unknown.”⁹⁸ Thus, there was also a natural check on the speed by which reform could happen. Such limitations were consistent with Davis’ assertion that certain revelations, such as those of Swedenborg, could not be useful to the world in its present state.⁹⁹

Even a great reformer such as Jesus did not escape the prejudice of his age. Even though he was “more simple in his mode of developing laws...and his laws were less numerous” than previous reformers like Zoroaster, Moses, Solon, Socrates, and Plato, Jesus was still misunderstood. His simple injunction, “That ye love one another,” which was “a concentration of the excellencies of all previous laws; and a summary statement of what Jesus was designed, or...of what he was constitutionally qualified, to reveal to Man,” was still too much for his fellows. Jesus, Davis declared, “was superior to his age, and his age comprehended him not. He was a martyr to the philanthropy of patriotism; he was a martyr to the zeal and dauntless courage of heroism; and he was a martyr to the simplest law that was ever uttered. In a word, he was above his nation and his age; he was a reformer, and his age nailed him to the cross!”¹⁰⁰

The reformers Davis mentioned ran the gamut from Zoroaster, Moses, and Jesus, to George Washington, and Charles Fourier. Indeed, “Every nation,” he observed, “has had its reformer, and its truly original author, and its truly inspired Hero. And every age has given birth to some important truth.” Even among the least developed people on earth, reformers could appear to guide their people in a kind of natural aristocracy:

Far down in the depths of humanity’s history, I can perceive uncultivated, simple, and enthusiastic hearts—beating for the general good of mankind. The plains of Arabia have been traversed by the savage; but some representative of refinement and civilization has led that savage onward—some cool and powerful chieftain has been his friend and father. The savage and barbarian tribes of the desert were never without

⁹⁸ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 2, 73.

⁹⁹ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 587.

¹⁰⁰ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 2, 78-79.

God; they had some kind of a reformer in their midst—a nobleman by nature, who would unite their interests and lead them to the accomplishment of wiser ends.¹⁰¹

Nonetheless, “every age and nation has also had its dungeons, its racks, and its stakes...by which to cramp, and crush, and crucify its greatest discoverer or its most inspired prophet.” Worse still, Davis noted that “Every age and nation has also had its false reformer, its false author, and its false prophet.” What this problem required was a “standard...whereby to measure and judge, with an impartial and most dispassionate judgment, who is, and who is not, the true manifestation of the divine spirit, and the true guide to the human soul.”¹⁰²

Unsurprisingly, the standard against which the reformer was measured was Nature. “[W]hile the world of minds are worshipping various kinds of religious or sacred books, which trammel and stupefy the spontaneous impulses of the Soul,” Davis declared, the Reformer “has no other book than Nature.” As the true source of laws and revelation, he noted, “*it is the only book* which can not be changed, misinterpreted, or manufactured by human hands; and in it no passages can be erased, or interpolated, or transposed, to suit the interest and predilections of clergymen or laymen.” In short, he concluded, “If any man is considered a reformer, and, at the same time, receives any other book than Nature, for his revelation and guide, then *he is not a True Reformer.*”¹⁰³

One of the modes by which such reformers were inspired was by direct illumination from the Divine. As Davis described it in 1867, with striking parallels to the Transcendentalists:

This Arabula [“the divine guest”]...It appears in the philosophical, moral, and spiritual teachings of Persians, Indians, Chinese, Jews, Greeks, Romans, Christians. It is peculiar to no people; to no religion; to no sect of believers; to no epoch or era in human history...[I]t everywhere dies upon the cross...It is worshiped as a God by some; is denounced as a Devil by others...It loves the companionship of the down-trodden and wretched; yet it enters the temples of rich priests, and holds controversies with the chief dignitaries of the empire. It is powerful with words; preaches sermons on mountains and in cities; fearlessly rebukes sin, forgives the lost women; stills the tempest, brings the dead to life; and, lastly, having no power over evil chieftains of the State, it falls into the hands of executioners, and dies, forgiving its enemies and blessing every thing human.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 74-75.

¹⁰² Ibid., 74-78, 83.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 98.

¹⁰⁴ Andrew Jackson Davis, *Arabula; or, the Divine Guest. Containing a New Collection of Gospels* (Boston: William White & Company, 1867), 37-38.

The indwelling spirit of God, the Arabula, was existent in all places and times.¹⁰⁵ While it was the animating spiritual force behind Christ, it was also not exclusive to him. All of the world's religions and true teachings were underpinned by the same interior spark of divine truth. It was merely the peculiar environmental conditions that altered its expression. Good things resulted in heeding its voice, and atrocities were committed by people who turned away from its guiding light. "Do you not perceive its presence in all the *good* men do, and in all the *truth* they speak?" Davis wrote. "When a volume of Light shines into the world, regardless by whom or by what it shines, do you not discern the *same qualities*, though differing in quantity according to person, circumstance, condition, or country?"¹⁰⁶ As Davis noted in a sympathetic treatment of the Shaker prophetess Mother Ann Lee, "Ann Lee demonstrated the IDEA, the impersonal Principle, that *inspiration* and *revelation* are not confined to China, India, Persia, Judea, Greece, Germany, France, England, Australia, or America; that...the celestial streams set just as *surely* through woman's soul as through man's."¹⁰⁷

Still, climate could even affect the quality of revelation, as well as race. As Davis remarked in the *Great Harmonia*, and in seeming contradiction to his stated belief that retrogression was impossible, "Give us endless summer and changeless climate...and ere four generations shall have passed, we will return to you with swarthy cuticle, our heads enshrouded in impenetrable darkness, our once flashing eyes dim with rayless ignorance, and our once powerful arms weak as sickness, swinging idly by our sides." Thus, the "blazing heat and sandy immensity" of Africa shaped "the formation of her son's peculiar temperament. They know little of ancestral progressiveness; nothing of altars consecrated to liberty."¹⁰⁸ Davis' link between revelation and racial hierarchies was further evidenced by a series of charts he produced that associated "Savagism" in government and "Fetichism" in

¹⁰⁵ Davis explained elsewhere that the Arabula was, among other epithets, "an intelligent spiritual presence"; "the inextinguishable light of intuition"; "the Father-and-Mother Spirit in each human heart"; and "the eternal Christ of the spirit." Davis, *Sacred Book*, 70.

¹⁰⁶ Davis, *Arabula*, 38.

¹⁰⁷ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 5, 192, 196.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

religion with the “Negro” stage of “development.” Anglo-Americans, by contrast, produced “Republicanism” and “Monotheism.”¹⁰⁹

Davis’ explanations of revelation also looked to what he termed “psychological” causes, which leaned heavily on Mesmerism and phrenology. In the third volume of the *Great Harmonia*, Davis provided detailed explanations of different human mental states: the rudimentary state, the psychological state, the sympathetic or psycho-sympathetic state, the transition state, the somnambolic state, the clairvoyant state, and the spiritual state.¹¹⁰ Among the seven mental states outlined in the 1852 volume, the “transitional state” was the most significant for Davis’ explanation of historical religion. It stood in mediatory position between the “psycho-sympathetic” state, in which the individual was rendered susceptible to external impressions and thought transference (i.e. telepathy), and the “somnambolic state,” which was the lowest degree of clairvoyance. The psycho-sympathetic state could explain lesser feats, such as Elisha knowing the thoughts of the Syrian king from afar, a feat performed by “placing himself in sympathetic connection with the mind of the Syrian king.” Davis also stated that examples of this state of mind were depicted in central American and Egyptian hieroglyphics.¹¹¹

The more significant prophets, however, were in the transitional state. In a universally applicable model for religious inspiration, Davis wrote:

I now proceed to affirm that all religious chieftains known to the world—Moses, Isaiah, Paul, Mohammed, Zoroaster, [Joseph] Smith, Swedenborg—were all, more or less, in what I term a *transition state* of mind, . . . a state in which the soul is strongly sympathetic with hereditary impressions, with educational convictions, and with prevailing forms of belief, while, almost at the same time, the mind exhibits a kind of consistency and independence of thought in proportion to the preponderance of the orderly faculties in the mental structure.¹¹²

As such, prophets could break free of the confines of sectarian religion and the prejudices of their environment to the degree to which they were personally developed. Yet, lacking in

¹⁰⁹ Davis, *Magic Staff*, 374-81. Davis’ model was similar to the second-generation Transcendentalist Samuel Johnson, who also argued that religion was a progressively evolving outgrowth of cultural conditions and human evolution. The two men understood the development of the mind in phrenological terms. See Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, 290-91; Versluis, *American Transcendentalism*, 260.

¹¹⁰ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 5, 5, 46.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 130, 241.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 185.

fully developed clairvoyant gift, these religious chieftains were still heavily influenced by their surroundings.

Davis' explanation of the transition state both naturalized and universalized the concept of revelation. As a psychological phenomenon, the mental state of prophets dispensed with the need for supernatural revelation. Higher states of mind could be understood through rational investigation and be cultivated, which was in line with Davis' progressive view of the cosmos. A psychological explanation also assumed a certain uniformity of human experience. Religion was therefore an inherent category of human experience, enabled by the natural workings of the mind. Indeed, as Davis affirmed, the "philosophy of the psychological and psycho-sympathetic manifestations of the human mind... shows the psychological condition of the ancient prophets to be substantially identical with the mental illumination or aberration of several persons in this age."¹¹³

Conveniently, Davis' model provided him a way to simultaneously accept different revelations as real and valuable while explaining away teachings that did not harmonize with other religions or with his own philosophy. Perhaps even more significantly, as historians such as R. Laurence Moore and Ann Taves have argued, the understanding of revelation advanced by Davis and other Spiritualists after him importantly pre-figured and informed the approach to religion of William James and other early psychologists and psychical researchers; in particular, psychological theories about the universality of religious experience, the notion of a subconscious mind, and religious as reflecting certain types—such as James' "sick soul" or "healthy minded" individuals—can be traced in part to Mesmerism and Spiritualism.¹¹⁴

Such psychological explanations also provided Davis with the leeway to give prophets the benefit of the doubt when it came to honesty. While he remained decidedly anticlerical, Davis was more forgiving of the motives of the prophets themselves, a move that brought him somewhat away from the imposture theory of the Deists. Nonetheless, good-faith did not equate to truth. While careful to point out that religious revelation should not be mistaken for insanity, Davis provided the hypothetical example of a man in a "lunatic asylum" who would swear that "'the Lord' forbade him stepping from the front door and

¹¹³ Ibid., 153.

¹¹⁴ Moore, *White Crows*, 133-68; Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 269-91.

enjoying the fresh air.” Ernest though he may be, few individuals would accept the validity of his claims. In the same way, prophets could be “explained by a proper application...of the many and various laws and impulses which control the mental constitution of man.”¹¹⁵

In a self-depreciating example, Davis even referred back to the poorer judgment of his younger self. He recalled how in an 1844 lecture he had boasted: “I possess the power of extending my vision *throughout all space*—can see things past, present, and to come. I have now arrived at the *highest degree* of knowledge which the human mind is capable of acquiring. I am master of the general sciences—can speak *all* languages—impart instructions upon those deep and *hidden* things in Nature which the world has not been able to solve.” With the benefit of hindsight, however, Davis came to realize that the more he learned about Nature’s laws, the less qualified he was to make such grandiose claims. At the time, however, the young Davis made the claim in good faith, ignorant as he was of what he still did not know about the universe and the spirit world. His good character could not compensate for his unrealistic estimate of his own abilities. The case, Davis wrote, “demonstrates the fact, that in case a religious chieftain is honest-minded, his claims to perfect knowledge and miraculous inspiration are based wholly upon his greatest foe,—namely—upon his own ignorance!” Proof of honesty was not proof enough, though deception also abounded. “Dishonesty and Ignorance,” Davis lamented, were “the twin-born of unprogressed minds on the earth, [which] have peopled the religious world with millions of false and pernicious doctrines.”¹¹⁶ While imposture and priestcraft certainly wrought havoc, well-meaning ignorance could be equally harmful. As he put it in 1851, “all ‘mysteries,’ when properly understood, may be traced to one of three causes, namely:—to Nature's immutable principles; to the misapprehension of individuals; to the misrepresentations of enthusiastic zealots.”¹¹⁷

Thus it was with other prophets too; to challenge their claims to infallibility was not to impugn their honesty. To make his point, Davis cited an eclectic mixture of prophets and explicitly framed them as equally legitimate and worthy of belief. “Was Zoroaster honest in putting forth this claim to infallible and boundless knowledge? Certainly! Then why not accept him as a divinely appointed messenger of Truth?” Davis asked. Zoroaster’s claims were little different from Moses’, but Moses’ writings were “in language far less sublime than

¹¹⁵ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 5, 209.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 210-11.

¹¹⁷ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 2, 8.

the professions of Zoroaster.” “Do you believe that Mohammed was honest?” continued the rhetorical line of questioning. “I certainly do. Why not, then, take him as an infallible teacher?” Similarly, Davis argued that “the testimony of Ann Lee...has an equally sound claim upon your credence.... Her testimony is far better supported by others than the testimony of the principal Bible authors.” Hindu prophets were no different. “Do you believe that this loyal Son [Krishnah] of the Hindoo God [Paramah] was honest?” came the question. “Most certainly! Why not, then, accept him as an infallible teacher—the foundation link in a spiritual and supernatural chain of miraculous events?” Davis replied. Readers might object that “Zoroaster, Mohammed, and Ann Lee were either deceiving or deceived, while the Bible authors and Swedenborg were truly inspired. Now this is very unreasonable,” Davis observed. “The testimony of one is just as sound as the other.” Given that both Daniel and Mohammed claimed to have been visited by the angel Gabriel with no other proof than their respective testimonies, it followed, Davis argued “that you have no more reason to question the truth or honesty of one chieftain than the honesty of the other. The cases are parallel.”¹¹⁸

No prophet or revelation could be accepted as infallible. “[W]hen a human being is accepted as an infallible revelator,” Davis wrote, “there is an end to all reasoning upon the probability or possibility of the reality of his revelations.” At best, there could be the “mere show of reasoning” which was “almost a sacrilegious treatment of divine things,—an insult to utterances of the Lord through his chosen vessels.”¹¹⁹ Though there was a wide variety in the moral character and quality of different prophets, Davis nonetheless called for rigorous investigation into them all: “The professions of Mohammed are just as worthy of a candid investigation as the corresponding professions of Moses; so, likewise, I esteem the high and incomprehensible claims of Swedenborg as much deserving of our candid attention as the analogous presumptions and assumptions of Joseph Smith.” In claiming divine inspiration and infallibility, prophets opened themselves up to investigation, however much believers might object. As Davis observed, “In the matter of professing to be the agents and selected messengers of God to man, these religious chieftains place themselves on the same identical platform.”¹²⁰ While accepting the model that revelations arrived through prophets, Davis was unwilling to accept the orthodox Christian view that the prophets of the Bible were

¹¹⁸ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 3, 204-207.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 185-86.

categorically separate from those they dismissed as impostors or deluded. The claim to professing divine truth made prophets equivalent, and the quality of the purported revelation was to be judged independently.

True to the democratic ethos of his namesake, Andrew Jackson Davis rejected the blatant double standard of judging a prophet's credibility based on education or social standing. "It would be presumption for a plebeian character to assert that the Lord had most graciously pleased to grant to him the 'privilege' of conversing with spirits and angels....But let a nobleman [Swedenborg]—a finely educated and esteemed patrician—set up a claim to heavenly privileges on the score of an ambassador [sic] admitted to the courts of a celestial aristocracy, and he is very likely to be believed." While defenders of Swedenborg, such as Professor George Bush, condemned Joseph Smith's claims—"made in all soberness and simple-mindedness," Davis noted—as "the veriest babblings of fanatical delusion," the truth was that "these two religious chieftains...are precisely identical; only Swedenborg was more comprehensive and hence correspondingly presumptive."¹²¹ Perhaps Davis saw a kindred spirit in the lowly origins of the Mormon prophet. Regardless, both prophets deserved to have their revelations put to the trial of Reason.

Historical Religion

In opposition to the eternal truths of interior religion stood the outward trappings of external or formal religion. External religions were not complete or true expressions of eternal truth, rather they had been warped by history and by priestcraft; they were only partial religions. This made them useless, if not downright pernicious, since they were based on superstition and sectarian division rather than natural principles. Nevertheless, if nature had equipped everyone with an innate sense of reason and interior divinity, from whence came the multitude of historical, or positive, religions and sects which filled the world and led people astray? According to Davis, "religious strife and party antagonism" had been disuniting humanity since the "early stages" of its development "until at the present day there exists a universal discord."¹²²

¹²¹ Ibid., 188, 208.

¹²² Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 710.

Davis emphasized the shared sources of different religions in the past and charted their development. Significantly, such an understanding of religious development relativized Christianity vis-à-vis other religions. Like the others, it emerged in a particular historical context, rather than arriving as a complete revelation. Indeed, its very doctrines owed to prior systems. Still, despite the hereditary nature of error which persisted, the outward forms of religion also advanced in tandem with society, and, as we have seen, the individual development of the world's prophets. With striking similarity to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker, and particularly the second generation Transcendentalists and Unitarians of the Free Religious Association, Davis understood the historical religions of the world to be continually evolving towards the absolute religion of Nature. The progress towards this absolute would never cease.¹²³

Sectarianism and Priestcraft

Reflective of the rationalistic and deistic side of Davis' thought, he was highly anticlerical. Whether purposefully or not, clergymen, Davis felt, exerted a profoundly negative influence on society. The exclusivity, dogma, and superstition they taught created faction and discord by turning believers against each other. By discouraging free thought and ongoing revelation, religious authorities stymied the realization of true religion in the world. They were merely interested in maintaining control, and the resulting proliferation of sects encouraged disbelief and confusion among the people.

All "arbitrary laws" and "religions and superficial systems of worship" were human inventions, whether "of the Chinese, of the Hindoos, of the Mohammedans, of the Persians, of the Jews, or of any who derive all their distinctive impressions from the teachings of the Primitive History [Old Testament]." Followers of external religions did nothing but sow sectarian conflict by claiming exclusivity and condemning each other's adherents. And yet, Davis asked, "can there be more than *one* true religion?" He urged that "Mankind should forsake all dogmatism—all sectarianism—all mythology—all unrighteousness—and become at once associated branches of the great Tree of Righteousness."¹²⁴ "If you seek Religion, do

¹²³ Robinson, "Free Religion Movement," 617.

¹²⁴ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 19, 486, 491.

you adopt as final the magnificent mummeries and cabalistic ceremonies of the Established Church?" asked Davis rhetorically in 1867. Clearly, the answer was in the negative. And yet, alluding to the empty rituals of the Pharisees in the Gospels, Davis lamented that "whited sepulchers attract thousands of worshipers, who habitually neglect the temple of the spirit."¹²⁵

Inferior to interior religion, the outward or external forms of religion were, and ought to be, subject to change; they expressed as much truth as circumstances allowed. "Let us discriminate between religion and the symbols or *vessels* which are supposed to contain it," Davis argued at the Hartford Bible Convention. "Man outgrows the clothing of his youth; may he not also outgrow the symbols of his religion? The essence of all religions may be immaculate, which I fully believe, but if the symbols containing it be deformed, does it not follow that the shape of the religion would be correspondingly defective?"¹²⁶ All religions, Davis wrote in the *Great Harmonia*, were "crystallized about some *central* principle, which some particular mind was constituted and inspired to realize and reveal." The problem arose, however, "when talented men confound private thoughts with universal 'ideas,' and exalt egotistic facts and convictions as though they were eternal *truths*." This resulted in "the controversies and sectarian animosities which distract the world."¹²⁷

It was only by challenging organized religion that the true natural religion would be allowed to flourish. Sectarianism held back humanity because it prevented people from having unified interests, though class differences also played a large role in setting people against one another. Sectarian bigotry had "check and arrested" the "natural tendency of... man to breathe forth an element of universal love, unity, peace and harmony."¹²⁸ The "*mental* slavery" that religious authority inflicted upon believers was like the "*physical* slavery" that was being inflicted upon blacks in the southern United States. Clergymen were like the slaveholders by propping up religious sects. No position in society could be "more unenviable and more corrupting," wrote Davis. He was emphatic that "all the miseries, the conflicts, the wars, the devastations, and the hostile prejudices, existing in the world, are

¹²⁵ Davis, *Arabula*, 7, 9.

¹²⁶ Davis, *Free Thoughts Concerning Religion*, 11.

¹²⁷ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 5, 271.

¹²⁸ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 376.

owing to the corrupting situation and influence of clergymen.” Individual clergymen might be “*good in spirit, but [they were] unholy in situation and influence.*”¹²⁹

At the Hartford Bible Convention, Davis remarked how clergymen guarded the “*pulpit*—a consecrated battlement, where laymen, no matter how talented and accomplished, are not allowed to enter!” Gatherings like the convention challenged this exclusive authority, however. Davis and the convention-goers, “unflinching *believers* in the existence and universality of Eternal Truth,” came to “*the freeman’s pulpit*—the public rostrum—and invite[d] hither the victims of the other mode of discussing religion.”¹³⁰ By contrast, priests, as Davis described them in *Principles of Nature*, did not convert people to a religion, rather they converted them to “*sectarianism.*” Furthermore, churches preached differences between people. By dividing people into good and evil, society brought suffering to those who were declared “evil.” Those who were called “good” or “Elect,” Davis chided, hid behind a facade of piety. Such divisions could only bring about pain and discord for the collective race.¹³¹ Denouncing priestly religion, he announced that man had made a “God after his own image, a devil after his own likeness, a theology after his own interest, and a system of practice after his own prejudices!”¹³² If millennial happiness could only be obtained by a universal understanding of the undying truths found in Nature, anyone who kept people from the unifying influence of these truths was guilty of wreaking untold havoc.

Even worse than merely keeping people disunited in their interest, the clergy were responsible for making the lot of the labourer and the common man even more dire. Due to their natural closeness to the earth, workers were predisposed to be free of sectarianism and sense the true principles of the Deity in the nature surrounding them. The clergyman, however, soon ruined this and cowed the common people with a fear of hell and damnation. No sooner were the people labouring in close proximity to the earth brought into industrialized society then they had their “natural genius” suppressed. Once the worker was dragged away from nature, Davis warned, “The clergyman presents to his mind a profound mystery, not surpassed by the invention of the Chaldeans or of the priests of the Juggernaut!” The desperation the poor man felt when the priest’s religion conflicted with natural reason,

¹²⁹ Ibid., 13, 699.

¹³⁰ Davis, *Free Thoughts Concerning Religion*, 8-9.

¹³¹ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 716, 718.

¹³² Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 706.

along with the fear he felt that he and his family could not be saved, drove him to vice. Drunkenness and crime followed and the man's family would eventually become destitute when he died at an early age.¹³³

Sectarian controversy was also responsible for promoting spiritual skepticism. Reflecting perhaps the modern anxiety over scientific materialism and the disorienting denominationalism of nineteenth-century America, Davis lamented in the *Liberator* that “antagonism among Bible-believers generates the Atheistic God in the reasoning classes.” The “Atheistic God” was like the abstract and distant Deity of Deism and was “a kind of hyper-galvanic Principle” in the world, “making mankind philosophical magnetic batteries of the hour, and the creatures of an inexorable ‘Fate.’” Christians, Davis argued, made up a small proportion of the world, and yet were “divided and subdivided into about fifty different distinct ‘systems of salvation,’”—a situation that was bound to undermine confidence in their claims.¹³⁴

Despite such ills, clergymen, like all people, were merely acting in their interest, Davis wrote. While other people had an interest in being free to exercise their natural reason, the priests of the world had an interest in suppressing it and promoting ignorance and submissiveness.¹³⁵ Clergymen “fear the electric fire of intelligence, and shrink from its penetration,” Davis declared, invoking a metaphor of the very scientific progress the religious establishment hoped to stay.¹³⁶ An interest in an ignorant flock was something that was shared by all clergymen throughout the world as chieftains in the distant past sought to control their tribes and amass wealth for themselves. In the end, though, the struggle of clerics to suppress human inquiry was doomed to fail for, despite their ill influence, the clergy could not prevent the “testimonies of a divine Nature” from being expressed.¹³⁷ Davis made the point forcefully in the *Great Harmonia*: “I say the church and the priests have used their old nostrums long enough. The trial has been fairly made, the verdict of enlightened men has been rendered, and it is now time to apply the remedies suggested by the Harmonial Philosophy. That is to say, let Nature and Reason prescribe their own remedies, and we shall

¹³³ Ibid., 693, 703-704.

¹³⁴ Davis, “The Gods of Religious Sects,” 144.

¹³⁵ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 700-701, 707.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 705.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 707, 714-16.

soon discover the true means and methods of individual happiness and of universal peace.”¹³⁸ The damaging influence of organized religion would soon crumble and give way to true religion, founded on natural principles.

Origins of Theology

Davis placed the origins of historical religion in a long chain of events dating back to the earliest dawn of humanity. Primitive errors were transmitted through generations, compounded by an increasingly complex mythological theology, and clung to with a stubborn bigotry. As he wrote in *Principles of Nature*, “the conviction of the Mohammedan, the Chaldean, the Persian, and the Christian, are all derived only from hereditary impressions.... All are seriously *convinced*, and all are as seriously *deceived*.”¹³⁹ While true natural principles might lay beneath various doctrines, these were often mired so deep in superstition as to be unintelligible. The “influence” of differing theologies was “partial,” Davis explained, “and their tendency is to restrict the teachings of Universal Law as displayed in Nature and in man, and they are therefore unholy, imperfect, and positively unprofitable.”¹⁴⁰ The fall of man was real, but it was in the turning away from interior principles. The corruptions of the historical religions were sustained by a bigoted attachment to one’s own traditions and a contempt for those of one’s fellows.

Reminiscent of Emerson’s remark in *Nature* that “The corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language,”¹⁴¹ Davis linked the beginning of the world’s social ills with the creation of symbolic language. Reading the book of Genesis as allegorically corresponding to the early development of humanity, Davis provided an elaborate description of how the first fully modern humans emerged in the fertile crescent of the Euphrates and Tigris, and divided into two tribes corresponding to Adam and Eve. Echoing Swedenborg, Francis Bacon, John Tolland, Emerson and other proponents of an Adamic or primitive

¹³⁸ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 3, 223.

¹³⁹ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 711-12. This was also a common Deist position. Consider Ethan Allen’s lament that “most of the human race do not, or will not will not reason, with any considerable degree of propriety, on the traditions of their forefathers, but receive them implicitly.” Allen, *Oracle of Man*, 115.

¹⁴⁰ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 491. Elihu Palmer made a similar characterization, arguing that “man should abandon his errors, and return to nature” and “elevate his conceptions above the prejudices resulting from a partial religion.” Palmer, *Principles of Nature*, 131.

¹⁴¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” in *American Transcendentalists*, 44.

language—a universal language in which signifier and signified corresponded perfectly¹⁴²—Davis informed his readers that the original humans displayed their interior natures involuntarily through their facial expressions, and were, therefore, not susceptible to deception and falsehood. With the advent of symbolic, vocal language, deception became possible and strife followed. The acquisition of symbolic language, Davis explained, corresponded to the story of the Tree of Knowledge as deceptive language was used to hide the nakedness of human interiority. Following this fracture, the Near Eastern tribe, which was Cain, violently subjugated its peaceful Asian neighbour, Abel, before relocating to the barren land of Nod on the borders of Europe.¹⁴³

The pernicious influence of symbolic language further enabled the creation of a “*mythological theology*” divorced from the truth of interior principles. Looking for the causes of their fighting and misery, people sought to explain their condition through the malefic influence of “breaths” of wind believed to emanate from the sun. Harkening to the priestcraft theories of eighteenth-century Deists, Davis claimed that an early emperor maintained power by telling his subjects that he kept the sun’s influence at bay. Subsequent theology built on the previous mythology and situated a greater source of fire beneath the earth, which was supposedly on the back of a large animal. Failure to obey was threatened with damnation in the flames below. The increasing complexity of this mythological theology over time demonstrated the principle of progression existed in religion, but that this evolution could be stymied by erroneous foundations. The “improved faculties of later generations,” Davis lamented, used “the gross materials of the primitive family” to craft “a most gigantic and imperative belief...claiming authority to govern the freeborn minds of mankind!”¹⁴⁴ In other words, error was compound. The misconceptions of primitive humanity provided a faulty basis on which subsequent theologies were built. In the pages of the *Univercælum* he explained the relationship between the interior religious impulse and its outward forms: “Religion, then, is an integral element eternally established in the human mind,” but it “develops itself into a variety of manifestations, according to the favorableness or

¹⁴² It was often contended that Noah possessed the original language—along with the primitive religion—but that it had been lost at the confusion of tongues at Babel. Some speculated that traces of it might remain. Chinese, Egyptian, and Hebrew letters were sometimes theorized to be possible remnants of the original language on account of their antiquity and pictorial characters. Harrison, *‘Religion’ and the Religions*, 146-57; Goodrick-Clarke, *Western Esoteric Traditions*, 164; Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, 93-94.

¹⁴³ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 328-39.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 377-82.

unfavorableness of the circumstances by which the mind is surrounded and influenced. The great diversity of religious institutions, and the numerous rites, ceremonies, and obligations imposed by them, prove that this sentiment has had, and has now, an incorrect development.”¹⁴⁵

Once the course of false mythological theology had been set, it warped with the innovations of different prophets over the years. In a somewhat confused account, Davis explained that the people of the Shinar valley improved on the existing theology by conceiving of a good spirit named “*Parama*,” or Brahma, who awoke from his slumber and created land by breathing a spirit named “*Narasayana*” into the waters which made up the world. “*Nar*,” Davis explained, “in the original Indian language, means water, and *sayana* signifies power to move; and thus the two conjoined mean moving water.” This secondary spirit created a giant egg that hatched in the moving waters, thereby creating the earth and humans. A third spirit, named Siva was said to be the source of the evil “breaths” that sowed discord amongst people. This doctrine, Davis explained, was adopted by the Persian prophet Zoroaster who modified *Parama*, Vishnu, and Siva into Ormuzd, Amshaspands, and a host of lesser spirits, respectively, eventually providing the original basis for the Christian Trinity.¹⁴⁶ As discussed in the next section, the creation story in Genesis supposedly derived from this earlier Hindu one.

Arguments for the Hindu source of the Christian religion were not unique to Davis. Similar theories were advanced by more respected members of society, such as Anna H. Leonowens, of *The King and I* fame, who told prominent members of the Chestnut Street Radical Club in Boston that Hinduism was the “parent of all other forms of faith,” based on the parallel between the Christian Trinity and the three major Hindu gods.¹⁴⁷ The parallel between Hindu gods and the Trinity was also advocated by French writers such as M. Denon and Louis Jacolliot.¹⁴⁸ Indeed, the nationalistic potential of this theory did not go unnoticed by Indians eager to demonstrate the prestige of their own traditions. For instance, Swami

¹⁴⁵ Davis, “The True but Unloved Religion,” 34.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 382-86, 402-403. Davis was unclear as to whether he considered *Narasayana* and Vishnu synonymous.

¹⁴⁷ Versluis, *American Transcendentalism*, 311; Mary Elizabeth Fiske Sargent, *Sketches and Reminiscences of the Radical Club of Chestnut Street, Boston* (Boston: J. R. Osgood & Co., 1880), 223-26. Some members of the club included A. Bronson Alcott, Samuel Longfellow, James Freeman Clarke, and Cyrus Bartol.

¹⁴⁸ Gabay, *Covert Enlightenment*, 227.

Dayananda, founder of the Arya Samaj (Aryan Society), advanced such claims of Hindu primacy in 1875.¹⁴⁹

Few escaped their theological inheritance, but it was possible under the right conditions. Davis expressed a great admiration for the spiritual beliefs of the American Indians, for example. The Indians, he declared, represented “the first instance...in which human thought took a proper, truthful, and natural direction.” This was on account of their strong social unity. “Disunity was not in their midst,” Davis wrote, “and therefore wickedness and abomination were to them unknown.” While they had inherited the theology of the “breaths” from before the great deluge that cut them off from the rest of the world, they reinterpreted these as the benevolent breaths of the Great Spirit since a belief in evil spirits did not fit with their experience of nature’s abundant good. Portraying the Indians as the noble savages of the Romantic imagination, Davis explained that their closeness to the land brought them intuitive wisdom, making their thoughts “natural, spontaneous, true, and celestial.” They understood for example, “that the spirit-land was analogous to the one on which they dwelt” with “placid waters,...meandering streams, and...the forest and gardens of beauty and delight.” Correspondence and a Swedenborgian vision of the afterlife thus found its analogue in Indian beliefs. The wisdom and “more truthful theology” of the Indians far exceeded the bookish falsehoods of Christians who Davis chided to learn from the Indian example. Sadly, despite the fact “that they came nearer to a truthful conception concerning the higher spheres than the inhabitants of any other portion of the earth,” invading Europeans “incited for the first time within their breasts, the feeling of hostility, vengeance, and retaliation” as they were forced to turn to war.¹⁵⁰ True religion had once again been corrupted by the forces of history. Significant in the example is that, unlike Transcendentalists like Emerson, Davis appeared to be willing to extend the category of religion to encompass Indian beliefs, as he imagined them, despite their lack of scripture: a typical marker of differentiation between a “religion” and mere fetichism.

¹⁴⁹ Bayly, *Birth of the Modern World*, 342.

¹⁵⁰ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 362-63, 395-98.

Religious Evolution

The history of religion was not merely a story of hereditary error, however. The historical forms of religion evolved and advanced, too, expressing an ever higher degree of interior truth. As seen with Davis' notions of revelation, this was a process largely driven by the appearance of increasingly advanced prophets. Though products of their time and circumstances, great reformers slowly overcame the follies of the past and edged the world closer to its utopian destiny. Historical understandings of the divine reflected differing levels of advancement.

Religion moved through different phases, Davis explained in an issue of the *Univercælum and Spirit Philosopher*, passing through the "Barbarian Period" of superstitious sacrifice and idol worship, through a "Patriarchial [sic] Period" of priests and temples, and into a "Civil Period" of skepticism towards clergy and institutions. Though each period could leave its traces on later ones—"deified books" in place of idols, for example—and all might coexist at one like different aged members of a family, the tendency was upward.¹⁵¹ "Every alteration in Nature's domain is invariably succeeded by *better* circumstances.... So in the religious world," Davis told his audience at the Hartford Bible Convention. While sects bore the marks of their forebears, they also improved over time. "Protestantism," for example, was "but a *child* of Catholicism. By a law of hereditary descent, the parent transmits its character to the offspring; but, as evidence of a law of progress, the child is not so wicked and degraded as its venerable progenitor."¹⁵² The "many paths" of "theological speculation," Davis explained in *Principles of Nature*, were nonetheless necessary for all nations to travel "in order to arrive properly at the Fountain of true scientific and theological knowledge."¹⁵³

The outward form of a religion corresponded to the interior development of a nation's people. This evolutionary view of religious expression helped account for the plurality of positive religions, while still allowing for an absolute standard to be striven for. "It is distinctly evident," Davis observed in *Principles of Nature*, "that all dissimilarity in opinions must in reality be owing to a difference in degrees in which different minds have become

¹⁵¹ Davis, "The True but Unloved Religion," 34-35.

¹⁵² Davis, *Free Thoughts Concerning Religion*, 5, 26.

¹⁵³ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 340.

unfolded to the reception of truth.”¹⁵⁴ A highly developed mind would be drawn towards higher religious truths, he elaborated in the *Great Harmonia*, since “a man’s theology is the legitimate offspring of his own mental state. His religion will be *savage, barbarian, patriarchal, semi-patriarchal, civilized, republican, or spiritual*, according to his outer education and intrinsic growth of soul.” Well-developed minds embraced “the sweet devotion of a universal religion in nature.”¹⁵⁵

In the *Liberator*, Davis grounded this theory in phrenology and biological hierarchies. For example, the Jewish God was a powerful “omniarch” and a “creation of the nether portions of the brain,” whereas the Methodist conception was derived from the higher regions and reflected “fixedness of character” and was benevolent and “gloriously democratic.” The truly monotheistic God of the Unitarians was “a creation of a well-balanced brain, whose central thought was ‘universal unity.’”¹⁵⁶ The powerful potential of such a model to orient and make sense of the dizzying denominationalism of mid-nineteenth-century America, not to mention the many eastern religions entering the public consciousness, is apparent: it explained pluralism, but promised to eventually overcome it.¹⁵⁷

Nonetheless, Davis’ notion of religious progress did not culminate in Christianity as some, like the Unitarian scholar James Freeman Clarke, would have it.¹⁵⁸ In this regard, he more closely paralleled Samuel Johnson—also a religious scholar and second-generation Transcendentalist and the author of *Oriental Religions* (1872-85)—who contested that “Jews, Hindus, Chinese, are not destined to become Christian.” Rather, he believed, “The Spirit has something better in store for mankind than to hang fast on one historical name.”¹⁵⁹ Davis, for his part, asserted that Christianity was a more “modified and rational system” than those of the “heathen philosophers” who “taught some *good*, but more *evil*” on account of their “uncultivated” wisdom and “underdeveloped” “moral faculties.” By contrast, the Bible

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 339.

¹⁵⁵ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 3, 109.

¹⁵⁶ Davis, “The Gods of Religious Sects,” 144.

¹⁵⁷ As Robert C. Fuller observes, “Davis recounts his life as though it were one long, religious, obstacle course. The various denominations thwarted him at every step of the way.” Fuller, *Mesmerism*, 97. For Davis’ accounts of his anxiety over the state of his soul, his run-ins with evangelical preachers, and his somewhat better impression of Universalists, see Davis, *Magic Staff*, 112-13, 158-62, 188, 191-93, 197-200. At least in his self-representation, Davis exemplified the “seeker” culture of nineteenth-century America, similar in some ways to Joseph Smith. Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 227-29; Albanese, *Republic*, 136.

¹⁵⁸ Buhr, *Infinite Possibilities*, 145-46.

¹⁵⁹ Quoted in Robinson, “Free Religion Movement,” 624-25; Samuel Johnson, “The Piety of Pantheism. As Illustrated in Hindu Philosophy and Faith,” *Radical* 5 (1869): 487-88.

contained “more real and useful principles than any collection of manuscripts on the earth” and was “of the highest importance to the human race.” Nonetheless, Christianity still “concealed the elements of evil and disunity” and stymied progress by virtue of its exclusiveness. This was attested to by the encroachments of missionaries upon the unwilling peoples of the world which drove non-Christians to stubbornly cling to their errors. “For behold,” Davis chided, “how much the more devotedly the Hindoo is attached to *his* religion, because he *hates yours!*” Christians, moreover, failed to effect real change because they only preached, but did not take concrete reformist action—the fruit of true religion.¹⁶⁰ Thus, Davis wrote in 1859 in an assessment that simultaneously relativized and privileged Christianity, “there is visible no essential difference between the Christian and the Pagan world as concerns the *causes* of sectarianism and villanous [sic] castes in society,” yet “the world of Christendom is centuries in advance of the population of the Oriental hemisphere.”¹⁶¹

The fifth and final volume of the *Great Harmonia* elaborated on the idea of a progressive evolution of religious forms in detail and combined the great religious figures of the world—a “Pantheon of Progress”—into a master narrative of religious development whereby each revelator added an essential insight to the totality of human spiritual knowledge. The eclectic assemblage ranged from ancient eastern figures to contemporaries of Davis, and revealed his sympathies as he praised religious liberals and sought to distill the “germs” of truth from other figures whose doctrines he found objectionable. The pantheon began with Brahma, Buddha, Sanconiathan, Moses, Zoroaster, and Confucius before moving through the ancient Greeks—Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Epicurus. Naturally, Jesus made the list, as did Paul and Origen. Reaching the Reformation, Davis paid carefully measured tribute to Luther and Calvin before veering off in more radical directions with George Fox, Emanuel Swedenborg, John Wesley, and even Ann Lee. From the “enthusiasts,” he moved on to religious liberals and Transcendentalists, giving John Murray, William Ellery Channing, John Humphrey Noyes, Theodore Parker, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and William Lloyd Garrison each a place in the pantheon. The list culminated in entries for Modern Spiritualism and the Harmonial Philosophy. Presumably Davis’ modesty prevented him from listing himself by name. Flaws and limitations of their respective environments

¹⁶⁰ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 724-25.

¹⁶¹ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 5, 275.

notwithstanding, each figure in the pantheon made a unique contribution to the totality of human spiritual knowledge.¹⁶²

Along with false doctrines, one could still find “footprints of the Creator” in “ancient Chaldean, Hindoo, Assyrian, or Persian” writings, much of which was substantiated by “modern philosophical science and scientific religion.” Brahma, for example, was an “Idealist” who, like the historical Jesus, “became inseparably identified and confounded with the Chief Deity” in “the subsequent traditions and mythology of Hindoo religionists.” His revelations in the *Vedas* or “*Baghavat Gheeta*” did “not suffer when placed in company with the best sayings in modern scriptures.” “In short,” Davis concluded, “the Hindoo Idea is neither eastern nor western.” Rather, stripped of its “multifarious oriental egotisms and local specialities,” Hinduism contained universe principles beneath the surface.¹⁶³

Davis catalogued the contributions of the other members of the pantheon in a similar fashion. “Budda [sic],” for example, “appeareth like a Luther among the priests and receivers of Brahma,” driving reform another step forward. Indeed, Davis observed, mapping the course of Christian history onto all other religions, “Budda was to Brahma what Jesus was to Moses, or Luther to Catholic Rome.”¹⁶⁴ Calvin’s contribution was to recognize that the “Truth is mighty and will prevail,” though Davis did not approve of “the withering, chilling, freezing, blasting, damning, theology of John Calvin,” which he attributed to the prejudices of the age and the harshness of the northern climate.¹⁶⁵ More favourably, the Shaker prophetess Ann Lee defied those who denied that women were equally capable of revelation,

¹⁶² Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 5, 278. In addition to the parallels to Transcendentalism, Davis’ evolution of theology, and even the examples he chose, resonates with Elihu Palmer, who wrote: “Luther and Calvin hurled their religious thunderbolts against the power and absurd tenets of the Church of Rome. . . . The Armenians, the Arians, the Socinians, and the Universalists, successively followed, with a purifying hand of reason, pruning and lopping off the decayed branches of the old theological tree, approaching still nearer to the source and principles of nature, till at length, by regular progression, the human mind discovered, that moral principle was placed upon a more solid foundation than the reveries of sectarian fanaticism. It has been in this manner that some portion of society has once more obtained a true idea of the religion of nature, or of that which may be denominated pure and simple Deism.” Palmer, *Principles of Nature*, 170.

¹⁶³ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 5, 79-81.

¹⁶⁴ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 5, 81, 84, 278; As Thomas Tweed notes, Spiritualist sympathy towards Buddhism importantly prefigured the adoption of Buddhism, particularly esoteric Buddhism, among many Americans. Davis, he observes, was among these early sympathizers. See Tweed, *Buddhism*, 43, 50-51. Ann Taves concurs with his assessment, but argues for an even more pronounced and early Spiritualist influence than Tweed, who emphasizes Transcendentalists, Unitarians, and the Free Religious Association more strongly. See Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 198.

¹⁶⁵ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 5, 148-50, 157.

and affirmed that “*God is as much Woman as Man*, a oneness composed of two individual equal halves, Love and Wisdom absolute and balanced eternally.”¹⁶⁶

The last two places in the pantheon were occupied by “Modern Spiritualism” and “the Harmonial Philosophy, respectively. That the two highest developments were not represented by an individual was testament to Davis’ conviction that no one prophet or authority should command a monopoly on revelation or inspiration. Telling of his democratic and individualistic ethos, Davis explained that as a movement Spiritualism “calls no man ‘master,’” regardless of whatever charlatans may try to claim the title. Consistent with his emphasis on utility, Davis explained that “Phenomenal Spiritualism” provided a “demonstration of individual post-mortem existence,” and was thus “a perfect antidote to... world-wide skepticism.”¹⁶⁷ An age of creeping materialism required such a demonstration so that skeptics could accept the eternal principles of the Harmonial Philosophy, or “Philosophical Spiritualism,” a philosophy that taught universal progress and “that the so-called ‘imperfections’ of the globe and the discords of nations will be eventually overcome by the perfect workings of our universal Father God.” Furthermore, it showed “that all religions, creeds, sects, theories of man, laws, institutions, and governments, are of human origin, and... indicate the wants of the age and the *status* of the different minds in which they appeared; that man’s only infallible authority or ‘rule of faith and practice,’ is the divine Light which ever shines in the highest faculties of his mental organization.” As “man’s affections become refined and his thoughts harmoniously exalted, so... will the world be visited with holier conceptions of God, with sentiments of Brotherhood more sacred, and with contemplations of the universe more enlarged and worthy,” Davis declared.¹⁶⁸ In other words, the outward historical forms of religion would gradually conform to the true interior religion as humanity developed. As true religion expressed itself more fully and overcame sectarianism, the utopian age approached.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 192, 196.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 250, 252-53.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 253-54.

Historical Jesus

A consequence of Davis' understanding of historical religion as a natural process whereby mythology emerged and was modified over time was that he attempted to separate the historical Jesus from the mythological messiah that his followers had invented. In this regard, Davis was a popular participant in a controversy over the Higher Criticism and the life of Jesus that had embroiled Unitarians at Harvard Divinity School in the 1820s and 30s and arrested the attention of the likes of Theodore Parker. Of particular interest to the Harvard divines was the German theologian David Friedrich Strauss' influential and inflammatory work, *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1835).

In it, Strauss argued that the historical Jesus was all but completely obscured by the mythology that the early Christians had created in order to fit him into preconceived notions of the Messiah derived from Hebrew theology. In essence, the Gospels were nothing more than myths and symbolism. Aside from Parker, others in the Transcendentalist movement attempted to disentangle the historical man from the mythical messiah, including William Henry Furness, a friend of Emerson, in *Remarks on the Four Gospels* (1836)—with its naturalization of miracles—and George Ripley, of Brook Farm fame, in an 1834 sermon entitled “Jesus Christ, the Same Yesterday, Today and Forever,” which revealed the influence of Friedrich Schleiermacher in emphasizing the unchanging nature of true religion much like Parker would later do. Jesus, Ripley suggested, merely gave true religious principles their greatest expression. Most famous, of course, was Emerson's 1838 “Divinity School Address” wherein he argued that Jesus was part of a “race of prophets” and spoke of miracles in a metaphorical sense by emphasizing the miraculous in the everyday workings of nature.¹⁶⁹ Using clairvoyant vision rather than biblical scholarship, Davis took up the task of separating the historical Jesus from the myth that had emerged in his wake.

In the *Principles of Nature*, Davis gave “a true history of JESUS” in which he recast him as a “great and glorious Reformer” and “the type of the human race,” rather than the “Son of God” as the “ignorant and uninformed” had declared him. If Jesus was the Son of God, it was only in the same sense that all humans were.¹⁷⁰ As Laurie Maffly-Kipp notes,

¹⁶⁹ Gura, *American Transcendentalism* 98-104; William R. Hutchinson, *The Transcendentalist Ministers: Church Reform in the New England Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 40-41.

¹⁷⁰ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 559, 563, 777.

Davis' account looked back both to the naturalistic Jefferson Bible as well as foreshadowed later "hidden gospels."¹⁷¹ After explaining that he would be filling in gaps in the Gospel record of Jesus' life, Davis invoked the language of phrenology to tell readers that, from his precocious childhood on, Jesus was well regarded because of the "perfect symmetry of his form and cerebral structure," as well as for his "benevolence and love toward all without distinction." Guided by an intuitive understanding of interior causes, the "unparalleled Moral Reformer" created a "perfect system" of truth that blended elements of philosophy and mathematics, and would bring about "the prevalence of a general harmony of interest and action, such as would join in one the whole race of mankind."¹⁷²

In a variation on the moral influence theory of atonement, Jesus exemplified moral self-culture and demonstrated the perfectibility of all humans. Not uniquely divine, Davis wrote of Christ that he belonged "in the same category with those worthy and noble philanthropists who have lived since...and those who still live to adorn the world." Indeed, Davis assured his readers, even now there were other individuals, often in the East, who embodied the same superior attributes, such as youths with startling mathematical abilities, or powerful clairvoyants and healers. These individuals could appear at any place and time in the world and possessing such abilities was the destiny of all of humanity.¹⁷³ Nonetheless, Davis lamented in the *Great Harmonia*, with the disharmonious state of the world the appearance of a Christ was a rare occurrence and "a divine curiosity."¹⁷⁴ Separating the Jesus from the universally applicable status of "Christ" in 1873, Davis explained, "Jesus is the name of a person; Christ, of an eternal principle." It was only theologians who had entangled the two together so as to make them almost inseparable.¹⁷⁵

Jesus' miracles, Davis believed, could be easily comprehended and stripped of their seeming supernaturalism by reinterpreting them with natural principles in mind. Using mesmeric principles, Davis explained that Jesus' supposedly miraculous powers of healing came from his soothing magnetic aura and from a knowledge of medicine derived from his careful study of nature during the unrecorded years between his adolescence and the age of

¹⁷¹ Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, ed., *American Scriptures: An Anthology of Sacred Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 117.

¹⁷² Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 559-66.

¹⁷³ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 562, 580; Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 1, 295.

¹⁷⁴ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 3, 374.

¹⁷⁵ Davis, *Sacred Book*, 70.

thirty-three. Such natural feats were dubbed miracles by the superstitious who so marvelled at them that they believed he was “the Son of God” and “bowed with a trembling veneration at the mere mention of the name.”¹⁷⁶ Thus, the myth was born of the man.

The Role of Scriptures

Just as the different religions of the world were formed by traceable historical processes, so were the holy scriptures which accompanied them. The Old Testament, which Andrew Jackson Davis referred to as the “Primitive History,” was the end result of the historical transmission of sacred texts and oral accounts from the ancient east. Mediated through the *Zend Avesta* of the Persian prophet Zoroaster, this sacred history and mythology was adopted and transformed by the Jewish prophets who eclectically brought various texts together. The Greeks had the “history” passed to them next, where it then passed into Latin, and ultimately English.¹⁷⁷ The interconnected history of sacred writings was clearly evident, Davis felt, because of the stories and themes that reoccurred throughout them. Moreover, wisdom could be found within different scriptures, and indeed all texts, so long as one did not treat them as authoritative.¹⁷⁸ With the Christian Bible as the implicit standard of comparison, scriptures became a more or less normative feature of religion. At the same time, however, the existence of multiple world scriptures challenged the Bible’s status as a special and authoritative revelation.

The Primitive History

The historical connection between the Old Testament and ancient eastern mythology, Davis observed, was evident on the basis of the “parallelism” of their myths. The previously mentioned Hindu creation myth matched elements of Genesis. Thus, “Parama [Brahma] dwelt in the great waters, and had there reposed for many ages” corresponded to the Bible

¹⁷⁶ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 562-63.

¹⁷⁷ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 390, 403, 419-20. The Renaissance scholar and Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino made similar claims about the connection of Zoroaster to Moses. See Allen, “Ficino, Marsilio,” 362.

¹⁷⁸ In *Principles of Nature*, 434-559, Davis went through the various books of the Bible and assessed their respective degrees of truth, an endeavour that resembled the illuminated reading of Swedenborg who asserted which books contained the Word and which did not. See: Block, *New Church*, 24-27.

passage, “And the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” The spirit of God that moved the waters, Davis helpfully explained, was the aforementioned *Narasayana*. “And the passage which reads, ‘And the darkness was upon the face of the deep,’” Davis continued, “was derived from the passage in the Sanscrit language which reads, ‘And *Brahma* was within the great waters and was *asleep*,’ the word ‘asleep being rendered ‘darkness’ in the other passage.”¹⁷⁹ Similarly, the allegorical story of Cain and Abel, according to Davis, had its origins in ancient Egypt with the brothers being known as Typhon and Osiris, respectively. Following the same literary pattern, Typhon was stronger, worked the earth, and represented darkness. Osiris, on the other hand, was “gentle” and represented good and light. In a baffling conflation of religious traditions, Davis wrote that Osiris was favoured by Brahma and Vishnu and was slain by the envious Typhon. The original written account of what was originally an oral history was allegedly copied into Chaldean, Greek, and Hebrew scriptures, where the protagonists became known as Cain and Abel.¹⁸⁰ Far from being a unique revelation, the Christian tradition, inherited from the Jewish one, was merely part of a historical chain stretching back to the errors of the past.

The *Principles of Nature* was filled with many other examples of historical exchange taking place in the context of religious texts and Davis’ comparisons between them. For instance, Davis wrote that the Tree of Knowledge which Adam and Eve ate from in the Garden of Eden and the resulting fall of man closely mirrored a story the *Zend Avesta*, with the role of devil being filled by malicious spirits called *deevs*.¹⁸¹ In addition to the *Zend Avesta*, the Old Testament drew upon the *Shaster*, which Davis described as the “Hindoo Bible” created out of the *Vedas* and the *Brahmanas*. The six days in which God created the world and rested were supposedly mirrored by Brahma, who also rested on the seventh day. Drawing the allegory into the realm of science, Davis noted that the six “days” of creation corresponded to geological cycles of mass extinction and development.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 388.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 405.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 411-12.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 271, 294-95, 407-409.

Mirroring the Higher Criticism challenges of the authorship of the Pentateuch,¹⁸³ Davis asserted that the Book of Genesis was not the work of Moses, but was rather a collection of traditional eastern mythology from earlier times and reflected the allegorical style of the East. Given the history of the Bible as a text, the attempts of Christian theologians to read the Old Testament and the Fall of man as being connected to the redemptive promise of Christ were senseless and futile. Other parts of the Old Testament, such as the Book of Job and the Book of Psalms, were derived from what Davis referred to as the “Orphic hymns of the Shaster.”¹⁸⁴ All of this meant that the Bible was not the reliable and authoritative source that Christians believed it to be. At best, it was a historical record of past theologies and a rough allegory of the early history of humanity. Moreover, the revelations it was believed to contain were not in any way unique: they were historically transmitted through equivalent texts in other cultures. In a more modern example of the historical transmission of religious ideas, Davis noted that there was an unmistakable influence of the “Bhagvat-Geeta” on Parker and Emerson’s writings.¹⁸⁵

The accounts of miracles and the prophets in the Bible needed to be properly historicized to be understood or reconciled with natural law. For instance, the common phrase in the Bible “the Lord spake,” Davis wrote, was actually a reference to the aforementioned spiritual “breaths.” Ancient people, Davis suggested, thought that they were inspired to speak by the winds and thus God spoke through them. Moses was guilty of a similar misattribution when he mistook the intuitions of his interior awareness as the literal speech of God, rather than as an inspiration from natural principles. Thus, when Moses’ own knowledge of his people’s needs and his meditations upon Nature led him to write the Ten Commandments, he mistakenly believed that they had come from the cloud hanging in the sky because he believed all thoughts originated from God. Failure to locate the episodes within their cultural and historical context led to them being misunderstood. Inevitable translation errors compounded this problem. What could not be explained by cultural context and error could be explained away by natural law. For example, Moses’ parting of the Red Sea, far from being miraculous, Davis wrote, was really the result of the shifting sands had temporarily

¹⁸³ Cathy Gutierrez, *Plato’s Ghost: Spiritualism in the American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 60; Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, 25.

¹⁸⁴ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 409, 434-35, 445-46.

¹⁸⁵ Davis, *Arabula*, 99.

dried up a portion of the sea. The Pharaoh and his army, being much more numerous, took longer to cross. In the meantime, the tide returned and destroyed his army.¹⁸⁶

Another piece of sacred history that Davis attempted to naturalize was the story of the Flood. Contrary to the Old Testament, Davis contended that it was scientifically impossible for the entire world to be submerged—a debate that had preoccupied Enlightenment thinkers like William Whiston, Thomas Burnet, and Deists like Charles Blount.¹⁸⁷ Swedenborg, too, took a later interest in the debate, though he believed the Flood to have an inner spiritual meaning.¹⁸⁸ Despite Davis' contention that a comprehensive flood was at odds with scientific principles, he acknowledged that there was an actual geological event of catastrophic proportions which left a deep impression on the various survivors. In Davis' clairvoyant (and somewhat confused) account, the deluge destroyed the people of Shinar valley, leaving the people of China and Japan alive. With hints of priestcraft and imposture theory, the eastern ruler told the people that Brahma had repented of ever directing Vishnu to create humanity and had decided to wipe them out for their sins. It was only their virtue and sacrifices to Brahma that had spared them. Variations of the story, either through direct transmission or independent memory, existed among the “Chaldean Persians, or the Japan tribe [sic],” the Buddhists and Jains, the Greeks, the Jews, and even the American Indians. The legendary eastern leader was remembered by various names, such as Fohi among the Chinese, Xisuthrus among the Persians, Deucalion to the Greeks, Noah to the Jews, and Sottavarata to the Indians.¹⁸⁹

Similar speculation about the connection between various mythologies was commonplace among eighteenth-century scholars in England, like Samuel Shuckford who also equated Noah with the legendary first king of China, Fo-hi. Likewise, Jacob Bryant argued that “under whatever title he may come...the first king in every country was Noah.”

¹⁸⁶ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 436-39.

¹⁸⁷ James E. Force, *William Whiston: Honest Newtonian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 32-62; Peter Harrison, “Newtonian Science, Miracles, and the Laws of Nature,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56, no. 4 (1995): 539-41. Elihu Palmer similarly believed that the Flood was an impossibility. Palmer, *Principles of Nature*, 46-49. See also Koch, *Deism*, 88-89.

¹⁸⁸ Friedemann Stengel, *Aufklärung bis zum Himmel: Emanuel Swedenborg im Kontext der Theologie und Philosophie des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 71-74.

¹⁸⁹ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 391, 393-95, 398-400. An anonymous editor, “A Doctor of Hermetic Science,” of a digest of Davis' work observed, the seer's geography was highly confused. It seemed at times that he was unaware of where countries like China were actually located. See: *The Harmonial Philosophy: A Compendium and Digest of the Works of Andrew Jackson Davis, the Seer of Poughkeepsie* (London: William Rider & Son, Ltd., 1923), 223n1.

In this way, pagan beliefs could be explained as being historical corruptions of the pure religion of Noah.¹⁹⁰ As with the historical transmission of theology, Davis' historicization of biblical accounts in the *Principles of Nature* placed Christian revelation in continuity with other traditions. It was not a special revelation from above, but simply the latest outcome of an ongoing and natural transmission of mythology with other equivalents, whether textual or oral.

The Bible and the Bibles

Historicized in this manner, the Christian Bible was just one of many “bibles” in other religions, all of which had an equal claim to belief. While all scriptures could contain some value, the ultimate source of truth was “Nature rather than a book.”¹⁹¹ The Christian Scriptures were held to exactly the same standard as any other: its “*intrinsic worth and truthfulness.*” Nothing was divine, Davis argued, unless it corresponded to “the laws, qualities, and principles, contained in the great Tree of universal causation.” More importantly, no book ought to carry inherent authority on account of being a holy text. Whatever its truth, “no book is worthy the veneration which the Mohammedan pays to the KORAN, the Brahmin to the SHASTER, the Persian to the ZEND AVESTA, or the Christian to the BIBLE.”¹⁹² Particular and exclusive reverence for one scripture, presented as a universal component across different religions, was fatal to the project of determining the immutable laws of Nature. The exclusive love of one's holy texts was sectarianism and even idolatry. Speaking in Hartford, Davis declared that anyone “who would not ‘be wise above what is written’ . . . is a miserable pagan,” for a book was no less man-made than a stone idol.¹⁹³ Indeed, with the rampant biblicism of the United States, Davis felt himself at times to be a missionary for Nature in an “Idolatrous Land.”¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ Harrison, *Religion*, 140-42. The famous Scottish Freemason, “the Chevalier Ramsay,” similarly thought that all religions derived from either Enoch or Noah and that they became corrupted after the Flood. See: Palin, *Attitudes to Other Religions*, 28.

¹⁹¹ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 706.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 533.

¹⁹³ Davis, *Free Thoughts Concerning Religion*, 11, 38.

¹⁹⁴ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 3, 366-67.

Human attachment to the teachings of one scripture blinded religionists to the revelations of Nature. In comparing the Bible to other scriptures, Davis sought to loosen its hold on people's affections by showing that it had equally venerated equivalents. In the process, he paradoxically reinforced the Christian standard that "world religions" possessed a uniform scriptural text.¹⁹⁵ "You will bear it in mind," Davis chided Christians, "that the *Hindoo* has a Bible which he venerates as much as you do yours. So also has the *Mohammedan*, and the *Persian*." If each were equally devoted to his own text, what assurance did Christians have that they possessed the truth?¹⁹⁶ Christian confidence was particularly misplaced, as Davis elaborated in *The Great Harmonia*, because other scriptures like the Koran differed little from the Bible in both content and quality. Both texts were "bathed in blood," promised hellfire, and had been "promulgated by threats and the sword." Indeed, Davis observed "without any fear of a successful contradiction," there was "nothing inferior to the Christian scheme of salvation" in the Koran. "In truth, the constitution and threats of the one resemble very closely the peculiarities of the other."¹⁹⁷

Despite the obvious parallels, sectarians held fast to their own scriptures. Davis noted that a Persian "fire-worshiper" located truth in "the Zenda Vesta...his Holy Bible," while the "the Brahmin, the Chinese, and the Turk...severally refer you to their Bibles.... But you doubt them all." Indeed, the conflicts within Christendom were equally divisive, with different denominations being unable to agree on how to properly interpret the Bible. Despite the variety of opinions, Davis argued, the "fire-worshiper is just as honest as the Turk; the latter as the Christian."¹⁹⁸ In a nineteenth-century extension of the Early Modern and Enlightenment confessional polemics in which the comparison of one's enemies to paganism had weakened the relative position of Christianity as a whole,¹⁹⁹ Davis firmly situated Christianity as one religion among many, all equally beholden to a bible.

¹⁹⁵ Bayly, *Birth of the Modern World*, 332-34.

¹⁹⁶ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 557.

¹⁹⁷ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 3, 204-205.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 371.

¹⁹⁹ Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions*, 9.

Scriptural Authority

The static and historical nature of texts made them unsuitable vessels for true religion. Various religions were evolving forms that reflected their times and scripture was no different. “The Old Testament,” Davis explained to his Hartford audience, reflected “the Patriarchal Age—the era of Force,” whereas “the New Testament is a statement of the ideas and events of the Transitional Age—the era of Love.” Nonetheless, he inquired, “why should the statement of one age *remain* the statement of all ages?” Slipping into the register of a biblical prophet, he demanded, “What would ye think of a man who does all his *farming, ploughing, and planting, by reading books* on Egyptian and Roman agriculture?” It was folly to believe that religion would be any more static than technological advancement. Rather than consulting an ancient book, people had to embrace their inner divinity in the present.²⁰⁰ After all, Davis emphasized that the Bible was merely a collection of texts that a council of three hundred and eighteen bishops and the Emperor Constantine had declared holy. Ever the republican, Davis inquired, “Are we not *as fully* authorized...to consider whether any emperor or bench of bishops have a *peculiar right* to determine the shape and pattern of our religion?”²⁰¹ Indeed, when it came to deciding on the biblical canon, Davis wrote in the *Great Harmonia*, “Swedenborg had as much right as the Emperor Constantine and his favorite Bishops.”²⁰² Thus, scripture, emergent in a cultural context and subject to historical forces, could not be suitable for all people in all ages. The only suitable approach to religious truth was individual judgment: a basic and natural right of all humans.

Taking aim at the Christian assumption that religion required scripture and that religious authority was grounded in the Bible, Davis asked, “Can religion be based on a book?” Christians, he observed, “imagine the heathen to be benighted, and *without* religion!” But God was no “respector of persons or nations.” Spiritual truth was written into the very fabric of the universe and was eternal: “True religion, like true anatomy and physiology, is *older* than books! There must be a religion *older* than the Bible, a God *better* than it declares.”²⁰³ Echoing Theodore Parker, Davis reasoned, “If Christianity be true, then God has

²⁰⁰ Davis, *Free Thoughts Concerning Religion*, 37-38.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁰² Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 3, 369.

²⁰³ Davis, *Free Thoughts Concerning Religion*, 37.

written it on the broad pages of Creation,—upon the human heart,—upon the crystal bosom of Nature’s unchanging Laws....He who framed this vast universe, has written the Truth there is in Christianity, or in any other system, imperishably upon the constitution of things. Nature is the only infallible authority.” The “paper, pasteboard, and ink” of the Bible was transient and vulnerable to error, whereas the truths of Nature were permanent and absolute and the only safe foundation for religion. Indeed, “All books and all men might be swept from the earth at once without in the least impairing aught which is eternally true,” Davis remarked.²⁰⁴ “If the Bible is God’s Truth,” Davis reasoned, “then the existence of the Book can not be essential.” God’s truth was “absolute—it is binding yesterday, to day [sic], and forever.” And yet, Davis lamented, “most believers fail to discriminate between the book itself and the Truths which it unquestionably contains.”²⁰⁵ While Davis routinely normalized scripture as a component of the historical religions—by pointing out the myriad “bibles” that were comparable to the Christian one—he steadfastly refused to accept scripture as a necessary facet of *true* interior religion. That authority belonged to unchanging natural principles alone.

Miracles were no indicator of scriptural authority either. The Bible, Davis pointed out, was neither alone in deriving authority through miracles of its prophets, nor was it the oldest text to do so. Mohammed was said to have performed miracles, too, Davis wrote. These were taken by Muslims to be proof of the Koran’s divine origin in the same way that those of the Persian prophet Zoroaster were taken as evidence for the truths of the *Zend Avesta*. If antiquity was a source of religious authority, Davis argued, why not give Zoroaster’s miracles primacy over those in the Bible? Newer sects such as the Mormons and the Shakers also appealed to miracles to proclaim the truth of their scriptures.²⁰⁶ Thus, Christianity was neither the oldest nor the newest religion to claim to be the sole source of revelation.

In addition to the sheer number of scriptures professing miracles as proof, Davis struck a decidedly Deist tone and argued that the miracles themselves were absurd to anyone but a believer. Thus, he wrote in the *Principles of Nature*, “The mussulman...tells you that his inspired lawgiver traversed the sun and its brilliant atmosphere without casting a shadow, and deliberately separated the moon with a knife, and traversed ninety heavens in one night,

²⁰⁴ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 3, 368, 376. For comparison, see Parker, “A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity,” 162-74.

²⁰⁵ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 3, 365, 368, 376.

²⁰⁶ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 507-508, 528-31.

on an animal that was one half woman and one half horse!...No miracles can be more inexplicable than these;” Davis proclaimed, “none more inconsistent with the laws of Nature; and, reader, you do not *believe* them: for they are written in the Koran by Mohammed, and in the productions of his followers!” Yet, despite the derision with which Christians viewed Muslim beliefs, Davis reminded people that the Bible “proclaims mysteries almost as inconsistent, and *them* you *believe!*” In the same way that Christians discounted the Koran, “the mussulman disbelieves the claims of *your* religion, and *its* miracles, because it is written *in the Bible*, and that by authors unknown.”²⁰⁷ If more than one religion could make equivalent claims to supernatural authority, then the reasoning was faulty.

In a similar naturalization of scriptural miracles, Davis explained in the *Great Harmonia* that the Bible contained “simple accounts of clairvoyance, as that *power* was frequently manifested *by Jesus* during his three years’ labor for humanity.” As “an example of good ordinary clairvoyance,” Davis cited the story from Luke 5 where Jesus, “perceiving where the fish were then swimming,” instructed Simon where to cast his net. Jesus’ clairvoyance also enabled him to predict that Judas Iscariot would betray him.²⁰⁸ In performing such feats, Davis speculated that “Jesus probably understood the science of physiology and the principles of magnetism and psychology, and perhaps, something of the power of faith, better than did his followers,” because “he simply rebuked their ignorance” in calling his powers miraculous. Thus, when Jesus told a cured woman, ““Daughter, *Thy* FAITH hath made thee whole,”” Davis explained that “Jesus meant that the *cause* of her cure was more *in herself* than *in him*.”²⁰⁹

Other examples of “*spiritual insight, good clairvoyance, and practical inspiration*” could be found in “the *Koran* of Mohammed; in the *Zeuda* [sic]*Vesta* of Zoroaster; in the *Shaster* of Brama; in the *Talmud* of the Jewish rabbi; and in the more recent *Roll* of the Shakers,” which spoke to the naturalness and potential universality of Jesus’ feats. Other accounts provided “incontrovertible evidences and indications of the mental manifestations under present consideration.”²¹⁰ As we will see in later chapters, reinterpreting miracles, both

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 711.

²⁰⁸ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 3, 144-45.

²⁰⁹ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 1, 290.

²¹⁰ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 3, 28-29.

biblical and otherwise, using the language of animal magnetism and clairvoyance became a popular feature of Spiritualist exegesis.

All things, Davis believed, were inherently natural, rendering the very concept of the supernatural faulty and making it an irrational foundation for scriptural authority.²¹¹ In the *Great Harmonia*, Davis was “impressed to esteem nothing as supernatural. . . . I believe in no suspension, transcendion [sic], contradiction, or variation of, no superaddition to, no supernatural interference, on the part of Deity, with any of the principles of his own constitution.”²¹² Consequently, those who based their veneration of scripture off of supernatural premises were doomed to try to reason from “a foundation, which is lost in the dark depths of incomprehensibility.” When theologians and biblical commentators attempted to reconcile natural science and revealed religion, draw connections between the books of the Bible, or smooth out its glaring contradictions, they presupposed the infallibility of the scriptures and the existence of the supernatural.²¹³ “You seldom hear a Christian ask—‘Is the foundation of my religion reliable?’” Davis remarked. Christians had become “so accustomed to mental slavery” that they did not dare “exercise a particle of reason on the soundness of the foundations of their faith.” Trusting in the writings of prophets and “religious chieftain[s],” the Christian “virtually resigned his mind to the government of another” and became dependent like “a lame man who would walk without his crutch.”²¹⁴ Protestants flattered themselves that they had left behind slavish obedience to the Catholic Church, but as Davis informed his listeners in Hartford, “I can see *no difference* between the *infallibility* of the Pope and the infallibility of Paul.” Catholics placed their faith in the authority of the Church, and Protestants in the Bible, but neither were willing to open themselves up to an unbiased examination of Nature. “Indeed,” Davis affirmed, “it is hard to determine which is the worst enemy of freedom and humanity, the party that would make *the Church* our master, or those who would give to us the Bible as sovereign.”²¹⁵

Yet, in the intellectual climate of the nineteenth century, Davis saw the proverbial writing on the wall for the Bible. Christians feared investigation into the Bible because it

²¹¹ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 508.

²¹² Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 3, 170.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 178-79, 181.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 160-61, 192.

²¹⁵ Davis, *Free Thoughts Concerning Religion*, 26-27.

could not withstand it.²¹⁶ “The *reading of the book is fatal* to the idea of its supernatural origin, also to its so-called infallible principles of religion and truth,” Davis declared in 1853. Protestant notions of *sola scriptura* would prove their own undoing. The “door which Martin Luther opened *can never be shut against* the onward march of the free-born soul.” Moreover, the nineteenth century provided the scientific and historical tools required for a more enlightened reading of the Bible. “Without a philosophical and historical understanding of the *origin* of the Bible,” Davis asked, “how can we estimate its *authority*?” At the time it was written, such understanding was decidedly lacking. Historicizing the authors of the Bible in a narrative of progress, Davis inquired, “Unaided by the revelations of science, how could the early inhabitants give us a Bible without mythology and error?” Fortunately, the people of the nineteenth century had the “requisite information” to tackle questions of scriptural authority and the supposedly miraculous. “The miracle of *Joshua*,” Davis declared, “could not be answered until the immutable laws of planetary harmony were discovered; the cosmological theory of *Moses* could not be answered until the science of geology was developed. As these sciences have *for the first time* gained a footing among the people, even so for the first time are the people *prepared* for the examination of the questions before this Convention.” The unstoppable “progress of scientific discovery,” Davis triumphantly proclaimed, “is carrying the war into the very *heart* of biblical authority.” “The positive and unavoidable deductions of astronomy, of ethnology, of archaeology, of hierology, of physiology, stand in startling opposition to nearly all the assumptions of popular theology pertaining to Bible infallibility.”²¹⁷ Davis appeared acutely aware of a democratization of scientific knowledge—a “village Enlightenment” as Craig Hazen calls it²¹⁸—which would open up new avenues of rationalist Bible scholarship to ordinary Americans.

²¹⁶ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 3, 366.

²¹⁷ Davis, *Free Thoughts Concerning Religion*, 7, 23, 28. The salvific power of science hearkens back to Elihu Palmer, who wrote, “It is the light of science alone that can destroy such causes of human wretchedness.” “[S]cience opposes its own strength to the injurious effects of error and prejudice, and in proportion as the former shall increase, the latter will decrease; so that the hopes of the human race rest upon the diffusion of knowledge, and the general cultivation of science.” Palmer, *Principles of Nature*, 148-49.

²¹⁸ Craig James Hazen, *The Village Enlightenment in America: Popular Religion and Science in the Nineteenth-Century* (University of Illinois Press, 2000), 5-6.

Though all scriptures shared in their folly and error, they also all contained some grains of truth. Holy texts, regardless of their origin, could play a role in teaching universal truths, provided one exercised inner awareness to separate valuable principles from the dross.

Setting a scripturally eclectic tone in 1847, Davis declared:

In all ages of the world, revelations of various degrees of importance have been made, though in many instances the world knew it not....It is proper for every mind to venerate revelations of every kind, in proportion to their congeniality with the uniform teachings of Nature, and the highest sanctions of a well-constituted judgment....I would again enforce the absolute importance of not bestowing veneration upon any revealments [sic] that are to be found in the Bible, more than upon those found among the productions of other writers.²¹⁹

As discussed previously, revelation was a universal human potential. It was little wonder, then, that the world's scriptures could contain useful truths in whatever measure their authors were developed. Thus, the Chinese philosopher Confucius had given the world a code of ethics that was unmatched by any other than that of Jesus. The Hindu "lawgiver" Brama had revealed "interior truths" about the "social and spirit world" yet to come. Zoroaster had foreseen that the world would be free of sin and Mohammed had written about "spiritual truths" which had been confirmed by modern psychology and by the revelations of Emanuel Swedenborg. Indeed, Davis claimed, despite Swedenborg's exegetical shortcomings, some of his revelations were currently beyond the ability of the world to comprehend them,²²⁰ though Davis appeared to go back on this position in his later disputes with Professor George Bush and balked at the inherent absurdity of the claim that "the intellect [can] understand any thing which is incomprehensible."²²¹

In general, Davis saw a "harmony in the revelations of each age" in which "each revelator has presented truth in proportion to the favorable situations in which his mind was placed, and the favorable developments to which it attained."²²² As for the Bible itself, Davis considered the Old Testament to mostly be useful for its historical value; the New Testament contained some valuable principles, particularly the ethics of Jesus, but, for the most part,

²¹⁹ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 581.

²²⁰ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 583, 587-89.

²²¹ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 3, 168.

²²² Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 590.

failed to teach natural law. There was a “nobleness of those early writers and the superior physical and mental endowments of Jesus, are still preserved as a source of instruction,” however they were “so much obscured beneath a heterogeneous mass of unjust and useless materials.”²²³ Given that the truth permeated so many works, it was useful to try to read the theological works from around the world in search of universal truth. The purpose of reading different revelations, Davis wrote, was “to point out the good and practical parts of each, that they may be preserved for future application.” The dross would be progressively identified and discarded as humanity developed and was ready to understand higher truths.²²⁴

His commitment to reading multiple scriptures was reflected in concrete practice in 1867 with Davis’ publication of *Arabula; or, the Divine Guest. Containing a New Collection of Gospels*. As the title of the book promised, the book included an eclectic assortment of reprints from various sources, which were printed in two columns, mimicking the layout of the Bible.²²⁵ With its wide range of eastern and western writings, Davis’ “new collection of living Gospels” challenged traditional notions of what constituted scripture and revelation in the mode of the *Dial*’s earlier “ethnic scriptures.” In such august company as “St. Confucius” or “St. Menu,” the “Son of Brahma,” Davis included Transcendentalists such as St. Ralph (Waldo Emerson), St. Theodore (Parker), and St. Octavius (Brooks Frothingham).²²⁶ Introducing Emerson as “one of the inspired Scripturalists of this century,” Davis quoted an excerpt from the essay “History,” which began fittingly with the declaration that “To the poet, to the philosopher, to the saint, all things are friendly and sacred, all events profitable, all days holy, all men divine.”²²⁷ As Albert J. von Frank notes, the popular collection “established the durable genre of ‘Pearls from Emerson,’” which became a popular feature of New Thought writing.²²⁸

All of the scriptural excerpts he presented contained true natural principles that had been given to the interiorly enlightened individuals of the world. As Davis put it in his

²²³ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 404, 579-80.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 591-92.

²²⁵ In 1873, Davis authorized a reprint of just the new gospels, which were “APPOINTED TO BE READ IN ALL THE CHURCHES OF ARABULA.” Davis, *Sacred Book*, vii; von Frank, 130.

²²⁶ In the introduction to his reprint of the gospels, Davis announced his purpose: “Saints of the past and present, whom the churches reject as sinners and refuse to canonize, are herein summoned to present new gospels in the interest of human progress.” Davis, *Sacred Book*, v. Davis, *Arabula*, 3, 308, 310, 326, 330, 338.

²²⁷ Davis, *Arabula*, 338.

²²⁸ von Frank, “Religion,” 130.

introduction to the extract from the *Vedas*: “All Scripture-writing is given by inspiration.”²²⁹ Theodore Parker’s Gospel, for example, affirmed the intrinsic holiness of all humans and promised universal salvation regardless of creed, writing “God includes all, the heathen, the Hebrew, the Mahometan, the Atheist, and the Christian; nay Cain, Iscariot, the kidnapper, are *folded in the arms of the Infinite Mother*, who will not suffer absolute evil to come to the least or the worst of these, but so tempers the mechanism of humanity that all shall come to the table of blessedness at last!”²³⁰ Other new saints included the Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier with his poem “The Reformer,” the medium Emma Hardinge, and the Hindu Rishis.²³¹ Davis invited readers to “see the footprints of the everlasting God through all the sacred writings of every age and people.” The universal truths were available to any who would put aside their bigotry and use their reason, for “Only the proud and prejudiced—only the ignorant and superstitious—are shut out of this beautiful and beneficent garden.”²³² If one could put aside Eurocentric contempt of India, he would see “conceptions of divine ideas, in the propositions and teachings of the Shaster and Vedas; manifesting the eternal glory of its presence as *perfectly* in the Indian as in the European consciousness.”²³³

Davis’ new Gospels endeavour was reminiscent of Thoreau’s call for westerners to learn from the lofty philosophy of the east. Thoreau previously declared, “It would be worthy of the age to print together the collected Scriptures or Sacred Writings of the several nations, the Chinese, the Hindoos, the Persians, the Hebrews, and others, as the Scripture of mankind.”²³⁴ To this end, he published “Ethnical Scriptures,” such as wisdom from Confucius, in the Transcendentalist periodical the *Dial*.²³⁵ In a similar vein, Octavius Brooks Frothingham, of the Free Religious Association, questioned why “the Christian Bible [should] be limited to the writings included in the New Testament.” Believing that the “creative power of religion was not exhausted,” he advocated producing a “Bible of

²²⁹ Davis, *Arabula*, 303.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 327.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 303, 317, 336.

²³² *Ibid.*, 303.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 99.

²³⁴ Henry David Thoreau, “Christianity and Hinduism Compared” (1849) in *American Transcendentalists*, 181.

²³⁵ Lawrence Buell, ed., *American Transcendentalists*, 178, 427.

Humanity” that would bring together different scriptures into one collection.²³⁶ Whether Davis was aware of such efforts or not—travelling in similar circles, he likely was—his project followed a comparable logic: the world’s religions were equivalent expressions of truth and could therefore have their wisdom and teachings compiled for the good of the entire human race.

Scriptures contained truths, but as can be seen from Davis’ addition to the canonical gospels, they did not contain the entire truth. Moreover, no holy text had a monopoly on truth; they were all only worth as much as the sum of the natural principles therein. It was therefore important to examine them with one’s sense of reason and compare them to natural principles. If holy texts did not prove useful to the human race, they were either in error or we had not yet reached a point where we could utilize their revelations. In both cases, it was fruitless to continue to revere them. In the end, Nature, with its interior truths, was the only religion for humanity and the only thing worthy of devotion.

Religious Concepts

While Davis acknowledged that all religions had reached some degree of truth, there was much that they got wrong or failed to realize. Interior revelation had proven many of the key aspects of various religions wrong. As such, Davis had a different understanding of certain points of dogma than more traditional and orthodox interpretations. Concepts like the soul, the nature of God himself, sin and morality, salvation, and immortality all took on unorthodox characteristics in Davis’ cosmology. Nonetheless, even as he presented a view of such doctrines that he considered reconcilable with Reason and the findings of modern science, he revealed his indebtedness to the Christian culture of nineteenth-century America by employing categories such as sin, or by the assumption that religious systems required a cohesive metaphysics.

²³⁶ Quoted in Robinson, “Free Religion Movement,” 620; Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *The Religion of Humanity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Butts, 1873), 61-62, 64.

Spirit and Matter

Drawing heavily on the ancient concept of materialism and a broad understanding of Swedenborg, Davis asserted that spirit was a form of highly refined matter. While Swedenborg himself never believed that the soul was material *per se*, it was the interior cause which resulted in the external manifestations of the physical world,²³⁷ a theory which reflected the influence of earlier Neoplatonist philosophy.²³⁸ As gross matter refined itself to ever higher forms, it progressively became “spiritualized.” Davis likened this transformation to water passing into the more rarefied state of steam, or—with questionable medical accuracy—of blood progressing to sweat or chalk becoming bone.²³⁹

In the second volume of his encyclopedia the *Great Harmonia*, Davis explained that contrary to the “general opinion...that spirit is something *entirely* unlike matter,” reason forced the conclusion that “spirit *is* something; and *something* must be substance, or else... there could be no such a *thing* as spirit.” Given that spirit must have substance to exist, “in the absence of a better word, we term *that* substance ‘matter,’” Davis concluded.²⁴⁰ Rather than being something beyond the realm of the physical, Davis explained that “spirit is a word which signifies...an organization of matter in the highest state of advancement, refinement, and perfection. Spirit is an indissoluble *unity* of the finest particles of matter.” Evoking electricity, thereby grounding spirit within the discourse of science, he wrote that spirit was as superiorly refined compared to electricity as electricity was to “common earth.” Earth, electricity, and spirit were all just matter at different stages on the same continuum. “[E]lectricity is matter,” Davis wrote, “and so is spirit.”²⁴¹ As alluded to previously, such an electro-magnetic understanding of spirit meshed well with the popular mesmerist theories of mid-nineteenth-century America, providing a compelling and scientific model for how an individual’s spirit could be thrown into magnetic sympathy with the spirit world, thereby throwing open the door to personal revelations.²⁴²

²³⁷ Albanese, “On the Matter of Spirit,” 5-6.

²³⁸ Goodrick-Clarke, *Western Esoteric Traditions*, 162.

²³⁹ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 46-47, 62-63, 67-68.

²⁴⁰ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 2, 248.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 248-49.

²⁴² Bertrand Meheust, “Animal Magnetism/Mesmerism” in *Dictionary of Gnosis*, 80-81; Albanese, “On the Matter of Spirit,” 13; Gabay, *Covert Enlightenment*, 228-31; Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 32-34.

In addition to the magnetic and electric attributes of the spirit, individual souls also mirrored the progressive nature of the universe. Reflecting correspondence to a chain of being that connected the natural to the spiritual in an increasingly complex series of degrees through the mineral, vegetable, and animal kingdoms—a concept derived from Swedenborg²⁴³—Davis wrote that the spirit passed through different stages during life before transcending to a fully celestial state making it ready for association with the next sphere of existence: like a butterfly ready to shed its cocoon. The three stages of this process reflected the same trinity found everywhere in nature, including its “kingdoms.” Humanity stood at the top of the created order: the crown of creation and representative of all lower kingdoms, which were contained in his form. Man was thus “*the perfection of Motion*,” the primordial principle of life, and represented the highest form of creation, reflecting in Neoplatonic fashion the motive power of the Deity, the first cause. While all souls shared the same unifying and organizing principles, they were at different stages of development in the same way that evolution governed the development of the body. Such variance in spirits’ development explained how people like Jesus could be produced, who were in a more perfected state than their contemporaries.²⁴⁴

Through a steady process of refinement, gross matter became spiritualized and was slowly being drawn back into unity with Great Positive Mind in “a universal condensation and consolidation of matter constantly going on.” Through the law of association, whereby like attracted like, there was “a constant reception and rejection of particles taking place between all bodies in the Universe,” Davis wrote in *Principles of Nature*.²⁴⁵ In the same way that a seed contained the essence of a flower, unprogressed matter carried the imprint of the divine and slowly tended towards the perfection of the First Cause. “[T]he Basis, or original Cause,” Davis explained, “is using Nature as an instrument, which may be termed an Effect, to produce *Spirit* as an End or Ultimate.”²⁴⁶ As he put it in the *Great Harmonia* with mechanistic and Deist inflections, it was “proper...to consider Nature as a mighty and Magnificent MACHINE” for consolidating spirit, with “the Divine Mind as the omnipotent and

²⁴³ Swedenborg taught that all things originally derived from a single point of motion. Williams-Hogan, “Swedenborg, Emanuel,” 1099; Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, 60. Elihu Palmer, too, made the argument that matter and motion were co-eternal. Palmer, *Principles of Nature*, 162-64.

²⁴⁴ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 62-63, 596-604, 607, 620, 643-46.

²⁴⁵ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 107.

²⁴⁶ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 76, 92-93

omniscient ARTISAN.”²⁴⁷ The purpose of the universe was to refine matter through the mineral, vegetable, and animal kingdoms, with humanity at the apex of this hierarchy as the representative of all lower kingdoms. His 1870 book *The Fountain; with Jets of New Meanings* exemplified this with an illustration of beetles, grasshoppers, and other insects gathered together in the dirt and undergrowth with the caption: “LITTLE MILLS FOR REFINING GROSS MATTER.”²⁴⁸ From the “organization of Mankind,” matter passed “onward to other states of refined and unparticled matter,” that is, spirit. Over an unfathomably long period of time, Davis explained, “all matter will pass through the multifarious forms and stages that are existing, and all will ultimately be resolved into the *unparticled state*, and will ascend to associate with higher and more glorious spheres—of *spiritual* composition.... And then *Deity* and *Spirit* will be existing *only!*”²⁴⁹

If a reading of *Principles of Nature* did not in fact suggest that literally every particle in the universe would be refined into spiritual matter, one might be forgiven for arriving at that conclusion. One reader, anyway, was confused enough to write Davis for clarification on the point. Reproducing the letter in the second volume of the *Great Harmonia*, Davis explained in his answer that this was not the case because both “Mind (or God) and Matter (or Nature) are uncreated and eternal” and it was impossible for something “*uncreated*” to cease existing. Moreover, progression was an eternal principle of the universe and had no final end. Instead, existing atoms were simply repurposed. Linking this refinement to biology, Davis explained that food in the human body was “analyzed and appropriated by the gastric fluid and digestive functions” and its atoms portioned out to various processes, such as the creation of bone, nerves, muscles, veins, and arteries based on the quality of the respective atoms, with the very highest particles, God’s spirit in nature, forming the “*spiritual principle* by which the whole system is moved and illuminated.” Once this universe had created as much spirit as it was constituted for, the remaining “unspiritualized” matter would “fall back into that ‘unimaginable ocean of liquid fire’” to “subserve the purposes of a new creation”: an

²⁴⁷ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 1, 20.

²⁴⁸ Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Fountain; with Jets of New Meanings* (Boston: William White & Co., 1870), 44.

²⁴⁹ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 118, 149.

endless process wherein “every re-construction of the Universe will be an *infinite improvement* upon the preceding structure.”²⁵⁰

The Deity

As previously explained, the Deity was the interior principle that underpinned all of creation. The Great Positive Mind, while immanent in all things, also existed as a mighty sun at the centre of the universe and around which all things orbited. The “Great Centre and Spiritual Sun is the habitation and throne of the DIVINE MIND, the Great Positive, Central Power of the Universe, and of all eternal movement! And it is a Fountain in which nothing exists but what is pure, divine, everlasting, and infinite!”²⁵¹ Like the Kabbalistic or Swedenborgian Grand Man, the universe was the body of the Creator and the central sun was his brain,²⁵² but in an idiosyncratic kind of panentheism, the Deity was also infinitely transcendent, the unattainable aim of a progress that would persist forever.²⁵³ Situated at the centre of the cosmos, the Great Positive Mind drew spirit towards himself like a mighty magnet. As Davis explained in the *Great Harmonia*: “Matter is repelled by the central Sun, but spirit is attracted incessantly toward it.”²⁵⁴ As Catherine Albanese observes, Davis’ rhetoric of the Divine as a great magnet fused with the body of the universe took on increasingly sexual qualities as a mystical union between Father-God and Mother-Nature which was reflected through correspondence in the celestial marriage between man and woman. Thus, as ever, cosmology and metaphysics had real ramifications for reform through the implied equality between men and women and the need for divorce in order to make way for “true” marriages, which, like the “conjugal [sic] love” of Swedenborg, persisted into the afterlife.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁰ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 2, 243-48. Davis noted on page 251 that he used “Mind” as synonymous with “Spirit,” “Soul,” and “Individual.”

²⁵¹ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 674.

²⁵² Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 2, 288-89; Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 676.

²⁵³ Panentheism differs from Pantheism in that it posits that God is at once immanent in the world, but also contains it within himself and is therefore greater than it and transcends it. John Culp, “Panentheism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta ed. Retrieved 2 Sept. 2018. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/panentheism/>.

²⁵⁴ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 5, 414. See also: Albanese, “On the Matter of Spirit,” 7; Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 103.

²⁵⁵ Albanese, “On the Matter of Spirit,” 8-11; Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 660-61.

Situated in the physical universe, the Deity possessed substance and was subject to the laws of Nature which were derived from his own being, though he was still a “spirit” in the aforementioned sense. Writing in 1850, Davis wrote that “the Deity is himself an organized substance—yea, organized upon anatomical, physiological, mechanical, chemical, electric, magnetic, and spiritual principles.” It was “not only self-evident, but incontestable,” he declared, “that *the Deity is a substance moving substance*.”²⁵⁶ Indeed, as Davis later elaborated, the Divine Mind was subject to the very laws that reflected him. “Here I affirm,” he wrote, “that the Deity did no more create the Laws of Nature than did they create him; they are simply the outer manifestations of the internal essential principles which constitute his existence and Organization; and consequently, the Deity and his Laws are equally beyond the possibility of being *changed, suspended, transcended or destroyed*.”²⁵⁷

The Deity’s existence within the order of nature precluded miracles or special providence. Regarding his teachings on the spirit and the Deity, Davis admitted that “the unphilosophical Christian will be startled at this seeming materialism;” but insisted that “the doctrine herein disclosed is truth.” The modern age would come to accept the necessary reconciliation of materialism and spiritualism.²⁵⁸ In order to challenge materialism in an atheistic sense, Davis felt it necessary to place the Deity at its centre, with a hierarchical understanding of matter. In this, he was not unlike the Mormons who responded in a similar way to the growing crisis of materialistic science.²⁵⁹

As Bret Carroll noticed, abstract, distant, and deistic understandings of the Deity present in Spiritualism more broadly brushed up against the broader cultural desire for a personal and benevolent God.²⁶⁰ The same tension existed in Davis’ writings as he presented a God who was both the Central Sun of the Univercœlum, but also a loving Father. The self-evident beauty of the natural world, Davis argued in his 1852 work, the *Approaching Crisis*, “prove that a Perfect Deity is both its Author and Friend.” The self-evident love of the Creator in his creation provided justification for discerning the true religion in natural law. “The eternal Deity, my friends, amply demonstrates to us the character of Religion!” Davis

²⁵⁶ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 1, 47-48.

²⁵⁷ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 2, 348.

²⁵⁸ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 1, 70.

²⁵⁹ For Mormon materialism, see Hazen, *Village Enlightenment*, 25, 31-32, 40-46; Albanese, *Republic*, 142.

²⁶⁰ Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 86-88.

announced. “His *creed* is written all over the firmament. It is expressed in the *order, beauty, and loveliness of Nature*....All indications testify, fully, that the *true religion* is *Justice, and joy, and peace, and beauty*.” The distance and radical power of the Divine could be mediated by the direct experience of his goodness in the natural world around us. Davis encouraged readers to “contemplate the *works and ways of Nature’s God*. We are never so *free and happy* as when we bring our spirits into direct sympathy with the forms and flowers of nature.”²⁶¹ The gulf could similarly be crossed by his divine influx into the individual, as discussed in the earlier section on revelation.

Sin and Salvation

Reflective of the Deity’s benevolence and Davis’ optimism about human nature, there was no sin in an absolute sense, nor was there a hell. Embodying a liberal stance on sin and the activist reform impulse of mid-century America, Davis saw it as the natural result of disordered circumstances. Echoing the Transcendentalist philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson and earlier Neoplatonist ideas,²⁶² Davis was certain that humans had no natural inclination towards evil. For someone to do good, conditions had to permit it. “In order to read,” Davis wrote, “a man must have a book.” Correspondingly, a “man can not be good when influences are *evil*. He can not be *perfect* when he is *imperfectly* constituted.” It was a basic “*misdirection* of man’s physical and spiritual powers, which generates unhappy consequences.” Good and evil was “a distinction created by the clergy, the influence of which fills the prison, and gives employment to the legal profession and to the *hangman*.” True morality was conformity with natural law. “[N]othing is natural which is not moral,” he affirmed. “All things, therefore, are good in themselves, but consist of different degrees of goodness.” Sin, in his view, had no independent ontological reality, but was relative. Punishments meted out for sin were the natural result of the transgression: “Nature demands obedience,” Davis wrote. “Upon her and her laws depends your misery or happiness. She

²⁶¹ Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Approaching Crisis: Being a Review of Dr. Bushnell’s Recent Lectures on Supernaturalism*, (New York: Andrew Jackson Davis, 1852), 90-91.

²⁶² Versluis, *Esoteric Origins*, 103.

everywhere proclaims this truth: that at her hand is the punishment of every vice, and the reward of every virtue.”²⁶³

Self-evidently, if there was no sin, there could be no original sin either: an unjust and unnatural doctrine, Davis believed. It was inconceivable that God would create humans doomed to succumb to temptation, only to condemn them, along with all of their descendants, for all eternity to hellfire of his own creation. The implicit suggestion in this doctrine was that God lacked the wisdom and foresight to design perfect humans capable of conforming to his will, and, outrageously, had to undo his mistake by taking a human form as his own son and dying on the cross. Furthermore, original sin implied a moral declination, which was an impossibility in Davis’ progressive worldview. Thus, like original sin, the atonement was “a repulsive blasphemy” and the product of a “deranged imagination” in that it required God taking extraordinary measures outside of the scope of established natural law in order to correct a fundamental design flaw.²⁶⁴ Nonetheless, even the optimistic Davis struggled with the suffering he saw in the world and, by his own account, slipped into a dark period of atheism as he pondered what God could permit such pain to exist in the world.²⁶⁵

Unsurprisingly, if there was no sin and punishment was causal, there was no hell either; salvation awaited every human. Davis felt certain that the benevolence of the Deity, visible in his creation, precluded the notion that there could be a hell:

He can not see the eternal “*destruction*” of the wicked, and yet send forth a principle of *love, youth, and beauty* into the world—causing the birds to sing the songs of gladness, and the fields to teem with blushing loveliness! No; the thought is impossible! For if there were a hell in the neighbourhood of heaven, as asserted by misimpressed [sic] and wrongly educated clergymen; and if that *abyss* contained but *one*—just one—lost soul; we *know*, granting the Lord to be unable to save, that the angels in heaven—our departed brothers and sisters—would *weep tears enough to extinguish the fires of hell*; and, upon the swelling bosom of *an ocean thus formed*, that once lost soul would ride triumphantly into the courts of heaven!²⁶⁶

Davis was certainly not alone in his rejection of the doctrine of hell and of an angry God. His view of salvation seems a likely reflection of the company he kept. Many of Davis’ associates

²⁶³ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 340, 521, 716, 729-30, 781. Elihu Palmer made a similar remark: “Sin is the consequence of the infraction of moral law.” Similarly: “Nature is correct and righteous in all her operations; man is wrong only when he deviates from her laws.” Palmer, *Principles of Nature*, 126, 145.

²⁶⁴ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 481-83, 515-16.

²⁶⁵ Davis, *Arabula*, 30-31, 34.

²⁶⁶ Davis, *Approaching Crisis*, 91-92.

and early mentors—Rev. Abner Rogers Bartlett, Rev. Gibson Smith, Dr. Silas Smith Lyon, Rev. William Fishbough, and Rev. Samuel Byron Brittan—were all Universalists, as were many of his first followers. While a relatively small denomination, Universalists represented a somewhat less elite and urban denomination than Unitarianism, though they shared very similar doctrines.²⁶⁷

In terms of concrete outcomes, fear of hell did no apparent good anyway. If anything, hellfire prevented the moral self-culture that was a necessary component of true religion. “Who,” Davis inquired, “can be *reformed* and *sanctified* by belittling his intellect, surrendering his reason to a fearful faith, believing that nine hundred and ninety-nine out of every thousand will be endlessly miserable?”²⁶⁸ The degrading nature of the doctrine corrupted the very reason. Countering opposing claims that it was Atheism, Deism, and Universalism that led to crime and poor morals, Davis stated in *Arabula* that, after having extensively interviewed prisoners, he had come to the conclusion that “*The doctrine of endless punishment is—strongly and broadly speaking—the orthodoxy of State prisoners.*”²⁶⁹ In an attempt to salvage Jesus, the Great Moral Reformer, from association with immoral teachings about hell, Davis asserted in *Principles of Nature* that Jesus should not be taken literally with regard to his warning that the sheep would be separated from the goats. Rather, this kind of language reflected the oratory style of the time and the parable was of no use to modern people and should be ignored. If Jesus had actually advocated such division and disunity, he would have been just as misguided as anyone else and could not possibly be the great and enlightened reformer that he was.²⁷⁰

Given its societal causes, sin had to be tackled on a systemic level, a belief which informed Davis’ reform agenda. Borrowing Charles Fourier’s metaphor, Davis likened the world as it is now to a poorly played musical instrument. The actual instrument itself was flawless, but all the notes that it was capable of playing sounded out of order and created a hideous cacophony. All that was required was that the notes be rearranged into a harmonious melody. The “circumstances, which govern the world,” Davis wrote, “are the creations of *man*, and...*he* possesses power to seal their everlasting destruction, and to create superior

²⁶⁷ Buescher, *Other Side of Salvation*, 21-25, 29-42; Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 46-47.

²⁶⁸ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 5, 255-56.

²⁶⁹ Davis, *Arabula*, 137.

²⁷⁰ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 574-76.

ones in their stead.” The current approach to tackling sin was backwards. “Do not cultivate the *flower* of morality, before you have planted the *seed* of human industry,” he implored. Sadly, he wrote, “No one feels an interest in his [a criminal’s] welfare; but all are pleased at his capture, condemnation, and repulsion from the bosom of society.”²⁷¹ As Davis laid out in the *Approaching Crisis*, evil was something progressively overcome through successive ages. “The doctrine of evil... is a local and arbitrary matter; which the succeeding generation will alter to suit the standard of another construction.” While, for example, “One person may be *morally and intellectually above* the act of theft,” a less developed individual, despite realizing that it is wrong, may find “his moral feelings not very strongly opposed to the act.”²⁷²

One of his projects for combating social evil was intended to employ such as systemic approach. The ambitious “Moral Police Fraternity,” which Davis founded in 1863 with the backing of Dodworth’s Academy, where he lectured at the behest of the New York Spiritualist Association, would attack the root causes of crime and poverty rather than vainly dealing out punishments after the fact.²⁷³ With the motto “LET NO ONE CALL GOD, FATHER, WHO CALLS NOT MAN, BROTHER,” the Moral Police would be a “Christ-like band of brothers” who would, unlike the municipal police, “search out all the cases and victims of actual want” and tackle all forms of crime, vice, poverty, and sectarianism at their roots. Additionally, the fraternity—a misnomer as the organization was programatically inclusive of women—would advocate for criminals in court by making the tribunals “thoroughly acquainted with the causes and extenuating circumstances of the transgression.” Rather than temporary measures, Davis explained, “the *permanent* good of the individual and the various interests of society, must ever be the first and paramount considerations.”²⁷⁴ The moral police put into practice Davis’ call for activist religion in *Principles of Nature* to “Preach in *deed*, and not in *speech*. Cease unmeaning prayers, and go forth into the sinks of social wretchedness and desolation, and offer an *assisting hand*, which is a prayer divinely manifested.”²⁷⁵ Tragically, the Moral Police—willing to “do good where we can to a Hindoo the same as a Christian”—came to an

²⁷¹ Ibid., 585, 687, 718.

²⁷² Davis, *Approaching Crisis*, 100.

²⁷³ Delp, “Prophet,” 48-49.

²⁷⁴ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 2, 119-21; Davis, *Arabula*, 119.

²⁷⁵ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 777.

untimely end as it became overwhelmed by the crime and poverty that grew with New York's population.²⁷⁶

Beyond the societal, salvation came from the cultivation of the innate divine qualities that humanity had inherited from God himself. Wisdom, the highest faculty of man, guided the race and provided for its glorious eternal life. In the *Great Harmonia*, Davis took the Christian language of salvation and internalized it. "The *true* Savior," Davis wrote, "—he who is coessential and coeternal with the Creator of all things...—is WISDOM, the embodiment and image of universal Harmony, and the ever-blooming flower of the Divine Mind." Inherent in God, the principle of Wisdom was dispersed into all of creation. "I *know* that his spirit is immanent in man," he wrote. In an interplay between mass social reform and moral self-cultivation, Davis saw the "exercise" of Wisdom "in all places" as a way to free society from anything that "tends to retard social, scientific, and spiritual development."²⁷⁷ Similar to the Transcendentalists, Davis emphasized the interior and moral nature of salvation, but more strongly emphasized its social and communal aspects than Emerson ever did. In the same way that Leigh Eric Schmidt observed that "A significant swath of New Thought was simply liberal propositions [such as from Transcendentalism] put into practical dress," the same could be said about much of Davis' reform agenda.²⁷⁸

Immortality

The process of salvation did not end in this world. The soul was immortal, Davis repeatedly affirmed, and would continue to develop in the spiritual spheres beyond this world. Though apparent that Davis' understanding of the soul and the afterlife was implicitly informed by the Christian doctrines—particularly those of Swedenborg—one of his key criticisms of Christianity was that it failed to provide any concrete evidence of immortality.²⁷⁹ Reason inevitably led to the conclusion that the soul was immortal, however. The soul's forward progress was eternal, rendering the concept of death meaningless. What was the body but the external manifestation of the interior principle of the soul—a microcosm of the relationship

²⁷⁶ Delp, "Prophet," 49; Davis, *Arabula*, 122-27.

²⁷⁷ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 1, 451-53.

²⁷⁸ Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 17.

²⁷⁹ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 558.

of the Deity to Nature? The body died, but the principle was eternal.²⁸⁰ As Davis wrote in the *Great Harmonia*, “Believe not, that what is called death is a final termination to human existence, nor that the *change* is so thorough and entire as to alter or destroy the constitutional peculiarities of the individual; but believe righteously, that death causes as much *alteration* in the condition of the individual as the *bursting* of a rose-bud causes in the situation and condition of the flower.”²⁸¹

The principle of progression in the human spirit, inherited from the Divine Mind, continued to unfold in the afterlife as the soul reconfigured itself in the six successive spiritual spheres beyond the “material” world. Through correspondence, the spiritual spheres resembled the natural world, having trees, streams, mountains, and other natural features, but were increasingly perfect.²⁸² This cosmology and worldly heaven replicated Swedenborg’s visions with minor adjustments, such as the reconceptualization of the three hells and three heavens into six spheres of increasing harmoniousness. Davis accounted for the discrepancy by explaining that Swedenborg had misinterpreted the relatively lower nature of the first three spheres as being diabolical relative to the more perfect higher ones. Like Swedenborg, Davis also believed that the spirits, or angels, associated with each other on the basis of spiritual development and “mutual affinity”—a model reflected in his Fourierist reform schemes on earth, discussed later. They also cared for children and entered into “conjugal marriages.”²⁸³

The earth existed in the natural sphere, which was followed by the spiritual, celestial, supernatural, superspiritual, and supercelestial spheres. The seventh sphere was the “Infinite Vortex of Love and Wisdom” and “Spiritual Sun of the Divine Mind”: the seat of the Deity around which everything in the Univercœlum revolved. Indeed, the spiritual spheres, or “Summer Lands,” existed as grand concentric rings in outer space, separated from each other by rings of matter. In his 1867 book *A Stellar Key to the Summer Land*, Davis attempted to

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 412-13, 613, 617.

²⁸¹ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 1, 157.

²⁸² Frank Podmore quipped that “The revelations of Andrew Jackson Davis...made heaven as familiar as Yarmouth beach, and about as alluring.” Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, vol. 2, 175.

²⁸³ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 34, 40; Gabay, *Covert Enlightenment*, 220. Swedenborg’s visions themselves revealed a pronounced Neoplatonic influence in their emphasis on spiritual hierarchies and progress. See Goodrick-Clarke, *Western Esoteric Traditions*, 15, 19-21, 159, 164-65.

reconcile these spheres with contemporary astronomy in great detail.²⁸⁴ Individuals dwelt in a sphere until they progressed to the point where death reconfigured them for the next sphere. The second sphere, the spiritual, still had some of the shortcomings of the natural world. For instance, the power and influence of sectarianism was so strong, that some individuals were slow to abandon their previously cherished beliefs and sought for a time to reconcile them with what they were currently experiencing, another phenomenon Davis possibly derived from Swedenborg.²⁸⁵

By the time an individual reached the sixth supercelestial sphere everything and everyone took part in a co-dependent and reciprocal relationship which created absolute harmony and unimaginable joy. It was in the sixth sphere where existed the “house of many mansions” described in the Bible.²⁸⁶ Reconciling his universalism with a system of justice and rewards in the afterlife, Davis later affirmed that the Harmonial Philosophy also taught “that the conditions and experiences of the individual after death, will be in accordance with the development of the sentiments and the intellect before leaving the earth.” Through natural association, a spirit would be drawn to its proper place, much in the same way Swedenborg had envisioned. Nonetheless, a lower situation was temporary as the inevitability of progression meant that all humans “will ultimately be harmonized by the spontaneous will or ever-operative laws of the Great Positive Mind.”²⁸⁷

Utopian Progress

As exemplified by a correspondence between the evolution of theology, the spiritual and bodily advancement of individuals, and the fundamental cosmology of the universe, progress was central to Davis’ philosophy. With a characteristically nineteenth-century optimism in progress, Davis believed that the various strands of human history would soon culminate in global reform. The time was ripe, he felt, for humanity to finally move beyond all partial and

²⁸⁴ Andrew Jackson Davis, *A Stellar Key to the Summer Land* (Boston: William White & Co., 1868), 64-76.

²⁸⁵ See Emanuel Swedenborg, *Treatise Concerning the Last Judgment, and the Destruction of Babylon: Shewing that all the Predictions Contained in the Revelation are at this Day Fulfilled. Being a Testimony of Things Heard and Seen* (London: R. Hindmarsh, 1788), 96.

²⁸⁶ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 160, 643-77.

²⁸⁷ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 5, 254. Swedenborg believed that evil souls willingly cast themselves into hell. See Block, *New Church*, 42; Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, §545-47.

sectarian religion and embrace the universal religion found in Nature and revelations from the spirit world. At last, the true essence of religion would be realized in history, though this by no means meant that development would cease. The physical and spiritual ascendancy of modern humanity permitted people to receive revelations for which the world was not previously ready and bring about an outpouring of wisdom from the spirit world. Actively appropriating higher spiritual truths in one's life and reordering society along natural principles would bring an unprecedented era of human flourishing and happiness.

Individual and Collective Evolution

Human evolution moved in tandem with and helped drive societal progress. As early as 1847, Davis was steeped in the racial hierarchies of nineteenth-century science, even as he proclaimed the innate holiness of all humans, and divided the human family into five races of ascending perfection, each with their representative cultural productions, theologies, and forms of government. There was an inherent logic to Davis' model since, as discussed in the section of revelation, the physical attributes of a person, conceptualized in phrenological terms, mediated access to divine truths. Moreover, correspondence dictated that interior development would be manifested externally in the world. As Davis explained in the *Approaching Crisis*, "Progression in mind brings *physical* refinement; thus the animal-man becomes extinct in proportion as the spiritual-man obtains the ascendancy."²⁸⁸

It scarcely needs be remarked that Davis placed "Negroes" at the bottom of the human racial hierarchy and Caucasians—specifically Anglo-Americans in later writings—at the top. Davis' evolutionary schema similarly emphasized the relative closeness of Africans to apes, proto-humans, and the less-developed inhabitants of the lower planets—the dark, hairy "orang-outang"-like inhabitants of Mercury and "giant-like," "barbarous," "savage," and warlike inhabitants of Venus.²⁸⁹ The "Negro" stage of development, Davis associated with "savagism" in social state and inferior cultural productions, such as "lifeless" art, "discordant" music, simple architecture like huts, the barest traces of science, and "fetichism"

²⁸⁸ Davis, *Approaching Crisis*, 102.

²⁸⁹ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 204-209, 304, 318-19, 366-68; Davis, *Magic Staff*, 374-81.

in theology.²⁹⁰ Despite his outspoken abolitionism,²⁹¹ Davis' view of society and the universe was fundamentally hierarchical in that it assumed a full spectrum of development at all times in history; the promise of progress was universal, but it was variously actualized among different people.

Nor was Davis' concern for reconciling religion with theories of evolution unique in nineteenth-century America. New theories of evolution in the scientific world generated spiritual anxiety and put pressure on believers to account for these ideas. Members of the Free Religious Association, like John Weiss, Frothingham, or William J. Potter, emphasized the need to bring religion into line with the most recent findings of scientists. In order to reconcile evolution to spiritual matters, they, like Davis, framed evolution in terms of progress and human advancement. Seemingly ignoring the implied chaos of Darwinism, they favoured a linear and upward model of evolution in which humans partook in the grand development of the universe.²⁹²

With a patriotism befitting his name, Andrew Jackson Davis saw America at the apex of the world's social and religious evolution, engaging in what Bret Carrol called a "spiritual republicanism." Nowhere was this impulse better illustrated than in Davis' 1851 "Declaration of Independence," published in the *Spirit Messenger*, in which he asserted the natural right of the individual to liberty of conscience and the free exercise of Reason in opposition to the tyranny of clergymen and creeds.²⁹³ With republican government at the top of his hierarchy of various social organizations, Davis' placed America on the forefront of millennial progress and declared that there was a "REPUBLIC OF SPIRIT embosomed and gestating in the dominant political organism."²⁹⁴ Unabashedly exceptionalist in his opinion of America's moral role in the world, Davis wrote in 1852 that as the "highest of all nations" the "American Nation, . . . to-day sits in judgment against all the nations of the earth—rebuking them for their evils,

²⁹⁰ Davis, *Magic Staff*, 374-81.

²⁹¹ Davis, *Magic Staff*, 194-95. Davis formed the journal *Herald of Progress* in 1860 in response to the *Banner of Light*'s unwillingness to openly condemn slavery. His position cost him popularity among southern Spiritualists, mirroring the larger trend of church schisms prior to the Civil War. See Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 75-76.

²⁹² Robinson, "Free Religion Movement," 621-22.

²⁹³ Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 35-37; Andrew Jackson Davis, "Declaration of Independence," *The Spirit Messenger* 1, no. 43 (May 31, 1851): 337-40.

²⁹⁴ Davis' pronouncement inspired the title for Catherine Albanese's landmark history of "metaphysical religion" in the United States. Albanese, *Republic*, 218; Andrew Jackson Davis, *Beyond the Valley; a Sequel to "The Magic Staff: an Autobiography of Andrew Jackson Davis"* (Boston: Colby & Rich, 1885), 64.

their discords, wars, and tyrannical institutions.” Nonetheless, the potential for progress applied to even the loftiest of countries. “America is also condemned by still more liberty-loving spirits for her Slavery and local disorders,” Davis warned.²⁹⁵

In a sacralization of the familiar metaphor of the melting pot, Davis noted in 1870 that America was “to be the birth-place of a comprehensively new blending of human with the celestial governments.” It was here that “all races meet also all religions. They are to be melted and run together into one conglomerate mass of historic stuff not good for any thing human.” Helpless before the “pulverizing advancement of positive science,” creeds would soon become a thing of the past. “Scientific skepticism...will crush institutionalized religion into nothingness,” Davis warned.²⁹⁶ The modernizing power of America, which bred a new American race, would also forge a new religion of the future out of the crude materials brought together in the republic.

The Era of Peace

Despite Davis’ rejection of traditional Christianity, the Christian idea of the Millennium was at the centre of *Principles of Nature* and Davis’ Harmonial Philosophy more broadly.²⁹⁷ The moment where mass reform was possible was rapidly approaching as a result of evolution and technological advancement. In the introduction to *Principles of Nature*, William Fishbough gave voice to the postmillennialist hopes of the age and enthusiastically announced that science was breaking the seven seals described in the Book of Revelation. Befitting an age of Reason, the number of open-minded people who longed for truth and listened to evidence was rapidly increasing. New communication technology, such as the telegraph, brought people together, suggesting that soon there would only be one unified society and religion. Davis’ revelations, poised at this particular historical moment, were perfectly situated to bring about a “grand and universal System of thought and action, based upon the nature of things and the true relations of men to each other.”²⁹⁸ The aim of Davis’ revelations and plan for reform was nothing less than the establishment of “the general

²⁹⁵ Davis, *Approaching Crisis*, 99-100.

²⁹⁶ Davis, *Fountain*, 74-75.

²⁹⁷ Versluis, *Esoteric Origins*, 59.

²⁹⁸ Fishbough, introduction to *Principles of Nature*, iv-v, xxi.

millennium.”²⁹⁹ Nonetheless, as Davis later elaborated in the *Great Harmonia*, such a time would not come as a sudden rapture, rather it would be a protracted process. Rather than “a sudden manifestation of truth,” humanity would “*gradually* glide into the realization of three things—first, the nearness of the Spiritual world to the Natural world; second, the possibility of Spiritual intercourse; and, third, the reorganization of society, which will be a commencement of the kingdom of heaven on earth.”³⁰⁰

The reorganization of society was based on the expression of natural law in the world. Sharing a broader cultural interest with others like Transcendentalists and Swedenborgians,³⁰¹ the new society Davis described in *Principles of Nature* borrowed heavily from the socialist utopianism of Charles Fourier³⁰² who, Davis wrote, understood that the harmony and reciprocity of plants also applied to humans. Through the principles of association and attractive labour, every person would perform tasks based on their abilities and natural inclinations and be provided for on the basis of their individual requirements. This division of labour would take the form of various collectives, such as the Agricultural Association, Mechanical Association, or more specific associations, such as for lawyers and physicians. Through correspondence, the associations would symbolically mirror the different parts of the human form, and indeed the Grand Man of the universe more broadly. By pooling resources and working for the good of society, narrow interest and class conflict would be resolved. The inability of others to compete with these collective associations would compel them to join.

At the culmination of this grand reorganization, one person would seamlessly emerge as the most capable and wise to become the central governor of the others, ruling benevolently like the Christ of the Millennium until someone else surpassed him in wisdom and took his place. Echoing a larger trend towards the therapeutic and social uses of religion, Davis declared that “social government,” “distributive justice,” and “*universal happiness*” would prevail. He predicted that under such perfect conditions “the great Soul of Mankind will commune with the excellences of higher Spheres,” thereby adding the wealth of the spirit

²⁹⁹ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 745, 778.

³⁰⁰ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 1, 211.

³⁰¹ Jean-François Mayer, “Swedenborgian Traditions” in *Dictionary of Gnosis*, 1106-1108; Sterling F. Delano, “Transcendentalist Communities,” in *Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*, 255.

³⁰² Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 20.

world to our own. In order to begin the ambitious transformation, Davis called on a handful of benevolent individuals from different occupations—a mere six agriculturalists—to put aside selfish concerns for the good of the race and become the catalyst for change.³⁰³ He entertained similar hopes for grassroots reform later in life with his aforementioned Moral Police. As he described its mission, “the *moral police* must strive, and work, and pray, for the establishment of the kingdom of Heaven on Earth!” Indeed, he confided, “My impressions will not permit me to disguise the fact, that the grand, ulterior *object* of the voluntary organization of a MORAL POLICE, is the re-organization of society.”³⁰⁴

Religion, too, required an association in Davis’ scheme. The formerly pernicious occupation of the clergy would be reformed so as to fulfil a useful role by performing the true work of religion: discerning the universal laws of Nature and putting them into practice. Within their clerical association, clergymen would promote “moral culture and spiritual progress” by combining elements of science, philosophy, and theology into one coherent system. Rather than an exclusive institution which excluded the poor, the clerical association would accept anyone appropriately constituted for the task. With the divine principles of Nature in mind, clergymen would comb through the theologies of the world’s religions and parse out the sound interior principles from the bad ones which promoted disunity. The wisdom they discovered would inevitably “flow” to the lower associations, adding a wealth of knowledge to the whole of society. In addition, the clergy would create just laws which promoted overall harmony. The first seminary, Davis speculated, could be funded by money that was currently being squandered on the coffers of the churches.³⁰⁵ Thus, like the Transcendentalists, moral self-culture, here aided by social reform, became the central component of true religious practice.

Amidst the global reform that would unite all human interests and banish disharmony and sectarianism, “all minds,” Davis wrote, “are seemingly converging to one centre, at which will be developed the perfected knowledge of psychological and eternal truth.” The collective streams of human knowledge would bring about “the establishment of some vast, comprehensive, united system of theology”: a universal religion for all mankind that would express the true essence of religion in history by sustaining “an inseparable connexion with

³⁰³ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 585, 739-76, 780.

³⁰⁴ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 2, 120.

³⁰⁵ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 700, 766-69.

the natural, interior elements of man, and with the universal laws of Nature” and which would also provide “consoling truths in reference to a future and interior world.” Unlike the corrupted external religions, it would “be a theology perfected by the knowledge of scientific truths” and thus suitable for the modern era.³⁰⁶ “Sectarianism is not in man,” Davis wrote in the *Great Harmonia*, “except the central tendency to associate, and form groups or bodies, as the planets were made, by the spontaneous gravitation of congenial parts—the Sectarianism of the Universe! As this is the true form of association, religious and social, he should form no other.”³⁰⁷ As always, natural law supplied the blueprint for the true state of humanity.

Emphasizing the commonalities between a wide range of prophets, Davis announced that the coming millennial era had been anticipated by “David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, and Malachi,” as well as by “Confucius, Zoroaster, Brama, Jesus, Mohammed, [and] Fourier” alike. “It was sung in the Orphic hymns of Egypt, described in the writings of heathen poets and philosophers, preached and anticipated by Paul, and metaphorically described by John in the Apocalypse.” Visions of the coming age had brought “consolation to every writer who feels the importance of social reformation,” inspired philanthropic souls, and brought hope to the depressed and downtrodden throughout time.³⁰⁸

Sounding very much like the second-generation Transcendentalists who came after him, Davis predicted that the best parts of all religions would be brought together into a universal and post-Christian religion for all mankind. As “remarkable as it may appear,” Davis wrote in 1847, “it is true that the most prominent writers, from the time of Confucius and Zoroaster to the present century, have spoken of this period with prophetic delight. Each one has contributed some principles that are true and practicable. They descend from the heathen philosophers, and flow through the Old and New Testaments, and are presented in various forms at the present day.”³⁰⁹ As he elaborated a few years later in the *Great Harmonia*, the world’s “many Doctrines and Revelations from the depths of antiquity” possessed “some beautiful and important truths; but an Eclectic Philosophy—a Philosophical Revelation of the Natural, Spiritual, and Celestial Universe—has never before been presented to mankind.” The Eclectic Philosophy would extract the interior truths from the outward

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 339-40.

³⁰⁷ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 2, 71.

³⁰⁸ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 778-79.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 776.

forms. “It makes no difference who knocks at TRUTH'S door for admission into her divine presence—whether it be Christian, or pagan, or Jew, or gentile, or theologian, or philosopher, or atheist, or idolater, or king, or artisan—for she is no respecter of doctrine, nor wealth, nor position, nor title.”³¹⁰

Allowing for individual inflections to the true religion of Nature, Davis advocated that people “take the central inspiration of each past teacher, and rally around a standard composed of *all the central principles* thereby announced by the Infinite to mankind,” while still “leaving to each mind the glorious privilege of thinking his own ‘thoughts’ . . . and not infringing upon the sacred prerogatives of individual temperament.” This would inevitably result in “anti-sectarianism and universal happiness.” “We can not be sectarian;” Davis urged, “neither can we part with a single central principle held sacred by each sect, for it liveth in the life of the mind. Let us become very large! We will join all the sects, both Pagan and Christian, and thus *destroy* their differences.”³¹¹ All of the historical religions served a necessary purpose in giving expression to some particular religious truth. In the utopian age, however, all fragmentation would be brought into unity and interior truths would be expressed like never before.

Davis’ pronouncements sound like they could have sprung from the pen of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the Unitarian minister and Transcendentalist who wrote in his 1871 essay, “The Sympathy of Religions,” that he wished to have “*the religion*” that “must not include less than the piety of the world.” “[T]here is but one religion under many forms,” Higginson wrote, “whose essential creed is the Fatherhood of God, and the Brotherhood of Man.”³¹² As Leigh Eric Schmidt argues in his 2005 monograph *Restless Souls*, earlier “liberal sentiments” from the likes of Emerson—enabled of course by increasing knowledge of other religions through philology and colonialism—allowed individuals like Higginson, Lydia Maria Child, and the poet Walt Whitman to be in “sympathy” with different religions and amalgamate them, perhaps even hoping like Child to form an “Eclectic Church of the Future.” Schmidt places a heavy emphasis on the influence of Higginson’s essay in helping “launch the idea of the sympathy of religions into prominence,” particularly through his

³¹⁰ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 1, 9-10.

³¹¹ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 5, 273, 276.

³¹² Higginson, “The Sympathy of Religions,” 184, 187. Higginson is often remembered for being Emily Dickinson’s pen pal. See Turner, *Academy*, 41.

involvement with the FRA and with the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago being its most visible expression.³¹³

Without diminishing the importance of Higginson and others that Schmidt emphasizes—including New Thought writers like Ralph Waldo Trine—it needs to be acknowledged that Davis was consistently and prominently preaching the “sympathy of religions” over twenty years before Higginson’s essay. Davis’ influence was certainly caught Whitman’s notice and he incorporated the seer’s teachings into his own work.³¹⁴ Higginson himself became very hopeful of the potential of Spiritualism to overcome sectarian division and was a regular participant at séances. In a similar vein, Child, who authored *The Progress of Religious Ideas Through Successive Ages* in 1854, was acquainted with Higginson and William Lloyd Garrison, himself a devout convert to Spiritualism, and, indeed took some interest in the movement herself.³¹⁵

Taking to heart Catherine Albanese’s argument that “metaphysical” religious movements, like evangelicals, are best appreciated as networks³¹⁶ is significant here in that Garrison, as previously mentioned, became friends with Davis, staying at his home during the Hartford Bible Convention and also publishing his articles in the *Liberator*.³¹⁷ Reform networks similarly connected other Spiritualists like the Hicksite Quakers Amy and Isaac Post—early promoters and friends of the Fox sisters—to prominent abolitionists like Abigail Kelly, Henry C. Wright, Garrison, and Frederick Douglass. As Albanese observes: “With the Posts involved in the Underground Railroad..., the incipient spiritualist movement was already being connected to the cutting edge of the period’s reform movement.”³¹⁸

Through his abolitionism, Theodore Parker similarly rubbed shoulders with Spiritualists, including Higginson with whom he was close. Such networks could even spill over into the academy as in the case of the famous Orientalist and comparative religion scholar F. Max Müller, who enthusiastically invited Higginson to Oxford after meeting him in England. Notable, too, was the membership of some Spiritualists in the Free Religious

³¹³ Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 101-41.

³¹⁴ Versluis, *Esoteric Origins*, 158; von Frank, “Religion,” 130.

³¹⁵ Higginson and Garrison were also acquainted. Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 109-15, 134. See also Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 255; Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 27; Moore, *White Crows*, 3.

³¹⁶ Albanese, *Republic*, 8.

³¹⁷ Delp, “A Spiritualist in Connecticut,” 357-59.

³¹⁸ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 11; Albanese, *Republic*, 180.

Association.³¹⁹ The significant overlap of networks between higher class Transcendentalists and Spiritualists like Davis suggest that the discourse that constructed understandings of religion had a far broader reach than has usually been appreciated. There was no clean line of transmission from the older generation of Transcendentalists like Emerson to the younger generation of Higginson, rather notions of comparative religion were being negotiated in a complex discourse that crossed back and forth between class boundaries in a two-way exchange. Individuals like Davis both popularized this discourse, but also radically transformed it and realized its concrete implications for social reform even before later Transcendentalists like Higginson, themselves already entangled in Davis' discursive world.

The utopian society Davis envisioned represented the confluence of different historical streams fed by a common underlying truth, eternally present in universal natural laws. While misdirected from prehistoric times through to the present day, human potential was slowly being realized as the external forms of historical religion progressively expressed truer conceptions of religious principles. The general realization of these principles, read largely as the discovery and implementation of true ethics and implicitly informed by Christian norms, would overcome all sectarianism as people discovered common eternal truths in the revelations and scriptures of all nations. Now, at last, humanity was advanced enough to consolidate these truths together into a coherent whole. The Harmonial Philosophy was the glorious apex of thousands of years of physical, moral, and spiritual development—the latest stage in the Pantheon of Progress, which would never cease perfecting itself. “This,” proclaimed Davis triumphantly, “will be the era of peace.”³²⁰

³¹⁹ von Frank, “Religion,” 129; Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 107, 126, 134.

³²⁰ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 776.

CHAPTER THREE - THE HARMONIAL BROTHERHOOD

“Missionaries in the Field”

On the eleventh of August, 1847—the twenty-first birthday of Andrew Jackson Davis—a small group gathered together in New York “to begin a journal by an harmonious association of labor, capital, and talent.” After a short deliberation, the “harmonious association” determined to call the journal *The Univercœlum and Spiritual Philosopher*—Univercœlum being Davis’ neologism for “the united revolving heavens.” Signifying the paper’s emphasis on the correspondence between the external and internal, the paper’s motto—selected by Samuel B. Brittan (1815-1883), its editor—was, “The things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.”¹ With *Principles of Nature* completed, Davis and this small band of “missionaries”—armed with their journal and organized into “brotherhoods”—set forth to propagate the “Harmonial Philosophy” and sow the seeds of global reform. The religious agenda they advanced held that revelation was individual, universally accessible, and ongoing, and that religion was a universal and inward human characteristic which progressively expressed itself in various forms throughout the course of history. The nature of true religion was moral and its true practice was concrete reform based on natural law.

The core group leaned heavily towards Universalism, Swedenborgianism, and radical reform, particularly Fourierism. William Fishbough (1814-1881)—“the scribe”—we have already learned, was a Universalist minister, as was Brittan. Both Thomas Lake Harris (1823-1906)—an Englishman and “the poet” of the group—and Woodbury M. Fernald

¹ The phrase is from 2 Corinthians 4:18 (KJV). “While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.” Davis, *Magic Staff*, 359-60, 389; Samuel B. Brittan, “The Univercœlum,” *Univercœlum and Spiritual Philosopher* 1, no. 1 (Dec. 4, 1847): 9.

(1813-1873) had started out as Universalist ministers before gravitating towards Swedenborgianism and Davis' teachings.² The anarchist land reformer Joshua K. Ingalls (1816-1898) was raised a Quaker, but briefly became a Universalist minister too.³ Many of the journal's literary enticements came from the women's rights reformer and abolitionist Francis (Fanny) H. Green (1805-1878).⁴

While as a whole more middle-class than either Davis or the Spiritualist movement more generally, the Harmonialists were composed of religious radicals who seized upon the comparative religion discourse of elites like Ralph Waldo Emerson or the Unitarian divines at Harvard and distilled a popularized version of it into the world of popular print.⁵ On the whole, Universalists tended to come from a lower class and possess less education than Unitarians in spite of the significant doctrinal overlap between them. Unitarianism, on the other hand, went virtually unnoticed by ordinary Americans.⁶ Indeed, in the assessment of Octavius Brooks Frothingham, compared to orthodox doctrines, "Unitarianism and Universalism were unpopular," whereas it was Spiritualism that "rushe[d] across the continent depopulating churches, desolating homes of faith, scattering communions, burying shrines, and covering the fair gardens of religion with heaps of ruin."⁷

² Presumably in error, Eliab Capron refers to Fernald as a "Unitarian preacher of some note." Eliab W. Capron, *Modern Spiritualism: Its Facts and Fanaticisms, its Consistencies and Contradictions*. (New York: Partridge & Brittan, 1855), 217; Gabay, *Covert Enlightenment*, 233-37; *The Universalist Register: Containing Statistics of the Church, with an Almanac for 1875* (Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1875), 124.

³ "Rhode Island Convention," *Universalist Union* 5, no. 27 (May 23, 1840): 426; Jack Schwartzman, "Ingalls, Hanson, and Tucker: Nineteenth-Century American Anarchists," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 62, no. 5 (2003): 315.

⁴ Sarah C. O'Dowd, *A Rhode Island Original: Frances Harriet Whipple Green McDougall* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2004), 94.

⁵ An article in the *Shekinah* claimed that both William Fishbough and Dr. Silas Smith Lyon (Davis' magnetic operator) came from humble origins and were self-educated. Fishbough, despite being a minister, had supposedly not completed any theological training, and Lyon was a botanical doctor and mechanic. A Mystic, "Andrew Jackson Davis. The Great American Seer," *The Shekinah Papers*, vol. 3 (New York: Partridge & Brittan, 1853), 12; Brown, *Heyday of Spiritualism*, 93; Albanese, *Republic*, 208, 214-15.

⁶ Braude quotes from Lewis Saum's study of antebellum diaries that Unitarianism "came almost not at all to the attention of the common people." Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 44-46; Lewis O. Saum, *The Popular Mood of Pre-Civil War America* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1980), 48-53.

⁷ Quoted in Moore, *White Crows*, 40-41.

In the first issue, Brittan explained that, while the *Univercœlum* was to be an impartial counterweight to the slew of denominational journals that dotted the American landscape,⁸ its “general tone and tendency” with regards to “theology, morals, and spiritual and social science” was to “recognise the Great Supreme Intelligence as a Cause, Nature as the Effect, and the immortalized Human Spirit as the Ultimate Result, the three being united in the formation of one Grand Harmonious System.” While respecting natural law as the unchanging foundation of all morality, the journal would also recognize that “the Deity is constantly *speaking to man*, and making known his Will.” Aside from advocating Davis’ philosophy, the journal promised to print interesting articles on medicine, psychology, animal magnetism, clairvoyance, “philosophico-theology,” and any significant political, social, or religious movements of the day.

More ambitiously, the editors of the journal aimed to break the chains of credal religion, and, through reform, bring about “the establishment of the kingdom or government of heaven on earth, . . . though ages may elapse before this consummation shall have been *fully* attained.” From the “ten thousand religious sects” of the world, making up “so many *strata* in the great geology of the mental world,” the editors promised to take “whatever of the truth we may find in their opinions or in the teachings of their respective sacred books.”⁹ Thus, the prospectus of the paper suggested that from its very inception it would follow the threefold understanding of religion: true religion as an eternal essence—identified with ethics and natural law—which took partial form in the religious “systems” of different cultures and ages, yet would be progressively revealed in its fulness and, through reform, become actualized in a utopian age as a universal religion for all mankind.

Though the readership of the *Univercœlum* was relatively small—reportedly 2,700 subscribers at its high point¹⁰—the Harmonialist movement soon merged with séance

⁸ Brittan’s point is well taken as the general trend in religious periodicals in the early nineteenth century was towards denominational identification. Before 1800, only two out of the thirty-four existent religious periodicals declared a denominational leaning, whereas by 1830 one hundred and thirty-one out of one hundred and ninety-three had, making subscription increasingly an act of religious self-identification. Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 144-45.

⁹ Brittan, “The Univercœlum,” 8-10.

¹⁰ Historian and archivist John Patrick Deveney notes that many of these subscribers failed to pay, contributing to the demise of the journal. Like most statistics surrounding Spiritualist periodicals, the number should be treated with caution. John Patrick Deveney, “Univercœlum,” The International Association for the Preservation of Spiritualist and Occult Periodicals (IAPSOP). Retrieved 28 Aug. 2018. <http://www.iapsop.com/archive/materials/univercoelum/>.

Spiritualism during its formative years, carrying these radical views of religion to a larger and more mainstream audience as many of the Harmonialists became prominent within Spiritualist circles.¹¹ Though small, the Harmonialists were, as Catherine Albanese observes for metaphysical religion more broadly, “a group of people who ‘speak’ the same religious language.”¹² Soon, however, this shared language would reach beyond this little brotherhood of reformers and would engage with a much larger audience.

A Living Demonstration

Writing in *Principles of Nature* in 1847, Davis had informed readers, “It is a truth that spirits commune with one another while one is in the body and the other in the higher Spheres.” This could occur even unconsciously, as with prophetic dreams. Nonetheless, this “truth,” Davis announced, “will ere long present itself in the form of a living demonstration. And the world will hail with delight the ushering in of that era when the interiors of men will be opened, and the spiritual communion will be established such as is now being enjoyed by the inhabitants of Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, because of their superior refinement.”¹³ The spirit rappings of the Fox sisters in Hydesville and Rochester, New York, one year later in 1848 provided just such a demonstration.

Despite the appearance of Davis having predicted the spirit manifestations, the Harmonialists were, as Frank Podmore observed in 1902, “slow to reconise in them the fulfilment of their hopes.” In a short write-up by William Fishbough in February of 1849, the editors of the *Univercælum* acknowledged the good character of the witnesses and expressed their willingness to believe in the reality of the rappings on the basis of earlier phenomena such as the Seeress of Prevorst and the French Prophets. Nonetheless, they soberly called for thorough investigation before passing judgment. Davis, having satisfied himself of the reality of the rappings, gave his endorsement in 1850, and in 1851, supposedly due to popular request, published a guide to spirit communication and hauntings, entitled the *Philosophy of*

¹¹ Both “Harmonialism” and “Spiritualism” are somewhat nebulous terms in that neither represented a denominational commitment, nor were they mutually exclusive. Indeed, as described in the following section, the two movements blended seamlessly into one another. Whether there is a distinction after that point is a matter of opinion and will be taken up again in the conclusion.

¹² Albanese, *Republic*, 9.

¹³ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 675-76.

Spiritual Intercourse, which leaned heavily on magnetism and electricity for its explanations.¹⁴ Twenty years after the fact, Davis claimed that on the day the manifestations began, he felt a warm breath on his face and heard a voice which said, “Brother! the good work has begun—behold a living demonstration is born.”¹⁵

Most historians have considered the relationship between Harmonialism and Spiritualism to be symbiotic. Frank Podmore mused that without the Harmonialists, “the Rochester knockings might have remained as barren of results as the Cock Lane ghost [in eighteenth-century England], or any other exploded Poltergeist.”¹⁶ From the other side of the equation, the Harmonialist movement, which had failed to gain much traction on its own, became much more successful once it became the explanatory vehicle for Spiritualism. “Davis would likely have remained an obscure prophet had he not tied his cause to the new manifestations,” writes Ann Braude. “But, once linked to the ‘mysterious noises’ and their echoes, Davis became the philosopher of a mass movement.”¹⁷

In effect, believers in spiritual phenomena received a compelling explanation for their experiences that, with its scientific language of Mesmerism and elaborate cosmology, was more satisfying than traditional folklore. Davis and the Harmonialists received their “living demonstration” of their philosophy.¹⁸ As Robert Cox put it, “Davis’s mesmeric visions of the afterlife dovetailed so neatly into the early Spiritualism that most commentators saw only continuity.”¹⁹ Looking back from 1870, the Spiritualist medium Emma Hardinge saw Davis as “the John Baptist which inaugurated that sunlit day...of modern Spiritualism.” The

¹⁴ W. F., “Strange Manifestations,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 3, no. 10 (3 Feb., 1849): 155; Frank Podmore believed that the article was written by W. M. Fernald, but I disagree. Elsewhere, Fernald’s articles were always signed “W. M. F.” Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, vol. 1, 173; Albanese, *Republic*, 217; Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 34-35.

Davis’ guide was based on his investigations of a much-reported on poltergeist haunting on the Connecticut farm of Dr. Eliakim Phelps, the grandfather of the novelist Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps was the author of the immensely popular *Gates Ajar* novels, which drew heavily on Spiritualist themes for their domestic and worldly depictions of the afterlife. Davis, *Philosophy of Spiritual Intercourse*, 46-70.

¹⁵ Andrew Jackson Davis, *Memoranda of Persons, Places, and Events; Embracing Authentic Facts, Visions, Impressions, Discoveries, in Magnetism, Clairvoyance, Spiritualism. Also Quotations from the Opposition* (Boston: William White & Co., 1868), 100; Quoted in Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 139.

¹⁶ Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, vol. 1, 169.

¹⁷ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 35.

¹⁸ Albanese, *Republic*, 217-18; Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 170-77.

¹⁹ Cox, *Body and Soul*, 75. Others were making connections between Davis’ philosophy and the Rochester rappings at the same time that the Harmonialists were. Eliab W. Capron and Henry D. Barron’s 1850 explanation of the spirit rappings drew connections to Swedenborg, the Seeress of Prevorst, and Davis, noting his prediction in *Principles of Nature*. William Fishbough’s endorsement of spirit communication also received a mention. Capron and Barron, *Singular Revelations*, 34-41; Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 175-76.

Univercælum, she praised as “the first spiritual periodical of modern date in America” and “a compendium of the best thoughts and purest philosophy of the age,” which “laid the foundation of a noble and genuine tone of thought, the fruits of which will be felt in all ages where true spiritual life and philosophy can be appreciated.” Indeed, the journal “formed a nucleus from which the irradiations of spiritual thought and influence flowed out in abundant and startling force.”²⁰

When the “nucleus” of the *Univercælum* folded in June of 1849 due to a combination of financial difficulties and interpersonal tensions, the Harmonialists scattered, but became prominently involved in various publishing ventures and Spiritualist activities. Speaking to the parallels of Harmonialism with Transcendentalism, the *Univercælum*’s subscription list was purchased by William Henry Channing and merged with the Brook Farm *Harbinger* to form the *Spirit of the Age*.²¹ With the Brotherhood’s journal gone, Davis published primarily through the Springfield, Massachusetts, paper the *Spirit Messenger*—founded in the summer of 1850 by Rev. R. P. Ambler,²² another Universalist, and Apollos Munn in order to replace the *Unvercælum* as the mouthpiece of the Harmonial Philosophy. Fanny Green also made the move to the *Spirit Messenger*, eventually becoming a coeditor. In addition to its articles on theological and philosophical matters—steeped in the language of Davis—the journal promised to investigate trance and spiritual phenomena, and featured printed communications from spirits, some through the mediumship of Ambler himself.²³ In pursuing these goals, the paper, more explicitly than most, blended Harmonialism with spiritual phenomena.

Of particular importance for bringing the Harmonialist brand of universal religion into the Spiritualist mainstream was Samuel B. Brittan. Emma Hardinge believed that “By his eloquent advocacy, public discussions, and editorial labors, Mr. Britain [sic] has rendered

²⁰ Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 26-27; Albanese, *Republic*, 206-207.

²¹ Though the divide was supposedly healed, Davis stopped writing for the journal in protest after being accused of spending the night with Mrs. Catherine Dodge—his significantly older benefactress and, later, first wife—while boarding in Samuel Britten’s home. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 393-413, 420-27; Albanese, *Republic*, 214.

Podmore confuses the *Spirit of the Age* with the *Present Age*. Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, vol. 1, 175-76, 203-204; Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 45.

²² Already suggestive of ties between more “philosophic” Spiritualists and popular mediums, Ambler was a friend of Leah Fox and supported her mediumship. Brown, *Heyday of Spiritualism*, 129.

²³ The journal chose the opening sentence from *Principles of Nature* for its motto: “Brethren, fear not: for Error is mortal and cannot live, and Truth is immortal and cannot die.” R. P. Ambler and Apollos Munn, “Introductory,” *Spirit Messenger* 1, no. 1 (Aug. 10, 1850): 4; “To the Patrons of the Univercælum,” *Spirit Messenger* 1, no. 1 (Aug. 10, 1850): 6; R. P. Ambler, “To the Patrons of the Messenger,” *Spirit Messenger*, new series, Aug. 15, 1852, 14; Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, vol. 1, 204; O’Dowd, *Rhode Island Original*, 94.

services to the cause of Spiritualism which can never be over-estimated.”²⁴ In 1851, he joined a circle of New York Spiritualists centred around John W. Edmonds (1799-1874), a justice of the New York Supreme Court whose conversion was hailed as a victory by Spiritualists, but which cost him his career amid accusations of senility and questionable powers of judgment. In the New York Circle, Brittan made the acquaintance of the merchant Charles Partridge, with whom he started a publishing company, which printed virtually every notable Spiritualist book and several of the major journals, including the *Spiritual Telegraph*. Born out of a public conference held by the New York Circle, the *Spiritual Telegraph* ran from 1852 to 1857 and was one of the most important journals for early Spiritualism and is discussed in Chapter Four. Prior to the *Spiritual Telegraph*, however, Brittan was the editor of a shorter-lived paper, the *Shekinah*—Hebrew for the indwelling spirit of God—which he founded in 1852 before it folded eighteen months later.²⁵

Interior versus External Religion

One of the central concerns of the Harmonialists was identifying the essence of true religion. True interior religion stood in sharp contrast to the external and superficial trappings of the historical religions, though these could contain true principles. Sectarianism was a divisive force fostered by those who were more attached to their creeds than to truth. As with Davis, the Harmonialists believed in the innate power of human Reason to discriminate between truth and error; one need only approach a given doctrine with a mind free from sectarian bias and the preconceptions of one’s upbringing. Moreover, the powers of the human mind—unlocked through mesmeric trances, independent clairvoyance, and divine influx from the spiritual spheres—provided a new model for revelation that opened up the possibility of direct inspiration to all humans throughout the ages. Ironically, while they proclaimed the universality of true religious principles, the Harmonialists—like Davis and the Spiritualists who would soon follow—were firmly rooted in a Christian tradition through which they read

²⁴ Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 61.

²⁵ Edmonds and Dr. George T. Dexter’s two-volume recording of the New York Circle’s communications, entitled *Spiritualism* (1853 & 1855), was immensely popular, though critics and later scholars have derided it for its “jejune visions and tedious homilies of Bacon and Swedenborg,” which as Slater Brown notes, sounded nothing like the living writings of either of the two men. Brown, *Heyday of Spiritualism*, 228-35; Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 27; Albanese, *Republic*, 227-30; Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 176-77; Moore, *White Crows*, 13, 19-22.

non-western traditions. Even as they pushed the meaning of religion beyond Christianity and criticized its doctrines, they drew on Christianity as the normative model of what a religion was.

The first issue of the *Univercœlum* set the tone early. In it, the Universalist minister and convert to Davis' philosophy, W. M. Fernald delivered an essay outlining the insufficiency of Christian revelation. While Christians, along with others, had received some true understanding of the divine, not even Jesus himself, Fernald argued, had provided a complete religious philosophy based on natural principles since he did “not *attempt to philosophize* on the nature of God, or the fact of immortality,— the structure of the universe, or the organization of society.” In much the same way that Davis had charged in *Principles of Nature*, Christianity was incomplete because it did not provide a unity of knowledge or give a true understanding of natural law. The insufficiency of Jesus' revelations to mankind was apparent because he did not provide an understanding of the nature of God who, as the first cause of the universe, was the source from which all other things derived their ontological reality. “A true idea of God is the basis of all our reasoning on nature, morals, and religion,” he wrote. “Without this, we cannot proceed a single step, with certainty or profit.”²⁶ As the organizing principle of the universe, all natural law—and consequently ethics—derived from God. Discerning these laws was foundational to true religion.

Fernald was quick to clarify that he should “not be understood by this to assert that the mass of mankind, especially Christians, have no correct idea of the *attributes* of the Deity.” Around the world, humans had some understanding of things such as the Deity's power, wisdom, and mercy. “They have those ideas,” he explained, “both in Christian, Jewish, Mohammedan, and Pagan lands, more or less perfect as seen through their own cultivated minds, through Nature, or as Symbolized forth by an idol or a fetich.” Quite radically, Fernald implied that idolatry or fetichism qualified as expressions of the universal religious impulse, though only imperfectly. Tragically, however, discovery of true religion had been hobbled by priests, who denounced such investigation as “sacrilege” or with “the cold charge of Pantheism or Materialism.” Nevertheless, freethinkers were challenging the prerogatives of the church. Quoting the motto of Andrew Jackson Davis, Fernald asserted,

²⁶ W. M. Fernald, “The Necessity for New and Higher Revelations, Inspirations, or Forms of Truth, for the Benefit of Mankind at the Present Day,” *Univercœlum and Spiritual Philosopher* 1, no. 1 (Dec. 4, 1847): 1.

“Any theory, hypothesis, philosophy, sect, creed, or institution, that fears investigation, openly manifests its own error.”²⁷

It was only through such investigation that superstition and error could be eradicated and true religious principles triumph. “We need a truer idea of Nature, in order that what is called *supernaturalism* with all its blinding and obstructing influence, may be banished from among men,” Fernald declared. Supernaturalism “is death to all the high and spiritual aspirations of the soul. It induces men to rest on what are called the outward and miraculous evidences of truth, and never to stir the interior sources of their own minds, for higher and higher inspirations.”²⁸ As Davis had repeatedly argued in *Principles of Nature*, the truth could not be realized through shallow and external sources of evidence which relied on the senses or testimony, such as the biblical miracles. Instead, it had to appeal to our interior intuitions and hold up to rational scrutiny.

Nor was Fernald alone among contributors to the *Univercælum* to present such a dichotomy of interior and external religion. Samuel B. Brittan, also repeatedly emphasized the paper’s universalizing mission, explaining from the beginning that “we shall know no party save the whole human race, and no restriction of thought save, that which is prescribed by the laws of nature and the capacities of the human mind.”²⁹ Further expressing the aim of moving beyond petty external religion, Brittan remarked later in the same issue that “Those who worship a creed; whose religion is a set of opinions and ceremonies, may well tremble at the signs of the times. But to the great Soul whose law is development: whose religion is spiritual growth and illumination: whose practice is a life of great thoughts and illustrious deeds; whose prayers are the struggles of the spirit to be free!—THE PRESENT, is full of encouragement and hope.”³⁰ Indeed, Brittan mockingly noted in the *Shekinah*, a journal which followed the *Univercælum*, that the famed Congregational theologian Horace Bushnell seemed to tremble at the prospect. However, Brittan declared, “only the *outward form* of the Church can possibly be in danger. Its spirit is essentially indestructible.” As the political revolutions of Europe were demonstrating, outdated exteriors would be cast off to make way

²⁷ Ibid., 1-2.

²⁸ Ibid., 3.

²⁹ Brittan, “The Univercælum,” 9.

³⁰ S. B. Brittan, “The Signs of the Times,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 1, no. 1 (Dec. 4, 1847): 11.

for higher expressions.³¹ The true religion, the one that would one day become the religion of mankind, stood in stark contrast to the hollow ceremonialism and credal nature of external religion. The true religion was grounded in the interiority of the individual and ought not be contained by rigid confines of a sect. Reason would guide the religion of the future instead of doctrine. “We live at a period in which the mere dictum of arbitrary men is not mistaken for the oracle of God,” Brittan declared in the *Univercælum*. “The *ipse dixit* of the priest, is not the foundation of faith. *Evidence* is necessary to produce conviction, and nothing short of this will command our assent.”³²

Thomas Lake Harris—famous among Spiritualists for his epic poems, extemporaneously composed under spirit influence—similarly proclaimed the same basic division when he stated, “There have been through all time two religions—one of inspiration, the other of tradition—two philosophies, one material, the other spiritual—one the result of insight and intuition, the other the result of sensation and induction.”³³ Somewhat more elitist than his compatriots, Harris espoused a view reminiscent of the twofold philosophy as he differentiated between the true spiritual religion of inspired men, especially artists and poets, and the hollow traditions of outward religion. Similarly, J. K. Ingalls explained, “Religion is two-fold; the outward appearance, and the inward reality.... The one is everliving and progressive; keeping pace with, and leading the way for, mental development and spiritual growth. The first, like all external forms, is subject to continuous mutations, and yet upon this worldly religious place their hopes; when all experience should have taught them, that no reliance could be placed in a form constantly varying.”³⁴ Thus, while the positive religions might express truth, they stood on shakier ground. It was only interior religion that was constant and universal.

³¹ S. B. Brittan, “The Coming Ordeal,” *The Shekinah Papers*, vol. 1 (New York: S. B. Brittan, 1852), 189-90.

³² S. B. Brittan, “The Theology of the Church. Will it Reform the World?,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 1, no. 14 (Mar. 4, 1848): 216.

³³ Thomas Lake Harris, “The Inspirations of Common Life. A Discourse,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 3, no. 4 (Dec. 23, 1848): 51.

The three inspirational poems were entitled “An Epic of the Starry Heavens” (1854), “A Lyric of the Morning Land” (1854), and “A Lyric of the Golden Land” (1856). Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 213; Mary Farrell Bednarowski, “Harris, Thomas Lake (1823-1906),” *American National Biography* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2000). Retrieved 29 Aug. 2018. <http://www.anb.org/view/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.001.0001/anb-9780198606697-e-0800632>.

³⁴ J. K. Ingalls, “A Religion of Progress,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 1, no. 2 (Dec. 11, 1847): 21-22.

As an eternal essence that transcended history and culture, true religion progressively revealed itself to humanity as a whole. “From every name and tribe and tongue, from liberal and orthodox, believer and unbeliever, from Mohammedan and Pagan, from Jew and Christian, Catholic and Protestant, from every land under heaven’s wide canopy, there comes a voice of the Spirit, which asks a purer light that shall define all our positions, and harmonize our discordant action,” Ingalls declared. “Whether you are willing to call this spirit Christianity,” he continued, “is a matter of perfect indifference. It is the Religion of Progress; it has been the religion of all true men. . . . It is also the religion of Nature and the Universe, whose very constitution requires, in all things, an elevating tendency toward purity and harmony.”³⁵ True religion was the same regardless of what sect one belonged to, and had been realized by inspired men throughout the ages.

Fernald attempted to decouple true Christianity from historical Christianity, and conflated the essence of Christianity with natural religion. He noted in an 1850 issue of the *Spirit Messenger* that Jesus was not required for Christianity to exist, for its true essence was eternal. “Christianity is as old as the creation of man. Its laws are man’s highest nature,” he proclaimed, sounding very much the Deist. Christianity in its proper sense was eternally true, as it was identical to natural law. It could not suddenly come into being merely with the birth of Christ, who was, Fernald reminded readers, only a highly developed man. Drawing on natural analogues, Fernald wrote, “Christ is as Saturn to the planetary members. Beautiful above all his fellows, and altogether lovely.” However, Jesus’ qualities “existed, broad-spread throughout humanity,” but in a state of lesser development.³⁶ Beyond its Deist resonances, the willingness of the Harmonialists to conflate true religion with an idealized—and not-yet expressed—version of Christianity echoed the Transcendentalist Theodore Parker who differentiated between true, permanent Christianity, and historical, transient Christianity, but with a more progressive emphasis than the Deists.³⁷ In both cases the true theology was immortal, but Deists tended to view it as lost to time, whereas Parker saw it as being progressively revealed across the ages.

³⁵ Ibid., 22.

³⁶ W. M. Fernald, “The Christianity of the Universe,” *Spirit Messenger* 1, no. 11 (Oct. 19, 1850): 82-83. Fernald’s phrasing is likely an allusion to Matthew Tindal’s *Christianity as Old as the Creation: or the Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature*.

³⁷ Theodore Parker, “A Discourse of the Transient and Permanent in Christianity,” in *American Transcendentalists*, 162-74.

“Transient and permanent” aspects of Christianity aside, the Harmonialist debt to Transcendentalism was often more explicit. In one article in the *Univercælum*, a contributor mused that “Self-reliance is what we all need to learn; that we are to depend on our own energies and resources for all permanent, substantial good. What my *brother believes*, can no more benefit me than what he eats or drinks.” Observing that sectarian religion did not utilize the Reason, he quoted Emerson from the essay “Self Reliance”:

If I know your sect, I anticipate your argument. I hear a preacher announce for his text and topic, the expediency of one of the institutions of his Church. Do I not know beforehand that he cannot say a new or spontaneous word? Do I not know, that, with all this ostentation of examining the grounds of the institution, he will do no such thing? Do I not know that he is pledged to himself not to look but at *one side*, the *permitted side*, not as a *man*, but as a *Parish minister*? He is a retained Attorney, and these airs of the bench are the veriest affectation.³⁸

To be bound to a religious sect was to be beholden to the dead formalism of external religion. A creed was something already established by another and therefore failed to exercise one’s own interior Reason. If true religion were inward, and consisted of an endless journey of moral self-culture, a static creed soon became worthless and worn-out.

Setting a trend that would continue for Spiritualists throughout the nineteenth century, the Harmonialists frequently invoked Theodore Parker to lend credence to their view of religion as an eternal essence taking multiple forms. In one issue, the *Univercælum* reprinted an extract from *A Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion* which declared, “Inspiration is limited to no sect, age, or nation. It is wide as the world, and common as God. It is not given to a few men, in the infancy of mankind, to monopolize inspiration and force God out of the soul. You and I are not born in the dotage and decay of the world....God is still everywhere in nature, at the line, at the pole, in a mountain or a moss.”³⁹ Parker was speaking the language of the Harmonialists—nature as a living revelation that all could partake in. It was in the manner that one partook of this ceaseless revelation that separated them. With their great interest in popular science, the Harmonialists were inclined to bind the Romantic imagination to a more empirically informed mode of revelation. While most Transcendentalists would have been unlikely to agree with the specifics of the Harmonial Philosophy, their words could

³⁸ D. H. P., “Self Reliance,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 1, no. 24 (May 13, 1848): 377.

³⁹ Theodore Parker, “Inspiration Universal,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 1, no. 24 (May 13, 1848): 381.

be readily appropriated by Davis' advocates. The Transcendentalist call for new inspiration, living religion, and the universal possibility of revelation resonated strongly with the Harmonialists and meshed easily with the latter's belief in ongoing revelation and religious experience through mesmeric trances.

Given their belief in the universal reach of interior religion, it comes as no surprise that the Harmonialists were eager to discover cross-cultural examples of true principles in other religions. One article the *Univercœlum* republished from the *Christian Messenger* in 1848 cited the Sufis as a positive example of eastern religion, maybe even superior to common forms of Christianity. Following the principle that the infinite was manifested in the finite, the author wrote, "The common belief of the Sooffee is that every man is an incarnation of Deity, or that at least all are partakers of the divine principle." As such, the Sufis believed in striving to reunite with the "Divine Essence." "The great means to this end," the article explained, "is to abstract the soul from worldly things, and to absorb it in divine contemplation. This in their view takes the place of external worship, which they contemn [sic] as subjecting the soul to the bondage of arbitrary forms." In what was either a complement to Sufi mysticism or a swipe at Christian hermits, the article noted that "The *Mesnevi*, their principle book, is full of the most impassioned sentiments...in no way inferior to the spiritual reveries of Christian recluses."⁴⁰

William Fishbough, adding his own commentary to the end of the article, chided the Christians who derided Persians as being "in a state little above barbarism." Fishbough asked, "But where in all the innumerable folios that are constantly issuing from a *Christian* press, can we find an embodiment of a more sublime, more spiritual, more truthful Theosophy that that here attributed to the Sooffees of Persia?" Their writings, he concluded, were far superior to the "gross, indefinite, and materialistic views" of most Christians. In a challenge to the Christian understanding of religion that excluded "heathenism" as a separate category, Fishbough wished, "that professing Christians would learn reason and *spirituality* from these 'benighted Heathen,' if not from the *very similar* teachings which they may find nearer at home!" The homegrown teachings that Fishbough had in mind were presumably those of the Harmonial Philosophy with its emphasis on correspondence, which could be read as

⁴⁰ The fascination with Sufism was shared by Transcendentalists like Emerson. "Sooffeeism in Persia," *Univercœlum and Spiritual Philosopher* 3, no. 5 (Dec. 30, 1848): 70; J. D. Yohannan, "Emerson's Translations of Persian Poetry from German Sources," *American Literature* 14, no. 4 (1943): 407-420; J. D. Yohannan, "The Influence of Persian Poetry Upon Emerson's Work," *American Literature* 15, no. 1 (1943): 25-41.

resembling the aforementioned Sufi teachings on the finite partaking of the infinite. The resemblance between the Sufis and the new American revelations of Davis suggested their universal truth. “We have here another evidence,” Fishbough remarked, “that inspiration from the *higher spheres* is doing its work among nations now entirely estranged from us, with a view to bringing the whole Race ultimately to a unity of faith and spirit.”⁴¹ Thus, true religion would be expressed everywhere through direct inspiration and operated independently of cultural contact, unlike historic religions. Soon, as revelations continued to pour forth into suitable human interiors, the true religion would be given worldwide expression and the old empty forms would be discarded.

Not all Harmonialist treatments of other religions were as sympathetic. Often different religions were a bludgeon to attack Christianity by placing it in the same category of external religion, with its senseless rituals and empty forms. As one contributor inquired in a 1849 issue of the *Univercælum*, “Of what use are the religious observances of the Hindoos, except to perpetuate the dominion of their religious teachers?—of the Mohammedans, except to keep in subjection the minds of the people?—of the Greek and Roman churches, except to maintain hordes of ecclesiastics at the public expense?—or of the protestant churches, except to find renumerative employment to many worthy men?” None of these religions, Christianity included, practiced true interior religion. Like the Deists had charged, what the different religions of the world had in common was their priestcraft. Whatever the external form of worship, they were all equally hollow and were of no benefit to a God who did not require them. Like Davis, who emphasized prayer through action, true worship was expressed in good deeds. “It is thought that the affections are chastened and the heart purified by the ceremonies or the ritual,” the author wrote, “but it will be found that it is in the practice of benevolent *acts* and in cherishing a high and holy purpose to *do* right, together with a full confidence in the immortality of the soul, that chastens and purifies the heart, independent of any rites or ceremonies whatsoever.”⁴² In such a formulation, institutions were of little consequence in comparison to the individual spirit living in accordance with interior principles.

⁴¹ “Sooffessism in Persia,” 70.

⁴² H., “Worship,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 4, no. 1 (Jun. 2, 1849): 11.

That morality was derived from natural law was evident in how Harmonialists conceptualized sin. One trance lecturer, S. J. Finney—reported on by the *Spirit Messenger and Harmonial Advocate*—noted in language clearly derived from Davis that “The true principle of judgment is based upon the laws of the Great Positive Mind, as manifested in Nature.” Just as an individual who cuts himself bleeds, Finney explained, “punishment follows right on the heel of the violation” in exact proportion to the weight of the action. Nor could there be repentance. Prayer would not restore a limb if one cut it off. “*Moral law*,” Finney explained, “is just as inflexible as physical law.”⁴³

Sadly, Finney lamented, many had “deserted the interior sanctuary of the mind, and bowed to the teachings of Zoroaster, Mahomet, Swedenborg and others—thus worshipping the external creations of his fellows,” which was no better than idolatry. “Men have been guilty of moral and intellectual idolatry in worshipping names, thoughts, and sentiments which their brethren ages ago have developed,” he declared. “It is thus that many of your brethren worship to-day in the temples of the Christian world.” Even Protestantism was not beyond this critique: “The whole theology of Protestantism is a system of indulgences, as much as that of the Catholics. One may be purchased with money, but to the other is superadded the payment of blood. You are thus led to distrust yourselves, and to try to ride into heaven upon the goodness of another, and to leave the true track of spiritual and mental development.”⁴⁴ In the Emersonian spirit of “self-reliance,” the true practice of religion was self-development and no prophet or saviour could do the requisite work for anyone else. In the optimistic spirit of progress and theological liberalism, Finney affirmed the benevolence of God and universal salvation, promising that there was “no fabled hell of material flames, no burst of fire from the vindictive wrath of the Deity, no conflagration of nature herself at the end of all things, and no eternal death; but there is one bright and unceasing smile from the Great Spirit Father shining forever upon the course of man’s eternally progressive life!”⁴⁵ So much for the vicarious atonement.

Nonetheless, as Fishbough had argued on behalf of the Sufis, some good might still be found in the institutions of non-Christian religions to the degree that they accorded with

⁴³ S. J. Finney, “The Day of Judgment. A Discourse; Delivered Under Spiritual Influence, *At the Stuyvesant Institute, N.Y.*,” *Spirit Messenger and Harmonial Advocate* 1, no. 12 (Jan. 1, 1853): 177-78.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 181.

natural principles. The germ of true religion could still exist within the historically informed external institutions, only partially expressed. One article the *Univercælum* published on Mohammad made the usual move of suggesting that, in some ways, Islam was superior to Christianity, and was an example of the universal reach of inspiration. “Mahomet was no imposter, as Christians find it very convenient to call him,” the author L. A. Hine began. “He was one of the most fully inspired men the world ever knew. He was a great-souled and true-hearted Reformer, who appeared when he was needed.” In a twist on liberal Protestant suggestions that religions evolved as a response to their age, Hine asserted that it was when “Christianity was corrupted...[that] this extraordinary man appeared among the truest people that then inhabited the world...to save them from the moral desolation and physical destruction that seemed to await mankind.” Despite sectarian hostility towards him, Mohammad “was a prophet according to natural law—in the same manner as others before and after him have been prophets, by reason of his moral and intellectual superiority.”⁴⁶ The language was reminiscent of Jesus coming to purge the corrupt religion of the Pharisees with his superior moral attainments, but now the shoe was on the other foot. Mohammad had come to cleanse the bankrupt Christian Church.

The evidence, Hine stated, that Mohammad was not an impostor could be found in the relative soundness of his teachings. His doctrines, which included a belief in God, angels, scriptures, prophets, the resurrection and day of judgment, and God’s absolute sovereignty, were “not far behind Calvinism, at least.” In other regards, Hine believed that his teachings were superior to Christian ones. For example, “Mahomet understood the true mode of disciplining the spirit. In this his followers have the advantage of Christians, for he taught that the practice of religion is founded in cleanliness, well knowing that a pure spirit could not inhabit a corrupt body.” In terms of devotion, the Muslim practice of praying five times daily was so demanding that “Even the Catholics, who are the most devoted people on earth, can not take up such a cross as this.” “The Mahometans were superior to Christians of our day in another respect,” Hine noted, “—they never addressed themselves to God in sumptuous apparel, but laid aside their costly habits and pompous ornaments, if they wore any, when they approached the divine Presence, lest they should seem proud and arrogant.” More damning to Christian pretensions to superiority was the Muslim practice of “freeing

⁴⁶ L. A. Hine, “Mahomet and his Work,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 4, no. 4 (Jun. 23, 1849): 74.

their slaves when they become true believers. This is enjoined by Mahomet, but it is not practiced by Christians!” By demonstrating “the goodness of his heart, the purity of his system,” Hine hoped “to prove that he was no imposter. No man ever was an imposter who came with truth on his lips and blessings in his heart.”⁴⁷ Christian claims to exclusivity were undermined by the possibility that an “infidel” system that they derided as impostor could contain religious principles comparable to their own. If such were the case, the outward form of the religion meant little compared to its content.

One featured article, entitled “True Religion,” in the fourth volume of the *Univercœlum* held that religion was synonymous with truth, but simultaneously made the move to disassociate this truth from Christianity exclusively. The article began with a definition of religion that broadened its scope to include all peoples of the world, but also implied that its degree of realization was contingent on individual development:

THE word ‘religion,’ in its best sense, is generally used to represent that class of truths which relate exclusively to the invisible or spiritual world.... Thus the most advanced persons in every tribe and nation, have a natural attraction for spiritual thoughts, and are generally termed ‘pious’ or ‘religious;’—while the lowest or least advanced take very little interest in spiritual matters, and either deny altogether the existence of the invisible or future world, or entertain very gross conceptions of its nature and influence.⁴⁸

Thus the author maintained a distinction between different meanings of religion. In its “best sense,” it was synonymous with the interior truths that governed the universe. In its lesser form, it was the crude and partial expressions that led to external religions. As the more “advanced” people around the world developed, however, they would express the best sense of religion—the true essence—without the misconceptions. Implying both an individual evolution and a social one, the author observed that “the highest conceptions of the barbaric tribes are very gross” compared to those of more advanced societies. It was “very proper” to remember, however, that not all false conceptions of religion were the result of less advanced minds. Some, though they had “a love of religious truth,” were made “the dupes of their religious teachers,” who desired “unlimited control over the minds and bodies of the weak.”

⁴⁷ Ibid., 75.

⁴⁸ “True Religion,” *Univercœlum and Spiritual Philosopher* 4, no. 4 (Jun. 23, 1849): 65.

Such corrupt “imposters” were not truly “religious,” and ought to be “considered as usurpers who have stolen out of a lower class to take control of a higher.”⁴⁹

Significantly, the Harmonialist distinction between true interior religion and external religion reflected their approach to the emerging Spiritualist movement. The *Shekinah*, Brittan’s explicitly Spiritualist journal following the dissolution of the *Univercœlum*, first issued in October of 1851—later compiled and reissued by Partridge & Brittan—continued the project of explaining spiritual phenomena through the lens of the Harmonial Philosophy. Explicitly stating the intention of continuing the work started with the *Univercœlum*, Brittan proclaimed that the *Shekinah* would be “CONSECRATED TO THE CAUSE OF SPIRITUAL SCIENCE AND HUMAN IMPROVEMENT,” while simultaneously seeking to rein in the “impetuous and the vicious” who discredited Spiritualism by being mere “‘*sign seekers*,’ distinguished chiefly for their love of monstrosities.”⁵⁰ Already very early on in the Spiritualist movement’s history, then, there was concern among some that the more profound philosophical aspects of the movement were being sidelined by its superficial elements.

The first article in the *Shekinah* sought to define the purpose of Spiritualism as Brittan saw it, employing the dichotomy between true religion and the “old, arbitrary Formalism” of external religion. “A SUPERFICIAL system of philosophy,” Brittan explained, “will always be material in its nature, since it regards only the outward forms and visible phenomena of the Universe while a profound philosophy will necessarily be spiritual, because it...aims to discover those hidden laws and spiritual forces on which all physical developments depend.” Thus, the “deepest philosophy” was “the most religious, if not in the popular apprehension, at least in a rational and true sense.”⁵¹ In so defining Spiritualism, Brittan pushed back against a naturalism that would separate philosophy and science from religion. To be religious, in the true sense, was to understand the divine workings of the natural world, rather than to compartmentalize the natural and the spiritual. Indeed, in conceptualizing the pursuit of higher truth as a “spiritual” endeavour, Brittan partook in a modernizing discourse which conflated true spirituality with an individual relationship to the divine.⁵²

⁴⁹ Ibid., 65.

⁵⁰ S. B. Brittan, “The Shekinah,” *Shekinah Papers*, vol. 1, 86-87.

⁵¹ S. B. Brittan, “Spiritualism: Its Nature and Mission,” *Shekinah Papers*, vol. 1, 1.

⁵² Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*, 120-22.

Thomas Lake Harris, while highly Romantic in his valuation of poets, also pushed for a rational religion and a reconciliation of religion with science. “Criticise, examine, leave no line untested” was what Harris declared to be the practice of his church. “There has been war between the Pulpit and the University; mutual indignities, libels and persecutions,” Harris argued in a prefiguration of the “warfare thesis” of religion. “Religion remembers the irreverent ribaldries of Voltaire, and Reason forgets not the pangs of her martyred Galileo. Teachers of Religion have fought against each new discovery of Science—teachers of Philosophy have fought against each affirmation of Scripture.” Once the two had become reconciled, “the believing heart and the discovering brain shall coalesce—then Science shall will return from her groping among these perishable effects to drink in life and wisdom from the Infinite Cause.” True religion would of course be in accordance with the findings of science and innate human Reason. In common with the other Harmonialists, Harris seemed to recognize a growing gulf between science and religion, wherein the two were defined in opposition to each other; however, in asserting the inherent reasonableness of true religion, he sought to reconcile them. To the objection that “Religion will not stand the test of this terrible criticism” from Reason, Harris answered, “if it will not it is not Religion, it is not divine.”⁵³

In the *Spirit Messenger*, R. P. Ambler argued, that the “True Faith” was “*impartial and free*,” as well as, “*living and working*.” Thus, it moved beyond sectarian divisions and “the narrow enclosure of human systems” into the “unlimited sphere of truth.” Against Jewish or Christian claims to a special revelation, Ambler noted, “The true faith has no congeniality with those gloomy creeds which represent God as a partial Being, and reveal no heaven but for a few.” For religion to be true, it had to encompass all of humanity. God did not make covenants with single nations leaving out the mass of the human race. By the true faith being living and working, Ambler explained that he meant, “It is not a passive, dead, intellectual belief which is laid up in the mind to be remembered and rejoiced in at particular seasons. It consists not in a mere idea, thought, or opinion, which is to be treasured like a valued jewel. But it is a feeling, realizing and abiding sense of truth which is to operate

⁵³ Thomas Lake Harris, “The Church’s Duty and the World’s Necessity. A Sermon Delivered Sunday Evening, January 21, 1849, in the Coliseum,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 3, no. 12 (Feb. 17, 1849): 178.

continually within, and animate the whole spiritual man.”⁵⁴ True religion was necessarily interior by nature. It was felt, not merely acquiesced to. Despite the prevalence of external, historical religion in the world, Ambler nonetheless believed that the true faith would eventually be realized in the world. Despite “the efforts which may be made to stay its progress,” he predicted, it “shall at last prove triumphant;...it shall gain a mighty and glorious victory over the world—a victory in which all humanity shall rejoice, and which even angels on high shall delight to witness.”⁵⁵

The angels did in fact make their views known in the pages of the *Spirit Messenger* through the mediumship of Ambler. Sectarian “institutions are founded on the selfish views, feelings and desires of the man,” they chided. Sectarian religion existed, the spirits informed Ambler, because “mankind are, in their present condition, unprepared to erect any true and lofty structure of religion or theology.” This was on account of “the selfishness and materiality which now form the predominate elements in the nature of man, [and which] have assumed a supremacy which is and must be manifested in the creation of every external system.”⁵⁶ Since the religious system of humans reflected the development of their interiors, the present underdevelopment of the race had caused the existing religions to be too orientated towards the external and the material. Thus, the spirits were filled with “mourning and sorrow” to “see that worship has become only a custom, that religion has been resolved into a mere name, that the true altar of the heart has been deserted, that no incense is offered at the shrine of truth, that no light is sought from the unfolding heavens, and that no reality is felt in all the rites, and forms and ceremonies of the Church.”⁵⁷ Nonetheless, there was cause for hope, as the spirits declared that “the time is coming...when the institutions of a false theology shall feel the power of that truth which is descending from the heavens; and when... there shall flow out from every soul, as from a living fountain, the streams of heavenly peace which freshen and invigorate the wastes of human life.”⁵⁸ From the spiritual world, there would be an influx of truth into the interiors of all humans and, thus, true religion would be manifested in the world. Revelation would be universal in the interiors of all humans.

⁵⁴ R. P. Ambler, “Characteristics of the True Faith,” *Spirit Messenger* 1, no. 4 (Aug. 31, 1850): 28.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵⁶ “Wisdom of the Spirit. Number One. Sectarian Institutions,” *Spirit Messenger* 2, no. 1 (May 1, 1852): 9-10.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

Origins of Theology

The Harmonialist insistence on interior versus external religion and their belief in the universality of revelation provided the framework for explaining the emergence of diverse religious beliefs in the world, Christianity included, as well as similarities between them. Like Andrew Jackson Davis had done, the Harmonialists conceptualized external religion as the product of local historical and cultural forces that conformed to the truths of interior religion to the degree which a society or the individuals within it had advanced. In addition, doctrines spread through cultural contact and were maintained by clerical authority. Thus, progressively, interior truth was realized in the world, while, at the same time, being modified by local conditions and prejudices, which gave rise to historical religions. Encapsulating the dynamic between direct revelation and local conditions, William Fishbough commented in the first issue of the *Univercælum*, “Men in all ages and among all nations have thus been developed beyond the sphere of physical sense and have held converse with spirits and angels of a higher world; and many of the sayings and teachings of such are entitled to the name of *Revelations*.” Nonetheless, he continued, “These persons, respectively, wrote and taught with reference to immediate circumstances of their times and nations.”⁵⁹

In a manner highly reminiscent of Davis’ chronology, Fishbough, in a later series of articles, traced the historical development of theology. On account of the “the calamities constantly resulting from ignorance of Nature and her laws,” and perpetual “hostility and strife,” the savage early tribes attributed violent human passions and events to vengeful genii. These genii, they believed, could be satisfied with sacrifices in the same way that “the vengeance of a capricious tyrant is sated on beholding human loses or suffering.” This, Fishbough wrote, “was the origin of the sacrificial forms of religion so long perpetuated in subsequent ages.” Thus, a lack of connection to Nature’s laws—true interior religion—produced corrupted forms of external religion that morphed continually through natural historical forces. “The Fetichism and Polytheism of the earlier times...continued,” he Fishbough explained further, “with gradual modifications, as being best adapted to the conceptions of the masses, and was blended with the worship of heavenly bodies.” Dipping

⁵⁹ William Fishbough, “Revelation—The Bible,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 1, no. 1 (Dec. 4, 1847): 11-12.

into the familiar theories of priestcraft and the twofold philosophy, he noted that “The more philosophical minds, and especially those connected with the sacerdotal order, saw its [the existing theology] folly; and while they connived at its existence among the more ignorant classes as a convenient means of controlling them, they for themselves...converted it into a mere system of symbols representing various principles and operations of Nature.” Thus something closer to true interior religion existed with more developed individuals, but priestcraft kept the majority of humans from developing a better understanding of spiritual truths. As such, “The next step in the progress of the theological idea,” which was “a system of Pantheism, or the idea that all things were God[.]...was confined entirely to the more learned and philosophical.”⁶⁰

As Davis’ *Principles of Nature* had done before, Fishbough also traced the origins of the doctrine of the Trinity to the worship of the gods Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva, who, Fishbough asserted, emerged in Asia in parallel to the theology of the Egyptians and the Chaldeans. Due to a superior climate, the Asian theology was superior to its contemporaries, though still a “fanciful” and “stupendous mythology.” Brahma, Fishbough explained, was a “great invisible and incomprehensible spirit” who created a golden egg from which the earth emerged in the dark waters that existed previously. Both Vishnu and Siva were born from Brahma’s soul, thus “the three were but different forms or manifestations of one and the same being.”⁶¹

Perhaps Fishbough would have felt vindicated by an 1852 pronouncement of “the Spirits” through the mediumship of R. P. Ambler in the *Spirit Messenger* who affirmed that the “idea of Three Gods [the Trinity] the spirits recognize a relic which has been extracted from heathen mythology and unrighteously insinuated into the Christian religion.” As a superstitious doctrine at odds with Nature, it was “destined to fade away beneath the increasing light, which is rapidly bringing to view the deformities of ancient errors and the beauties of unfolding Nature.”⁶² Such comparisons of doctrine explained the continuing existence of what the Harmonialists considered superstitious and erroneous doctrines. Similarities between religions, like the Golden Rule, could serve as evidence of a principle’s

⁶⁰ William Fishbough, “The Theological Conception; Its Growth, Dependencies, and Probable Ultimate Form,” *Univercaelum and Spiritual Philosopher* 2, no. 18 (Sep. 30, 1848): 273-74.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 274.

⁶² “The Idea of Three Gods,” *Spirit Messenger* 2, no. 3 (Jun. 1, 1852): 94.

eternal truth, or, like in the case of the Trinity, could be used to trace an error to its historic roots and discredit it by associating it with primitive belief. In either case, however, the project of comparing Christianity to other religions was no longer confined to scholars and the intellectual elite, but was being distilled in the popular press by religious radicals like Fishbough.

Suggestive of how the Harmonialists understood the historical spread of religions in normative Christian terms was an 1849 article in the *Univercælum*, providing a brief narrative of the adoption of Buddhism in Ceylon. The author described an interaction between the king, Dewinepatisse, and a Buddhist priest, who, after satisfying himself as to the king's wisdom, "commenced a discourse, illustrating in flowery language the sublimity and purity of the religion and actions of Buddha." The king was suitably impressed and—in moves that seemed to follow the model of Christendom as established by Constantine—agreed to deposit the jawbone of Goutama Buddha in a reliquary (a "dagobah"), build temples ("wihares"), and declare "the national system of religion...to be that of Buddha."⁶³ Despite the supposed antiquity of these events, the account was distinctly nineteenth century in its assumption that there was a single "religion of Buddha" with a unified "essence" at all in the extremely diverse practices in Ceylon, Burma, Siam, Japan, Tartary, and China. In reading "Buddhism" as a system of beliefs—associated with the founding figure of Buddha—and which operated in a similar missionary and territorial fashion, the authors were partaking in a process that solidified Buddhism as one of the great "world religions."⁶⁴

Like the imposture theories of eighteenth-century Deists, the alleged miracles of revealed religions were little more than tricks to ensnare the gullible. Writing in the *Spirit Messenger*, Apollos Munn claimed that the "idea of something supernatural in the character of miracles" originated "in the mists and darkness of heathen ages." The "ancient and distinguished heathen philosopher, Zoroaster, the author of the Zendavesta,...constantly appealed to the marvellous susceptibilities of the human mind, for credence in relation to his miraculous conversation with the gods." From there, the idea that supernatural miracles could be employed as proof of religious authority spread historically. "The same idea of supernaturalism was recognized by Mahomet," Munn wrote, "who, like Zoroaster, appeals to

⁶³ "Ceylon: the Religion of the Cingalese" *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 4, no. 3 (Jun. 16, 1849): 46-47.

⁶⁴ Masuzawa, *World Religions*, 125-38.

the authority of miracles to establish a belief in his revelations, as given in the Koran.” Taking a similar line to Davis in the *Principles of Nature*, Munn noted that while Christians were quick to dismiss Muslim miracles as explainable natural phenomena, the miracles of Mohammed “adduce evidence quite as strong as the believers in the Christian religion can produce, in support of the alleged miracles of Christ.” The reasoning for treating these miracles separately was faulty. “It is a poor rule that will not operate impartially,” Munn chided. “If history, tradition, and the honest opinions of many millions of intelligent people, will not prove true the transfiguration of Mahomet in the sixth century, why should the same kind of testimony and *no other*, prove sufficient to establish the belief in the resurrection of the corporeal body of Christ?”⁶⁵ Thus Munn rejected the categorical separation between Christianity, Islam, and even “heathenism.” The justification by which each was presented to the world as true and authoritative was shaky at best. Based merely on third-party testimony, one religion’s miracles were no more worthy of belief than another’s. The true essence of religion was eternal in nature and not historically revealed.

One correspondent to the *Univercælum* took similar issue with the so-called miracles recorded in history. Far from being supernatural mysteries, these were “part of the economy of God and the nature of man; consequently divinely natural.” Moreover, they acted in all nations, regardless of sect:

Protestants call such phenomena works of darkness and of the devil when witnessed in heathen lands, in the Roman Catholic Church, under the reign of Allah, when recorded in the Koran and in Persian Bibles, or when their honest neighbors testify of them to-day; or perhaps they deny them outright. But God and human nature are in Hindostan, and in all books, herewith as to day....Philosophy will seek truth not only in Bible miracles, wrought 2000 years ago, not only in Catholic, Mahomedan, Brahman and Mandom miracles, but in *human* miracles the world over, in all time, to-day.⁶⁶

The miracles professed by the scriptures of different nations were all equally valid—when properly understood—and reflected humanity’s divine essence.

⁶⁵ Apollos Munn, “The Character of Miracles,” *Spirit Messenger* 1, no. 3 (Aug. 24, 1850): 20.

⁶⁶ H. O. S., “The Character and Extent of Miracles,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 3, no. 25 (May 19, 1849): 389.

Historical Jesus

Following the broader liberal Protestant and Transcendentalist interest in the true life of Jesus, the Harmonialists shared Davis' desire to recover the historical Jesus from the perverse clutches of theology and subsequent mythology surrounding him. In their pure form, Jesus' teachings reflected true interior religion, but centuries of superstition and clerical meddling had obscured them beneath false externals. In general, the Harmonialists tended to reject claims of Jesus' divinity and recast him as a great moral exemplar and a highly developed man whose miracles could be explained scientifically through Mesmerism. Consciously using the tools of history, the Harmonialists attempted to place the Gospel accounts of Jesus in their context and free them from clerical distortions. Thus, like Davis, they continued to engage in a popularized version of the historical Jesus scholarship described in the previous chapter.

Samuel B. Brittan, writing for the *Spirit Messenger*, for example, attributed distorted Christian teachings surrounding good and evil to converts from Zoroastrianism. "The ancient religion of Persia, and other Oriental nations," Brittan explained, "maintained the existence of two opposite eternal principles—*Good* and *Evil*. Light was deemed the most appropriate symbol of the good principle or Deity, and hence he was worshiped by Fire; whereas, Darkness was viewed as the proper representative of evil." Zoroaster modified the system by teaching "the supremacy of one independent Being, and the existence of two subordinate deities," one good and light, and the other dark and evil. "It appears," he continued, "that the philosophers who were converted from the religion of Zoroaster to Christianity, attempted, with some degree of success, to blend the two systems into one. Thus the religion of Jesus Christ was rendered corrupt, by those who had been indoctrinated in the schools of the Magi."⁶⁷ As such, Christ did not bear the responsibility for a Christian worldview which held that good and evil were locked in an eternal struggle. Historical transmission of false and superstitious doctrines instead had to answer the charge.

By contrast, Brittan asserted in the *Shekinah*, "Christ offered no written creed or deified book, to which an unreasoning conformity was demanded." The early Apostles were equally flexible and did not require "subscription to any sharply defined standard of opinion, either as the condition of present fellowship or of future salvation." True Christianity was

⁶⁷ Samuel B. Brittan, "Philosophy of Good and Evil," *Spirit Messenger and Harmonial Advocate* 1, no. 2 (Oct. 23, 1852): 17.

therefore far different than the historical Christianity that had emerged. It was all-encompassing, but at the same time was liberated from the bonds of sectarianism and creedalism. “Christianity,” Brittan wrote, “never contemplated *a oneness of opinion*, it aimed at a more glorious consummation ‘THE UNITY OF THE SPIRIT.’” Indeed, Christianity in its primitive form was like modern Spiritualism:

Christianity—not, indeed, as it is defined in the theological systems of the world, but the Christianity of Christ—the religion of that divinely beautiful life—was a SPIRITUALISM. It had no visible material object of worship; it required the observance of no costly rites and ceremonies; no gilded altars and fashionable temples—reared by the sweat and blood of the poor—were consecrated to its service. Christ announced the existence of one God—an all-pervading spiritual presence.⁶⁸

True religion, which the religion of Jesus embodied, had ultimately been corrupted by theologians and had taken on external rites and forms that Christ had not condoned. Similar to the contemporary logic of Christian Restorationism, with its comparable distrust of priestly corruption and theological innovation,⁶⁹ Brittan’s Spiritualism represented a return to the pure religion of Christ, based on the interior Reason of the individual.

William Fishbough, explicitly following Davis’ lead, engaged in a similar form of Christian primitivism and a historicization and naturalization of Jesus. Inviting the readers of the *Univercaelum* to use their reason and put aside their preconceptions of Christianity and see it in its historical context, “free from the vestments with which it was clothed by its subsequent followers.” Treating the Gospels as one would any other historical document, Fishbough noted their problematic nature as sources on the life of Jesus. For one, he remarked, the four Evangelists “claim *for themselves* no authority beyond ordinary history.” Moreover, the Gospels were not written until “many years” after the fact. Calling into question the reliability of the authors, Fishbough asserted that they wrote using only their “*natural information*” and were influenced by their particular cultural context. Thus,

as they *could not* have been eye and ear witnesses of all they record; as they received many things from *others* who had been with Jesus, (see Luke's preface,) and were possibly led sometimes by vague and exaggerated rumors, and as, moreover, they were men of little or no philosophy and at least *liable* to a degree of superstition, it is but fair that we should read the *marvelous* [sic] portions of thier [sic] history with those interpretations, and those abatements from strict credibility which may be necessary to bring them within the scope of reason and Nature. This remark will

⁶⁸ Brittan, “Spiritualism: Its Nature and Mission,” 5-6.

⁶⁹ Hatch, *Democratization*, 167-70.

receive additional force when we consider that in that age, the belief in prodigies and divine interferences was still common, both among Jew and thens [sic. Heathens?].⁷⁰

Here, emerging techniques of history and Higher Criticism were finding their way into a wider public of readers and, in the the process, undermining Christianity's claims to exclusive and divinely inspired revelation. The authors of the Gospels were men like any others and wrote with clear reference to their historical time and place. The miracles and "rumors" that surrounded the person of Jesus and were used by Christians as proof of his divinity were suspect. Nonetheless, like all external religion, they had been transmitted through the ages by well-meaning believers and religious authorities.

In contrast to the God-man that Christians worshiped, Fishbough rejected both the possibility and necessity of Jesus ever suspending natural law. With reference to Davis' revelations in the *Principles of Nature*, Fishbough made it clear that Jesus performed all of his healing feats and alleged miracles through animal magnetism, or Mesmerism. Still a lover of Christ, Fishbough assured readers that his purpose was "not [to] degrade Christ in the least possible degree,...[but to] elevate *man*, to whom he stands both as a brother and an exemplar; and we would shew that the lofty characteristics of Christ, may, in a greater or lesser degree, be attained by all who will seek for them in the proper way." With characteristic optimism, Fishbough believed in "*a Christ* in the interior nature of every man" and hoped "to induce every one to strive to *develop* that which is within him, and to live and act like a Christ."⁷¹ Or, as he put it in a later issue, "Christ was simply a *perfect* man, and that a perfect man is a finite God. *As* a perfect man, he was an exemplar to all other men to lead them also to perfection; but we believe also that the whole race will yet grow to the 'fullness of the stature of Christ,' in which case, men in general will be able to perform, if necessary, by *natural processes*, all the works which Christ did, and perhaps much more beside."⁷²

Echoing the words of Davis, Apollos Munn also affirmed in the *Spirit Messenger* that Jesus was a "GREAT MORAL REFORMER—A PERFECT MAN,...regarded by his disciples a SAVIOUR OF THE WORLD, through the force of his sublime teachings and splendid example. He required no so-called *miracles* to sustain the purity of his mission; nor was there an event

⁷⁰ Fishbough, "The Theological Conception," 289.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 291-93.

⁷² William Fishbough, "Sayings About the Univercœlum," *Univercœlum and Spiritual Philosopher* 4, no. 1 (Jun. 2, 1849): 9.

that occurred during his earthly pilgrimage, which, if properly understood, could not be explained upon principles entirely in harmony with nature's universal laws." Moreover, like Fishbough and Brittan, Munn ascribed a code of pure morality to Jesus in contrast to the sectarian religion that had developed around him. "Instead of wrangling about creeds, and vieing with the heathen and the Mahometan," Munn inquired, "would it not be better to cultivate a sincere love of TRUTH, and to illustrate the sincerity of our hearts, by living in accordance with the teachings of nature, and those sublime principles of equality, love, and practical holiness" shown by Christ?⁷³

Though not miraculous, Fishbough nonetheless believed that Jesus was blessed with an "utmost purity and benignity of soul" and "a most vigorous and independent intellect, which rose entirely above all the teachings of previous minds, and all the conventional dogmas and theories of his own times." Reading Jesus' teachings through the lens of spirit communication and divine influx, Fishbough wrote, "Into his pure and expanded soul, also, flowed truths from the higher worlds, communing...with special messengers or angels sent therefrom, who spoke directly to his inner being." Among the important spiritual truths he taught, "Jesus recognized the universality of the Paternity of God, and His consequent impartial favor to all." Jesus similarly taught what would become one of the most defining Spiritualist beliefs, namely, that "the passage out of this sphere into another, is nothing more than a change and elevation of condition, without losing one faculty, or one essential element of personal identity." Following the laws of association and progression, explained by Davis in the *Principles of Nature*, Jesus arrived at precisely the right moment in history for his teachings to be useful, and carefully gave his disciples truths they were ready to associate with, so as to "'Cast not your pearls before swine.'" ⁷⁴

Nonetheless, the Harmonialists were not a monolith, especially on the point of Jesus' divinity. Others, like Thomas Lake Harris, were more ambiguous in their views of Christ. In one of his sermons, reprinted in the *Univercœlum*, Harris plainly stated, "Jesus...is, to my mind, the divinely missioned spirit through whom the Deity is revealed to man—by whom Humanity is to be unitized or reconciled with God. I would claim perfection in his character, in his teachings, in his life." What Harris objected to was the way in which this doctrine had

⁷³ Munn, "The Character of Miracles," 20-21.

⁷⁴ Fishbough, "The Theological Conception," 353-55.

been enforced through church authority rather than innate Reason. He did, however, stop short of a fully orthodox trinitarianism, explaining in strong Swedenborgian overtones that “Man, as well as God, is a Trinity in Unity. The Spirit has three great primitive elements: Love, Wisdom, and Energy. These correspond to the three essential attributes of the Godhead: Omnipotence, Omniscience, and Infinite Benevolence. Man is related to God as effect to cause, as the child to its parent.” Jesus was “divine because the perfection of what in you and me is imperfect.” He was “a Perfect Man—the human incarnation of the Perfect God.”⁷⁵ Thus, Christ was the unique mode of God’s revelation to mankind, but was still a man, albeit a divine and perfect one.

In Harris’ view, the “Ideal Christ” and the “historical Jesus” matched perfectly in that the recorded actions of the latter were consistent with what would be expected of the former.⁷⁶ Indeed, he believed that the “form of materialistic Rationalism that denies the superordinary in the life and actions of Jesus is to me, of all things, most irrational.” Nonetheless, like the theology of liberal Protestants, Jesus’ superiority was in his spotless example “as men believe on him, and open their souls to influences emanating from him, they are quickened in each pulse of their moral being.” Such an influence made “sensualists into spiritualists, persecutors into martyrs, the avaricious into the benevolent—the adulterous into the pure.”⁷⁷ Expressing the ongoing role of Jesus as a divine mediator between God and the whole of humanity, Harris declared:

His religion, like his character, was of supersensual origin, and of a Divine authority. He was a great Central Mind, a Moral Sun: around him was to cluster the constellation of our Redeemed and Divine Humanity. Moral Life flowed out, and continues to flow, from God through him for the sanctifying and harmonizing of the Race. His Church is composed of the Pure, the Good, the Loving, the Redeemed of every Age and Land. They are One with Him, as he is One with God. They receive light and vitality from Him, as he receives it from the Father. And all of Earth, called by whatever name, who have received the sanctifying influences of his Spirit, belong to the same divine communion. He teaches us now as in the days of his dwelling in the flesh. And were our spiritual visions opened, we should perhaps behold him, in the midst of the divine glory, as he appeared to Stephen and to Paul. The Church on Earth and in Heaven are One.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Thomas Lake Harris, “Christ and Christianity: A Discourse, Preached in Rev. Mr. Raker’s Church, Fourth-Street, New York, Sunday Afternoon, April 9, 1848,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 1, no. 21 (Apr. 22, 1848): 321, 323.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 321-22.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 323.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 324.

Thus Harris evoked the solar system metaphor frequently used by Davis and the other Harmonialists, equating Jesus with the central sun, God. At the same time, however, Harris avoided an atonement-centred view of redemption and extended it to all people. In Harris' mind, Jesus represented a confluence of true and historical religion. While no lover of church authority, Harris upheld Christian claims to Jesus' divinity, all the while reading him through the lens of liberal Protestant theology, Swedenborgianism, and Davis' Harmonial Philosophy. Similarly, I. S. Hyatt in a letter to the *Spirit Messenger and Harmonial Advocate*, too, claimed that Jesus was divine and the saviour of mankind. In addition to his two years studying new revelations, Hyatt wrote that "the majority of the evidences which I have received from the Spirit-land, has been in support of the Divinity of Christ, and of his character as a Savior."⁷⁹ As would continue to be the case throughout the history of Spiritualism, the question of the historical Jesus and his divinity were issues that defied consensus.

Revelation

Alongside discussions of the nature of true religion, the Harmonialists took a great interest in the possibility of ongoing revelation and its possible modes. The *Univercælum*, and subsequent journals with Harmonialist leanings, frequently featured articles about magnetic and spiritual phenomena across time, including references to the ever-popular Seeress of Prevorst. Additionally drawing on Swedenborgian notions of influx, the Harmonialists believed in the possibility of direct inspiration from the spiritual spheres to men and women of superior constitution. In their fierce rejection of ecclesial monopolies on revelation, the Harmonialists can be understood as a "liberal" or "progressive" outgrowth of the democratic and antiauthoritarian impulses present in American revivalism. Like Andrew Jackson Davis' spiritual Declaration of Independence in the *Spirit Messenger*, the Harmonialists asserted that revelation was a natural right and a form of self-reliance and individual conscience befitting a democratic age.

⁷⁹ I. S. Hyatt, "Jesus Christ," *Spirit Messenger and Harmonial Advocate* 1, no. 7 (Nov. 27, 1852): 108.

Influx and Interior Inspiration

Consistent with their emphasis on the interiority of true religion, the Harmonialists followed Davis in assuming the existence of an innate religious sense, similar to the Reason of Deists, the moral-sense of Transcendentalists, or the Inner Light of Quakers. Humans had an affinity for truth and could discern divine law when their natural inclinations were given free rein. Moreover, the Harmonialists believed in the presence of the Deity in every human soul through the law of correspondence. Thus, divine inspiration poured into human interiors and granted ceaseless revelation. The inner divinity of all humans meant that inspiration could be found in even the lowliest expressions of the religious impulse, but also improved with the development of the individual.

Prefiguring later New Thought writers, and echoing the optimism of the Mormons about the potential divinity of humans, Samuel B. Brittan suggested in the *Shekinah* that human progression and ongoing revelation could make humans like gods themselves.⁸⁰ The “divine Philosophy,” he wrote, “teaches that Deity pervades and governs, by established laws, the Universe of material and spiritual existence; that all truth is *natural*, and adapted to the rational faculties; that God is enshrined in the human soul; and, moreover, that all men, as they become God-like in spirit and life, are rendered susceptible to divine impressions, and may derive instruction from a higher sphere of intelligence.”⁸¹ The divine in man possessed a natural affinity for the divine in the workings of natural law. Thus, through innate Reason, as well as with the help of spiritual intermediaries, all humans were perfectly constituted to receive direct revelations from God. The spiritual development of all humans occurred as they realized these natural truths, which in turn drove further development.

In one article in the *Spirit Messenger*, published in August of 1850, R. P. Ambler asserted the inherent attractiveness of “True Faith.” Some form of faith, he asserted, was self-evidently an innate attribute of humans given the world’s many creeds. Even in the absence of one, a person was “certain to entertain a faith of his own.” The true faith, however, would be “*beautiful and attractive* in its nature. Its messages are those of love, and peace, and good will to men. It speaks not in the thunders of Sinai, and its voice is not heard in the earthquake

⁸⁰ Albanese, *Republic*, 138, 142-43, 311-12.

⁸¹ Brittan, “Spiritualism: Its Nature and Mission,” 3.

or the storm.” By contrast, he wrote, “Error...can never be intrinsically beautiful....But on the contrary, the true faith, as it comes from the great Spirit of Beauty, and accords with the outward expressions of that spirit in nature, must be inherently attractive.” In addition to appealing to an innate sense of beauty, Ambler wrote, “the true faith is a *rational* one.” It could not be based “on mere theological speculations, and...the testimony of spiritual lords.”⁸² The innate religious sense responded to both the aesthetic and the rational qualities of truth in a blend of Romanticism and the Enlightenment so characteristic of the Harmonialists as a whole.

This particular blend of the subjective and the empirical in religion reflected larger cultural trends in nineteenth-century American Idealism more broadly—particularly as exemplified by the Transcendentalists, whom the Harmonialists so admired. While the influence of German Idealism on Transcendentalism was pronounced, it was typically mediated through the French philosopher Victor Cousin—“that hashier up of German metaphysics” as the Unitarian clergyman Andrews Norton derided him. Cousin’s “Eclecticism” tempered the pure Idealism of the German Romantics, which Transcendentalists like George Ripley found “too subjective,” by retaining a “Common Sense” emphasis on empiricism and a “spontaneous reason” that intuitively recognized natural truths. The Eclectic philosophy sought to identify and combine the best aspects of different philosophical systems and ground religion in the discourse of science and psychology, while still retaining the subjectivity of Romanticism in popularized form. Cousin’s more scientific approach to religion fit well with the American infatuation with empiricism, as testified to by the popularity of his works in the United States.⁸³ One can readily appreciate the parallels with the Harmonialist impulse to discover the best in each partial religion through the exercise of innate Reason.

The ability of humans to understand truth reflected the Harmonialists’ general optimism about human capacities. Contrary to the Calvinist belief that the Reason was too corrupted to tell truth from falsehood, Nelson Brown observed in the *Univercœlum* that “The elements of a true faith, and of a true philosophy of ethics, may be found in every human

⁸² Ambler, “Characteristics of the True Faith,” 28. In another article, Ambler summarized that “that doctrine should be received as good, which *accords with the teachings of Reason, is sanctioned by the revelations of Nature, and conforms with the pure desires and sympathies of the Soul.*” R. P. Ambler, “The Test of Doctrine,” *Spirit Messenger* 1, no. 24 (Jan. 18, 1851): 189.

⁸³ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, 13, 56-59, 107; Hazen, *Village Enlightenment*, 5-14.

heart, especially in its normal and uncorrupted state.” Rejecting the doctrine of Total Depravity, Brown insisted that even in “the climes of the fiercest barbarism” among the “Greenlanders, and Hindoos and Ethiopians, . . . you need not watch long to discover that even among those are moral feelings, immortal yearnings, heart affections, and perceptions of the good, the beautiful and the true, however their souls may be darkened by superstition, or corroded by evil.” “I cannot help believing,” he continued, “that there is an *inner vision* which can perceive an inner light. The law of God . . . [is] written by the finger of Deity upon the heathen as well as upon the Christian heart.” Indeed, “Had man never been endowed with a religious or moral nature, the world then might have been peopled with tribes of demons—and then, of course, the dogma of total depravity of soul would be a lamentable truth!” Reason must be intact, however, since “we can discover many redeeming principles in the hearts of those of the most barbarous nations.” Among the notable examples of the world, Brown identified “Confucius of China, Plato and Socrates of Greece, the Magi of Persia, Seneca and the Plinys of Rome” and conceded that “even Mahomet himself was, in some degree, guided, in the first stage of his career, by an interior light.”⁸⁴ A reprint in the *Spirit Messenger and Harmonial Advocate* noted that “there was central light in” Confucius and that “he was the man of fine nature and culture.” “His sentiments are now styled *Joo-kian*, the religion of scholars,” the author wrote. “Though in a nation of local tendency and prejudice, he taught universal doctrines,” making him “of the world’s most immortal teachers,” in the august company of others like Jesus and Socrates.⁸⁵

By the ever-present logic of correspondence, Nature was the standard by which the Harmonialists judged revelations. One contributor to the *Spirit Messenger* lamented in 1851, “The popular expositors of Religion, in building up an exclusivism for themselves, are wont to speak of the ‘dim light of nature;’ as though nature was something obscure, and unprofitable to investigate.” The error of such a view was apparent, however, since “all the works of creation are but transcripts, or outer manifestations of principles and designs previously existing in the mind of the Great Designer—the Deity. And it is apparent, too, that these works, being productions of the Great Mind, become external representations of the inward wisdom, power, and design—in one word, character of that mind.” Through

⁸⁴ Nelson Brown, “The Elements of True Philosophy,” *Univercaelum and Spiritual Philosopher* 1, no. 13 (Feb. 26, 1848): 197-98.

⁸⁵ I. S. H. “Chinese Ethics,” *Spirit Messenger and Harmonial Advocate* 1, no. 12 (Jan. 1, 1853): 187.

correspondence, Nature directly reflected the divine, thus inward truths could be discovered by reading them in the natural world. Since Nature was a direct revelation of the Deity's will and character, the revelations of the prophets of historical religions were not exclusive. The measure of truth was its universality, not the special status of the prophet. It was "as divine when announced by the poet, the philosopher, the statesman, the physician, as when declared by one who assumes to be 'the servant and ambassador of God,' as *sacred* when promulgated by Zoroaster, Confucius, or Mahomet, as when it comes to us in the pages of the 'Infallible Revealed Will of the Most High.'...[I]n the investigation and apprehension of that truth, we have seen that *Nature* must ever be recognized as the SUPREME AUTHORITY."⁸⁶ After all, as a writer in a later issue put it, "No system of religion can be true which conflicts with established and undeniable principles of nature."⁸⁷

Conceiving of God as "an inexhaustible Fountain of truth" at "the center of the Universe," R. P. Ambler observed that "all revelation—in whatever age it may be given—must necessarily proceed" from him. Moreover, Ambler wrote, "There is nothing which is in the least supernatural in any of the revelations that have ever been given to man. But in all ages the influx of truth has visited the human mind in a mode as simple and natural as that in which the light flows from the sun, or the raindrops fall from the clouds." Revelation thus poured directly from the Deity in Swedenborgian fashion. As such, the "silent ministry of Nature" was ever present. In addition, inspiration could also come through "individuals whose spiritual constitution has been a suitable receptacle for divine influx." Indeed, Ambler affirmed, "The human soul has always received that measure of truth which precisely corresponds with the inward capacity. If, in past ages, the mass of the world have groped in darkness, it is simply because they have not been prepared to receive the light." Nonetheless, despite the ubiquity of revelation, he wrote, "no revelation can present a complete and perfect system of truth, since man himself has never been sufficiently unfolded to receive such a system; and so the revelations of truth which have been given to the world in different ages, have been only parts of the great and mighty whole which resides in the Divine Mind."⁸⁸ "God," Ambler wrote in the language of Davis, "as the central vortex of intelligence, the great POSITIVE MIND, the superior SPIRITUAL MAGNET, will inevitably draw mind nearer and

⁸⁶ C. J. A., "Nature and Revelation," *Spirit Messenger* 1, no. 29 (Feb. 22, 1851): 228.

⁸⁷ "Philosophy and Religion," *Spirit Messenger* 1, no. 46 (Jun. 21, 1851):

⁸⁸ R. P. Ambler, "Revelation," *Spirit Messenger and Harmonial Advocate* 1, no. 3 (Oct. 30, 1852): 40.

nearer to himself, in regular progression, throughout an endless eternity.”⁸⁹ Revelation was not only natural and present in all times and places, but it would never be completed due to the infinite perfection of God.

Nonetheless, while interior inspiration was universal to all humans, its expression as a religion took on the characteristics of the individual revelator and its cultural context. One contributor to the *Shekinah*, O. W. Wright, upheld the importance of local conditions for developing religious beliefs and rejected as simplistic the notion that priestcraft was responsible. “Mythologies are regarded as mere inventions of priests for their own convenience,” he wrote. “It would be just as wise to call beef-eating an invention of butchers. Mythologies are something more than exaggerated, restricted, embellished, travestied readings of actual history. They have their reality in the fact that they are life products of nations.” Thus, the mythologies of a nation were indicative of its character—a distinctly Romantic notion harkening back to the German philosopher Johanne Gottfried Herder.⁹⁰ Rather than merely reading mythology as historical distortions, Wright saw in them a way to discern the culture of a people.

Convinced that people were essentially spiritual, he noted, “The spirituality of man’s being is declared even by the etymology of the word English, *man*; German, *Mensch*; Latin, *Mens* or mind; Sanscrit, *Manusehya* or man, the root of which *Manu* means spirit: which shows that the orientals are at least not behind us in spiritual insight.” Furthermore, the human propensity for worship expressed itself in many different ways, as evidenced by the variety of religious forms. “Soloman’s [sic] Temple, Mosque of St. Sophia, Parthenon, St. Peters, Westminster Abbey, have been built,” he wrote, “and man has worshipped the Infinite in stone, plant, statue, beast, stars, his fellow man, or in all space.”⁹¹ Wright’s distinction between the inner “spirituality” of all humans and the outward forms of their worship exemplified the construction of the liberal spirituality that Leigh Eric Schmidt associates largely with Transcendentalists and Free Religionists.⁹²

⁸⁹ Ambler and Munn, “Introductory,” 4.

⁹⁰ O. W. Wright, “Science of History,” *Shekinah Papers*, vol. 1, 33; George S. Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany: Religion and Aesthetic Culture from Romanticism to Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 33-35.

⁹¹ Wright, “Science of History,” 28-29.

⁹² Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 4-16, 227-28.

A similar logic could be found in a 1851 issue of the *Spirit Messenger* when the paper quoted Theodore Parker in support of Davis and other clairvoyants. Drawing from Parker's *A Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion* (1842), the editorial referred readers to excerpts such as, "The conception which a man forms of God depends on the character and attainment of the man himself"; or, "If a buffalo had religion, his conception of Deity would probably be a buffalo, fairer-limbed, stronger, and swifter than himself, grazing in the fairest meadows of Heaven." Naturally, such conceptions invited conflation with progress: more advanced nations developed more advanced theologies. As Parker explained it, "The conception of the form of future life depends on the condition and character of the believer. Hence it is a state of war or peace; of sensual or spiritual delight; of reform or progress, with different nations. The notion formed of the next world is the index of the man's slate in this."⁹³

Samuel B. Brittan made nearly the same argument as Parker in the *Shekinah*. In every man, Brittan explained, "we find in his religious life the autobiography of his inward being. ...If his religion be material, it is because his nature is so." This explained why in "a state of savagism, men worship some visible object," such astral bodies, natural phenomena, and plants and animals. Such was the result of "the highest faculties of the soul...slumbering in embryo."⁹⁴ Through correspondence, external forms reflected inward development and evolved in tandem with both personal and collective evolution. The "primitive" religion found in a "state of savagism" possessed the interior essence of religion, but it was unrealized potential relative to more advanced religions. As tribal peoples ascended the nineteenth-century historicist's ladder towards civilization, their idolatrous religions would cease to be material and would become spiritual.

Despite the culturally elitist view that religious evolution implied, it nonetheless allowed that primitive religions were still religions. As Brittan noted in the *Univercælum*, "God has nowhere left creatures in total darkness. Some rays of the light Divine penetrate the veil that is spread over the nations of the earth. The heathen sees around him glimmerings of the Eternal Spirit. The Almighty speaks to man in the voices of nature, and—the poor Indian sees God in cloud and hears him in the wind."⁹⁵ Fernald made a similar remark in an 1849

⁹³ "Theodore Parker's Discourses on Religion," *Spirit Messenger* 1, no. 50 (Jul. 19, 1851): 401.

⁹⁴ Brittan, "Spiritualism: Its Nature and Mission," 5.

⁹⁵ Samuel B. Brittan, "The Religion of Nature," *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 1, no. 14 (Mar. 4, 1848): 219.

issue of the *Univercælum*, noting, “The untutored savage is inspired to see God in clouds and hear him in the winds, and in his simple intuitions and ideas of the ‘Great Spirit,’ frequently has clearer perceptions of the Divine Being than many who claim enlightenment by the Christian revelation.”⁹⁶ In an evocation of the noble savage myth, native Americans could be seen as both less advanced but also purer and free from sectarian religion and false theology on account of their closeness to nature, a point Davis had emphasized in the *Principles of Nature*.

Fernald also cited Justinus Kerner, famous for his writings on the Seeress of Prevest, to suggest that primitive peoples, and easterners, were spiritually purer: “‘If we go back into the primitive ages, when men dwelt under the dominion of Nature, before the inner life was stifled by what is called *cultivation*—in the history of the Old Testament, for example, or even now in the East, which was the cradle of mankind—we shall find remnants of this inner life exhibited by entire races of people—such as when they are observed in individuals here, we are accustomed to look upon as symptoms of disease.’”⁹⁷ Too much reliance on a materialistic philosophy corrupted the primitive connection to the divine and steered humanity away from the natural religion. Foreshadowing the increasing turn towards the imagined mystical and spiritual east, “remnants” of this closeness to the interior religion could be found in distant and exotic lands.

In similar sympathy to “primitive” religion, Frances (Fanny) Green, a frequent contributor of poetry to the *Univercælum*, provided a short defence of African beliefs in the *Univercælum*, later reprinted in the *Spirit Messenger*. In the article, entitled “The Ministry of Trees,” she chided readers not to be contemptuous of heathen worship. “There are nations who worship trees, and not wholly heathen, not wholly void of life, can he be, whose God is so enshrined,” she explained. “We will not then, sneer at the simple African, who bows down and worships beneath the bending arch of his beautiful Mazamba tree, which is both temple and divinity.” After all, a tree was a more worthy object of reverence than the “yellow dust, which WE consecrate, and enshrine, and worship—with all strange rites, and fearful sacrifices, even of human life, under the name of GOLD.”⁹⁸ Thus, while African worship, as

⁹⁶ W. M. Fernald, “View of the Bible. Number Two,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 3, no. 14 (Mar. 3, 1849): 209.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁹⁸ Frances H. Green, “The Ministry of Trees,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 1, no. 11 (Feb. 12, 1848), 171; and *Spirit Messenger* 1, no. 45 (Jun. 14, 1851): 357-58.

she understood it, might not be complex or carry the usual markers understood to go with religion, such as scripture, it had the advantage of being closer to nature and was in that regard superior to those who concerned themselves only with material wealth. Even practices deemed primitive by Europeans and Americans had the germ of true religion in them.⁹⁹ Nonetheless, her metaphor of tree as both temple and deity implicitly mapped a Christian understanding onto African spirituality wherein the essential markers of religion were simply natural equivalents instead.

Ongoing Revelation

The Harmonialists repeatedly challenged the claims of orthodox Christians that the age of revelations had ended. Such claims oppressed humanity by denying them their right to individual judgment and unmediated access to the divine. Indeed, the Bible itself, Fishbough asserted, contained evidence that direct revelation, such as through “prophetic dreams,” was not “confined to the Jews as to a chosen people, but they occurred quite as frequently among the heathens.” By consulting such canonically sanctioned examples as Nebuchadnezzar, Fishbough wrote, “we may proceed, without fear of offending any consistent believer in the superiority of the Bible as a divine record, to instance cases from *profane* history, showing that the same mode of supernal instruction, the same mode of prophetic impression, and hence the same mode of divine, providential, and moral government, was, from the earlier ages, common among humanity outside of the ‘chosen people.’”¹⁰⁰ Thus, in a double move, Fishbough questioned biblical authority while simultaneously using it to uphold the universality of religious experience.

Samuel Brittan, too, balked at the Church’s denial of “all present inspiration, or direct influence of the Spirit.” While the Church might claim “that the age of Revelation and Miracle has gone by forever...,” he wrote, the “Spiritual Philosophy presumes that God has still an interest, not less manifest, in the affairs of men; that His relations to the soul are unchanged, and that Humanity retains all its powers.”¹⁰¹ The cessation of direct inspiration was incompatible with the Harmonialist understanding of natural law as eternal and

⁹⁹ Masuzawa, *World Religions*, 114.

¹⁰⁰ William Fishbough, “Dream-Life Among the Ancients,” *Shekinah Papers*, vol. 3, 222-23.

¹⁰¹ Brittan, “The Coming Ordeal,” 191.

unchanging and human progress ever upward. To limit such powers of inspiration to the past was to limit the unbounded potential of humanity.

Thomas Lake Harris similarly derided the notion that revelation and inspiration were confined to the past. “It is said that God never inspires men now, though he once did in bygone ages,” he remarked. “Foolish and impious thought. God is omnipresent—he is here. . . . The true light is not local or particular, it is common and universal.” “The canon of Truth is not yet completed. The record of revelation is not and never will be closed,” he wrote. “God will always have in reserve some higher and more perfect revelation.” Even in the distant future, Harris believed, “when you and I tread the stars together . . . we shall be pupils and learners still.”¹⁰² With still more lyrical flair, Harris wrote:

God made his Prophets Poets in the Past,
Foretelling harmony with voice and lyre;
He makes his Poets Prophets now at last,
Pours the bright Future o’er their lips of fire;
Making the Soul His trumpet-voice to break
The ancient Night with swift, electric breath,
To scatter hopes like morning stars, and wake
Humanity from death[.]¹⁰³

Like Emerson’s holy bards, Harris declared that prophets were poets and poets were prophets. A flood of new revelations, their newness invoked by the comparison to electricity, would shake humanity from its complacency and help inaugurate a utopian era when religious truth would be manifest in the world. New revelations were needed to keep religion vibrant and to keep it from falling into complacency and decay like the Christian churches had done.

Nor was Harris the only one to equate the highest forms of poetry with revelation. Samuel Brittan noted that “Revelation . . . takes the form of law, poetry, ethics, etc., and . . . depend[s], in a greater or less degree, on a variety of idiosyncratic peculiarities, and the general perfection of earthly media.”¹⁰⁴ Brittan construed revelation so broadly as to make virtually all of history a revelation insofar as its actors were physically developed. Like “religion,” revelation was stretched far beyond the bounds of the traditional Christian understanding to include great works of art and moral insight.

¹⁰² Harris, “The Inspirations of Common Life. A Discourse,” 51.

¹⁰³ Thomas Lake Harris, “The Transition Age,” *Shekinah Papers*, vol. 1, 236.

¹⁰⁴ Samuel B. Brittan, “Cerebral Influence on Revelation,” *Spirit Messenger and Harmonial Advocate* 1, no. 7 (Nov. 27, 1852): 99-100.

Gesturing towards Romantic theories of imagination and inspiration that conceived of acts of creation as spontaneous replications of the divine principles of the universe,¹⁰⁵ one contributor to the *Shekinah*—“a mystic”—declared that “influx from the divine Spirit is Inspiration, as distinguished from the knowledge derived from the perception of the senses.” It was intuitive and internal, rather than sensual and external. Anticipating the turn towards meditation later in the century, he advised that “quiet, meditative ‘receptivity’ is essential” and that “the original ideas of seer, prophet, poet, artist, and inventor, come from this source and in this way to their minds.”¹⁰⁶ Universalized beyond the Christian canon, revelation belonged to all and was expressed from within as a creative act.

Though the implications of Harmonialist views of revelation challenged orthodox Christian understandings of what constituted revelation, not all of the Harmonialists were equal in their treatment of Christianity; some privileged it more highly than others. Thomas Lake Harris, for instance, in a sermon given to his congregation at the Independent Christian Society, argued for the belief in three distinct sources of revelation. The first of these was “in Nature, that, when studied, reveals the immanence of God in all substance: that shows the divine process of Creation.” “Secondly,” he continued, “we have a Revelation in the inspired intuitions of the Christlike, and in the universal Reason of the Race.” Beyond the merely “Christlike,” however, there was Christ himself. “Supremely,” Harris wrote, “we have a Gospel in the life, the teachings, the acts of Jesus, a Divine Word, authoritative, eternal.”¹⁰⁷ For Harris, Jesus still stood as the highest exemplar for humanity and as an authoritative source of revelation—a position Davis would have rejected. Nonetheless, it should be noted that it was the life, teachings, and acts of Christ that were the true Gospel, not necessarily the Bible as a whole or in of itself. In this understanding of revelation, Harris remained much closer to the traditional division between natural and special revelation, although he still allowed for other lesser inspirations of human Reason.

Given the progressive trajectory of revelation, it made little sense to rely on the revelations of the past instead of newer and higher ones. An article in the *Univercœlum*

¹⁰⁵ M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 21-23, 119, 189-93.

¹⁰⁶ A Mystic, “Andrew Jackson Davis. The Great American Seer,” 17. See Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 63-100, 143-80, for a discussion of mystic solitude and the rise of meditation among American religious liberals.

¹⁰⁷ Harris, “The Church’s Duty and the World’s Necessity,” 178.

explained, “we see the folly of going back to the early ages of the world, to the unprogressed inhabitants of those infant eras, to learn the nature of the spiritual world and the relation which we sustain toward it.” Speaking to an optimism that the innate powers of reason would arrive at the truth, and to the empiricist ideology of nineteenth-century America, the author urged readers to be wise and “consult the advanced thoughts of the present age, to become familiar with the latest discoveries of the refined minds of our day, and then, after thoroughly digesting all the knowledge we possess upon the subject, to judge what is the true religion.” Unfortunately, the author lamented, the “religious class of this day” allowed themselves to be controlled by religious teachers “in such a manner as to effectually prevent a knowledge of these discoveries from coming to their minds.” The clerical authorities, fearful of ongoing revelation and discovery, insisted it was “a ‘sin’ to open an infidel book,” and thereby stymied a scientific and impartial investigation into religious truth. Yet, the author enthused, “if there is any meaning in this word ‘infidel,’ it can only be properly applied to those in whom the religious sentiment is not yet developed, who have no attraction for spiritual truths, and who deny the reality of a future state of existence.”¹⁰⁸

To support this broad understanding of revelation the Harmonialists made the frequent argument—familiar from the writings of eighteenth-century Deists—that it made little sense for God to exclusively reveal himself to one people. Indeed, the fundamental division between interior and external religion practically necessitated a universalized understanding of revelation. In a trance lecture reprinted in an 1853 issue of the *Spirit Messenger*, by then renamed the *Spirit Messenger and Harmonial Advocate*, S. J. Finney asked his audience, “Can it be possible that he [God] has given to you, my brethren, one law for the government of your religious faculties and powers, and another law to the poor Hindoo, and another to the Mahometan, and numberless others to other worshippers?” The external religions that people adhered to with equal conviction were merely “the results of man’s undeveloped conditions” and had “been handed down for ages.” The varying forms of religion reflected the deficits of “those poor credulous souls whose internals are yet too undeveloped to examine and reflect upon what they believe.” Yet, the world’s competing religions could not all be correct if they were at variance, Finney reasoned, since “God’s laws are immutable, universal, yet never contradictory.” Universal revelation provided the way out of this predicament: the only way

¹⁰⁸ “True Religion,” 65.

to reconcile the many outward forms of religion was for there to be a way for all to access interior truth. “Hence,” Finney concluded, “we must look somewhere else than in books, creeds and theories, to find the law which governs man in his moral and spiritual relations.” The source of this law was in the direct experience of the divine that all humans could access. “Hence, each man has his judgment-seat within his own soul,” he declared. To the objection that the heathens could not be trusted to determine what was right, he responded, “When you speak to the Mahometan, and tell him that his sentiments are low and false, he retorts by saying that yours are low and false. You tell him that yours are direct from heaven, and he replies, ‘So are mine.’”¹⁰⁹

Magnetic and Psychological Causes

In explaining how revelation occurred in the interiors of different individuals, Mesmerism and phrenology were popular among the Harmonialists—a more mechanistic and scientifically authorized version of the Reason of the Deists, the moral sense of the Transcendentalists, or the inner light of the Quakers. While the science of Mesmerism might be relatively new, evidence of its existence could supposedly be found throughout history, allowing for a naturalization of revelation. The phenomena surrounding Mesmerism, Harmonialists believed, could be a means of rationally explaining the seemingly supernatural powers of prophecy and clairvoyance. As Ann Taves has argued, this move prefigured late nineteenth-century psychological models for understanding the supposed ubiquity of religious experience.¹¹⁰ Robert C. Fuller notes how in the wake of the Second Great Awakening, many Americans moved into more “progressive” religious movements. A popularized Mesmerism provided them not only a “scientific” explanation of religious experience, but was also a way to approach the “essence” of religion by providing access to a world beyond the senses; it was a source of ongoing revelation that could justify their radical innovations where the Scriptures were silent. Emerging at the same time as the height of the revivals in the 1830s, the experiential—yet rational—qualities of Mesmerism fed the revivalistic impulse.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Finney, “The Day of Judgment,” 178-79.

¹¹⁰ Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 166-67, passim.

¹¹¹ Fuller, *Mesmerism*, 75-82, 100-101; Gabay, *Covert Enlightenment*, 238-39.

For instance, in an article comparing Swedenborg and Davis, W. M. Fernald spoke of “Swedenborg’s illumination” which he stated was “no more than a natural perception of interior truth, on precisely the same principles of those of modern mesmeric clairvoyance.” Granted, Swedenborg “possessed this power to an uncommon extent.” However, such power, Fernald wrote, “does not prove *supernatural* inspiration—it does not cut him off from his race, and elevate him to a high [sic] unaccountable on any principle of natural law. It simply shows him to have been a man of uncommon expansion and refinement of mind.” Indeed, his refined and learned mind might have made him “predisposed too strongly to peculiar habits of thought.” Davis, by contrast, only had a head which was “finely balanced, combined with an admirable temperament.” Emphasizing Davis’ passivity in phrenological terms, Fernald noted that the Poughkeepsie Seer’s skull “is quite high, well and evenly developed in the intellectual region, and combined with a temperament favored by Nature, and by other circumstances, and this is the mere *channel*, and it is a sufficient one, for truth to flow through unobstructed and unperverted, at least more than is *usually* the lot of man.”¹¹² In the context of the populist and anti-authoritarian tendencies unleashed in the Second Great Awakening,¹¹³ it is telling that the uneducated revelations of Davis were purer in Fernald’s mind than the aristocratic Swedenborg’s.

As evidence of the naturalness and universality of revelation, William Fishbough also argued that trances and visions were persistent cross-cultural phenomena which could be understood as an extension of the science of psychology. Through the common lens of the trance, Fishbough drew parallels between different revelations. The presence of trances, in “all ages and among all nations,” with their shared phenomena, “and among people of different mental predilections and religious views...distinctly refers it to some established law of the human mind. Cases of trance are recorded as taking place among the Chinese, Hindoos, Turks and Jews, which in their general psychical features are precisely analogous to those sometimes witnessed among professing Christians of different denominations.”¹¹⁴ Once reinterpreted through trances, religious experiences took on a common and naturalized character and could be compared to one another. As Ann Taves has convincingly shown,

¹¹² W. M. Fernald, “Swedenborg and Davis,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 3, no. 5 (Dec. 30, 1848): 66, 69.

¹¹³ See, for example, Hatch, *Democratization*.

¹¹⁴ William Fishbough, “Psychology: Its Present State and Teachings,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 1, no. 5 (Jan. 1, 1848): 67.

earlier “magnetic histories” of religion, which used Mesmerism to discredit “false religion” and “enthusiasm,” gradually gave way to more sympathetic accounts wherein Mesmerist trances were seen as legitimate states for receiving revelation and explained cross-cultural religious experience—a development that paved the way for psychological explanations of religion like those of William James.¹¹⁵

Trance states could also be purposefully cultivated. Writing in the *Shekinah*, Fishbough suggested that “Artificial preparations for such spiritual inflowings were very common among the prophets, pythonesses, and sibyls of the ancient heathen nations.” Like modern Mesmerists, the ancients likely performed “magnetic manipulations” for medical reasons, and Fishbough also considered it “probable” that they produced clairvoyant states in the same manner. Furthermore, “they resorted. . . to the use of narcotic potions, unguents, and fumigations, or to the inhalation of gases which had specific effects upon the nervous and cerebral system, similar to those now known to attend the use of chloroform and nitrous oxide gas.” It was in this way that the “oracles of Trophonius, and also of the Delphic Apollo,” were produced.¹¹⁶ In a later article, Fishbough also framed the transfer of spiritual knowledge as a sort of religious decline, similar to the Renaissance notion of the lost *prisca theologia*, when he observed “the numerous facts which show that the light of open spiritual influence passed, though with constantly diminishing radiance, down through many of the subsequent ages, and only became obscured as the Church sunk into the sensuality and materialism of these latter days.”¹¹⁷ It would take a return of inspiration and revelation to overcome this decay.

Occasionally, the Harmonialists would engage with the long-standing Christian fear that delusion might be mistaken for genuine revelation, making direct religious experience suspect and dangerous, particularly with regards to artificially induced revelations. For example, Fishbough quoted the warning in Jeremiah 29:8-9 against trusting prophetic dreams and diviners. This passage, Fishbough wrote, “advises that no one should pry, with undue curiosity, into the secrets of the future, or into the mysteries of the unseen world, and especially teaches us to abstain from all artificial, methods to force interior impressions from that spiritual or divine Source of intelligence which may see it best to withhold the

¹¹⁵ Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 139-41, 174-77.

¹¹⁶ Fishbough, “Dream-Life Among the Ancients,” 222, 224.

¹¹⁷ William Fishbough, “Spiritualism Among the Saints and Martyrs,” *Shekinah Papers*, vol. 3, 283-84.

information sought for; and the penalty impliedly annexed to a transgression of this rule is the extreme liability of being misled.” Indeed, he continued, taking a swipe at the more superficial elements in the Spiritualist movement, “If this rule were more generally observed by dreamers, clairvoyants, and ‘mediums’ of our own day, no doubt many unfortunate interior delusions would be avoided.” Rather than strive too hard for revelations, these individuals ought to “purify, harmonize, and religiously elevate all their affections, aspirations, and thoughts, and then to await passively and unanxiously the ‘movings of the spirit.’” Such interior impressions would be of higher quality and would be “eminently demonstrative of an over-ruling, angelic, and divine intelligence, constantly advancing the individual and the race toward a more celestial and beatific life.”¹¹⁸

Reconceptualizing visionary experience as an innate feature of human psychology, with shared “general psychical features,” made various revelations conceptually equivalent and subject to the same standard of judgment. Christian revelations could no longer be seen as a class apart from heathen delusions; in all cases, the source was the same, though modified in its expression by historical conditions and the particularities of the prophet. For instance, Fishbough explained, that the supernatural experiences and revelations of Mohammed did not have to be seen as “a designed imposture, as known psychological facts and laws show the possibility of these scenes being actually represented to his mind while in an interior or transic state.” Taking into account “his peculiar mental susceptibilities” and “his seclusion from the world and his profound meditations,” it was very probable, in Fishbough’s opinion, that the prophet had genuinely experienced the things he claimed and that his “spiritual teachings,” though “mingled with crudities,” were “not destitute of *some* important truth.”¹¹⁹ Thus, Fishbough’s “psychological facts” both legitimized Mohammed’s revelations, but also qualified them by making their quality contingent on circumstances.

This psychological model of revelation carried significant explanatory power. It dispensed with the necessity of dismissing the manifold claims to direct spiritual experience around the world as a deliberate deception as many eighteenth-century Deists or Christian polemicists had done. Rather than engage with the imposture theory, which was difficult to prove and might not satisfactorily explain all prophets, a psychological explanation for direct

¹¹⁸ Fishbough, “Dream-Life Among the Ancients,” 234-35.

¹¹⁹ Fishbough, “Psychology: Its Present State and Teachings,” 68.

inspiration allowed for various revelations to be treated as legitimate without necessitating acceptance of the entire revelation as the word of God. All people had the innate capacity to receive direct inspiration of spiritual truths, but no one could do so perfectly. Thus, the aspects of the revelations that accorded with Reason, as construed by the Harmonialists, were universal truths, while anything seemingly fantastical, barbarous, or supernatural could be waved aside as being the product of local conditions or the mental constitution of the prophet.

Spirit Communication

While initially not emphasized as heavily as with the mass Spiritualist movement, the Harmonialists accepted as real the possibility of spirit communication and saw it as a source of revelation which had operated throughout time. The belief that the “angels” communicated with the natural world fit well with the Swedenborgian sympathies of many Harmonialists, such as Harris and Fernald.¹²⁰ “The power of departed spirits to influence mankind,” Brittan wrote in the *Shekinah*, “—to infuse their thoughts into the human soul, or to present themselves in the forms which characterized their earthly existence—is everywhere recognized, Christ and his Apostles, as well as the Seers and Prophets of all ages and countries, entertained this idea.”¹²¹

William Fishbough similarly sought “to prove that the alleged spiritual occurrences of our own day are neither new nor incredible.” Such “intercourse with a source of intelligence superior to man was known, according to accredited histories and traditions, among the most ancient inhabitants of the earth,” the report summarized. The ability to commune with spirits, Fishbough informed his listeners “was applicable to our first parents in the garden of Eden, and to different individuals in subsequent times down to the general deluge.” From the “subsequent heathens there gradually arose a sacerdotal order, called the Magi, who, together with many isolated individuals in more private life, enjoyed communion with the invisible world by means of dreams, visions, clairvoyance, etc.” Showing an interest in what might be referred to as shamanic practices, Fishbough alluded to “the art of closing up the outer and

¹²⁰ Belief in the influence of and communication from the angels was standard among Swedenborgians, though the New Church was divided on whether or not it was advisable to solicit such experiences through Mesmerism due to the possibility of demonic trickery. Gabay, *Covert Enlightenment*, 245-46.

¹²¹ Brittan, “Spiritualism: Its Nature and Mission,” 7.

developing the inner senses by means of narcotic potions, unguents, fumigations, and magnetic manipulations. It has been ascertained that these arts were among the pagan mysteries.” Among the many others who affirmed the possibility of spirit communication, Fishbough noted that Confucius, Pythagoras, Plato, Zenocrates, Empedocles, Ocellus, and Socrates all professed such a doctrine, with the latter even claiming “to be personally and sensibly under the constant guidance of such a monitor.”¹²² Similarly, the *Shekinah* reprinted a short account of the “singular Asiatic tribe known as the Yezidees, or ‘devil worshipers.’” The traveller, writing to the *New York Tribune*, observed a “‘man in black’ who holds direct communication between Sheikh Nasir, the religious head of the Yezidees, and his Satanic Majesty.” From this interaction, he deduced, “The doctrine of Spirit-rappings is not so new as some of you Americans suppose.”¹²³

As would come to define Spiritualist exegesis more broadly, Fishbough also cited many examples of supposed spirit communion and angelic intervention in both the Old and New Testaments. Furthermore, he noted, in an attack on cessationism, that “the proof of the cessation of the spiritual communion... was certainly not to be found in the New Testament. It rather intimated a continuance of the same, or similar spiritual gifts to those which were enjoyed by the first disciples.”¹²⁴ As Fishbough argued in another article, “the assumption which limits the open manifestation of spiritual influences to the age of the apostles is not only totally unauthorized by any sayings in the New Testament, but contradicted by the plain implications of several declarations of Jesus, who mentioned the power of casting out devils, of speaking with new tongues, of healing the sick, and of handling deleterious things without harm, as among the signs of true believers, *without reference to the age* of the world in which they might live.”¹²⁵

Beyond the Bible, Fishbough listed an eclectic array of figures, including Martin Luther, Joan of Arc, Paracelsus, Dr. John Dee, George Fox, the French Prophets, the Shakers, and the Phelps family in Stratford, Connecticut—whose haunting Davis had personally investigated—as evidence of the ongoing nature of spiritual experiences. Of a haunting in

¹²² “Spiritual Manifestations, in Former Ages and Different Nations,” *The Shekinah Papers*, vol. 2 (New York: Partridge & Brittan, 1855), 189-90.

¹²³ “Spiritualism Among the Yezidees,” *Shekinah Papers*, vol. 2, 298.

¹²⁴ “Spiritual Manifestations, in Former Ages and Different Nations,” 190-91.

¹²⁵ Fishbough, “Spiritualism Among the Saints and Martyrs,” 283.

seventeenth-century England, Fishbough speculated, “These were probably spiritual phenomena, whose unfolding was favored by some remnants of Oriental magianism, or magic, and of the Druidical mysteries which had filtered down through the ages and grown into their last forms, being practiced by men in the flesh and men out of the flesh.” In any case, intervention from “the lower spiritual spheres” seemed likely, possibly influenced “by a diseased spiritual state of persons in the flesh, and even perhaps by some peculiarities in the surrounding physical, magnetic, or odic elements.”¹²⁶

The works of Böhme, or “Behmen,” he wrote, contained teachings “that spirits and angels were frequently cognizant of, and had influence upon, the affairs of men in this world.” In these, he wrote, “the spiritualistic reader will be pleased to recognize a strong resemblance to many of his own ideas, as received from other quarters.” So long as one could set aside the “crudities” and “errors” and “master the ‘interior sense’ of his writings...they would be as a rich mine of intellectual and spiritual wealth.”¹²⁷ Another contributor to the *Univercælum* similarly noted that “Prophetic dreams are not confined to Scripture history.” Among the non-biblical evidences of spirit communication, he cited the missionary “Brainard [sic]” who described “an Indian priest, who said that he used to have seasons when the Great Spirit appeared and talked with him.” Similarly, the cures described in the Bible were equivalent to mesmeric phenomena. “Animal Magnetism, Mesmerism, Pathetism, &c., have the same spiritual characteristics we recognise in the Bible cures, in a greater or less degree,” he wrote.¹²⁸

Fernald saw, too, evidence for spirit communication in the Bible. Jacob’s ladder, for example, was “a most appropriate representation of our whole subject of spiritual communication. It represents the connection, or intercourse between heaven and earth—the connection of both worlds by means of angelic ministry. Of this cheering fact we have many intimations, both in the Old and New Testaments.” The book of Job contained further evidence that, through dreams and visions, “the superintendence of spirits and angels” could “withdraw man from purposes of error and evil, and turn him into those channels whither he is best fitted and destined to run.” Interpreted through a Spiritualist hermeneutics, the Bible foretold of an “influx or inspiration from the heavenly world—that it is confined to no age or

¹²⁶ “Spiritual Manifestations, in Former Ages and Different Nations,” 192-94.

¹²⁷ William Fishbough, “Jacob Behmen,” *Shekinah Papers*, vol. 3, 56-57.

¹²⁸ H. O. S., “The Character and Extent of Miracles,” 388-89.

people.” Fernald was confident that there would be “extensive realization of this power of spiritual communication with heaven,” universally enjoyed by all. There would come a “future refinement and perfection of the race,” which would be “a general fulfilment, not in any vague, fanatical, or unphilosophic sense, of the prophet’s language in Joel ii: 28,—‘And it shall come to pass afterward, (that is, in the latter days) that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophecy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions.’”¹²⁹

Indeed, citing examples such as Jacob Böhme, Swedenborg, and the Seeress of Prevorst, Fernald argued that such inspiration “*out of the sacred Scriptures,*” the product of the “highest degree of inspiration or enlightenment from the sphere of spiritual being” and “of direct intercourse with that higher sphere,” shared the same origin as “that inspiration enjoyed by many of the writers of the Old and New Testaments.”¹³⁰ The authors of the Bible, “in common with some others of the human race, were inspired not only from the Universal Spirit which flows through all, but from the spiritual world which surrounds this...by dream and vision in hours of sleep, and by conscious communication in a wakeful state.”¹³¹ Writing in the *Spirit Messenger and Harmonial Advocate* in 1852, he went a step further and linked spiritual communication to the authorship of the world’s major scriptures: “Absolute communication, either with the Deity in person, or with his angels, has characterized the pretensions of all who have been most distinguished for their religious teachings, as may be seen by referring to the sacred books of all nations: as, for instance, the Shaster of the Hindoos, the Zend Avesta of the Persians, the Koran of Mohammed, and the Bible of the Jews and Christians.”¹³²

¹²⁹ W. M. Fernald, “View of the Bible. Number One,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 3, no. 13 (Feb. 24, 1849): 227.

¹³⁰ W. M. Fernald, “View of the Bible. Number Four,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 3, no. 16 (Mar. 17, 1849): 241.

¹³¹ W. M. Fernald, “View of the Bible. Number Six,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 3, no. 18 (Mar. 31, 1849): 276.

¹³² W. M. Fernald, “Connection of the Natural and Spiritual Worlds,” *Spirit Messenger and Harmonial Advocate* 1, no. 6 (Nov. 20, 1852): 82.

The Role of Scriptures

Of central importance to the Harmonialist project was the reinterpretation of the role and meaning of scripture. As we have seen, the Harmonialists, in advocating for the mesmeric and clairvoyant revelations of Andrew Jackson Davis, took a non-exclusive and ongoing view of revelation. As such, the Bible, and other scriptural texts, understood to be the “bibles” of their respective religions, could not claim to be exclusive and authoritative. While occasionally the Harmonialists would show an interest in native American religious traditions—and even more rarely, African—the Christian model of having a “bible” was taken for granted. What they challenged instead was the notion that any one text—Davis’ *Principles of Nature* included—could provide a complete and infallible revelation of God’s will. Employing a popularized understanding of contemporary philology and history, they were willing to read sacred scriptures in their historical context and consider the history of such texts as texts.

Scriptural Authority

W. M. Fernald helped establish the principle that Davis’ revelations belonged in the same category as the Christian Bible in the very first issue of the *Univercælum*. Speaking of the *Principles of Nature*, Fernald affirmed that “in the mysterious Book which is now presented to the world, we find that which is justly entitled to the name—‘Revelations.’ It is, at least, as much of a revelation as any which the world has ever received.” In the spirit of democracy, people must have the ability to decide for themselves what texts were worthy of their regard and which were not. The early Christian councils who determined the canon “rejected any quantity of manuscripts by *their* judgements,” Fernald reasoned, so “why may not we take the same liberty with those that are left? Or, if uninspired authority is sufficient to decide what *is* inspiration, then I say, uninspired authority is sufficient to decide what is *not!*” Thus, some of the Apocrypha that such councils discarded as untrue could very well contain truth. In any case, theologians and clergymen were no more qualified to make such a judgment than anyone else. Fernald quipped, “It is acknowledged by many very learned theologians that they made *some* mistakes—they might have made more. This is a question, I say, that has

never been satisfactorily answered, *and never can be*. A child can appreciate it, and—only a theologian will dispute it!”¹³³ In the same vein, Apollos Munn wondered in the pages of the *Spirit Messenger* why ecclesiastical authorities did not include the apocryphal gospels in a comprehensive volume and “trust the people to judge for themselves, with the *whole* evidence before them?”¹³⁴

W. S. Courtney, in a 1853 contribution to the *Shekinah*, made the democratic right to judge scripture for one’s self explicit. “Protestantism,” as Courtney conceived of it, “is the inherent right of each individual to freely pursue the dictates of his own conscience.” Thus, he argued, “each individual has a heaven-descended right to read the Scriptures, (any Scriptures), understand them, and do them for himself, provided he awards the like right to others.” This, he believed, was an “inalienable right” and the essence of what was meant by “*religious liberty*.” In no uncertain terms, he affirmed, “A democrat, to be a true democrat, must be at the same time a Protestant, and a Protestant, to be a true Protestant, must at the same time be a democrat.” Impartial Reason would, as usual, arrive at the truth. If true, Scripture would survive the test of Reason and its advocates should not fear investigation.¹³⁵

With echoes of the broader American belief in the possibility of “common sense” readings of the Bible,¹³⁶ Courtney questioned the argument that Scripture was beyond ordinary human understanding. “If you say, that it is superhuman, and above my comprehension, then I answer, that neither you nor I can understand it. It is out of our reach, and might as well not exist.” The Bible was instead subject to the same laws as anything else. It followed the doctrine of correspondence, as Swedenborg would have it, but no more so than any other book or facet of nature, which was a divine revelation in and of itself:

If you say, it is ‘inspired’ in the sense you affirm it to be, then I reply, *you* must also be inspired in like manner to be able to read and understand it, and why not be inspired directly and at once? If you say its origin was superhuman and divine, but that it is readable and understandable by the light of reason, so I say the same of all books, and men, and nature. If you say, that it has an ‘internal sense’ and spirit beyond the latter, so I say the same of *all things* but God. If you say, it bears with it *intrinsic* evidence of its divine origin and inspiration, so I say do *all things*, and I am

¹³³ Fernald, “The Necessity for New and Higher Revelations, Inspirations, or Forms of Truth, for the Benefit of Mankind at the Present Day,” 2, 4.

¹³⁴ Munn, “The Character of Miracles,” 20.

¹³⁵ W. S. Courtney, “Issues of Protestantism and Democracy,” *Shekinah Papers*, vol. 3, 274.

¹³⁶ The classic example is the Restorationist leader Alexander Campbell, who endeavoured “to read the scriptures as though no one had read them before me.” Hatch, *Democratization*, 179-83.

unable to see any plainer marks of the Divinity there than in nature or in my own soul—and so forth.¹³⁷

Rejecting the Puritan and evangelical view of those, like Cotton Mather or Jonathan Edwards, who believed in the necessity of conversion to understand the spiritual sense of Scripture, or that of Swedenborg, who claimed the privilege of special illumination, Courtney asked why anyone so inspired would need the mediation of a text at all.¹³⁸ Optimistic about the potential of common sense to distill truth from error, Courtney affirmed that “under the operation of the Protestant formula, it will be ‘sifted as wheat,’ and all that is *true* of it preserved immortally, and all that is fantastic perish evermore.”¹³⁹ The individual conscience of Protestantism, taken to its furthest extremes, was destined to destroy even *sola scriptura* itself.¹⁴⁰

Tied to the process of “sifting” the Bible was an understanding that its contents belonged to a historical context. In a similar fashion to Davis, W. M. Fernald treated the more seemingly outlandish aspects of the Bible as reflections of established natural laws or as reflecting the historical conventions of the time. For instance, the dreams of Josph, the Pharaoh, and Nebuchadnezzar, he wrote, “were undoubtably divine, and we have no reason, from the antiquity of the record, or doubtfulness of their authenticity, to distrust their actual occurrence in accordance with well known psychological laws.” Other times, linguistics provided an explanation, such as when the Bible “said that the *Lord* spake to Abram.” In an argument familiar from Davis, Fernald explained that this was a “common method of speech among the ancients, to represent any divine impulse with which they found themselves moved. Sometimes they were ‘moved of God,’ sometimes ‘by the spirit,’ sometimes ‘the Lord spake,’ and sometimes ‘the angel of the Lord,’ all of which are used interchangeably,

¹³⁷ Courtney, “Issues of Protestantism and Democracy,” 279.

¹³⁸ For a discussion of New England exegesis, see Ryan P. Hoselton, “‘Flesh and Blood Hath Not Revealed It’: Reformation Exegetical Legacies in Pietism and Early Evangelicalism,” in *Multiple Reformations? The Many Faces and Legacies of the Reformation*, eds. Jan Stievermann and Randall C. Zachman (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 325-41; On Swedenborg, see Gabay, *Covert Enlightenment*, 6, passim.

¹³⁹ Courtney, “Issues of Protestantism and Democracy,” 279.

¹⁴⁰ Much more disapprovingly, the Transcendentalist-turned-Catholic Orestes Brownson came to similar conclusions in 1846 with his article “Protestantism ends in Transcendentalism.” The inevitable outcome of their dissent from the Catholic Church’s authority in favour of “private judgment” was that everyone had the unrestricted ability to decide on the validity of all religious truth. Protestantism, so extended, Brownson argued, was like the spiritual equivalent of “Lynch law.” Orestes Brownson, “Protestantism ends in Transcendentalism,” *Brownson’s Quarterly Review*, vol. 3 (Boston: Benjamin H. Greene, 1846): 377-80.

and mean one and the same thing.”¹⁴¹ Thoroughly historicizing the Bible, passages that seemed at odds with Reason could be explained by the linguistic conventions of the time.

Given its numerous contradictions, Fernald also questioned the premise that the Bible could be taken as a coherent whole. The “the whole idea of the unity of the Bible, as the product of one Mind, or of many minds agreeing designedly in one object, and guided by Deity,” was “the first and most prominent error in regard to the Bible” and “the most bewildering.” Borrowing from the doctrines of Swedenborg, Fernald believed that the Bible’s various prophets, such as Moses and David, were inspired by divine influx to varying degrees, and that worthy teachings might be found in their writings; however, a reader needed to treat the text as a historical document and “make allowances for their errors, for the different circumstances under which they wrote, for the different ages of the world, and for the different mental constitutions of the writers.”¹⁴²

The Bible, Fernald concluded in another article in the same series, “emanated from a nation representing in a peculiar manner the religious element of mankind.” “Mixed with baser matter,” it nonetheless contained “some of the highest principles of natural and revealed religion, (both are natural,) the loftiest devotion, the sublimest poetry, the truest prophecy, the purest principles of morality and wisdom, . . . and the noblest aspirations for the welfare and prosperity of the human race. It also contains the life and character of the noblest pattern of humanity [Jesus] who ever graced this favored planet.”¹⁴³ It was thus a product of its place and time, but still had value as an expression of the universal religious essence in humanity, so long as one separated the externals from the its pure teachings, particularly those of Jesus.

Indeed, Fernald believed, there ought to be “a selection by made of the Old and New Testament Scriptures, preserving the truly worthy, and spiritual, and historical, and pure; and rejecting the impure, the doubtful, and the erroneous.” Such an edited Bible would be a “quarter of the size of our present volume, would be of invaluable service to humanity.”¹⁴⁴ As he later wrote in the *Spirit Messenger*, “Those principles in the Bible which are fixed, and unalterable, and unimprovable, are those which are grounded in Nature and in the laws of the

¹⁴¹ W. M. Fernald, “View of the Bible. Number Three,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 3, no. 15 (Mar. 10, 1849): 226.

¹⁴² Fernald, “View of the Bible. Number One,” 195-96.

¹⁴³ Fernald, “View of the Bible. Number Six,” 276.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 276.

human soul.”¹⁴⁵ As R. P. Ambler succinctly put it in 1852: “Truth is infinite. It cannot be embraced within the narrow limit of any book or books.”¹⁴⁶ Treating the Bible as authoritative, Fernald argued, had been responsible for wars, bloodshed, and sectarianism. Were it not for exclusionary views of the Bible, different people “would not have that cause for difference. Each would be left to the formation of his own opinions, and having no external standard of infallible authority, they would appeal to their own souls and to the inspirations of universal Nature, leaving others to do the same, and brotherly and Christian love would spring up as a necessary consequence.”¹⁴⁷ Having an authoritative scriptural text hampered an individual’s ability to arrive at truth through his own interior sense.

The Open Canon

With revelation forever ongoing, the canon was not, and never could be, closed; anything true according to the dictates of Reason had its place. The Harmonialist impulse to push the boundaries of the biblical canon was in good company in nineteenth-century America, as David Holland has documented in cases such as the Shakers, Mormons, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Transcendentalists.¹⁴⁸ In the first issue of the *Univercælum*, William Fishbough challenged the sufficiency of the biblical canon. “The *collections* of books considered as ‘revelations,’” he argued, “that have been made in various ages, are based upon human authority alone, and that of rather questionable character, and should be open to *reconsideration*.” As with any other claims to truth, interior reason had to be the standard by which a scriptural text was judged. While still holding the Bible in higher regard than other scriptures, Fishbough nonetheless held it to the same standards of “our *internal convictions*.” Truth ought to be accepted, he wrote, “whether it is found in the Shaster, the Zend-Avesta, the Koran or the Bible,” and “whatever we find in either of those books to which reason cannot assent, should be disregarded.” Following the same Harmonialist logic of religion, wherein the true spiritual essence expressed itself in progressive forms, Fishbough explained that

¹⁴⁵ Fernald, “The Christianity of the Universe,” 81.

¹⁴⁶ Ambler, “Revelation,” 41.

¹⁴⁷ Fernald, “View of the Bible. Number Six,” 275.

¹⁴⁸ David F. Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 127-208.

“Each of these books contains some, and the Bible much, true revelation: each contains matter not deserving the name of revelation, and which is of no particular importance to the present age. There is also much true revelation now extant that has never been embodied in either of these books.”¹⁴⁹ It was new revelations like those of Davis that Fishbough believed gave a modern articulation to eternal spiritual truths.

Speaking to the arbitrariness of the Christian canon, Fishbough historicized its selection in the same manner as Davis. The bishops who had established the biblical canon, Fishbough wrote, had “relied upon the resources of their own reason, (perhaps we should rather say caprice,) in deciding which books were divine, and which were not.” Given that, he argued, it was “positively incumbent on us in this *more enlightened* age, to consult *our* own reason as to whether the collection they in their ignorance and fanaticism have made, is in all respects a true and useful one.” Each person needed to use his “best and purest reason in judging of *every* thing written in the Bible” in order to overcome “superstition, fanaticism, and sectarian intolerance.”¹⁵⁰

The literary section of the *Univercælum*—beyond acting as a feature to entice readers—reinforced the message of an open canon and ongoing revelation, not to mention its resonance with Romantic notions of true poetry as revelation. For instance, one of the later issues reprinted a poem from the New England Romantic poet James Russell Lowell entitled “Bibliolaters.” The verses scolded the Christian for “Bowing thyself in dust before a Book, / And thinking the great God is thine alone.” Such an individual was like a “blind, unconverted Jew” who sought to “make a jail to coop the living God.” Lowell was confident that “God is not dumb that he should speak no more.” Affirming a progressive and universal view of revelation, he wrote, “Slowly the Bible of the Race is writ, / And not on paper leaves nor leaves of stone; / Each age, each kindred adds a verse to it.”¹⁵¹ The lines forcefully suggested that true religion was grounded in an individual’s direct and interior connection to the divine. As such, it was ongoing and transcended the static pages of the written word.

Nor was the Lowell poem the only comparison to idolatry made in Harmonialist periodicals. One Wisconsin writer to the *Spirit Messenger* observed that “this is decidedly an

¹⁴⁹ Fishbough, “Revelation—The Bible,” 12.

¹⁵⁰ William Fishbough, “The Bible,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 4, no. 3 (Jun. 16, 1849): 43.

¹⁵¹ James Russell Lowell, “Bibliolaters,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 4, no. 4 (Jun. 23, 1849): 76.

age of idolatry.” Such idolators, he complained, “crucified *reason*, the true saviour, and with a blind devotion, superstitious fear, and constrained belief in the Christian Bible, . . . to which they pay their devotions in the same manner as do the heathen to images of wood and stone.” Rather than trust to interior wisdom, they made the Bible “the test by which the truth of every development of science must be tried.” They would “reject every truth unfolded by God's true volume, the book of nature, unless they can see it confirmed by the language of the image of their hearts.” Despite the idolatrous worship Christians bestowed on it, it was not essentially different from other scriptures. “That the Bible contains some truths no one can deny; that it teaches many good lessons, none will deny; so does the Koran—so does the Zend Avesta; but in neither case does this render them worthy of the entire confidence of the human mind.” Whatever truths it may have, he wrote, “a truth is no better nor more worthy in the Bible than in any other book; and if we scrutinize closely, we shall find very few truths of importance to man's happiness and destiny originating in the Bible.” While, he conceded, “it has some historic truths . . . [and] some good and worthy moral precepts and teachings—so does the Koran, the Mormon Bible, and many other books on which a blind devotion rests.” This did not, however, mean that “they, or any of them, should be made an idol and receive the daily homage of the human heart.” Lamentably, “The truth is, *the book* is the idol of the heart of all Christian sects and denominations.” Yet, he affirmed “the time shall come . . . that every intelligent mind shall abandon the worship of idols, and take reason for a guide, then will the truths in the Bible, the truths of nature, the truths of science, all combine and form a harmonious book, which will teach wisdom, and make harmony and happiness in the social and religious departments of society.”¹⁵²

Joshua K. Ingalls, writing in the *Univercælum*, noted that many of the best teachings in the Bible had been articulated before. He assured readers that “no blight comes over the faith” from the observation that the ancients possessed “some things approaching the doctrines of virtue and immortality as unfolded in the New Testament.” Socrates, as well as others before him, for example, had articulated the Golden Rule, and “gloomings of the hope of future life in the earliest ages” had later been “asserted with more distinctness by Xenophon and Plato.” Eternal spiritual truths were always present to be discovered, but merely assumed a fuller expression with the course of history. The Bible was simply another

¹⁵² W. C., “Idolatry,” *Spirit Messenger* 1, no. 7 (Sep. 21, 1850): 53.

stage in this progressive articulation of unchanging truth. The universality of revelation, Ingalls felt, was “no disparagement to Jesus, because we believe that ‘all things are of God,’ and that it is to him our thanksgivings are due.”¹⁵³ Despite Ingalls’ desire to not disparage Jesus or the Bible, his presentation of it as one expression of underlying religious truth among many was a direct challenge to Christian claims that it was a special revelation from God. Identifying true religion and ethics with natural law made it impossible for anyone, even Jesus, to reveal anything truly new; Jesus could only express them in a way that his age could understand. As W. M. Fernald wrote, “the *germs* or *principles* of all truths are implanted naturally in nearly every human mind.... Even Christ revealed no new *principle*, of morals or religion. Most, if not all, even of his *precepts* can be discovered among the heathen philosophers.”¹⁵⁴

The Bible itself, Ingalls argued, did not support the notion that it was closed. After all, the various books were written by different prophets, widely accepted to contain different levels of inspiration. “There is no intimation that the five books of Moses were *sufficient*; and that the Lord having spoken *once*, had debarred himself the privilege of ever speaking to his children more,” he wrote. “It was not regarded blasphemy, that I know of, for Joshua to claim the gift of *inspiration*, or Samuel, or David, or Isaiah, or Malachi.” Whatever claim to scriptural exclusivity the Old Testament had, he continued, was in fact used against Jesus and the disciples, thus seriously calling the principle of “sufficiency of revelation” into question. No one questioned the premise “that different writers of the sacred volume enjoyed different degrees of light,” Ingalls argued. This could be accounted for on the grounds that either God dealt out his gifts with an uneven hand or that certain individuals “were more or less developed in their spiritual, moral and intellectual capacity.” If the latter were true, Ingalls wrote, “then he is just as ready to impart the different degrees of light to you, to me, and every human being, when we attain the same eminence, *and will do it*.”¹⁵⁵

Indeed, he continued, “I am ready to go farther, and assert my most earnest faith, that whenever the human mind, advances to the same plane of thought and action upon which Jesus stood, it will associate with the same sublime truths, and exert the same wondrous

¹⁵³ J. K. Ingalls, “The Divine Gifts Impartial and Immutable,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 1, no. 14 (Mar. 4, 1848): 209.

¹⁵⁴ Fernald, “The Necessity for New and Higher Revelations, Inspirations, or Forms of Truth, for the Benefit of Mankind at the Present Day,” 1.

¹⁵⁵ Ingalls, “The Divine Gifts Impartial and Immutable,” 211.

powers.” A reliance on scripture at the expense of direct inspiration had served to undermine true religion. Indeed, “the moment inspiration was attached to the ‘letter,’ and denied to the human mind, the corruptions of Christianity began,” Ingalls wrote. “Man lost communion with God, or only held it through mediation of a priesthood, and thus was laid the foundation of all that despotic tyranny, those monstrous special claims which arrayed the Christian world in the most degrading and corrupting superstition.”¹⁵⁶ Whatever divine truths the Bible may contain, it was still an external source of authority and could not act as a substitute for direct and ongoing revelation, the true practice of religion being the individual appropriation of natural moral law into one’s life. With a marked optimism about the potential of human development, Ingalls not only believed that all humans would become Christ-like through this self-culture, but that becoming Christ-like would also bring “wondrous powers” like those of Jesus.

The Bibles of the World

Given the shared spiritual origin of different scriptures, they all had value, though none was complete in of itself. In the *Spirit Messenger* Fernald explained, “Many nations have had their Bibles, and they have contained much truth of a spiritual nature. The Koran of Mohammed, the Shaster of the Hindoos, the Zend Avesta of the Medes and Persians, no less than the Bible of the Jews and Christians...have each, while accomplishing much good in sustaining the spiritual life and preserving a certain authority for highest things, at the same time contracted within unnatural limits the conceptions of the Great Eternal Cause.”¹⁵⁷ Ambler, too, cautioned against an exclusive view of the Bible, arguing, “Let not mortals, then, look upon any book which has been produced on earth and say it is infallible.” Revelation could be found everywhere and proceeded in tandem with spiritual development. New revelations, he wrote, “will be always given as they have been given in the past—in fragments, being furnished to the world as is required by the real wants of every age, and increasing as these wants enlarge and deepen.”¹⁵⁸ Value might be found in various “bibles,” but no one of them could act as a sufficient revelation alone.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 211.

¹⁵⁷ Fernald, “The Christianity of the Universe,” 81.

¹⁵⁸ Ambler, “Revelation,” 41.

Others like S. J. Finney went further and questioned the value of scripture entirely. He asked in a trance lecture, reprinted in the *Spirit Messenger and Harmonial Advocate*, where God's natural laws might be found. "Shall we find it in the Avesta or in Swedenborg? Shall we find it in the Alkoran of Mahomet, in the Bible of the Christian, or in the mummery of the Catholic Church? No, certainly, in none of these, and among them all it is in vain to look." God, he proclaimed, "does not leave his revelations to be mutilated by changes in language, and to be subject to human councils, human authority, and consequently to human error. No, his book of laws is written in the language of universal nature; in language which all men can read, which is native to the soul itself and which needs no priest to explain it. Ay, each man is a book of law to himself."¹⁵⁹ More radical than simply affirming value in all scripture, Finney emphasized the individual need for direct experience of the divine.

Fernald also questioned the borders of what qualified as a suitable subject of revelation. While "all the great and noble souls who have ever lived—Socrates, Plato, Zoroaster, Jesus, Paul, John, George Fox, Swedenborg, and a countless host of moral and intellectual men...drank inspiration from the upper world"¹⁶⁰ and gave the world high spiritual ideas, inspiration could "be of a moral, religious, or intellectual character. It may be even purely of a scientific nature." Indeed, Fernald argued, "there can be no doubt, that many discoveries in art and science, have owed their origin to impressions and suggestions from the spiritual world...It was left for *theologians* to confine all inspiration to moral and religious subjects."¹⁶¹ Inspiration was not only universally available to all (sufficiently developed) individuals, but could not be limited to narrow categories. Works of science and art could, too, be as inspired as religious scriptures.

Correspondence

While the Harmonialists were frequent in their praise of Swedenborg, they generally did not share his same reverence for the Bible nor accept his exegetical approach in its entirety. In a comparison between Andrew Jackson Davis and Swedenborg's respective approach to the Bible, W. M. Fernald described Swedenborg's view that "the sacred Scriptures...were written

¹⁵⁹ Finney, "The Day of Judgment," 178-79.

¹⁶⁰ Fernald, "View of the Bible. Number Two," 210.

¹⁶¹ Fernald, "View of the Bible. Number Three," 226.

in a language framed according to a law of *correspondence between things natural and things spiritual*, by which an interior meaning, differing entirely from the exterior, or mere letter of the word, was invariably the true and most important sense.” Fernald conceded that in doing so Swedenborg had “vast discoveries in this matter, rescuing the sacred writings from numberless absurdities which appear only in the letter, and investing them with a high spiritual, internal significancy and meaning.” Nonetheless, he was quick to add, “such an admission does not invest the writings of the Bible with a meaning and importance above all others exclusively. This correspondence between things spiritual and material, is *natural*—is founded only in *Nature*.”¹⁶² As such, the Bible could contain great spiritual truths represented through correspondence, but they were not exclusive to the Bible itself; they derived rather from Nature.

Fernald further felt the need to reconcile Davis’ inconsistent position on the Bible, with regards to Swedenborg, in the *Principles of Nature*, in which he, in different places, claimed that there were correspondences in the Bible and denied such a possibility. To critics such as Professor George Bush, Fernald explained away the contradiction by stating that Davis meant that symbolic language, that is the words of the Bible, did not contain correspondences because it was “artificial.” All things in Nature, however, did contain them. Thus, the objects represented in the Bible could be read as having correspondences, but not the words for them. Fernald readily conceded that Davis, uneducated and unpolished as he was, had been unclear on this point and should have used more precise language to draw out the distinction.¹⁶³

Whatever criticisms he might have made of the *Principles of Nature*, however, Fernald was not shy about his enthusiasm for Davis’ revelations, noting in the *Spirit Messenger*, that regardless of the ridicule he had received on account of his endorsement of it, “It is still the *Book of books*...[and] the only complete salvation.” While, he was quick to add, he did not intend to “depreciate” other books, “this book, in *principle*, and in *unity*, *harmony*, and *universality of thought*, takes the pre-eminence of all others...God speed this best of books. It should be bound in gold, and read in all the churches.”¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Fernald, “Swedenborg and Davis,” 81, 84.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 82-83.

¹⁶⁴ W. M. Fernald, “Nature’s Divine Revelations,” *Spirit Messenger* 1, no. 6 (Sep. 14, 1850): 46.

On the whole, Fernald wrote, “The Bible remains, an inspired book, or rather collection of books, but not a unity in perfection. It is filled with high and towering conceptions...[and has] a real and internal meaning which does not appear to the superficial observer.” As such, it “has the highest morality, and the most spiritual religion, exemplified in...Jesus Christ, but does not, and cannot by reason of its separate books, published hundreds and thousands of years apart, and with no idea of their ever being bound into one, as an infallible, outward authority, command our homage in the usual Church style.”¹⁶⁵ Fernald later affirmed in a series of articles on the Bible that “there *is a law*” informing the interior sense of the Bible, though it was not “universally or even uniformly written in this style.” Nonetheless, “the Scriptures were *many times* written in precise and philosophic accordance with this law.” However, Fernald would not grant that “even *knowing* the law, we could arrive at correct conclusions in all the *particulars* of a prophetic historic account; or even that Jesus and the apostles were capable of always arriving at the truth in this matter.” As for Swedenborg, Fernald had “no doubt that he did perceive many [hidden relations in the Bible], and that truly, but whether his inspiration was such as to perceive all, or to keep him from much error and fanciful interpretation” was much more questionable.¹⁶⁶

Nor was the Bible the only text to be written in such a fashion. As Fernald explained, “this style of writing was known and practised among profane writers of the most remote antiquity. There can be no doubt that the fables of antiquity, in their otherwise apparently monstrous construction, were framed upon this principle.” In the same way that a correspondence-based reading of the Bible could be used to redeem some of the grosser aspects of the Bible, heathen superstition too could be salvaged. For example, rejecting a Euhemerist reading, Fernald noted that “the heathen deities in general were not originally simply deified men, who had signalized themselves by deeds of power and beneficence, but were distinct ideas of the One Infinite God.” The “several idols were not worshipped as gods in themselves,...but only as so many different perfections or attributes in the One Divine Being.” In a variation of the twofold philosophy, he concluded that “the worshipping of idols as themselves gods was only an after innovation of the more ignorant vulgar.” Given that writing with correspondence was prevalent in the ancient world, one would expect to find it

¹⁶⁵ Fernald, “Swedenborg and Davis,” 84.

¹⁶⁶ W. M. Fernald, “View of the Bible. Number Five,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 3, no. 17 (Mar. 24, 1849): 257, 259.

in both the Bible and heathen texts. Thus, he observed, “we have no reason to believe that there is a hidden, interior meaning beneath the letter, in these writings of the ancient Scriptures, in any different sense, or by any different principle, than that which was known and practiced by the heathen writers before referred to.” Fernald accepted that there was “a meaning purely spiritual hidden under cover of natural images,” prevailing “very extensively” in the Bible, and that “the law by which this style of writing is framed” had “its foundation in Nature.” Nonetheless, this did not make the Bible unique. “But the question is,” he wrote, “—Is it any different from that which has prevailed with other writers, especially in remote antiquity? And we answer, no. Another question is—Is there any proof that the Scriptures were *universally* written in this style? And we answer again, no.”¹⁶⁷

The Church of Humanity

As seen in the previous chapter, Andrew Jackson Davis argued for the existence of a “law of progression,” which governed evolution, the ascension of matter to ever higher forms, and the advancement of society and its productions more generally, religion included. While the Harmonialists generally did not elaborate on the specific evolutionary or geological aspects of progression, they referred frequently to the progressive nature of religion and revelation. Like Davis and many other nineteenth-century reformers, they envisioned a coming utopia where society would exist in harmony and true religion would displace superstitious and external forms. A confluence of scientific discovery, republican government, and free religious inquiry was set to inaugurate an era of peace and millennial happiness. “Never, since the period of the Reformation, has spiritual authority been so questioned, and never have intellectual science and religious inquiry run such courses,” W. M. Fernald boasted in the *Univercœlum*.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 260-61.

¹⁶⁸ Fernald, “The Necessity for New and Higher Revelations, Inspirations, or Forms of Truth, for the Benefit of Mankind at the Present Day,” 1.

Religious Evolution

The Harmonialist approach to history and the development of religion followed the broader nineteenth-century tendency to view history as linear and progressive. As such, while true religion existed in the revelations of all nations throughout time, these were by no means equal and represented different stages of individual and cultural development. Truly religious individuals and great prophets saw spiritual truth more clearly than their fellows. “Primitive” peoples may have possessed a degree of true religion, but the Harmonialists generally considered it to be at a less developed stage than more “civilized” societies. Consistent with nineteenth-century narratives of historical progress, religion reflected the degree to which a civilization had advanced. While the true essence of religion was eternal and accessible by all, it did not manifest itself all at once. Rather, it was progressively revealed and built upon the advances of the past. While the priests of different religions may try to stop its advance, the gradual establishment of the true and natural religion was ever onward and upward.

With a historicism that privileged eternal progress, the Harmonialists saw newer and higher religions as supplanting more primitive forms. Writing in the *Univercælum*, William Fishbough observed, “the Church now existing is one of the natural stratifications in the great mental geology of the world, having its granite base in the lowest forms of original Heathenism, upon which base, as containing a *germ* of truth, all subsequent forms of religion have been progressively unfolded.”¹⁶⁹ Religion was an inherent human quality that corresponded to, and followed the same natural processes as, other aspects of nature, including the geological makeup of the earth itself. J. K. Ingalls explained in an earlier issue that “Like all earthly forms, establishments of religion are subject to constant change;... Thus Judaism is undeveloped Christianity; Calvinism and Arminianism, rudiments from which ultra Universalism is formed.... The error consists in the endeavor to preserve the body embalmed in the affections, after the spirit has fled.”¹⁷⁰

Almost five years later, S. J. Finney delivered a trance lecture in which he declared that “Eighteen hundred years ago, the theology of Moses was succeeded by the purer system which found expression through the mediumship of Jesus Christ.” The Jews, jealous and

¹⁶⁹ William Fishbough, “The Pope—the Church—Reform,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 3, no. 8 (Jan. 20, 1849): 121.

¹⁷⁰ Ingalls, “A Religion of Progress,” 21.

angry with the “the new and glorious principles,” which “were incompatible with their old traditions,” naturally denounced him. Unlike Ingalls, however, Finney did not present Christianity as a direct outgrowth of Judaism, but argued rather that Jesus read “from the inspired Book of Nature—in the lonely desert—the fruitful valley—the solitary forest—on the mountain-top—in the running brook and the mighty river.” Thus, it was through direct experiential and inward religion that Jesus “learned that the Jews were not the chosen and ‘peculiar’ people of God; that the sun shone upon the good and the evil, and the rain fell upon the just and the unjust: and this universal law the Jews denied.” History, as ever, brought corruption as Christians divided into “innumerable sects, each one claim[ing] to have the peculiar truth.” In addition, the sectarians made the Bible infallible and built churches, neither of which, Finney said, Jesus had done. Nonetheless, the truth would ultimately triumph. “[T]he doctrines of Jesus will live while the false creeds which surround them will die.”¹⁷¹

Typical of Davis and others before him like Marsilio Ficino, Fishbough saw such religious progression a line of prophets that included Zoroaster, Abraham, and Moses. Following his discussion of Pantheism and Asian theology, Fishbough chose to focus on “the Median reformer and law-giver,” Zoroaster. Zoroaster, Fishbough explained, took the “materials of former theologies, and from his own independent and profound speculations, constructed a system far more spiritual, and perhaps more consistent, than any which had previously existed.” In much the same way, Abraham’s “mind arose above the gross idolatry of the times, and he conceived of a God possessing a somewhat more spiritual character than the gods generally believed in at that time.” His revelations, which could be explained based on “psychological principles which are now being discovered,” nonetheless still suggested a God who demanded sacrifices and who was therefore “only one degree in advance of the heathen theologies of his times.” Moses progressively improved on Abraham’s teachings and introduced “one of the most just and equitable political constitutions and codes of laws any where in record upon the pages of antiquity.”¹⁷²

Thomas Lake Harris divided the historical development of religion into three distinct phases, which nonetheless retained their representatives in contemporary America. These

¹⁷¹ S. J. Finney, “The Old and the New,” *Spirit Messenger and Harmonial Advocate* 1, no. 9 (Dec. 11, 1852): 136.

¹⁷² Fishbough, “The Theological Conception,” 274-75.

“three great eras of development which mark the history of the race” were the “Barbaric Class,” the “Civilized Class,” and the “Spiritual Class.” Each of these, Harris believed, embodied “opposing influences or tendencies, which struggle for mastery with each other.” Thus, “The tendency resulting from the Barbaric Class is to a physical force government—a social agrarianism—a religious sectarian supernaturalism.” One step higher, “The tendency resulting from the Civilized Class is to oligarchy in government—extreme individualism in society—formalism in religion.” Lastly, “The tendency resulting from the Spiritual Class is to theocracy in government—unity and association in society—and in religion to the absolute, the catholic, the universal.”¹⁷³

W. M. Fernald took a similar view and saw the different religions as constantly evolving expressions of their local circumstances. Thus, he wrote in the *Univercœlum*, the “Jewish dispensation... was truly *representative* [of its time], and in precisely the same way as the vegetable kingdom is representative of the animal!” It was a lower form of religion, but was important insofar as it made up one of the building blocks of the more advanced Christian religion. Bringing in nineteenth-century notions of racial hierarchy, Fernald elaborated:

If one species of plant prefigure another species, and so of animal productions, why not one nation or character of men?... If in the Negro we see the Malayan, and in the Malayan the Mongolian, and in the Mongolian the Caucasian—the *general* physical and mental qualities of the race are thus progressive, and of course representative one of another, who shall say that *particular* qualities or elements may not exist in one nation... which, in an imperfect degree, really typify higher and more intellectual, or more spiritual, as the case may be, qualities in another? And may not this analogy run into the very habits and doings of men? Most certainly, if the principle is universal, for the general includes the particular, and so we may have... even in the *exploits*, and *buildings*, and *particular* persons, and *modes of worship*, and even journeyings, and trials, and a whole host of experiences, something *by Nature* answering to a representative people, all whose history shall be fulfilled in that which is to come!¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Thomas Lake Harris, “The Barbaric Classes in America,” *Univercœlum and Spiritual Philosopher* 2, no. 23 (Nov. 4, 1848): 360.

That theocracy was the highest form of government was perhaps indicative of things to come as Harris later made himself infamous among Spiritualists when—disillusioned with Davis—he co-founded an apocalyptic and highly authoritarian communitarian project at Mountain Cove, western Virginia, in 1851 together with Rev. James L. Scott. Like the two “witnesses” in Revelation, they claimed prophetic authority and the ability to spit flames and turn water into blood. Prominent Spiritualists like Emma Hardinge expressed their consternation at the project and she denounced Harris’ pretensions as “one of the earliest, most prominent and persistent slurs that the white standard of Spiritualism has endured from the hands of its own legionaries.” Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 217; Albanese, *Republic*, 268-70; Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, vol. 1, 204, 295. In an apparent error, Podmore writes J. D. Scott.

¹⁷⁴ Fernald, “View of the Bible. Number Six,” 274.

In the same way Davis had, Fernald linked race to cultural productions and concluded that “higher” races possessed a more advanced culture, including their religion. While the universality of the law of progression meant that all humans were destined to advance infinitely, some were lower and had an, as yet, unrealized potential. Both race and religion contained the germ of their higher expressions. Tying racial and religious evolution together was yet another way in which the Harmonialists tapped into the authority of science and tried to unite it with religion in one comprehensive system of knowledge.

The interior germ of religion was eternal and unchanging, but it was progressively expressed more fully in its various external manifestations. Samuel Brittan explained that “RELIGION has, also, an outward form and an inward life—a body and a soul. The spirit is immortal, but the body, like all external forms, may be decomposed. The same law will be found to control the formation and dissolution of all outward forms in religion.” As such, the “outward forms [of religion] have corresponded in their nature and comparative perfection to the various degrees of spiritual growth and illumination,” which accounted for the many varieties of religious expression. “The spirit of Religion, like the soul of man... can only pervade and animate one body, so long as that body is adapted to its growth and refinement.” In other words, the externals of religion needed to be discarded once the interiors of men had transcended them. The same progressive principle operated in the political arena, Brittan observed, such as the wave of democratic political revolutions that were erupting across Europe as he wrote in 1848.¹⁷⁵ William Fishbough, too, looked at the exile of the Pope from Rome in the wake of the 1848 revolution as a sign that churchly authority was coming undone in the new age.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ S. B. Brittan, “The Church of the Future,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 1, no. 21 (Apr. 22, 1848): 328; Interestingly, some of the German revolutionaries took an interest in Davis’ revelations and translated them into German. See: Daniel Cyranka, “Religious Revolutionaries and Spiritualism in Germany around 1848,” *Aries* 16, no. 1 (2016): 13-48.

¹⁷⁶ Fishbough, “The Pope—the Church—Reform,” 121.

The Universal Religion

As a result of such progress Fernald, writing in 1849, predicted an approaching church that would surpass all existing ones and express universal truth. “There is nothing in the mere word *church*,” he wrote, “which signifies an establishment of any particular character, good or bad, religious or political—the word signifying merely an *assembly* or *congregation*, the nature of which is to be understood from connecting circumstances. A church may be Jewish, Christian, Pagan, Mahometan, or any thing else.” The outward form was incidental, but, Fernald observed, there “is that in all sects which is important and necessary truth, and it will only be in the due appointment and adjustment of their different peculiarities by an enlightened philosophy, that anything of harmony can take place in the religious institutions of man.” Thus, just like Christianity, other systems of belief had some measure of truth that could be extracted when viewed through the lens of reason. Like all of the Harmonialists, Fernald was optimistic about the possibility of realizing true interior religion in the world. “There is *coming* a truly Catholic church,” he proclaimed, “but in vain do we look or wait for it among the incongruous elements of an old supernaturalism, or the artificialities of a crude and perishing theology. The Church of the future shall be One and Universal; the church of the present is both disunited and partial.”¹⁷⁷ It was only by cutting away the externals of historical religion and discerning the shared truths of interior religion that harmony and worldwide unity could be achieved. When the various religious teachings of the world were viewed in the correct way, their truths could be separated from their falsehoods. Since the same truths would ultimately be arrived at in all cases, sectarian conflict and differences of theology would cease.

Samuel B. Brittan similarly noted that “Human Reason, long fettered by the chains of theological authority, and immured in the dungeons of hereditary belief, is now beginning to arise from her depression, and to assert her high prerogative...of free and unbounded investigation.” With such auspicious signs of the times, the *Univercælum* would serve as a journal “wherein new truths may be presented and old errors exposed, and wherein all subjects relating to the moral, social, and spiritual elevation of man may be freely discussed, irrespective of the religions, political, and social prejudices that exist in the world.”

¹⁷⁷ W. M. Fernald, “The True Catholic Church,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 3, no. 10 (Feb. 3, 1849): 152.

Following Davis' lead, Brittan conceptualized this coming golden age in Swedenborgian terms as a Grand Man. Thus, "by a constant and gradual *progression*," he wrote, "we expect that there will be an ultimate *development* of a grand *Form* or Organism that will unite the whole human race as one vast Brotherhood—as one *grand man*, of which every individual person is a necessary *organ*." The kingdom of heaven on earth would be the goal of all reformist action and the fruits of living in harmony with natural law.¹⁷⁸ As he triumphantly predicted in the *Shekinah*, "The Heavens, so long veiled in gloom, are beginning to be illuminated with divine coruscations, as though the Shekinah was about to be revealed anew in one vast halo encircling the nations."¹⁷⁹

The coming utopian era would be characterized by a rejection of the cold materialism that many feared was displacing religious sentiments, as well as by the cessation of sectarian bickering. As one 1848 article in the *Univercœlum*, reprinted from the *Sunday Dispatch*, noted, "The tendencies of the age are all toward spiritualism." In the spirit of ecumenical optimism, the author stated, "The bigotries of Christendom seem to be fast dissolving, and there are indications that all men will soon reach a common platform of religious faith and feeling, in a higher plane than has as yet been trodden by any but the loftiest spirits of our race." Boldly asserting the universality of religious truth, the author wrote, "Every religious faith in the world is respectable—every man's religious feeling should be respected, because there is truth in every religious feeling and manifestation." Acknowledgement of this truth would lead to the end of "sectarian controversies," and then "all men will move on harmoniously, toward the higher life to which we all are destined."¹⁸⁰

The rapid spread of Spiritualism and the nature of its spread testified to its status as a higher expression of religion. In the *Shekinah*, Samuel B. Brittan compared the spread of Spiritualism to that of "the different systems of religion" in the world. Historically, religions had spread fast, Brittan conceded. For instance, "Constantine at once embraced the religion of Christ, when he saw its burning ensign above the horizon.... The religion of the Koran was very speedily established throughout Arabia. It carried its conquests into Syria, and was only arrested by the death of the Prophet." Moreover, Brittan continued, despite the fact that Mohammad spread Islam by the sword, "the means whereby the Roman Emperor and the

¹⁷⁸ Brittan, "The Univercœlum," 8-9.

¹⁷⁹ Brittan, "Spiritualism: Its Nature and Mission," 4-5.

¹⁸⁰ "Religious Movements," *Univercœlum and Spiritual Philosopher* 1, no. 20 (Apr. 15, 1848): 311.

Arabian Prophet achieved their conquests, were not essentially dissimilar...Constantine was neither a greater nor a better man than Mohammed.” The spread of religion by external means produced external results, which undermined whatever interior truths were initially present. Thus, Brittan observed, “the Church established by the power of the sword was a merely human institution. The remarkable gifts possessed by the primitive disciples were gradually withdrawn, and the spiritual element, which was the divine life in the Church, seemed to languish and expire at its own altars...The crucifixion, in a most essential sense, occurred when Christianity was married to the temporal power. Then it was that its indwelling spirit departed.”¹⁸¹

By contrast, “Spiritualism is primarily indebted to no earthly agents or instruments for its present position and influence. An invisible and spiritual power, operating far and wide through the forms of material existence reveals itself in the diversified and startling physical and mental phenomena which have of late confounded the science and skepticism of the world.” Eschewing the ritual and outward forms of worship of historical religion, “Spiritualism, as taught in the first and the nineteenth centuries, abhors the bloody sacrifice, and requires its faithful disciples to leave those polluted shrines and ‘worship the Father in spirit and in truth.’” Timelessly true, Spiritualism’s “enlightened and true friends hope and trust that it will gloriously triumph...and that its white banner, already unfurled in the golden morning of Freedom and Immortality, may yet become the ensign of the world!”¹⁸²

Thus, one of the greatest differences between interior and external religion was the mode by which it spread. True religion appeared by means of direct inspiration from the spiritual world, whereas external religion was spread by mundane historical means, such as through government coercion. Indeed, true religion could easily become corrupted as the “Spiritualism” of the first century demonstrated, only to re-emerge through new revelations and divine agency. While conditions in the past had led to the destruction of true religious principles, conditions in the nineteenth century were more amenable, as evidenced by Spiritualism’s startlingly rapid spread. The *Spirit Messenger and Harmonial Advocate*, essentially the fourth volume of the *Spirit Messenger* under a new title and numbering, similarly argued for the historical presence of spiritual communications, suggesting that

¹⁸¹ Samuel B. Brittan, “Conquests of Spiritualism,” *Shekinah Papers*, vol. 3, 258-59.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 260-62.

“spiritual intercourse has been experienced more or less in all ages, and has been withdrawn or continued as mankind have been prepared or unfit to receive it.” Sadly, it had been hidden due to a destructive “fear of ridicule.” Nonetheless, the article continued, “the spirits have been at work, preparing mankind for this ‘second advent’ of spiritualism.”¹⁸³

Spiritualism, Brittan declared in the *Shekinah*, was the common platform that was healing the division between different religious thinkers and factions:

It is a remarkable fact that Spiritualism is bringing into one vast communion those who have hitherto entertained the most discordant theological opinions. The disciples alike of Voltaire and Rousseau, Lord Herbert, Bolingbroke, Hume and Thomas Paine, of Swendenborg [sic], Elias Hicks, John Calvin, John Wesley, John Murry [sic], Priestley and Channing are here; and with one spirit, and in a great degree with one mind, they are uniting in a new, and...more spiritual and glorious union. It is now manifest that when our faith shall be rationalized and our philosophy spiritualized, they will meet and form one comprehensive system of material and spiritual science, sanctioned by the illuminated reason and sanctified by the universal faith and worship of man.¹⁸⁴

Tellingly, the opinions of eighteenth-century rationalists and Deists were harmonized with those of liberal Protestants and proponents of direct religious experience: a fairly representative cross-section of influences upon the Spiritualist movement. Through Spiritualism, the many partial truths of the world were being synthesized into a purer system that would contain no contradiction between the natural sciences and religion. Since these natural truths would accord with Reason, they would ultimately find universal acceptance with the human race. As one contributor to the *Univercœlum* had it, “The Baconian age of material progress has a little preceded the Baconian age of spiritual progress. This latter must surely come. When, in the fulness of time, it does arrive, religious questions will be dealt with as the nature of the subject and the nature of man alike demand.”¹⁸⁵

The time was ripe, Brittan felt, for a new “Church of Humanity,” “whose articles of faith shall be the moral precepts of Jesus—whose sacred books shall comprehend and unfold the discovered principles and the concentrated wisdom of all ages—whose ministers shall be employed to illustrate the philosophy of the Material and Spiritual Universe, and to instruct

¹⁸³ E., “The Two Questions,” *Spirit Messenger and Harmonial Advocate* 1, no. 4 (Nov. 6, 1852): 56.

¹⁸⁴ Brittan, “Spiritualism: Its Nature and Mission,” 10.

¹⁸⁵ Joseph H. Moore, “Phenomena of Mind,” *Univercœlum and Spiritual Philosopher* 1, no. 22 (Apr. 29, 1848): 337. Moore’s lionization of Baconian empiricism was commonplace among nineteenth-century Americans—a so-called “village Enlightenment.” Hazen, *Village Enlightenment*, 5-8.

the people in the true science of life.” The church Brittan envisioned was eclectic in its sources of knowledge and would also rescue the pure teachings of Jesus from theological corruption. Like Davis’ emphasis on true religion as the expression of natural moral law through reform, Brittan declared that his church’s “sacraments shall be feasts of charity given to the poor—whose constant prayer shall be one mighty and unceasing effort to do good, and whose perpetual and eloquent sermon shall be a spotless life. A church where every true Reformer may have full liberty to utter his own thought, in his own way; and where the pure in heart and the free in spirit, of every name, shall gather to receive instruction.”¹⁸⁶ Dubbing the period the “Spiritual Era” in an issue of the *Shekinah*, Brittan declared that “we are entering on a New Era in the world’s history... The old systems which removed the Infinite to an inconceivable distance from the worshiper, leaving a measureless expanse between God and humanity, unaccompanied by any intervening gradations of being, left... a vast and unpeopled solitude on the spiritual side of man.”¹⁸⁷ That situation was being rectified by a new period of direct spiritual communication and inspiration for all.

Another contributor to the *Univercælum* stated his utopian vision even more forcefully, arguing that conditions were needed “where every man may fearlessly investigate the mythical, and the mystical, whether they may have been sanctified, and taught, in the name of God, or of Brahma, of Mahomet, or of Jesus.” Unfortunately, even the most “enlightened religious sects” to date had held fast to their opinions with “creeds, and test-questions.” Fortunately, however, “the present eventful time embosoms a luminous point of perfect religious liberty toward which all the Ages, and all the Religions of the Ages, with their progressive systems, have been converging.” The people, he wrote, were “yearning for light, pining for liberty.” This salvation was imminent in “a CHURCH OF THE PEOPLE—a Church of Humanity—whose constitution shall recognize, and maintain, the natural and necessary laws of progress and of growth.” “The spirit of the age demands it,” he warned.

Here are multitudes who have rejected, or are prepared to reject, all the old forms of belief; and having nothing instead to take hold of are drifting about in the wide and stormy sea of Thought; and many of them are struggling on the shoals of Skepticism; and many others are fast approaching the cold and barren shores of total Unbelief. In

¹⁸⁶ Brittan, “The Church of the Future,” 328. Brittan’s “Church of Humanity” very strikingly foreshadows the scientific and eclectic “Religion of Humanity” championed by the second-generation Transcendentalist and FRA president Octavius Brooks Frothingham. See Versluis, *American Transcendentalism*, 276-78.

¹⁸⁷ S. B. Brittan, “The Spiritual Era,” *Shekinah Papers*, vol. 2, 113-14.

order to save them from destruction, we must present to them an acceptable religion—not an abstract conception, invested only with intangible and mythical attributes, but a Faith that is vital with good deeds—a religion of humanity boundless as the universe—a religion of love deep and inexhaustible as its infinite Source. We must divest Truth of all her extrinsic deformities—of all her grotesque and monstrous garniture—and present her in the full and sacred beauty of her nakedness; and then the universal heart must welcome her—the universal soul must respond to her call.¹⁸⁸

The progressive nature of the human spirit meant that the old external forms of religion were no longer satisfactory for an increasing number of people. In order to stave off total atheism, religion would need to conform to their personal spiritual needs. Abstract doctrine, which no intrinsic appeal to the religious sense could never fulfill this higher need.

R. P. Ambler, too, saw spiritual unity as the destiny of the human race and proclaimed it in his *Spirit Messenger*. “As in the physical system,” he explained, “each organ is joined in sympathy to all other parts of the body, so in the great brotherhood of man. . . . In accordance with these principles, unity seems to be the ultimate end proposed in all the progressive movements of the race. . . . Subject to the eternal law of progress, the world moves on, approaching the mighty cynosure which shall constitute its millennial [sic] glory.” Through a combination of decreasing sectarianism and increasing aid from the spiritual spheres, humanity was drawing closer to this glorious period of unity. Unity would not come in any superficial or “*outward* sense,” however. “True unity,” Ambler wrote, “which is the end of human progress, is a unity of *heart* and *soul*; in other words, a unity which results from that inherent affection and spiritual affinity which are established in the internal being.” The present difficulty was that evil was “interwoven into the very structure of human association.” For example, he wrote in emulation of Davis, “The interest of the clergyman consists in the prevalence of ignorance; the interest of the lawyer in the extension of wrong, and the interest of the physician in the ravages of disease; while it is the business of those engaged in the marts of trade, or contending for the prize of fame, to overreach, deceive and injure each other.” Like the Fourierist scheme outlined in the *Principles of Nature*, Ambler believed that change had to occur on a systemic level.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ W. H. W., “Church of Humanity,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 1, no. 21 (Apr. 22, 1848): 329.

¹⁸⁹ R. P. Ambler, “Approaching Unity of the Race,” *Spirit Messenger* 1, no. 19 (Dec. 14, 1850): 145.

In an interesting twist on the notion of a Church of Humanity, one contributor to the *Shekinah* creatively reinterpreted Swedenborg in universalist terms. The “mystic” author was “impressed from our examinations as well as by the opinion of some of the most elevated and discerning of his friends and admirers, that Swedenborg's ‘*True Church of Christ*’ was a CHURCH OF HUMANITY, including in its bosom, all mankind, the rich and poor, high and low, saint and sinner—the outcast and abandoned as well as the exalted—all the children of the Heavenly Father, THE BROTHERHOOD OF MAN.” The author wrote that it remained to be seen “Whether this wonderful age is to confirm the views of Swedenborg’s vision, and of Davis the youthful Swedenborg of our day.”¹⁹⁰

The same anonymous author also provided the *Shekinah* with a glowing article on Davis, “The Great American Seer.” “God never leaves himself without a witness in the world, through which to reveal, in progressive teachings, a continually clearer and higher wisdom,” he wrote. Ever “does the divine plant of humanity flower forth in its seasons into glorious sages, seers, and prophets, the acme and quintessence of the race, the types of what all men shall be in the future.” Men like “Confucius, and Zoroaster, and Pythagoras, and Socrates, and Plato, with Jesus and Swedenborg... [and] the American Seer, the truthful, wise, and gentle Davis, who, like Pythagoras, and Jesus of old, is gradually drawing the hearts and thoughts... of the people unto him,” acted as “the thermometers of Deity, indicating the flow of divine thought and divine life into the world.” Like “the first giant waves of a rising tide that shall at length refresh and gladden the whole earth,” these “great Providential men, the Messiahs,” heralded things to come for humanity as a whole.¹⁹¹ Despite their higher level of inspiration, however, “the great Seers, Prophets, and Messiahs of the world” were “as much a growth of Nature, as the tree or the flower, the artisan or the artist.” The author was careful “to deny the existence of any thing miraculous or supernatural about them.”¹⁹²

While the Harmonialists, and Spiritualists more generally, embodied a strongly democratic ethos, such heralds of human progress created a sort of natural aristocracy, or, as the author put it, were “inspired and *naturally* ordained leaders of the race.” Like Representative Men or Davis’ reformers on the “Pantheon of Progress,” these giants were

¹⁹⁰ “Ancient and Modern Seers. By a Mystic. Swedenborg,” *Shekinah Papers*, vol. 1, 117, 119.

¹⁹¹ A Mystic, “Andrew Jackson Davis. The Great American Seer,” 1-2.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 5.

“centers of all the great ideas, and mental and spiritual influences of their own ages, and all preceding ages...[and] the prophets and leaders of the coming era.” As

the fairest flower of the ages...and, to his own epoch, the very acme and perfection of the race[,...]the great Seer of this age, if he be its real Messiah, must have in him the temperance, the continence, the pure harmony with physiological laws that distinguished Pythagoras, the naturalness, simplicity, and humor of a Socrates, the divine wisdom of Plato, the tenderness, humanity, and love of Jesus, and the spiritual communion and intercourse with the heavenly world that Swedenborg enjoyed, with the true reform spirit of a Luther; all these he must have in him combined, elevated, and intensified. But there must not only be in him the elements of all past ages and former prophets, but all the great ideas of his own age, harmoniously developed and expanded. In him the advocates of new freedom, of the natural laws of temperance, peace, universal equality, universal inspiration, universal redemption, of spiritual intercourse, of the new and truer philosophy, the better ethics, the higher harmony of life and society, must all find their leader, and hear their thoughts more harmoniously and perfectly utter themselves, and through him ‘old things must pass away, and all things become new.’¹⁹³

Paradoxically, it was through the utterances of great men that the world became more just and equitable. While everyone had the right to direct religious experience through inspiration or spirit communication, it was the great prophet who had the highest conception of truth and foreshadowed these developments for lesser men.

Like many others, the “mystic” believed that the nineteenth century was about to birth a new era of general spiritual enlightenment. While, he wrote, “in every age of the world's history, and among all nations, this faculty of spiritual insight, this opening of the interior vision of the soul, has been noticed in a few rare instances,...it has never—at least till now—been recognized as a power common to all men, a native and universal property of the mind, as yet only partially and feebly developed.” Nonetheless, evolution would take its course. “Doubtless, however, the time is rapidly drawing near,...when clairvoyant mothers, through the law of hereditary transmission, shall give birth to children that shall, even in earliest years, evince this now marvelous [sic] power of spiritual vision.”¹⁹⁴ Of this, Davis was living proof. The “mind and life of the great American Seer,” the mystic wrote, was “a new and before almost unknown phase of human development.” Moreover, it was “prophetic...of a *higher and fairer manifestation of all humanity* in the future.”¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Ibid., 2.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 7.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 19.

Moreover, this process was endless since “Revelations, indeed, grow old, and become exhausted, as do soils, and trees, and books.” Thus, “teachings that might have been of value to the ancient tribes of barbarous Hebrews, are little appreciated by the intellectual, refined, and spiritual minds of modern Christendom.” Indeed, the author continued, “it is not absurd to feel that something besides the Gospel delivered nineteen centuries ago may be needed in all the increased scientific, intellectual, and moral light of the present day, with its wonderful growth of ideas, inventions, arts, sciences, and development of philosophy and religion.” Thoroughly historicized, revelation served its time, but needed to be perpetually updated to account for the march of progress. “Every age, indeed,” he wrote, “from the very nature of things, must have its own especial and needed revelation; every time its own word of living, and reforming truth.”¹⁹⁶ As R. P. Ambler observed:

The unfoldings of truth being adapted to the intellectual development of the people, every successive stage in the advancement of mankind creates a demand for new and more extended revelations. The soul is not satisfied to feed forever on musty theories and time-worn creeds;...it sighs to pass the limits by which it has been confined....Thus in accordance with the necessity created by an increased intelligence, the former systems of faith and worship must pass away, and higher revelations—more beautiful conceptions of truth and duty, must be unfolded to the searching mind.¹⁹⁷

Since human evolution did not stand still, neither did revelation; the ever-advancing race needed a corresponding form of religion.

William Fishbough was another who believed that the march of human progress was uneven and that Davis was one such person who “has gone before us—‘entered within the veil’—and shown us the way.” “[I]t is our happy privilege to follow in his footsteps, so far as our state of development will permit.” Like trailblazing pioneers, these individuals carved a path for their fellows to follow. Moreover, “as an interesting feature in the signs of the times,” Fishbough observed, “numerous minds, in different parts of this country and Europe—more especially in Germany—have simultaneously...grown up to an interior knowledge of many isolated spiritual truths and principles which are unfolded...in Mr. Davis' book.”¹⁹⁸ The observation underlined how despite the Harmonialist belief in the universality of direct

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 3-4.

¹⁹⁷ R. P. Ambler, “Necessity for Higher Revelations,” *Spirit Messenger* 1, no. 6 (Sep. 14, 1850): 45.

¹⁹⁸ William Fishbough, “The New Philosophy: Mr. Davis’s Position,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 2, no. 20 (Oct. 14, 1848): 306.

religious experience, truth was not pluralistic per se, but rather existed in an absolute sense; different individuals would arrive at the same universal truth, and the more advanced humanity as a whole became, the more people would appreciate such truth and reject the old forms of religion. “The present age is an age of *aspiration*. Mankind are becoming dissatisfied with the old, and pressing forward to something new... Old superstitions are vanishing as the mist of the morning, and the so long consolidated forms in which they have been embodied, in governments, laws, creeds, and theologies, are fast falling into decay. Men now generally require a *reason* before they believe.”¹⁹⁹

Though human development helped advance religion, spiritual intermediaries aided in the process. Fishbough argued that conditions were right for “either of a most benign and magnificent social, humanitarian [sic], and theological system, or a most uncouth and stupendous monstrosity” to emerge. As such, he reasoned, “if there ever was a time when mankind *really needed* direction from a higher sphere of being, it is *now*. We believe, therefore, *consistently with all reason and philosophy*, that the second sphere of human existence... is now engaged in sending down the needed wisdom, using as its subject spirits hundreds of persons still in the body, among whom A. J. Davis... stands conspicuous.”²⁰⁰ Interestingly, then, Fishbough seems to have entertained the possibility that the continuation of historical processes already in motion might override the natural law of progression without the intervention of benevolent spirits. The possibility exposed a tension in the simultaneous Harmonialist beliefs that history was progressive, but error was hereditary and compounded on itself.

The spirits, for their part, also proclaimed the “Glories of the Future.” A group of spirits, allegedly from the sixth circle of the second spiritual sphere, spoke through the mediumship of Ambler to inform readers of the *Spirit Messenger* that “humanity [is] blessed as it has not been at any previous period; thus is the world advancing to higher stages of thought and action.” Asserting the ultimate power of human interiority, the spirits declared, “The power which resides in the great arm of Heaven, shall not be weakened by all the efforts which Bigotry has made,... [but] shall flow in an under-current beneath the foundation of all earthly structures, and with a silent but resistless energy it shall conquer and subdue the

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 307.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 307.

feeble force which is generated in the inharmonies of the world.”²⁰¹ Echoing the familiar message that the present was an exceptional time in the religious history of the world, the spirits noted that “Man is beginning to be dissatisfied with the state in which he now exists... and he feels the rottenness of those false foundations on which the creeds and theories of the world are based...[H]e is loosing [sic] the blind faith which he once possessed in the rituals, ceremonies, and formulas of the Church, and he is looking, with strained and anxious eyes, for the dawn of a new day and the appearance of a more expanded wisdom.”²⁰² The denizens of the spirit world were rejoicing at these developments. In place of the old churches, the spirits proclaimed in true Harmonialist fashion, “Nature... shall be the temple in which the throngs of humanity shall gather, and the altar of truth and freedom which angels shall establish on the earth, shall be the shrine at which the burdened spirit shall bow and worship.”²⁰³ The spirits also affirmed the principle that revelation was always ongoing and promised to continue rationing truth to the world as it became ready. The “Spirits have not unfolded all that has been stored in the exhaustless treasury of divine truth,” they wrote through Ambler. “But as they perceive that the world is prepared for the revealments which they desire to make,—as they see that the interior of man is sufficiently unfolded to appreciate and enjoy them, they will... reveal those realities which shall be welcomed by the soul as the food on which its strength depends.”²⁰⁴

Spiritual truth did not need to appear fully developed in “mighty champions” of truth, “but it was only essential that this truth should be dropped as a seed upon the warm bosom of some expanded soul, to secure its rapid growth and ultimate perfection.” Jesus, the spirits informed readers, introduced such truth to the world, but “the cold breath of the most desolating skepticism” caused it to “disappear beneath a veil of gloom.” Simultaneously appropriating the Christian belief in the millennial return of miracles, and recasting those of Jesus in universal terms, the spirits declared that “in the present age are witnessed the resurrection and birth of the ancient miracles.... There has been the return of those astonishing exhibitions of invisible power which were the characteristics of the age in which Jesus lived, and there has been manifested, also, the same internal medium through which the

²⁰¹ Spirits of the Sixth Circle, “Glories of the Future,” *Spirit Messenger* 2, no. 1 (May 1, 1852): 2.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁰⁴ The Spirits, “Spiritual Unfoldings,” *Spirit Messenger* 2, no. 1 (May 1, 1852): 14.

new-born truth has been conveyed to the hearts and minds of the people. Therefore has the soul of man reason to rejoice that the world has become again illuminated with celestial light, and that the wide bosom of humanity is moved with the throbbings of an inward life.”²⁰⁵

Seemingly the message of the *Spirit Messenger* changed very little during the stint during which the spirits assumed editorial control.

The proliferation of spiritual intercourse and mediums seemed to be compelling proof that the Harmonial Philosophy was being realized in the world. The *Spirit Messenger* reported in 1852 that “Originally, the mediums were counted by units, now they count by hundreds. At first, the believers [in spirit communication] were numbered by tens, now they number by tens of thousands.” The editors had “no doubt that in this city and its vicinity, there are at least one hundred mediums and twenty thousand or twenty five thousand believers; and the number is every day increasing with tremendous velocity.” The benefits of such a development were clear. “Every one who is a believer becomes a better person for it; more truly Christian, and less sectarian; more regardful of others, and less regardful of self; more and more obeying the injunction to love our neighbor.” Moreover, the article continued, “Everywhere, where the intercourse has extended, skeptics in the existence of a God, or a future state, have been converted to the belief in both.”²⁰⁶

A central part of the Harmonialist goal for establishing a utopian universal religion for the entire world was identifying the natural truths on which members of all religions could agree—an aim they held in common with the later Free Religious Association. For example, in the *Univercælum* Fishbough quoted excerpts from a liberal Jew by the name of Major M. M. Noah, who argued that Christian morals were the same as Jewish ones, just under a different name. Noah, in denying the divinity of Jesus, but upholding his moral righteousness, asserted that Jews were “the head of the Unitarians” and that in accepting the Unitarian view of Christ, “Christianity would still be Christianity, in all its high moral attributes.” Fishbough saw “nothing in this to which the more liberal and rationalistic Christian may not fully subscribe. The extract shows the only ground upon which Christians may reasonably expect ever to unite, not only with the Jews, but also with the followers of Mahomet, and the

²⁰⁵ The Spirits, “The New Era,” *Spirit Messenger* 2, no. 3 (Jun. 1, 1852): 72.

²⁰⁶ “Important Considerations,” *Spirit Messenger and Harmonial Advocate* 1, no. 6 (Nov. 20, 1852): 88.

Heathens.”²⁰⁷ Clinging senselessly to a superstitious belief in Jesus’ superhuman nature precluded ever finding common ground with those who denied it. “That Jesus of Nazareth who was born of a woman...and who passed through all the successive and *natural* stages of *mental* and physical growth, from infancy to manhood,—was that identical, eternal, uncreated Essence who in the beginning dwelt in the vortex of Infinitude, and rolled forth innumerable worlds, is what mankind *universally* can never be brought to believe.”²⁰⁸

Fishbough was optimistic that the division would be overcome, however. Regarding the divinity of Christ, Fishbough predicted that “all the tendencies of the age clearly foreshow that Christians themselves will universally cease to believe it at no distant point.” What all people would be able to agree on, using their Reason, was “that Jesus was a great and noble *Man*, a true Prophet, and sublimely exalted Teacher.” This common ground, he believed, “will unfold a spirit of universal eclecticism which will award to *all* the great teachers, Jewish, Christian, Mahometan, and Heathen, both of ancient and modern times, their just dues, and combine all that is true and good in their teachings, into one grand, harmonious, and unitary SYSTEM.” Thus, he wrote, “The mystical and unnatural creeds of all nations, which have rested only upon the dicta of ancient teachers, and the arbitrary interpretations of priests, will gradually melt away before the dawning light, and there will at length be but one standard faith, recognized throughout the world—the teachings of Nature without, and of the unfolded and inspired spirit within.”²⁰⁹ As a reprinted 1841 address from the Unitarian “Dr. Channing” put it, the “one commanding characteristic” of the age was “the tendency of all its movements to expansion, to diffusion, to universality... This tendency is directly opposed to the spirit of exclusiveness, restriction, narrowness, monopoly, which has prevailed in past ages.”²¹⁰ Progress would shuck away the husks of outmoded doctrines and exclusive creeds, and would bring together the pure teachings of all inspired prophets into one true universal religion of mankind.

The emphasis on progress and religious evolution gave the Harmonialists a more distinctively nineteenth-century character than earlier attempts at discovering true religion,

²⁰⁷ William Fishbough, “The Jews,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 3, no. 4 (Dec. 23, 1848): 57.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

²¹⁰ “The World was Made for All,” *Univercælum and Spiritual Philosopher* 3, no. 9 (Jan. 27, 1849): 133.

which often involved the rediscovery of ancient knowledge or a *prisca theologia*. While, as we have seen, historical transmission and priestcraft could be responsible for corrupting pure teachings, especially those of Jesus, the general tendency of theology was upward to ever higher forms. Apollos Munn put it succinctly in the *Spirit Messenger* in 1850, writing that the present generation could “look back through the long vista of eighteen hundred years, and trace in the history of generation after generation, proof after proof, of the existence and operation of the eternal rule of progression.” Unlike early modern thinkers, who tended to ascribe enormous authority to the ancients,²¹¹ Munn cautioned that people should “not, then, despise new facts because they were not discovered by the ancients; but hail with delight the unfoldings of the secrets of nature, as exhibited by every development of truth.” Because truth was discovered progressively, he wrote, “let no one vainly imagine, that himself, his church, or his nation, has attained to that mental growth, where they can justly claim that their knowledge is perfected, and their doctrines infallible.”²¹²

Progress in governance advanced along with progress in religion. W. S. Courtney, writing to the *Shekinah* in 1853, asserted, “The antagonists of the Protestant and democratic formula of the ‘sovereignty of the individual’ and ‘liberty of conscience’ are civil tyranny in the social sphere, and spiritual tyranny in the religions sphere; arbitrary power over the actions, property, and life of the individual in the one case, and arbitrary power over his conscience and worship in the other.” “The formula of freedom,” he wrote, “civil and religious, centers in *individualism*. It begins and ends with the individual.”²¹³ Taking the tendency of religion to move towards individualism to its furthest logical extremes, Courtney envisioned a future of totally idiosyncratic beliefs. “Forms of conscience and worship, as various as the interminable individualities of human character, is the final result of the Protestant formula....The current religions, orthodox faith, Presbyterianism, Methodism, Episcopalianism, Unitarianism, Trinitarianism, Mormonism, Baptistism [sic], Swedenborgianism, Spiritualism, etc., which are but the larger types and *prophets* of this ultimate individuality, must all fall under this terrible and all-searching analysis; and under it they will disintegrate, dissolve, resolve, dissipate, evaporate, and precipitate.”²¹⁴

²¹¹ See Harrison, *‘Religion’ and the religions*, 7.

²¹² Apollos Munn, “The Gradual Evolution of Truth,” *Spirit Messenger* 1, no. 3 (Aug. 24, 1850): 22.

²¹³ Courtney, “Issues of Protestantism and Democracy,” 274-75.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 277.

Anticipating the hyper-individualistic spirituality of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—such as the much-derided “Sheilaism” described by Robert Bellah and his colleagues²¹⁵—Courtney believed that truly free religion meant that every person would decide what accorded with Reason. As the great American proponent of Reason and democracy Thomas Paine put it, allegedly from beyond the grave, “It is not the few among you who shall become teachers of the people; but the unfolding of Spiritualism shall make all teachers and all learners.”²¹⁶ The endless variety of human advancement and circumstances meant that no two people would arrive at quite the same conclusion, even if there were an absolute and ultimate truth to strive towards.

Consistent with the zeal of the revivalistic and reform culture of the mid-nineteenth-century United States, the Harmonialists possessed a strong sense of mission. A friend of S. J. Finney, lamenting the inadequate charity of “cold and selfish...orthodox Christians” in a letter to Finney, hoped that “all the world should unite in one grand scheme for mutual improvement and enlightenment, and, shoulder to shoulder, work on to gain the jewel of knowledge, the possession of which would make the earth a Paradise, and all mankind angels.” In answer to Finney asking after Davis, the correspondent wrote that he was “at present delivering a course of lectures in Cleveland, after which he intends visiting our little town for the same purpose.” Hopeful about Davis’ missionary prospects, he predicted that “he will have full houses at all his lectures. I think there is much seed sown here that will spring up under his care; for many persons I know believe in the Manifestations who do not make it public.” Somewhat smugly, the writer mused about “how far we were ahead of those whose minds were swaying to and fro in doubt and uncertainty, now believing, and now rejecting; continually remaining on the outskirts of the happy land, while those in whose minds doubt had given place to belief, were enjoying the pleasures of an intercourse with the inhabitants, unmarred by any trouble or pain.”²¹⁷ The efforts of mission would no doubt bring the doubters into the happy fold of the true religion.

Another contributor to the *Spirit Messenger and Harmonial Advocate* suggested that the “mind which has thrown off the shackles of mental slavery” target “subjects...of the

²¹⁵ Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 269-71.

²¹⁶ “Communication, Purporting to be Given by Thomas Paine, *Through Mrs. S—, medium*,” *Spirit Messenger and Harmonial Advocate* 1, no. 12 (Jan. 1, 1853): 183.

²¹⁷ “Spirituality Abroad,” *Spirit Messenger and Harmonial Advocate* 1, no. 8 (Dec. 4, 1852): 122-23.

prevailing systems of theology,” since these were most obviously in need of “reformation.” In addition, “the calamitous effect of the inconsistent and ignorant Church-doctrines of the day, by which thousands are plunged into the worst forms of infidelity,” provided an opportunity for missionaries to offer correction. “The advocate of Spiritualism can here be the means of inconcievable [sic] benefit,” the contributor wrote.

Let him approach the subject of material influences, and point to the present spiritual unfoldings; and by calmly and judiciously overcoming the prejudice which a vindictive church and prevailing sensualism has created against the New Dispensation, he will prepare that darkened mind for the reception of immortal light, and bring it to witness the positive evidences of spiritual existence.²¹⁸

Ever confident in the powers of rational argument to sway individuals from external and hereditary religion, the author encouraged a level-headed approach for missionaries of the true religion.

Harmonialism not Sectarianism

Despite appearances, the Harmonialists were generally quick to distance themselves from the appearance of adding another sect to the denominational confusion of nineteenth-century America or of trying to turn Davis into another Joseph Smith. As early as 1847, Fishbough emphasized in his introduction to *Principles of Nature* that Davis was utterly without creed.²¹⁹ Writing in the *Univercælum*, Fishbough explained that Davis’ revelations made “no supercilious and arbitrary claims upon human credence, but professes to be simply an appeal to the *reason*.” Rather than “crush and enslave the reason by the authority of a tyrannical dogmatism,” it was intended “to free and enlighten the mind, and enable men to see the truth for themselves.”²²⁰ Samuel Brittan similarly emphasized in the opening issue of the *Univercælum* that, while Davis’ revelations were the occasion for founding the journal and that they were a “light...shed on our path,” he “would not be understood as receiving this or

²¹⁸ H., “The Mission of the Spiritualist,” *Spirit Messenger and Harmonial Advocate* 1, no. 10 (Dec. 18, 1852): 152.

²¹⁹ Fishbough, introduction to *Principles of Nature*, v, vi-xiv.

²²⁰ Fishbough, “The New Philosophy: Mr. Davis’s Position,” 305.

any other *mere book* as *infallible authority* in matters of faith and practice.” By his own account, Davis approved of Brittan’s independence of thought.²²¹

Thomas Lake Harris, on the other hand, was reportedly disappointed by Davis’ refusal to accept the mantle of prophetic authority—a hope that Davis claimed to have thwarted by purposefully giving Brother Harris false predictions in order to prove his own fallibility.²²² Nor was Harris the only one to see a prophet in Davis. One admirer of Davis marvelled at his appearance, which—styled in the mode of an Old Testament patriarch with his “long and heavy beard” and “masses of black-brown hair”—gave him a “weird and supernatural mien” and “stamped the character of ‘seer’ and ‘prophet’ upon his every lineament.” With even less restraint, the abolitionist Henry C. Wright declared in the pages of the *Liberator* that Davis was “a *Jesus* of this day,” by whom “millions will be redeemed from abject mental thralldom.”²²³

As for the Harmonial Philosophy itself, which critics denounced as a “new dispensation” which had “cut loose from the Bible,”²²⁴ Davis stopped short of calling it a religion himself, but suggested that whether a philosophy “which puts the human soul and spirit into harmony with God and Nature and Humanity—is ‘religion’ or not, is a question cheerfully left with the intuitions of mankind to answer.” Nonetheless, he opined, “No receiver of these divine principles, it is believed, can be irreligious in the large and intelligent use of the term.”²²⁵ Thus, the Harmonial Philosophy embodied the true essence of religion, but resisted becoming another religion among many. For this reason, Davis would not accept the appellation of “founder.” Unlike a historical religion, the eternal religion could have no founding prophet. “The authority of the Harmonial philosophy,” he wrote, “is not based upon the Revelations of ‘Davis,’ but upon the Revelations of Nature.” Fortunately, he said, “I do not think that I stand in any danger of being deified; for I have too much faith in the reasonableness of this age.”²²⁶

²²¹ Brittan, “The Univercœlum,” 9; Davis, *Magic Staff*, 398-99.

²²² Davis, *Magic Staff*, 385-86, 390.

²²³ A Mystic, “Andrew Jackson Davis. The Great American Seer,” 6; Henry C. Wright, “Spiritual Convention. Hampden Hall, Springfield, April 7, 1853,” *Liberator* 23, no. 16 (Apr. 22, 1853): 64; Delp, “A Spiritualist in Connecticut,” 355-56.

²²⁴ Delp, “A Spiritualist in Connecticut,” 355-56.

²²⁵ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 5, 271.

²²⁶ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 3, 375.

Perhaps Davis had good cause to hope. As one Spiritualist later proclaimed in 1876, “We live in the eve of the decline of the age or era of hero or man-worship.” Like “Gen. Washington [who] broke the sceptre of kings, . . . A. J. Davis severed the wand of priesthood.” Having done these great duties, both men stepped back to allow their fellows freedom. “Gen. Washington refused to accept a crown and become a King, and A. J. Davis refused to become a priest.”²²⁷ Nonetheless, in the mass Spiritualist movement that he had helped animate, Davis would find much that displeased him.

²²⁷ Thomas Cook, “Great Men—A. J. Davis,” *Religio-Philosophical Journal* 20, no. 21 (Aug. 5, 1876): 161.

CHAPTER FOUR - MASS SPIRITUALISM

“The Truth Against the World”

“All mental progress tends to the discovery that ‘God’s will’ is only manifest in *law*,” wrote the popular medium and Spiritualist chronicler Emma Hardinge in 1870. “Religion, ethics, miracle, and supersensuous life...all resolve themselves at last into stern and immutable procedures of a set of mental laws as stringent as any of those that bind our physical existence.” Carrying on the legacy of natural theology from Deism, Transcendentalism, and Harmonialism, true religion, Hardinge announced, was discernible in the operations of nature. God revealed himself in the unchanging and orderly nature of the universe and all morality necessarily mirrored natural law, which was discoverable by scientific means. Thus, she wrote,

Spiritualism, with a large majority of its American adherents, *is a religion*, separate in all respects from any existing sect, because it bases its affirmations purely upon the demonstrations of fact, science, and natural law, and admits of no creed or denominational boundary. With such a foundation, its philosophy must necessarily ramify through immeasurable realms of natural and unceasing revelation; whilst destitute of the hedge of sectarian limitation, its aims must encompass the whole human race in membership....And hence it is that American Spiritualism, *as a religion*, based upon facts, proved by science, and defended with an irresistible tide of burning oratory amply demonstrative of a supramundane source, has not only taken captive the minds of the masses, but has also appealed, and that most successfully, to the deep thinkers of the land, to whom “religion must be a science” and “science a religion,” or one or the other must be false and worthless. As we are not aware of any other country than America, where a popular religion thus appeals to the reason and requires its votaries to do their own thinking, or of any other denomination than “American Spiritualists” who base their belief on scientific facts, proven by living witnesses, so we deem...American Spiritualism as an unique, concrete, and at present isolated movement....¹

¹ Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 9-12.

Hardinge, speaking as a prominent voice among American Spiritualists and as the historian of the movement, employed the—by now familiar—threefold configuration of religion wherein the true essence of “religion” was conflated with natural law and ethics, multiple “religions” existed that approximated this essence to varying degrees, and the utopian hope was entertained that the true essence of religion might be realized in history as the establishment of a universal religion for all humanity—here identified as Spiritualism.

Only Spiritualism, thriving in its uniquely American context of religious freedom and individualism, Hardinge argued, was concerned with the empirical investigation and demonstration of divine law and resisted the sectarianism of other religions. Its emphasis on individual investigation and ongoing revelation paradoxically made it the most universal because it dispensed with all outward forms and instead constituted a timeless community of rational investigators. The inherent truth of its claims, forcefully declared in the “burning oratory” of its advocates, would allow Spiritualism to flourish in the rough and tumble of the American marketplace of religion and overcome the denominational chaos. Employing the categories of modernity, even as she rejected the divisions between them, Hardinge saw Spiritualism as the religion that could be reconciled with science in that it employed its methods, while at the same time refusing to keep them confined to the limited realm of the mundane.

Conceptualizing Spiritualism not as an institution or a creed like the other religions, Hardinge imagined it as a loose community connected by the shared mission of discovering the eternal truths of nature. Like the “invisible church” of Christianity—particularly the evangelical Protestantism of the surrounding culture—a Spiritualist was a member of a timeless brotherhood which knew no denominational boundaries, and yet was being actualized in America like never before.² “The earnest American Spiritualist is one who combines all the restless and inquisitive tendencies of his country with strong additional propelling power to locomotion which a search after the marvellous supplies,” she wrote. Embodying the fearless and intrepid mobility of the confident republic, he “undertakes frequent pilgrimages for the purpose of investigation” and “visits distant places and persons

² Molly McGarry has emphasized how spirit communication collapsed past and future by allowing the dead to speak. She sees this as a counter-narrative to secularization and theories of “disenchantment.” Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (London: University of California Press, 2008), 6-14, 17-18.

on spiritualistic ‘missions.’” Aware that true religion transcended incidental forms, he eclectically “reads all the journals of the time and place where he tarries; he visits all the media and joins all the circles held there, whether in garrets, cellars, saloons, halls, steamboats, mines, woods, valleys, Indian wigwams, or among the ruins of ‘lost races.’” Through his investigations or his own mediumship, “he has his own store of phenomenal history to add to the general sum.” The Spiritualist community of believers was thus bound together by a shared ethos of impartial “seeking”—one that recognized the Indian’s wisdom as equally valid—and was discursively constructed by a sharing of one’s finding through journals and the séance circle. Religious progress was endless and each Spiritualist contributed to the unifying knowledge of the race as true religion was realized in the world. The “axiom of invincible strength and never-failing triumph” that Hardinge proclaimed was simple: “The truth against the world.”³

Itinerant Mediums and Reading Communities

Emma Hardinge (1823-1899) was born Emma Floyd to Ebenezer Floyd and Anna Sophia in London, England. The death of her father in 1834 plunged her and her mother into poverty and she was forced to support them both by giving music lessons and acting—which she did under the name Hardinge. After showing mediumistic potential as a youth, she fell in with a secret occult society in London where she was exploited by a man she described as a “baffled sensualist” and who blocked her attempts to get work in order to keep her under his power. Nonetheless, she managed to free herself from his influence by escaping to Paris with a British acting troupe. The prospect of a job on Broadway brought Hardinge and her mother to New York in 1855 where she became drawn into the world of Spiritualism even as she initially sought to discredit it. Soon she was the director of the Spiritualist choir at Dodsworth Hall in New York and became acquainted with prominent Spiritualists such as the Fox sisters and Judge John Edmonds. Encouraged by the efforts of the Spiritualist Horace Day, Hardinge overcame her reluctance to embrace the calling from the spirits to preach. Her career as a trance lecturer quickly took off, making her one of the best-known mediums of the day. In

³ Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 16, 19.

1870, she married William Britten who took over management of her lecturing career and published her writings.⁴

Mediums like Emma Hardinge—who could rise to prominence despite her sex and humble, if not disreputable, background—exemplify both the democratic and loose nature of American Spiritualism. Mediums could arise from all walks of life in a sort of “natural aristocracy” based on their abilities rather than ministerial training. While theoretically anyone could become a medium, certain individuals were more susceptible because of their innate passivity, indicated, for example, by cold hands and pale skin.⁵ As with the earlier example of Andrew Jackson Davis, simplicity and a lack of education could serve as a source of credibility since observers assumed that the medium or clairvoyant could not have possessed the knowledge displayed without a higher spiritual source—a dynamic that was particularly true of women, who were assumed to lack the ability to discourse learnedly on scientific and religious topics. Moreover, the supposed natural passivity of women in nineteenth-century culture, and the Victorian identification of piety with the private sphere of the home, made women particularly suited to the role of medium.⁶

While internationally touring star mediums like Emma Hardinge or Cora Hatch—launched into fame as a teenager by her father in the mode of a modern-day child star—were not representative, mediumship was one of the relatively few careers open to nineteenth-century women in America, though the numbers of male and female mediums were relatively close—110 to 121 in 1859 by Uriah Clark’s reckoning. Though mediumship blended with the commercial almost immediately—as with the Fox sisters—most did not find themselves particularly wealthy for their efforts, and letters to the popular Spiritualist journal the *Banner of Light* bemoaned the lack of fair payment and blamed austere wages were for driving female mediums into compromising associations with disreputable individuals. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the censure and suggestions of sexual impropriety that female mediums invited made it an occupation unsuitable for ladies of higher station and education. Travel,

⁴ Ann Braude, “Britten, Emma Hardinge (1823-1899),” in *American National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2000). Accessed 26 Aug. 2018. <http://www.anb.org/view/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.001.0001/anb-9780198606697-e-0801862>; Georgina Byrne, “Britten [née Floyd], Emma Hardinge (1823–1899),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Retrieved 26 Aug. 2018, from <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-70567>.

⁵ Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 143-44; Albanese, *Republic*, 235-36; Moore, *White Crows*, 121.

⁶ McGarry, *Ghosts*, 131; Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 23-24.

lodging, and venue rentals all conspired to cut into the typical medium's profits. Like Methodist itinerants, many mediums made long and arduous journeys across the country, frequently staying in strangers' homes and braving the harsh elements, and accepting private sittings in order to supplement their income. As R. Laurence Moore notes, however, the persistence of many mediums despite the rarity of spectacular material success should serve as a caution against ascribing purely worldly motivations to them; aside from whatever frauds there undoubtedly were, many Spiritualist mediums suffered such deprivations out of conviction. Catherine Albanese points to the way that the blending of Spiritualist practice with the market suggests the increasing dissolution of "traditional communities" in the face of a rapidly changing society.⁷

The Spiritualist community that formed in contrast to traditional religious communities was connected by an extensive network of public lecturers, séance circles, and readers. While Spiritualists lacked an ecclesial structure, these other activities bound them together as a community of believers that had a shared language concerning religion—albeit, a contested one. Lectures delivered around the country by itinerant mediums and clairvoyants were reprinted in Spiritualist journals allowing for a broad audience. The central component of Spiritual practice, the séance circle, provided a communal activity that counteracted the individualistic tendencies of Spiritualism. Circles, while sometimes private, also received visiting sitters and sometimes shared their experiences in lectures, at Spiritualist conventions, or in print form.⁸ Significantly, as Ann Taves observes, the radically universalistic tendencies of Spiritualism were not confined to prominent figures like Andrew Jackson Davis, but found expression through the voices of spirits at the séance table, perhaps, she suggests, because the spirits permitted one to experiment with controversial and transgressive doctrines while maintaining a degree of separation from them.⁹

Perhaps the most significant way in which Spiritualists shared a language and formed a community was through reading. In much the same way as their evangelical counterparts, Spiritualists deeply engaged with the print revolution of the nineteenth century. Indeed, it is probably safe to say that nineteenth-century Spiritualism could not have existed without it.

⁷ Moore, *White Crows*, 104-29; R. Laurence Moore, "The Spiritualist Medium: A Study of Female Professionalism in Victorian America," *American Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (1975): 201-202, 213-14, 221; Albanese, *Republic*, 223-24.

⁸ Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 120-23.

⁹ Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 194-95.

The incredible proliferation of cheap print and religious periodicals in the opening decades of the nineteenth century is by now well-studied. Changes in printing technology, such as the steam-powered press, stereotype plates, and machine-made paper, dramatically drove down the cost of producing books and newspapers. At the same time, improvements in transportation in infrastructure—railroads, canals, steamboats, and the postal service—made it possible to bring printed materials to a large number of people. Large publishing centres like Boston and New York—both also major Spiritualist centres—produced a dizzying array of publications, including a growing number of religious ones with an increasing tendency to declare a denominational affiliation. During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the number of religious periodicals and books published increased by five-hundred percent. Of the approximately 605 religious periodicals that had been established by 1830, only fourteen of them had existed prior to 1790. From 1800 to 1830, the number of people subscribed to religious journals leaped from five thousand to four-hundred thousand. The tendency of nineteenth-century people to read out loud to each other and to lend their books and journals when finished meant that actual readership could be several times higher than suggested by circulation numbers as printed works got passed around entire neighbourhoods.¹⁰

This proliferation of reading material—not to mention relatively high rates of literacy and the resulting broader social reach of print—went hand in hand with changes in how people read. While before people had tended to read a small number of works very closely and repeatedly—often to the point of memorization—by the early decades of the nineteenth century, they subsisted on a steady diet of new material, including fiction. Nonetheless, as David Nord argues, religious publishers and editors had an ambiguous relationship with the marketplace dynamics of the “reading revolution.” The possibilities offered by new technology were exciting, but the pernicious influence of popular fiction and the spread of heretical ideas were a source of anxiety. As Nord puts it, “the managers of the religious

¹⁰ Diane Winston, “Religion and the News,” in *Cambridge History of Religions in America*, vol. 2, 800-801; Tona J. Hangen, “Religion and the Media, 1790-1945,” in *Cambridge History of Religions in America*, vol. 2, 812-18; Hatch, *Democratization*, 142; David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 147.

publishing societies launched their products into the currents of commerce, but against the flow.”¹¹

Spiritualists particularly exemplified the “reading communities” that scholars like Candy Gunther Brown or Nathan Hatch have studied with regards to evangelical Protestants. Through shared periodicals and books, Spiritualists—like evangelicals—could achieve a sense of belonging and group identity. The ever-prescient Alexis de Tocqueville anticipated the way that the burgeoning American press could form “imagined communities” by bringing people with common concerns into dialogue with each other. As Hatch observed, religious editors “could impart a sense of coherence and direction to widely scattered congregations. Blessed with a public hungry for religious discussion, they could extend the art of persuasion, and thus their own authority, far beyond the reach of personal charisma.”¹²

The same could easily be said in the case of Spiritualism, as indeed Brown does, noting that a lack of denominational structures and or any clerical authority made periodicals especially important for creating a Spiritualist identity and for enabling organization and communication with each other.¹³ Ann Braude comes to a similar conclusion, suggesting that Spiritualist “reading communities” not only helped compensate for a lack of institutional organization in connecting like-minded individuals, but also served the practical purpose of tracking the movements of itinerant mediums, who often travelled unpredictably at the urging of their spirit guides. In this way, Spiritualist periodicals, particularly large, nationally-circulated ones like the *Banner of Light*, “forged bonds between members of a non-geographic community of believers.”¹⁴

Aside from the aforementioned organizational issues of Spiritualists, the evangelical Protestant “priesthood of all believers” ideal that Brown saw enacted in the participatory nature of periodicals is particularly evident among Spiritualists, who took it even further by insisting on individual revelation for all believers. Braude argues, for example, that

¹¹ Like other religious periodicals, Spiritualist and Harmonialist journals frequently included short serialized stories to entice readers to subscribe and to compete with more secular productions. Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 164; Hangen, “Religion and the Media,” 817-18; Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 6-7.

¹² Hatch, *Democratization*, 145-46; Winston, “Religion and the News,” 800-801.

¹³ Brown, *Word in the World*, 41, 147, 180-81.

¹⁴ Ann Braude, “News from the Spirit World: A Checklist of American Spiritualist Periodicals, 1847-1900,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 99, no. 2 (1990): 404-406.

Spiritualists embraced the same ideology of a democratic press that David Nord saw in William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator*. Convinced of the truth of their position, Spiritualists, like other reformers, believed in the perfectionist possibilities of public debate to convince others. The Spiritualist ethos of free investigation allowed anyone to publicly express opinions on religious matters. The same impulse to convince an increasingly fractured society of the truth of one's position and to counter perceived errors animated Spiritualists as well as evangelical Christians. Faced with a confusingly pluralistic religious landscape, Brown argues that evangelical Christians "longed for a sense of connection with a timeless, placeless, unified church." Through texts that mirrored their own experiences, they could "envision themselves as belonging to the church universal, which included Christians from all time periods, countries, and denominations."¹⁵ The same impulse is apparent in Spiritualism.

From the very beginning of the mass-movement Spiritualism that was catalyzed in 1848 by the Fox sisters, newspapers were crucial for the spread of Spiritualism. It was Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* that first reported the news of the rapping phenomena beyond western New York, which prompted a slew of similar occurrences and claims of mediumship across the country.¹⁶ While the more Harmonialist-oriented journals examined in the previous chapter were generally short-lived and only modestly circulated, they prefigured the torrent of Spiritualist periodicals and books that would flood the American landscape during the second half of the nineteenth century. Already by 1857, Uriah Clark's *Spiritualist Register* claimed a combined twenty thousand subscribers to various Spiritualist weeklies and monthlies, "embracing a circle of readers numbering nearly a hundred thousand." The list of Spiritualist books Clark and his wife, Eliza, had available to order from their Auburn office—a wide catalogue, mostly published by Partridge & Brittan and Bela Marsh, with offerings from Andrew Jackson Davis, Adin Ballou, S. B. Brittan, W. M. Fernald, Thomas Lake Harris, William Fishbough, and others—supposedly reached "as many as five hundred thousand

¹⁵ They also shared a faith that "Reason" or "Common Sense" would allow people to arrive at the correct conclusions when presented with the evidence, revealing, as Brown observes, the influence of Scottish Enlightenment philosophy. Brown, *Word in the World*, 12, 141-42, 169-71, 176; Braude, "News from the Spirit World," 406-410.

¹⁶ Albanese, *Republic*, 222.

souls.” By 1860, Clark’s estimated number of periodical readers had risen to two-hundred thousand.¹⁷

Spiritualists created a similar imagined community in response to the same anxieties by reading mediumship and clairvoyance into history and across religious boundaries—a version of the invisible church that included even Jesus. With a press that reported on notable spiritual phenomena, reprinted lectures and spiritual communications, advertised the same canon of books, provided a platform for debate, and informed readers about the movements of famous mediums and about upcoming lectures, Spiritualists could feel connected to a community of like-minded believers, even as they asserted the right of individual conscience. While they may have debated the particulars, they shared a universalized language of religion.

The Essence of Religion

The dichotomous understanding of religion as consisting of a true interior essence and the external forms of historical religion held by Davis and his associates continued into the Spiritualist movement more broadly. Like the proponents of the Harmonial Philosophy, Spiritualists fixated their hopes on realizing the true and eternal religion in history, overcoming sectarian division once and for all. Within all humans, regardless of circumstance, there was an innate religious sense that could discern truth, though this had to be cultivated and progressed with civilization. The human interior remained for mass Spiritualism the locus of true religion, underpinning all incidental forms. Halfway between the Enlightenment and the Romantic age, Spiritualists saw true religion as reasonable and scientific, but also individualistic and resonating in the heart.

¹⁷ Uriah Clark’s statistics should be treated with caution by the historian as they were largely conjectural and certainly not disinterested. He himself observed that “none will expect [them] to be full and accurate in every particular.” Uriah Clark, “Publications on Spiritualism” and “Monthlies,” *The Spiritualist Register, with a Counting House & Speaker’s Almanac; Containing Facts and Statistics of Spiritualism, for 1857* (Auburn, N.Y.: U. Clark, 1857). Retrieved 30 Aug. 2018. http://www.iapsop.com/spirithistory/1857_spiritualist_register.html; Uriah Clark, “Summary,” *Fourth Annual Spiritual Register, with a Calendar and Speakers’ Almanac, for 1860; Facts, Philosophy, Statistics of Spiritualism* (Auburn, N.Y.: U. Clark, Spiritual Clarion Office, 1860). http://iapsop.com/spirithistory/1860_spiritualist_register.html.

True religion

The renowned Vermont medium Achsa Sprague (1827-1862) described the true essence of religion in poetic terms at a 1861 lecture reported on by the *Banner of Light*.¹⁸ “Worship must be considered as a principle,” she declared. “Man’s devotional nature lives and burns within him, like a lamp in a charnal-house [sic]; and you may know the character of men and women by the way they worship God—always considering the circumstances of birth and education.” Strongly echoing the language of correspondence, she continued, “Everything has a living, vital principle, aside from its outer habiliments. The leaf, stem and petal are not all of the flower. So is the religious element innate in the nature, as the life.”¹⁹ The outer shell, the flesh, was not the true essence of a person any more than it was in the case of the things of nature. It is tempting to see her forceful rejection of the body as a “charnal-house” as a reflection of her own personal trials with a debilitating disease of the joints that struck her at age twenty and left her unable to walk for seven years until she was delivered by a miraculous cure by spiritual agency and called upon to become a travelling medium.²⁰ The divine, Sprague believed, existed within us all and was expressed to the extent that one was developed—a concern that found expression in her prodigious reform efforts, particularly abolition and prison reform.²¹ The worship of “wood and stone” or observing of “forms and ceremonies” would no longer suffice in the modern age. There was “a higher demand... not temples builded with hands. Man must worship God in the temples of the living soul.”²²

¹⁸ The *Banner* was the most read and longest running Spiritualist journal, though it began as a general interest literary magazine. According to John Patrick Deveney, the *Banner* claimed a subscription base between fifteen and thirty thousand over its long run (1857-1907), but notes that “the claims were enormously inflated and masked the journal’s precarious position as it lurched from one financial crisis to another.” John Patrick Deveney, “The Banner of Light,” IAPSOP. Retrieved 30 Aug. 2018. http://www.iapsop.com/archive/materials/banner_of_light/.

The *Banner* was sufficiently popular and literary that Harriet Beecher Stowe’s publisher sent a copy of *Oldtown Folks* (1869) to the journal at Stowe’s urging in the hopes that they would favourably review its “spiritualistic features.” Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 27.

¹⁹ “Miss A. W. Sprague at Allston Hall, Sunday, Jan. 6, 1861,” *Banner of Light* 8, no. 17 (Jan. 19, 1861): 8.

²⁰ Disease returned to Sprague once more in 1862 when she died suddenly at age thirty-four. Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 99-116; Sheryl A. Kujawa, “Sprague, Achsa W. (1827-1862),” *American National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Retrieved 27 Aug. 2018. <http://www.anb.org/view/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.001.0001/anb-9780198606697-e-2000972>.

²¹ Kujawa, “Sprague, Achsa W. (1827-1862).”

²² “Miss A. W. Sprague at Allston Hall,” 8.

The *Banner of Light*, also reported on a similar 1857 lecture by L. Judd Pardee that explored the relationship between interior and external religion. “It is well known to the spiritual philosopher that from the inner all else proceeds,” he explained. Nonetheless, there were “certain sorts of external culture” that had “not much to do with those internal spiritual conditions which are directly derivable from the influxes from lofty spheres of spirit life.” Echoing the familiar theme, Pardee argued that for society to be reformed, internal principles had to be actualized externally. This was one of the goals of the spirits in communion with the natural world. “Now what is sought to be externalized at this day by spirits, is the wholeness of spiritual civilization; a civilization, which, starting from the centre of a man’s character, shall spread outwardly, like a sphere...so that civilization shall exhibit a harmonic wholeness.” The interior religious sense in all humans was the source of all religions; the interior germ existed in all, but was expressed in various forms historically. Awareness of God was innate. As Pardee explained, “In the most savage nations, you find that after satisfying the cravings of the animal nature, their first thought was of something beyond and superior to them...and involuntarily they fell down and worshipped their idea of God.”

Invoking the ubiquitous motif of religious progress, he noted that “You find that in different nations various kinds of worship have prevailed, corresponding to the degree of development, and these have taken the name of religion.” Stemming from interior inspiration, “the various religions which have appeared have in one sense been spiritual gifts,” Pardee explained, “adapted to the peoples among whom they prevailed, however rude or barbarous and unadapted to the present time some of these religions may seem.” Despite these crudities, external and imperfect forms of religion were necessary for their time. “God graduates himself to his children and meets their wants, adapting their spiritual food to their condition and capacity; and as the nations advanced, as their wholeness of being unfolded by the progressive principle within, a still higher form of religion was given to them.”²³ True religion existed eternally and manifested itself in history ever more fully as the people in a society became more cultivated.

Not all Spiritualists agreed with Emma Hardinge’s aforementioned assertion that Spiritualism was a religion. Debates over whether Spiritualism constituted the true religion, or even a religion at all, featured prominently in the Spiritualist press. In the columns of the

²³ “Abstract of an Address Through Mr. L. Judd Pardee at the Music Hall, Sunday Morning, August 23, 1857,” *Banner of Light* 1, no. 23 (Sep. 10, 1857): 6.

Spiritual Age—“Devoted to Rational Spiritualism and Practical Reform”—of which Samuel B. Brittan was an editor, one correspondent took a position on the matter in 1858 which was very similar to Davis’ later criticism of Spiritualist excesses. The author felt assured of his readers’ agreement with the statement that religion, strictly speaking, was “the conviction that it is the duty of man to love God with his whole heart, and to cherish good will toward all his fellows.” Noting the etymology of the word religion “denotes a ‘binding back’ of the soul to something behind, or superior to, itself,” he argued that “religion, as distinguished from theology, especially insists on, is the great fact of man’s duty, under the laws, and in the sight, of his Maker.” It was therefore a duty or obligation. True religion was similar to the “heart religion” of evangelical Christians.²⁴ It consisted of “realizing in our life, inward and outward, the conviction of our obligation to love our Creator supremely” and acting accordingly to one’s fellows. Spiritualism, however, required no particular duty, but merely referred to “the belief that the spirits of our fellow-men may, and sometimes do, after their departure from their fleshly bodies, continue to hold perceptible and intelligible intercourse with persons living in this earthly sphere.” Consulting spirits was all well and good, but was “quite analogous to going to hear a person whom we presume to be better informed than ourselves on certain subjects, converse or lecture upon them.” Particularly ironic was that “many sensible people, for want of a little reflection in this matter seem really to suppose that their conversing frequently with their departed friend, Tom Jones who, it may be, was never remarkable for attainments in Christian life and knowledge is, somehow, a very sacred and religious act.” Such practice was no more religious in of itself than “reading one of Plato’s (or any other) well-reasoned and convincing demonstrations of the soul’s immortality, and of the importance of a good life here as pre-requisite to a good and happy one hereafter.”²⁵

Moreover, the writer opined, since none of its doctrines were new, Spiritualism could not be considered a new religion, as some would have it. “[L]ike Romanism, Calvinism, Swedenborgianism, or—what it most resembles—Unitarianism, it is not, strictly speaking, *religion* at all, but only *theology*. It is not life; it is only knowledge.” “Let Spiritualism, then, be valued as an aid to religion, and used in its service; but let us never delude ourselves with

²⁴ Catherine Albanese notes the similarity of “metaphysical” religion to evangelical “heart religion,” but suggests that it is substituted for the experience of “mind,” construed in an exceedingly broad sense that includes clairvoyance and intuition. Albanese, *Republic*, 6.

²⁵ G. B. F., “Spiritualism Not Religion,” *Spiritual Age* 1, no. 24 (Jun. 12, 1858): 1.

the dangerous falsehood that belief in it, however sincere, is itself religion...—but only ‘*to be spiritually minded*, is life and peace.’”²⁶ Underscoring the controversial nature of the debate, one of the paper’s editors, A. E. Newton, followed the article with a disclaimer of his own, arguing that “Spiritualism is sometimes used in the broad sense of a comprehensive System of truth, including all that relates to the spiritual nature, capacities, needs, destiny, etc., of man, of course embracing his religious faculties and all truth which appeals to them. Considered, however, in its mere *phenomenal* aspect, as the *fact* of spirit-communion (which is all that is ordinarily meant by the term), Spiritualism is not a Religion, as our correspondent avers.”²⁷

Another correspondent took issue with this refusal to call Spiritualism a religion a month later and charged the initial author with holding a view of religion that was “peculiar, and wholly unsustained by that popular belief which pervades the mass of the people, and which acknowledges religion as that sentiment which embodies our belief in a future life, and our hope of happiness hereafter.” Beyond merely bringing us closer to our lost loved ones and providing assurance of a life after death, “Spiritualism teaches that God is Love. It exhorts us to do good, disposes us to love God and all God’s creatures, and strive to promote the happiness of all mankind.” Taking particular aim at the writer’s differentiation between “religion” and “theology,” the correspondent observed that most people, including the clergy, used the two synonymously. “We are told of biblical and of ecclesiastical Theology and of Practical Theology, or Christian ethics. Human imperfection makes a wide distinction between Religion and Morals, which should never exist... When man is perfect, Theology, Religion and Morals may become synonyms [sic], although but remotely approximating terms so long as Jew, Mohammedan, Pagan, Romanist and Christian are each known and recognized as the followers of a distinct Religion.” Ideally, religion would encompass pure ethics and a sound, scientific theology. That not everyone acted on his beliefs as he ought to should not be held against Spiritualism. “Faith without works is peculiar to no Religion,” the author wrote. “Why, then, should instances of barren faith amongst its professors, condemn Spiritualism? Founded upon the same evidence as Christianity, and when embraced by pure and loving spirits, leading to the same happy results, why may it not with propriety be called

²⁶ Ibid., 1.

²⁷ A. E. Newton, “Spiritualism and Religion,” *Spiritual Age* 1, no. 24 (Jun. 12, 1858): 2.

a Religion?” Going further, he affirmed that Spiritualism was true religion and “the same Religion that Christ taught—I will not say improved from that pure fountain, but more universally taught, and destined, in God’s own time, to transform this rude world into a Paradise.”²⁸

The issue was obviously contentious enough that the editors of the *Spiritual Age* felt the need to articulate their own position on the matter more explicitly in 1859. The first of a series of articles, entitled “Spiritualism in Religion,” tackled the question directly. “We are not of those who regard Spiritualism as a new Religion, or as offering to mankind a distinctive system of religious faith and duty,” the editorial remarked. “On the contrary, we recognize the existence of but ONE absolute Religion; and all the various forms of it which have prevailed among men, however crude or refined, false or true, have indicated efforts at one and the same end.” Embracing the dichotomy between “religion,” in the true and eternal sense, and the historical “religions,” as the accidents or expressions of such truth, the article situated Spiritualism as a means to bridge the two; in other words, to realize the absolute religion in history. “Spiritualism we regard as a most valuable help to a broad and clear understanding of the one universal Religion, and to an enlightened and loyal performance of its duties,” the article proclaimed. “We shall treat it, therefore, not as being in itself a defined system of religious doctrines, but as an element, the infusion of which into all systems of Science, Philosophy or Religion, will vastly clarify, elucidate and elevate; and out from them educe an eclectic, complete, harmonious system of Universal Truth.” As A. E. Newton previously suggested, the *Spiritual Age* would take Spiritualism in a broader sense than mere spirit communication and insisted on embracing interior principles within it. “The word *spiritual* involves the fundamental ideas of refined, pure, ethereal, essential, internal, etc. Hence no theory or practice that is at variance with these qualities can with propriety be termed Spiritualism. It, therefore, is the opposite of mere materialism in science, of superficiality and atheism in Philosophy, of externalism in Religion, and of selfishness and sensualism in Morals.” Despite the modernizing tendency to separate knowledge into different specialized spheres such as science or religion, the editors saw Spiritualism as something that could bridge this growing divide by opposing the superficial aspects of each form of knowledge.

²⁸ W. S. W., “Is Spiritualism a Religion?” *Spiritual Age* 1, no. 29 (Jul. 17, 1858): 1.

Religion, contrary to the belief of some, went beyond the crude, superstitious doctrines and priestcraft of that unfortunately characterized “Much of the so-called religion of the world.” Rehashing the linguistic argument that religion signified binding and therefore duty and obligation, the editorial stated that the “fundamental idea of Religion, it will be observed, is *sense of duty*, or *obligation*.” A strong coercive element, such as the Christian fear of hell or punishment, helped push the less developed into compliance with their duties, since their natural inclinations shied away from these. “But as man becomes enlightened and spiritualized, or truly regenerate, he perceives and loves the right and the good; he chooses them for their own sakes; his spontaneities become pure; duty fades into delight, and religion merges into *spirituality*.” The true religion was spiritual and interior, but development took time. Cruder expressions of external religion were necessary “stepping-stones to higher and more spiritual conceptions.”²⁹

An article in the *Banner of Light* similarly privileged obligation to God, and to others, and argued that “but one Law only forms [the Spiritualist] basis of faith and rule of life, and that is, ‘Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and thy neighbor as thyself.’ This is all there is of any importance in Religion.”³⁰ Weighing in on the nature of Spiritualism in his 1871 work *Arcana of Spiritualism*, the prominent Spiritualist Hudson Tuttle, whose works Davis promoted,³¹ characterized it as “knowledge of everything pertaining to the spiritual nature of man” and a “cosmopolitan eclecticism, receiving all that is good, and rejecting all that is bad.” Nonetheless, he, too, differentiated between Spiritualism as a broad descriptor for belief in spirit communication and as true religion. “Those who believe that departed spirits communicate with man, however else they disagree, are Spiritualists; but only as they cultivate the noble faculties, and harmonize their lives, are they entitled to the name in its highest meaning,” he wrote.³²

James M. Peebles (1822-1922), a former Universalist minister,³³ put a similar premium on moral development as the core of true religion, in stark contrast to the bigotry of

²⁹ “Spiritualism in Religion.—No. I,” *Spiritual Age* 2, no. 11 (Mar. 12, 1859): 2.

³⁰ “Fanaticism,” *Banner of Light* 1, no. 18 (Aug. 6, 1857): 4.

³¹ Andrew Jackson Davis, “Wanted—Complete Works of Hudson Tuttle,” *Religio-Philosophical Journal* 19, no. (Dec. 25, 1875): 326.

³² Hudson Tuttle, *Arcana of Spiritualism: A Manual of Spiritual Science and Philosophy* (Boston: Adams & Co., 1871), 13.

³³ Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 185.

organized religion, when he wrote to the *Banner* in 1860 that Spiritualism “says to each individual, ‘Be thyself, honor thy inner Christhood, live the spiritual life, live up to the highest ideal of the absolute right, following the authority of God’s truth as revealed in thine inmost nature, and speaking out thine highest inspired thoughts, though faggots be kindled and the cross rebuilt.’”³⁴

Achsa Sprague, too, took this “higher” view of Spiritualism, equating it with the progressive discernment of natural laws and then living by them. “Spiritualism is a religion that not only allows investigation, but demands it; and the more it is tested, the firmer and clearer it becomes,” she declared. By contrast, “The phenomena of the nineteenth century” were merely “for the satisfaction of doubting Thomases.” Spiritualism was, by way of its empiricism, “a rational religion”; it answered the call of the nineteenth century, when “science and laws are better understood,” for a religion “that assures [the world] of immortality in a rational manner.” In this way, she declared, “Inquiry has changed the Atheist and Deist—thinkers—into believers in the beauties and realities of the divine life.” True religion had nothing to fear. “Some men talk as though religion could be harmed,” she chastised the audience, “—as though it needed to be fenced about for security. A religion that needs such support is surely a rotten one.”³⁵

Additionally, Sprague emphasized, “Spiritualism is a practical religion. It is a steady search after wisdom and knowledge, and a measuring of your life by it.” The discernment of natural principles and a moral self-culture based on them constituted true religion, and, in that regard, Spiritualism qualified so long as it went beyond mere phenomena and formality. “The aim of this religion is not to worship God,” Sprague noted, “so much as to strengthen and individualize the human mind. It is not alone to make men better, but to flood the world with thoughts of nobleness and beauty.”³⁶ Thus, like Davis, the willingness of many to claim Spiritualism as religion hinged very much on how one chose to define it. Religion had to encompass an inward moral self-culture, and not just outward forms, regardless of whether these manifested as the séance circle or the Catholic Mass. The disagreement tended to focus more on whether the term could be applied to both the interior and external aspects of Spiritualism, or merely the latter.

³⁴ James M. Peebles, “Letter fro [sic] J. M. Peebles,” *Banner of Light* 7, no. 17 (Jul. 21, 1860): 6.

³⁵ “Miss A. W. Sprague at Allston Hall,” 8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

The eternal and inward truths of Spiritualism stood, for some like Hudson Tuttle, in stark contrast to the empty forms of Christianity, or “Churchianity,” as he colourfully dismissed it.³⁷ “Spiritualism is not a religion descending from a foreign source, to be borne as a cross: it is an outgrowth of human nature, and the complete expression of its highest ideal. Have you a truth?—it seizes it. Has the negro of Africa a truth? Spiritualism asks not its origin, but makes it its own.”³⁸ True religion was interior and an expression of human divinity. Though seemingly expecting less truth from Africans, Tuttle nonetheless maintained that all humans, regardless of race, were capable of producing novel and valuable revelations. Tuttle was programatically eclectic and argued that Spiritualists ought to draw from the best truths that the world’s religions had to offer and discard their falsehoods: “Like the bee, drinking nectar from the poisonous nightshade as well as from the fragrant rose, it absorbs the *truths* of Catholicism, of Mohammedanism, of Buddhism, of Philosophy. It is not a religion; it is not a philosophy: it is a perfect union of the two with science.”³⁹

Spiritualism was therefore the ultimate synthesis of knowledge. Reflecting anxieties over modernity, it appropriated the greatest revelations of the world’s religions, and also bridged the gap with science and philosophy, ever-widening by 1871 when Tuttle published *Arcana of Spiritualism*.⁴⁰ Nor was he alone in this view. Benjamin Franklin Hatch, the first (and significantly older) husband of medium Cora Hatch,⁴¹ noted in the preface to an 1858 collection of his wife’s trance lectures that “no true principles of religious ethics can ever be divorced from the manifestations of God in the material universe,” and, for this reason, in all of his wife’s “discourses there is a blending of Religion and Science, the one the material form of which the other is the spirit.”⁴² The interior-external logic of correspondence applied to religion and science as well.

³⁷ Tuttle, *Arcana*, 423.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 426.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 442.

⁴⁰ Bergunder, “‘Religion’ and ‘Science’ within a Global Religious History,” 86-141; Harrison, “‘Science’ and ‘Religion,’” 86-106.

⁴¹ Cora Hatch (née Scott) was sixteenth when they married, making Dr. Hatch almost three times her age. Ann Braude, “Richmond, Cora L. V. Scott Hatch Daniels Tappan (1840-1923),” in *American National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Retrieved 27 Aug. 2018. <http://www.anb.org/view/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.001.0001/anb-9780198606697-e-0801893>; Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 135.

⁴² B. F. Hatch, preface to *Discourses on Religion, Morals, Philosophy, and Metaphysics*, vol. 1, Cora L. V. Hatch (New York: B. F. Hatch, 1858), 5.

While the *Banner of Light* was the most mainstream and moderate of the Spiritualist periodicals that “avoided bitter attacks on orthodoxy and did not routinely equate Christianity with other religions” and was more representative of the “Christian Spiritualist” end of the spectrum, a neat division between anti- and pro-Christian Spiritualism is fraught with difficulties.⁴³ Given the more conciliatory voices of the moderates, Catherine Albanese has suggested that “the anti-Christian reputation of spiritualism seems overblown.”⁴⁴ While it is certainly important to bear in mind that not all Spiritualists were as relentless in their criticisms of Christian orthodoxy as individuals like Davis, journals like the *Banner* were by no means above attacks on what they saw as a false conception of Christianity. Like some of the Harmonialists we saw in the previous chapter or Theodore Parker, they were willing to differentiate between an external or historical form of Christianity and a true, eternal essence: the primitive Christianity of Christ, which, of course was Spiritualism. In other words, they engaged in a form of Christian restorationism, but with Spiritualist inflections.⁴⁵

Such a position was not that far from Davis’ own, since he too had argued that the pure teachings of Christ had been corrupted by priestcraft. Nonetheless, even an attack on orthodoxy in an attempt to position oneself as the true representative of Christianity contributed to undermining Christian claims to exclusivity by making its position assailable. As Peter Harrison argued for the early modern period, polemics against other sects could have the unintended side-effect of making Christianity as a whole open to comparisons to “heathenism.”⁴⁶ Thus, even while the Christian Spiritualists positioned themselves as purer Christians, they placed historical Christianity in the same category as other religions and generally accepted that there were other lesser spiritual teachers aside from Jesus.⁴⁷

⁴³ Ann Taves prefers to see Spiritualists on a continuum between Christian and non-Christian rather than as a dichotomy. Nonetheless, the pressure to identify with one camp or the other increased later in the nineteenth century, as Christian Spiritualists tended to view themselves as being in the minority. Significantly, Spiritualists of all stripes hoped for the inauguration of a universal religion for all mankind, whether Christian or not. Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 184-85, 400n1, 401n2; Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 107-108.

⁴⁴ Frank Podmore also concluded in 1902 that, with the exception of a few like Davis, “Spiritualists in general showed no hostility to the Christian faith,” though they tended to reject Christ’s uniqueness and biblical authority. Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, vol. 1, 299-300; Albanese, *Republic*, 233.

⁴⁵ Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 186.

⁴⁶ Harrison, ‘*Religion*’ and the Religions, 9, 146.

⁴⁷ For Cora (Hatch) Richmond’s definition of Christian Spiritualists, see Cora L. V. Richmond, “Presentation of Spiritualism. To the World’s Parliament of Religions, Chicago, October, 1893,” in *Proceedings of the National Delegate Convention of Spiritualists of the United States of America. Held in Chicago, Illinois, September 27, 28, and 29, 1893* (Washington, D.C.: Stormont & Jackson, 1893), 178.

The *Banner*, for instance, compared the Spiritualism of the nineteenth century to the advent of Christianity, noting how in both cases the orthodox clergy were bitterly opposed. “Spiritualism comes as Christianity came,” the editors wrote, “scorned and ridiculed by priest and the learned, loved and cherished by man and the people.” Then, as now, the clergy failed to exercise reason and instead “rested entirely on the words of another,” fearfully deriding the new religion. Emphasizing the popular nature of Spiritualism, the article noted that “It cannot boast of many wise or many mighty as among those called to its fold—neither could Christianity—but it has a great host of true and honest hearts gathered around its pure white banner. Hearts that speak the truth, and that love the truth for the truth’s sake; hearts that throw creed and dogma to the winds, and feel their freed spirits rise as the weight falls off.” Just as the Pharisee priests had rejected the true spiritual principles of Jesus, modern-day clergymen spurned the light of Spiritualism. Spiritualism would nonetheless press on fearlessly with “no darling creed to cherish, no pulpit to sustain, no priesthood to fear or favor.”⁴⁸ “Alas,” bemoaned another *Banner* writer, “that a Godless priesthood should still persist in feeding us with their dead formulas, whose fruit, like the Dead Sea apples, are but ashes to the taste.”⁴⁹

Another article that the *Banner* reprinted from Partridge and Brittan’s *Spiritual Telegraph*,⁵⁰ observed with satisfaction that “Our clerical and orthodox brethren have become comparative silent, either in astonishment at the rapid spread of the new faith, or becoming suspicious that there is more in it than meets the eye of their superficial philosophy.” Realizing that they were powerless to stop the advance of Spiritualism, they were being forced to adapt lest they become extinct. In light of this, “the churches are making up their minds that a Spiritualist may even be a Christian.”⁵¹ The celebrated medium Cora Hatch (1840-1923)—born Scott, and subsequently known as Hatch, Daniels, Tappan, and, finally,

⁴⁸ “Introductory,” *Banner of Light* 1, no. 4 (Apr. 30, 1857): 6.

⁴⁹ C. B. P., “Ancient Glimpses of the Spirit Land: Number Twenty-One,” *Banner of Light* 8, no. 15 (Jan. 5, 1861): 3.

⁵⁰ According to Uriah Clark, the *Spiritual Telegraph* had over five thousand subscribers in 1857. Clark, “Weekly Spiritualist Journals,” *The Spiritualist Register* (1857). R. Laurence Moore calls it “the most widely circulated spiritualist newspaper of the period” until it was overtaken by Luther Colby’s *Banner of Light*.

⁵¹ “The Church Tolerating Spiritualism,” *Banner of Light* 1, no. 4 (Apr. 30, 1857): 6.

Richmond from later husbands⁵²—situated Spiritualism as the mediating force between the crude forms of religion that predated it and a coming true Christianity that was activist instead of merely doctrinal. Spiritualism was a “stepping-stone from Infidelity to Christianity—that true Christianity which consists not simply in a form of belief, but in a practice of a life in harmony with God.”⁵³

Hatch’s emphasis on true Christianity as practical was in fitting with her upbringing. At age ten, her family moved to Adin Ballou’s Hopedale—a Christian socialist commune in Massachusetts with a heavy reform emphasis and practices of spirit communication. At eleven, by then at a similar commune in Wisconsin, she started channelling the spirit of Adin Augustus Ballou—Ballou Sr.’s beloved and recently deceased son—and other spirits through automatic writing and trance speaking. Under the management of first her father and then her husband—who she later accused of exploiting her and keeping all of her income—Hatch embarked on possibly the most successful trance-speaking career of the Spiritualist movement.⁵⁴

In shades of Theodore Parker, whose spirit she frequently channeled after his death,⁵⁵ Hatch affirmed that the eternal and true Christianity was what Jesus had preached, and that it had manifested itself in different religions. “The Christian religion, that which Christ taught, is not essentially a new religion,” she declared. “It had been embodied in religions long before that, but he practically demonstrated what men had previously taught. He was a Christian, because he lived what he believed.” This stood in stark contrast to nominal Christians who only followed the external forms of religion. “There is a wonderful difference between practising and preaching; between the religion of Jesus of Nazareth and that of the

⁵² Embittered by their divorce, Dr. Benjamin Hatch released a pamphlet in which he denounced the loose marital relationship of Spiritualists, alleged that half of the three hundred mediums he surveyed were divorced, and that many others were permitted by their spouses to live with other lovers. For her part, the former Mrs. Hatch accused him of associating with prostitutes and of hurting her “health and delicacy” with his unseemly sexual appetites. Moore, *White Crows*, 118; Braude, “Richmond, Cora L. V. Scott Hatch Daniels Tappan (1840-1923)”); Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, vol. 2, 134.

⁵³ Hatch, *Discourses*, 102. Theodore Parker wrote that if “Jesus of Nazareth had never lived, still Christianity would stand firm, and fear no evil.” Parker argued that “Christianity is not a system of doctrines, but rather a method of attaining oneness with God. It demands, therefore, a good life of piety within, of purity without, and gives the promise that whoso does God’s will, shall know of God’s doctrine.” Parker. “A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity,” 172, 174.

⁵⁴ Braude, “Richmond, Cora L. V. Scott Hatch Daniels Tappan (1840-1923).”

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

tall-spired churches of your nineteenth century; between that which was exhibited on Mount Calvary and that which rolls by in fine coaches and preaches in gilded altars.”⁵⁶

The anti-credal character of Spiritualism extended to their own activities. The *Banner* took such a stance and condemned conventions as futile in 1857, arguing that “Spiritualists do not want any rules prescribed for them by any set of men. They want no creeds, no priests, no deacons, fastened upon them to enslave them.”⁵⁷ Tuttle agreed in 1871, expressing skepticism of conventions or organizations except as the “best method to reach desirable results.” All organizations had to be based on “absolute personal freedom, and unquestioned right to individual opinion and action.” Immediate and interior revelation made Spiritualism the ultimate form of spiritual “self-reliance.” “It frees man from the bondage of authority of book and creed. Its only authority is truth; its interpreter, reason,” Tuttle wrote. Utterly rejecting unifying creeds, he took the individualizing impulse of Spiritualism to its furthest conclusion, stating simply, “Every individual must be a law unto himself, and draft his own creed, but not seek to force such on others.”⁵⁸ Spiritualism, Tuttle believed, was a radical outgrowth of Protestantism, which granted the “right of private opinion.” Indeed, he “this protestation may go on to the complete separation of all individuals, leaving all believing and acting differently.”⁵⁹ Tuttle, however, was not willing to acknowledge “Christian Spiritualism” as legitimate on the grounds that Christianity “cannot let go its concremented dogmas for the individualism of the new philosophy,” try as it might.⁶⁰

Individualism was, however, critical to the Spiritualist conception of true religion. If interiorly situated, individual judgment against the standard of reason and nature was the only true measure. Such a view of religion necessitated a willingness to defy orthodoxy and the conventions of one’s time. “Infidelity,” Tuttle wrote, “as now used by the church, so far from being a term of reproach, is the most honorable title that can be bestowed; for it means a thinker, one who can and does think for himself, and act on his own responsibility.” Relativizing the religions of the world, in a move reminiscent of Davis, Tuttle remarked that “The Christian is infidel to the creed of the Mohammedan, and the latter is an infidel in the

⁵⁶ Hatch, *Discourses*, 245.

⁵⁷ “Fanaticism,” 4.

⁵⁸ Tuttle, *Arcana*, 17-18.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 414.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 422.

estimation of the Christian. The Brahman is an infidel to Christianity, and the Chinese are infidel to Brahmanism.” All held to an arbitrary standard of religious authority and therefore each could denounce the others with equal justice. But, cleaving to orthodoxy was no virtue. “Jesus was an infidel,” Tuttle reminded readers, as were “Melancthon [sic], Luther, and Calvin.” “The infidel has good company. Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Newton, Laplace, and Herschel are with him in science; and Confucius, Zoroaster, and Christ are with him in religion.”⁶¹ Of note was that Tuttle similarly conceptualized those who pushed the bounds of science forward with those who advanced religion. In neither case were they special and authoritative revelators, rather they were renegades who defied the limits of their age and followed the dictates of their own conscience and reason.

Despite the belief that Spiritualism was true Christianity, moderate Spiritualists nonetheless saw other religions as conceptually equivalent to Christianity and recognized spiritual truth in their teachings. For example, an 1857 article in the *Banner* introduced readers to various sects of Islam. Among these were the “Hanefees,” who the article described as “the contemplative philosophers, Oriental spiritualists or transcendentalists.” In addition, there were the “whirling dervishes,” or “Mevleves,” who the excerpt designated as “the Oriental Shakers.” These Oriental Shakers were alleged to practice “resignation to God” by means of losing themselves in their ecstatic dances. Not missing an opportunity to take a swipe at orthodox Christians, the author observed, “There appears to be as much reason in the creed of the Mevleves as in many of the ‘articles’ to which some in our part of the world subscribe as essential to salvation.”⁶² The implications of the article were twofold: one, that external Christianity as practiced was in no way superior to or conceptually distinct from those considered heathens, and, two, that there could be truly “philosophical” groups around the world that had independently arrived at the truths of Spiritualism.

Indeed, as Cora Hatch noted in a trance lecture, the truths and phenomena of Spiritualism were universal and transcended time. Speaking to a Brooklyn audience in 1857, she explained that “Modern Spiritualism is so called simply because there are manifestations, phenomena, and revealments, in this age, which correspond with those of the apostolic age. Modern Spiritualism signifies the Spiritualism of the present age, and so signifies, by

⁶¹ Ibid., 415-16.

⁶² “Oriental Shakers,” *Banner of Light* 1, no. 4 (Apr. 30, 1857): 6.

antithesis, that there is an ancient Spiritualism.”⁶³ The outward forms had changed, but there were commonalities that could be read in different traditions and throughout history. This true interior germ of religion, identified with Spiritualism, was revealed to different prophets by means of direct inspiration or communications from the spirit world.

Revelation

As with Davis and the Harmonialists, Spiritualists believed strongly in the possibility and necessity of ongoing revelation. The interior quality of true religion meant that one’s own personal experience of the divine, unmediated by priests and rituals, was central. As Achsa Sprague inquired, “When God has spoken to you, does it need a pope or bishop to vouch for it?” Opposed to free, individual revelation, “the churches are more prone to close the hearts of men against the light of progression,” she warned. But, “Men of thought will achieve new truth, though the fiat of the church be sent out against it. So prophets, and martyrs’ spirits have spoken in all times.”⁶⁴ Direct revelation was freedom. It removed the necessity for mediators and churchly authorities. Given the centrality of ongoing revelation to Spiritualist ideas about true religion, they required models to explain revelations in all times and places. These usually took the form of direct inspiration or as intermediary messages from the spirit world.

Spiritualists, like the Harmonialists, drew heavily on the theories of Mesmerism to provide a model for direct inspiration. In her history of the movement, Emma Hardinge, while being careful to note that Mesmerism was not “a complete solution to the mysteries of Spiritualism,” nonetheless “performed an important part in ushering in the more comprehensive movement of Spiritualism.” With “its wonderful results in somnambulism and clairvoyance,” Mesmerism preprepared the ground for Spiritualism by getting people interested in such phenomena. “[M]any of the best mediums—especially the trance speakers and magnetic operators—have taken their first degree in Spiritualism, as experimentalists in the phenomena of mesmerism,” she explained. In particular, she noted, Davis and his philosophy became the bridge or “interregnum” between the two movements. “Chemistry,

⁶³ Hatch, *Discourses*, 95.

⁶⁴ “Miss A. W. Sprague at Allston Hall,” 8.

Physiology, Phrenology, Magnetism, and Clairvoyance” were all “steps leading up through the once-forbidden mysteries of nature” and “the temple of mind” where the “telegraphic knocks of the spirit” invited humanity to “ascend, as on a Jacob’s ladder, that mighty column where Physics is the base, Science the shaft, Metaphysics the superstructure, and Spiritualism the coronal glory of the capital.”⁶⁵

As historian Ann Taves has convincingly demonstrated, Mesmerism was significant for Spiritualist views about religion and revelation because “trance states could provide access to the spirit realm.” The Spiritualist “view of trance as a common or universal doorway to the other world provided a new basis for interpreting the Bible, the history of Christianity, and the various religions of the world.”⁶⁶ Or as Albert Gabay suggested, the “alternate-consciousness paradigm” of Mesmerism provided access to the “alternate-reality paradigm” revealed in the visions of Emanuel Swedenborg. Mesmerism was one of the key modes of revelation for Spiritualists, as it had been with Davis.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, as R. Laurence Moore observed, the Harmonialist emphasis on cultivating the interior senses became heavily diluted by the general Spiritualist emphasis on spirit communication and demonstrations detectible by the ordinary senses.⁶⁸

As with the Harmonialists and earlier “magnetic histories” before them,⁶⁹ Spiritualists read mesmeric phenomena into history and into the practices of other cultures. In doing so, they possessed a versatile theory of revelation that operated universally and carried the air of scientific authority. A surprisingly early report of an (alleged) “Hindoo priest” claiming the commonalities between ancient Indian wisdom and Mesmerism was published in an 1853 issue of the *Spiritual Telegraph*, as well as in the *American Phrenological Journal*. The source of both articles was a letter from California by an A. B. Pope to a friend out east, describing an encounter with a “Hindoo priest” and “celestial medium” by the name of “Lehanteka.” Lehanteka’s philosophy of mind, Pope observed, was very similar to that advanced by the Spiritualist J. R. Buchanan in his *Journal of Man*.⁷⁰ For his part, Buchanan

⁶⁵ Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 22-23; see also, Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 167-68 and Albanese, *Republic*, 206-207.

⁶⁶ Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 167.

⁶⁷ Gabay, *Covert Enlightenment*, 228-30, 248.

⁶⁸ Moore, *White Crows*, 18-19.

⁶⁹ Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 139-41.

⁷⁰ A. B. Pope, “Hindoo Mysteries in California,” *Spiritual Telegraph Papers*, vol. 1 (New York: Partridge & Brittan, 1853), 346-47.

repudiated the comparison in a later article and balked at the notion that a Hindu priest would have a comparable theory of the mind to his own. He dismissed the “tendency of the Hindoo mind in ancient times” as “speculative and poetic, but not scientific. In the VEDAS, and in the poems of KALIDASA,” he continued, “as well as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and the later Bhatti-kâvya, the descriptions of Nature are poetic and devotional—sometimes highly graphic and picturesque, but never philosophic.” More likely, he believed, was that Lehanteka was an English or American impostor.⁷¹

Lehanteka’s philosophy of Nature, Pope explained, taught that everything “serves in some way to transfer matter from a lower to a higher state of refinement,” a sentiment that sounded extraordinarily like Davis’ law of progression and development. “[S]cience and religion,” he continued, “are calculated to qualify minds for the next state of transformation.” Additionally, Lehanteka taught “that the mind, strictly speaking, is a feeling (sensorial) substance; and that to accomplish its appropriate functions, it is endowed with an organized apparatus which serves to multiply and diversify its sensory powers, and to enlarge its capacity for scientific and religious instructions.”⁷²

Furthermore, the mind possessed the ability to associate with objects beyond the body. As William Fishbough, an associate of Davis, explained in the *American Phrenological Journal*, Lehanteka believed that the highest of the three departments of man was “an interior and supersensuous medium, or soul-essence, by which knowledge may be obtained of outer things, and active connection may be formed with them, by *direct volition*, and without the intervention of any physical medium. This he calls the *celestial* department of the soul, and its full development and exercise he calls ‘magic,’ or ‘celestial wisdom.’” Thus, Lehanteka’s Hindu wisdom paralleled the Harmonialist view that of man as a trinity, and of the correspondence between true interior essences and outward, external forms. Fishbough further explained that by use of the will, Lehanteka could perform feats of impressive clairvoyance or create hallucinations in others, such as birds flying across the room. “By this experiment,” Fishbough observed, “he showed a mastery of the general principles on which the electro-psychologists, so called, of our own country, produce illusions upon susceptible minds.” Moreover, “Lehanteka did not speak of these arts and mysteries as being peculiar to

⁷¹ J. R. Buchanan, “Hindoo Philosophy,” *Spiritual Telegraph Papers*, vol. 2 (New York: Partridge & Brittan, 1853), 48-50.

⁷² Pope, “Hindoo Mysteries in California,” 347.

himself, but as having been possessed, in common, by the Hindoo priesthood from time immemorial. Their identity, in all essential principles, with the science and arts of animal magnetism, clairvoyance, electro-psychology, psychometry, &c., as more recently discovered in Europe and America, cannot fail to be perceived.” Indeed, the fact that “these psychological arts and sciences, which among us are of recent discovery, have been known and practised among the sacerdotal orders of the Hindoos from immemorial time, should certainly go far to remove any remaining doubts as to their reality,” Fishbough observed. “[F]or surely it is not probable that essentially the same theories would have been hit upon in different ages, and by people so widely disconnected, and that they would have been perpetuated, withal, through so long periods, if they had not some substantial foundation in nature.”⁷³

A similar reading of Mesmerism and Spiritualist practices in India came from James M. Peebles. With Mesmerism as an explanatory framework for the miraculous, he followed the early precedent Davis had set for the movement by reconceptualizing Jesus as a highly developed man in possession of magnetic powers. Peebles went further and implicitly put Jesus in the same ancient Spiritualist tradition in which he saw Brahmin priests by noting the common source of their seemingly miraculous feats: “As a common magnet will lift up a piece of steel, so by spirit attraction did Jesus walk upon the sea; and as a table, or other object by invisible hands, under the same law, is carried above the heads of the spiritual circle, so were the Brahmins of India floated in the air, which many a medium to-day can testify is true. How beautiful is history under the light of Spiritualism!”⁷⁴ Animal magnetism both explained the miracles of Jesus and the mysterious powers of Hindu priests, but, significantly, drew a line of continuity to the present by comparing both to the table tipping and levitation performed by contemporary mediums at the séance.

In some cases, altered states of consciousness could be achieved by other means. With regards to mediumship, Hudson Tuttle observed, “Impressibility may be natural or induced. Fasting, the use of narcotics, stimulants, sickness, or loss of sleep, are favorable to the manifestation of the spirit-power. Whatever weakens the body increases impressibility, and

⁷³ William Fishbough, “Psychological Mysteries of the Hindoos,” *American Phrenological Journal* 18, no. 2 (Aug. 1, 1853): 33.

⁷⁴ James M. Peebles, *Seers of the Ages: Embracing Spiritualism, Past and Present. Doctrines Stated and Moral Tendencies Defined* (Boston: William White and Co., 1869), 30.

thus allows the nearer approach of the spirit-world.” Even Jesus had undergone extensive fasting in the desert. Foreshadowing the twentieth-century interest in shamanism and the use of mind-expanding psychedelics,⁷⁵ Tuttle noted, “Various substances from the vegetable and mineral kingdoms have been employed, more especially by savage peoples, to induce a state of excitement or intoxication, whereby sensitiveness might be produced.”⁷⁶ While difficult to demonstrate a direct influence on Spiritualism historically, however tantalizing, Catherine Albanese has observed that native American shamanistic practices were a part of the general cultural tapestry of nineteenth-century America, and at least some Spiritualists saw commonalities, if crude, between their own practices and those of the Indians.⁷⁷

Another source of revelation, most heavily emphasized in mass Spiritualism, was communication with spirits, the “ministry of spirits.” Davis’ prediction of an age of free communion with the spiritual spheres, as previously mentioned, seemed to have come true after the 1848 Rochester rappings and other modern phenomena.⁷⁸ The séance was the principle ritual of Spiritualist practice, with spirit communication being, in the words of Bret Carroll, “the central, most distinctive, and most attractive feature of their new religion.” Such communications came in a wide range of forms, including rappings, table tipping, possession of the medium by a spirit, automatic writing, disembodied voices, and even full materializations of spirits in front of the sitters. Spiritualists tended, for the most part, to receive revelation from spiritual intermediaries rather than God, who existed in tension between the abstract principle of Enlightenment Deism and the loving father of Romantic liberal Protestantism. Spirit ministry helped bring the divine closer even as God became distant. Carroll, too, notes the disdain for the religious authority of the clergy implied by having spirits take their place in ministering to humanity. Notably, spirit communication also complicated the notion of “direct revelation” because, while communications from the spirit world challenged clerical authority, they created a new source of authority in the medium herself. Moreover, Spiritualists understood the spirits to be individuals with their own personhood, and placed great emphasis on their teachings.⁷⁹ Thus, while spirit

⁷⁵ For example, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Entheogenic Esotericism,” in *Contemporary Esotericism*, eds. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (London: Routledge, 2014), 392-409.

⁷⁶ Tuttle, *Arcana*, 298-99.

⁷⁷ Albanese, *Republic*, 252-53.

⁷⁸ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 675.

⁷⁹ Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 85-86.

communication was an important component of ongoing revelation, it should not be conflated with direct revelation. In fact, Spiritualists themselves made the distinction, as evidenced by individuals like Davis, who differentiated between different types mediums, as enablers of spirit communication or impressions, and independent clairvoyants, who could associate with higher knowledge and could see interior essences and spirits.⁸⁰

As scholars have noticed, spirit communication introduced a strange paradox in that it allowed the ghosts of the past to help steer the course of the future; it looked back even as it looked forward.⁸¹ In this way, Achsa Sprague could promise her audience that “The Spirits of the past are your teachers. Plato, Socrates, Cicero, Confucius, are no longer dead, but living, and they stand beside you to give of the wealth of their experience.”⁸² The Persian prophet Zoroaster similarly returned through the mediumship of one of the relatively rare black mediums, Paschal Beverly Randolph, to emphasize the ongoing nature of revelation and eternal progress. “When I was a dweller of Earth,” said Zoroaster, “I thought I had attained the acme of morality—the summit of the mount of Wisdom.” Yet, the “subtile principle of progress” had advanced religious conceptions since the days when Zoroaster and his followers worshiped “at the shrine of Ormuzd and Ahriman, the Deified ideas of the Persian mind, not the True and Everliving God of Nature!” Predictably, progress, said the “prophet, seer, . . . prince” and one time “demi-god,” Zoroaster, would be aided by spiritual intermediaries: “Men are not yet able to walk alone on the dizzy heights of absolute knowledge; they need a nurse and revealer, and, lo! they have both in Spiritual Ministrants!”⁸³

The *Banner of Light*—strong proponents of spirit communication—went so far as to suggest that “All forms and modes of worship, all faiths and creeds were based on it.” “Ancient history,” it noted, “gives us numerous instances of the appearance of spirits, and spiritualism in the days of which it speaks was the universal belief of the people.”⁸⁴ A Boston medium struck a similar note when she asserted, “It matters not at what page of history we

⁸⁰ Albanese, *Republic*, 223, 225; Davis, *Philosophy of Spiritual Intercourse*, 97; Davis, *Magic Staff*, 308-12; Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Present Age and Inner Life; Ancient and Modern Spirit Mysteries Classified and Explained. A Sequel to Spiritual Intercourse. Revised and Enlarged* (Boston: William White & Co., 1869), 172-287.

⁸¹ Gutierrez, *Plato's Ghost*, 4-5, 13.

⁸² “Miss A. W. Sprague at Allston Hall,” 8.

⁸³ P. B. Randolph “From One of the Ancients,” *Spiritual Telegraph Papers*, vol. 1, 333-34.

⁸⁴ “Early Manifestations,” *Banner of Light* 1, no. 4 (Apr. 30, 1857): 7.

turn, we find the impress of angels there.”⁸⁵ Moreover, Spiritualists continued the Harmonialist challenge to cessationist Christians who denied the possibility of ongoing revelations and demanded that they prove that there was any scriptural warrant for their position. As the *Banner* noted, “every attentive and intelligent reader of the Bible” would “find no proof upon its pages that spirit communion was not to be permitted the world in future, even as it had been in the past.” Moreover, the editorial argued, the “Christian system of faith...rests upon such a foundation alone as is furnished by the very same sort of ‘manifestations,’” that Christians sought “to turn over to ridicule.”⁸⁶

Even among the most primitive people, spirit communication was ubiquitous. “Among savage peoples, the belief in the existence and presence of spiritual beings is almost universal,” wrote Hudson Tuttle. While enlightened nineteenth-century Americans might scoff at their methods of mediumship, such as “The shaking of the bunch of cocoanuts” by “the Feejean,” they nevertheless produced “communications...adapted to the wants of the receiver” as much “as the pen of the inspired medium to another race.”⁸⁷ Uriah Clark, writing in 1863, also considered revelations from direct inspiration and spirit communication to be universal and, indeed, a requirement for religion. “Every age and nation have had their religions and revelations,” he wrote, “and the very idea of religion and revelations presupposes the necessity of inspiration from the invisible world, and the agency of spiritual intelligences acting as angels or ministering spirits to communicate between God and men.”⁸⁸ Clark thus put ongoing revelation from spiritual intermediaries at the heart of religion. Without some bridge between man and the divine, one could not talk about religion in any meaningful sense.

James M. Peebles longed for humanity to “become thoroughly convinced of the present ministry of angels. Aching hearts call for these beautiful ministrations,” he declared, “—the oppressed of all lands pityingly demand them—doubting churchmen require them in demonstration of immortality, and bigoted sectarists, in their highest inspirational moments crave, and should be baptized into their broad equalizing and liberalizing influences.”⁸⁹ The

⁸⁵ “Lecture at the Melodeon,” *Banner of Light* 2, no. 13 (Dec. 26, 1857): 4.

⁸⁶ “Spiritualism Tested by Christianity,” *Banner of Light* 2, no. 9 (Nov. 28, 1857): 4.

⁸⁷ Tuttle, *Arcana*, 292.

⁸⁸ Clark, *Plain Guide to Spiritualism*, 21.

⁸⁹ Peebles, “Letter fro [sic] J. M. Peebles,” 6.

ministry of angels, or spirits, served as a way to broaden revelation and topple the corrupt forms of institutional religion. Thus, Peebles saw the intervention of the spirit world as a way for true religion to become actualized in the world. Exemplifying the Spiritualist premium on experience and empiricism, spirits would develop people's religious sentiments by concrete demonstrations of immortality.

The universal possibility of true revelation and inspiration meant that Spiritualists maintained the position that eternal principles would be expressed in different places and times. Even the *Banner* acknowledged that Jesus' Golden Rule had close equivalents predating him. Nonetheless, the *Banner*, unlike Davis, rated Jesus' expression of this immortal truth as being the most elegant: "Confucius, Pythagoras and Jesus taught the same doctrine of forgiveness; the formers's words and those of Jesus are more nearly alike; but Christ has given the sentiment in the most simple, touching and concise language."⁹⁰

Messages from the spiritual spheres or inspired prophets nonetheless had to be evaluated. Spiritual communications could at times be at odds with each other, be of low quality, or even be demonstrably false. More cautious voices within the movement were careful to note that the source alone did not prove a revelation's authenticity. A. E. Newton, for example, writing in the *Spiritual Age* in 1859, warned that "Nothing is true or authoritative merely because it is written or spoken by a person who is *sometimes* inspired." "Neither can any teaching be infallibly and plenary true, merely because spoken or written under an *inspiring* influence." This was important because, as the Harmonialists had insisted, the quality of inspiration depended on the development of the individual who revealed it. "Niagara cannot be forced through an inch hose-pipe;" Newton wrote, "no more can the thoughts of an archangel or the conceptions of a Deity be fully uttered through even the most capacious human organism, much less through narrow and uncultivated minds." The word of the spirits could not necessarily be taken at face-value either "even though really and unmistakably *inspired from the spirit-world*; for the plain reason that inspiration may come from a great variety of sources from any mind, wise or unwise, angelic or demoniac, that can obtain access to us and establish the conditions of *rapport*." Susceptible to impressions, the passivity of a medium put her at risk of acting as the conduit for false impressions if she was thrown into sympathy with a spirit with a lower nature. Similarly, "Neither do *miracles*

⁹⁰ "Light Shines on all Alike," *Banner of Light* 1, no. 9 (Jun. 4, 1857): 6.

establish the truth or infallibility of accompanying words of inspiration,” since they too could come from a variety of sources. “The Egyptian Magi,” for example “performed as *real*, and with one exception as *great* miracles with the aid of their ‘enchantments,’ as did Moses with the aid of Jehovah. . . . The miracles, in either case, proved nothing as to the *truth of doctrines*—nor can they ever. They only showed superiority of *power* or *skill* on the one part.”⁹¹ The standard of whether “inspired teachings” were true or not was internal. One had to consider “*the intrinsic character, qualities, and tendencies* of the inspired communications themselves,—to which we must apply *our intellectual and moral perceptions and our spiritual intuitions*.”⁹²

Samuel B. Brittan, continuously active in the Spiritualist movement, was critical of unphilosophical “dreamers in whose estimation every idle fancy is deemed a spiritual impression, and who respect the wildest vagary as they would reverence the presence and voice of an angel.” Outlining the policy of his new journal the *Spiritual Telegraph*, he urged that “our spiritualism needs to be *rationalized*,” and that “we must regard the *intrinsic nature* of these manifestations. . . . The only divine authority of any revelation, known to the rational mind, is the TRUTH it contains.”⁹³ Likewise emphasizing the empirical values of Spiritualism, James M. Peebles, writing to the *Banner*, argued that the demonstration provided by spiritual phenomena was far superior to mere faith or second-hand revelations: “Present tangible proofs, touching the soul and soul-forces, is far more satisfactory to profound investigators, than imperfect records of what anciently occurred, though labeled ‘Holy.’ Souls were before books; and all legitimate authority is in man—not in scrolls nor parchments. There is little merit in belief.”⁹⁴ Consistent with the division between external and interior religion, all purported truths had to be subjected to one’s innate religious sense so that truth could be separated from falsehood with no regard for the alleged sacredness of the source. As Selden J. Finney, another former contributor to the *Univercælum*, put it in the *Religio-Philosophical Journal* in 1865, “We do not ask any charity for our delusions. We are not cowards, and do

⁹¹ A. E. Newton, “The Test of Inspiration,” *Spiritual Age* 1 (new series), no. 6 (Oct. 8, 1859): 4.

⁹² A. E. Newton, “The Test of Inspiration. Continued,” *Spiritual Age* 1 (new series), no. 7 (Oct. 15, 1859): 4.

⁹³ Samuel B. Brittan, “Address to the Reader,” *Spiritual Telegraph* 1, no. 1 (May 8, 1852): 2.

⁹⁴ Peebles, “Letter fro [sic] J. M. Peebles,” 6.

not go crying mercy for our faith from the critics. A candid criticism, (a very rare thing to obtain) we invite; an uncandid one we do not fear.”⁹⁵

Suggestive of their Romantic sympathies, Spiritualists as a whole retained the expansive view of revelation seen in the writings of Davis and the Harmonialists. Thus, art and science, increasingly fenced off from religion by the specialization tendency of modernity, were conceptualized by Spiritualists as revelations or inspiration in an attempt to heal the widening divide. L. Judd Pardee explained in a lecture that “there is another, element besides religion in civilization, and that is art and science. The religious element was the avenue through which other energies of man struck out and unfolded themselves, and thus were evolved art and science.” These “came out from the inward, through the agency of spirits, who inspired men with conceptions of art and science, which their constructive and perceptive faculties energized and caused to project into visible forms of use and beauty.” Thus Pardee conceptualized art and science as discrete aspects of culture from religion, but sacralized them by seeing them as operating through the innate religious faculty. They came as direct inspiration from the spirit world, and were then externalized by the specific constitution of the individual. As such, he explained:

The great philosopher does not manufacture the grand thoughts that occupy his mind, but he receives them, appropriates them, and his powers of appropriation, of digestion, and of impartation, correspond to his development. . . . So it is with the poet; he is the recipient of inspiration and truth from the poetic realms; and poetry is a spiritual element in civilization. So with every literary execution, it primarily descends from the inmost; . . . in proportion as his ideas are raised towards the Infinite and towards spiritual things, does literary execution take on the stamp of spirituality.

Revelation was broadened to encompass every facet of civilization, with the ultimate goal being a truly “spiritual civilization” which “shall flow over all the hills and vales of external life, and God be felt by man in his deep inmost.”⁹⁶ C. M. Beebe took a similarly expansive view of revelation, emphasizing inspiration as universal and inward, but also encompassing imagination in the Romantic sense: “All prophets are essentially spiritualists—they see not, but feel. The poet’s power of imagination is spiritual.”⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Selden J. Finney, “Concerning Spiritualism: Its Extent, Its Value and its Work,” *Religio-Philosophical Journal* 1, no. 1 (Aug. 26, 1865): 2.

⁹⁶ “Address Through Mr. L. Judd Pardee,” 6.

⁹⁷ “Lecture at the Melodeon,” 4.

Pardee went further and conceptualized facets of society that most would agree belonged firmly in the realm of the profane as manifestations of interior principles. Thus, even “Columbus and Vespuccius were inspired as well as Jesus” on account of their courage and energy. Broadening revelation even more into the realm of the mundane, Pardee argued that “Commerce descends from the inmost, and so is a spiritual element in civilization, as is everything that is prominently active in human concerns.” For Spiritualists, inward self-culture was critical to the project of realizing their utopian vision. Expressing the spiritual in all aspects of society, Pardee felt, was “the essence of rational religion.”⁹⁸

Nature itself was a revelation, as both the Transcendentalists and followers of Davis had asserted. One communication published in the *Spiritual Telegraph* was purported to have come from an Indian spirit through the mediumship of a thirteen-year-old girl. Conflating poetry with revelation, and invoking the trope of the noble savage close to nature, the spirit spoke: “You may deem it strange that an untutored savage should think of poetry, but *nature* is full of poetry; the Indian’s heart is full.... The mountains towering in lofty majesty, the forest retreat, whose wavy boughs afford a shade to the dream-loving, all these speak to us, and awaken one absorbing passion.”⁹⁹ The communication exemplifies Spiritualism’s Romantic tendencies, which it possessed in tandem with an Enlightenment rationalism.¹⁰⁰ The “vanishing Indian” was often invoked by mediums to lecture whites on the beauty and purity of nature.¹⁰¹ Here, the Indian spirit suggested to Spiritualist readers that revelation was universally accessible and took a variety of forms, including the poetry of nature.

Historical Religion

While Spiritualists, through the agency of spirit guides and direct inspiration, saw true religion as an eternal essence, they also, like Davis and the Harmonialists, differentiated this essence from its historical forms. Religion in this second sense was an abstract category which encompassed both Christianity and the other “world religions.” These various “religions” expressed natural truths to a greater or lesser degree. But, unlike the eternal

⁹⁸ “Address Through Mr. L. Judd Pardee,” 6.

⁹⁹ “An Indian Spirit’s Speech,” *Spiritual Telegraph Papers*, vol. 1, 20-21.

¹⁰⁰ Albanese, *Republic*, 157, 210, 230.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 248-51.

religion of nature, these outward forms of religion emerged historically, counter to Judeo-Christian claims to having been specially revealed. As historical entities, the various religions were influenced by their cultural context and emerged out of one another. American Spiritualists became increasingly aware that there were other traditions that predated Christianity and may have, in fact, influenced it. In addition, as part of their general historicization of religion, Spiritualists also joined their liberal Protestant and Transcendentalist contemporaries in the search for the historical Jesus, freed from the gross mythology that had later surrounded him.

Even among the most mainstream mediums of the day, we can see the conceptualization of the various historical religions as equivalent members of the same category. The immensely popular Cora Hatch asserted under the influence of a controlling spirit that the form that the inward religious impulse took was historically contingent but that all expressions were equally valid. “Man’s religion is in every way governed in its manifestations by the circumstances with which he is surrounded,” she told her audience. “Consequently, your manifestation of religious feeling differs very materially from that of the Romanist, or Hindoo, or Persian. Yet you can not prove that the religious feeling of yourselves is more deep or sincere than theirs. Theirs is what their own history has given them. They are sincere; and if God ever hears any prayers offered to him, if he ever sees any thoughts of his children; it matters not whether they are Christian, Romanist, Hindoo, or Mohammedan, in their sincerity, he sees and hears them alike.”¹⁰² God, having made all humans in the same way, was indifferent to the form that the religious sentiment took. In a similar valuation of worldwide prayers, an 1864 issue of the *Banner of Light* reported that a “Hindoo Spirit” appeared at a séance circle and “that *he prayed for Christians!*” “Well,” the editors wrote, “we are of the opinion that the prayers of the Hindoo are needed in their behalf quite as much as the Christian’s prayer is needed by the ‘benighted heathen!’”¹⁰³

Hatch explained that the propensity to worship was an innate religious sense, but the outward form this took was contingent on moral development, which accounted for the many historical forms of religion. Humanity’s religious and moral sense, she explained, are “nearly allied, as the perfume to the flower, or the sunshine to the day, or man’s heart to his life. Still,

¹⁰² Hatch, *Discourses*, 245.

¹⁰³ “A Hindoo Spirit,” *Banner of Light* 14, no. 25 (Mar. 12, 1864): 4.

they are different.” Because of this distinction, religion would exist everywhere, but would advance with moral cultivation. “You can never educate a man to be religious,” she explained. “You can educate him as to the method of manifesting that religion. You can educate men to be moral—to exercise that morality in higher and holier departments. But religion is not dependent upon education, or upon any human institutions. It is something more—the fruit of a sentiment which grows up in a man’s soul, and constitutes a part of his being.” Emphatically, she asserted, “There is no human being without religious impulse; for it is natural, and, being natural, it is universal. There are minds whose moral development is low.” As a universal sentiment, even the “savages of America adored and worshipped a Divine Being.” Indeed, she continued, “The heathen world, from the instinctive desire to worship, carves idols from wood and stone, and worships them—not because these possess any inherent worth, but because they must worship something.” Moreover, Hatch felt, the universality of the religious sentiment was, in of itself, evidence of the existence of God.¹⁰⁴

Over time, and with the cultivation of morality, these cruder expressions of the eternal and static religious sense gave way to higher forms. Sacrifice, for example, would be seen as “sacrilege” in “the present age,” but “Not because *religion* has progressed any, but because *morality* has.” The hierarchy of historical religion was therefore based on the moral qualities of the respective religions. “Ask the Christian of the nineteenth century what makes Christendom superior to the religions of savage and heathen nations,” she prompted. “Not its religion. The heathen is just as sincere, just as devout in his religion, as the Christian. Christianity has greater morality in theory,” though “not always in practice,” she was quick to note, and as the “Hindoo, or the Sandwich-islander, to whom you are constantly sending missionaries,” could attest to.¹⁰⁵

Despite its moderate reputation, the *Banner* printed an extract from the radical *Westminster Review* challenging the narrow and exclusive view of Christians on religion. “Were not the Egyptians, as much as the Jews, the pioneers in civilization?” the contributor to the *Banner* quoted approvingly. “Are Confucius, and the infinite millions who have lived and died under his dispensation, drops in the ocean of humanity? Did Buddhism do nothing for the principle of purity? or was Mahomet a feeble teacher of the idea of monotheism? To

¹⁰⁴ Hatch, *Discourses*, 240-41, 243.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 243.

ignore so much in the past may be the singular result of a classical education; but to drop out of mankind a vast majority of the human race, is an astonishing proof of the narrowness of the Christian teacher.”¹⁰⁶ The different religious traditions of the world were but local expressions of a universal human impulse. All were valid in their own right, and to ignore them was little more than Christian bigotry.

The historical religions, as well as expressing local conditions, followed the progressive course of history and built upon each other. “Every age furnishes a prophecy of the ages to follow,” wrote Hudson Tuttle. “The deeds of each century are evolved out of those that preceded it. The past contained the germs of the present, and the present of the future.”¹⁰⁷ Uriah Clark, too, emphasized that the Christian religion was but one among many older religions: “The oldest religions of which we now have any knowledge are the Chinese, the Hindoo, the Persian, and the Egyptian. All these were anterior to the Hebrew, whose history we find in the Old Testament Scriptures.” Religion, Clark argued, emerged historically as a result of a combination of humanity striving to answer existential questions, as well as from trying to make sense of spirit communications in the primitive ages of the world. As noted previously, Clark considered revelation to be inherently linked to the idea of religion itself. Having beseeched the “the Unknown God or gods”—inferred from the perfection of nature—for answers concerning his origin and destiny, early man at last received answers from “Faint voices...whispering from out the heavens” and “Unseen powers and intelligences.” These “spiritual beings,” Clark explained in a Spiritualist twist on Euhemerism, “were regarded as gods, and as such were idolized, and set up as tutelar deities and objects of worship. Hence the origin of polytheism, or the idea of many gods, and the idolatry universally prevalent in the earlier ages of humanity.”¹⁰⁸ In a familiar pattern, the crude conceptions of early humanity gave birth to the supposedly most rudimental expressions of theology, polytheism and idolatry. The same spiritual phenomena were present, but they were interpreted in a less advanced form, befitting the age.

Such crude and early expressions of humanity’s innate religious sentiment would evolve with the course of human development. In tandem with the overall development of a

¹⁰⁶ C. B. P., “Ancient Glimpses of the Spirit Land: Number Twenty-Two,” *Banner of Light* 8, no. 17 (Jan. 19, 1861): 3.

¹⁰⁷ Tuttle, *Arcana*, 412.

¹⁰⁸ Clark, *Plain Guide*, 22-23.

culture, the heightened revelations of great prophets advanced the religion of the day. “Religion is modified, and changed by the higher faculties of man, and in proportion to their development, power, and influence,” read a *Banner of Light* report on the medium L. Judd Pardee. “Thus God by his spirits will work out the salvation of man.” By means of influxes of inspiration into the interior souls of certain individuals, God was able to drive religious development to the next stage. “Religion takes a deep hold on men and nations, therefore it is difficult for a people to change its religion; hence the necessity of revolutions, moral earthquakes, coming from the angel worlds, to break up the existing state of things, and so leave room for a diviner thought to make its habitation in the soul of man.” Thus, “Moses had his idea of God as Jehovah, a great ruler, and from that sprang a religion of almost abject reverence; but Jesus, because the people were farther advanced, and needed higher things, gave to them from out the heavens, a loftier, truer, and more rational idea of religion.”¹⁰⁹

Achsa Sprague likewise affirmed the view that historical religion was yoked to the course of human advancement, declaring, “The religion, government and power of the past were in proportion to its capacity.” In a model of progress reminiscent of Davis, she informed listeners, “The world has made advances, socially, religiously and politically, and all go hand in hand.” Spiritualism was simply the most advanced in an endless march of historical progress: “Spiritualism is but one of the colors in the great divine rainbow of God’s overarching philosophy. Greater and grander efforts shall come from it in the future.”¹¹⁰

In a similar vein, the medium Thomas Gales Forster argued that new religious movements tended to emerge as free, revitalizing forces, “but as soon as they acquired popularity, they ceased to develop newer and brighter truths, and fell back on authority.” Once their initial hot-phase had cooled, something new had to emerge as a higher form. Thus, “Methodism...made a glorious beginning” before it became popular and began to “favor of slavery and of intemperance.” Next, “Unitarianism and Universalism were introduced into the United States, and they were met by the cry of ‘Infidelity!’ from the Orthodox churches.” Nonetheless, they too “have become subjected to the blind authority of the past, and have driven out from their midst some of the best minds, because they dared to be free, and declare

¹⁰⁹ “Address Through Mr. L. Judd Pardee,” 6.

¹¹⁰ “Miss A. W. Sprague at Allston Hall,” 8.

the newer truths they had seen.” Now, Forster argued, the world needed “Spiritualism, or something else, to reform it from the dark influences of the authority of the past.”¹¹¹

Cora Hatch, speaking the same year, seemed to agree. “The inspirations of former ages,” she explained, “are handed down to you through sacred and profane history, and they culminate in the present as a mass, a confusion of letters, of words, of sentences, of chapters, of books, of which you have no distinct idea except that they have come to you from ages bygone, and been made sacred by time.”¹¹² Historical religion had become an entangled and unintelligible mess through progressive transmission. The authority it carried did not derive from its intrinsic truth, but rather its sacralization. In response, the “beacon-light” of truth had gradually been “enveloped in clouds of materialism.” Now, a true Spiritualism had reasserted itself, “manifesting itself through simple tappings, calling in a loud voice, saying, ‘Man, thy soul is immortal!’” Hatch declared. Spiritualism shook up both the world of science and religion, and unified the two: “Materialism starts back, Science is affrighted, Religion stands appalled, and men cry, ‘Are there any principles of truth in this voice?’” The intellect, manifesting true reason, acted as the mediating bridge between the “religion [that] had its climax in the ages of the past, and materialism in the present age.”¹¹³

And yet, historical religions also possessed eternal germs of true religion either in the form of timeless ethical principles or spiritualistic practices, such as trance states or communion with the spirit world. James M. Peebles, the western editor for the *Banner of Light*, the largest Spiritualist journal, advanced such a theory in his popular work *Seers of the Ages*, which drew from, among others, the British Spiritual William Howitt’s 1863 book *The History of the Supernatural: In all Ages and Nations, and in all Churches, Christian and Pagan; Demonstrating a Universal Faith*.¹¹⁴ Among the 1869 book’s many topics was a comparison between Jesus and Krishna in which Peebles concluded that the mythology surrounding the former had been derived from the latter.¹¹⁵ Waxing poetic about the ancient religion of Indian, Peebles plainly gave it primacy over newer religions, while also conflating it with a universal Spiritualism: “Long before the patriarchs pitched their tents under Syrian

¹¹¹ “Abstract of an Address by Thomas Gales Forster, Esq., at the Music Hall, Sunday Afternoon, September 13, 1857,” *Banner of Light* 1, no. 26 (Oct. 1, 1857): 5.

¹¹² Hatch, *Discourses*, 96.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 97, 100.

¹¹⁴ Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 191-94.

¹¹⁵ Peebles, *Seers of the Ages*, 81-82.

skies, long before Moses saw the tables of stone on the Mount, long before the oldest Hebrew prophets were inspired to sound the alarm in Judean mountains, there were millions of Spiritualists, prophets, yogees, sages, seers and mediums in India. What is more, Abraham himself was, without the least doubt, a *Brahmin*.” Indeed, “The Pentateuch of Moses was nearly all made up from the Brahminical Vedas and Phœnician manuscripts,” he wrote.¹¹⁶

The historical dress of the outward forms of religion, however, would thankfully be cast aside, leaving behind a pure Spiritualism, Peebles informed the *Banner* in 1860.

“Traditions begotten in India, and cradled in Central Asia, are passing away with a ‘great noise,’ while the immortalized dwellers of that beautiful ‘morning land’ are imploring their own divine thoughts to Encourage and gladden a common brotherhood,” he wrote. “Modern Spiritualism, that so beautifully blends with and explains ancient historic Spiritualism, is not only stirring the American masses, but interesting the crowned heads of Europe. It cannot be stopped.”¹¹⁷ Interestingly, Peebles, having quit the *Banner* at the behest of a group of ancient spirits, travelled the world to learn about other religions. It was Peebles, a man who described himself as “a Parliament of Religions,” who furnished Helena Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott with contacts in India for their Theosophical Society. Peebles also foreshadowed the occult turn towards ancient knowledge in the mode of earlier esotericism.¹¹⁸

Of course doctrines themselves could be transmitted historically, not just expressed anew by different prophets. The doctrine of the final resurrection in the body, for example, was “not dependent on Christianity: it extended throughout the ancient world,” Hudson Tuttle wrote in *Arcana of Spiritualism*. “In Egypt, it was the death of Osiris by the malignant Typhon, and restoration to life by the lovely Isis.... In Syria, it was Adonis, cut down in the bud of his age.... In India, the same story is related, except that Adonis is Sita, the last consort of Mahadeva, whom he finds, and bears with lamentations around the world. In Phrygia, Atys and Cybele were the personages of the myth.... The Northmen constructed the same drama; but Atys became Baldur, their god of gentleness and beauty.” The doctrine was also present in the “Druidic Mysteries,” as well as, “Among the Incas of Peru and the Aztecs of Mexico,” where “the Mysteries were enacted with the horrible accompaniment of human sacrifice.” Placing native American beliefs in historical continuity with these, Tuttle suggested, “There

¹¹⁶ Peebles, *Seers of the Ages*, 27-28, 45.

¹¹⁷ Peebles, “Letter fro [sic] J. M. Peebles,” 6.

¹¹⁸ Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 197-98; Buescher, *Other Side of Salvation*, 114-18.

existed, among the most prominent North-American Indian tribes, a dim and shadowy resemblance to these systems.” “Christianity,” as “only the more liberal growth of the Jewish tree,” “imbibed the myths and dogmas of the Hebrew world in a great degree.”¹¹⁹ Similar way to what Davis had done in the *Principles of Nature*, Tuttle read the mythologies of vastly different cultures as retellings of the same story. Elaborating, he explained, “The Christian dogma of the resurrection of the body has its source in the wild speculations of Zoroaster, the Persian law-giver and prophet; and in the dogmas of the Egyptian priesthood. It was adopted by the Jews, who, in their close relations to that ancient people, were deeply impressed with the melodramatic outlines of this doctrine as taught at its source.” The transmission of myths and false doctrines continued beyond Christianity to more recent religions like Islam. “Mohammed engrafted this dogma into his theological system,” Tuttle explained, “and it is taken now in its literal sense by orthodox Moslems.”¹²⁰

A series of articles in the *Banner* by a correspondent named “C. B. P.” firmly historicized Christianity. Citing Dr. Temple, a liberal Anglican, from a collection of “Essays and Reveries,” the author argued “that the Jews knew nothing of immortality, save what they learned in Babylonia. It was here, through Chaldean mediums, that the soul-world was practically made manifest to the Jews; and it is this Spiritualism, of old time which constitutes the word of God in our Sunday-schools and churches.” Thus, not only was Hebrew—and by extension Christian—religion actually the outgrowth of older historically transmitted forms, but also contained the eternal core of true religion, identified with Spiritualism. The article also quoted a Dr. Williams, another contributor to the same collection, in support of the idea that Jesus’ ideas were not exclusive to him: “Both spiritual affection and metaphysical reasoning forbid us to confine revelations like those of Christ to the first half century of our era, but show at least affinities of our faith existing in men’s minds, anterior to Christianity, and renewed with deep echo from living hearts in many a generation.” Exemplifying the dual nature of religion, it was something existing cross-culturally and historically, but also had a timeless and true core that would be expressed in the minds of people like Jesus. Attacking even the notion that Christian doctrines were ever pure, even before the effects of priestcraft, the author quoted Dr. Wilson in remarking that

¹¹⁹ Tuttle, *Arcana*, 273-74.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 277.

“Grave doubts arise in the minds of really well-meaning persons, whether the secular future of humanity is necessarily bound up with the diffusion of Christianity.... We may appeal to the most ancient records extant, and even to the Apostolic epistles themselves, to show that neither in doctrine nor in morals did the primitive Christian communities at all approach to the ideal which has been formed of them.”¹²¹

Historical Jesus

Like the Harmonialists, Transcendentalists, and various liberal Protestants, Spiritualists took a keen interest in uncovering the historical Jesus and discerning his true nature. While they did not always agree on issues like whether Jesus was uniquely divine or not, or how best to understand the resurrection, they did tend strongly, even at their most conservative, towards a characteristically liberal Protestant view of Christ as an exemplar rather than a vicarious sacrifice.

Even a moderate journal like the *Banner* did not shy away from challenging orthodox understandings of Jesus and historicizing him. A review of Ernest Renan’s 1864 work *The Life of Jesus* published in the *Banner* noted that the book dealt with matters that had “been traversed by Strauss, Paine, Hume, and a multitude of others,” but nonetheless praised it for “its fluxions attack upon the torpid or declining condition of Christianity.”¹²² Thomas Gales Forster attacked the trinitarian understanding of Jesus in an 1857 lecture that the paper reported on. Critics of Spiritualism, Forster noted, emphasized “that it denies the divinity of Christ and the Trinity, and they allege that they have all the authority of the past, and the Bible, to prove these to be true, and, therefore, all modern Spiritualists, as well as some other reformers, are infidels.” Asserting that Spiritualists held to the innate and “glorious divinity of man, as the legitimate heir of the Infinite Divine,” he argued that the doctrine of the Trinity had been hotly debated by the Church Fathers until “about the beginning of the fifth century [when] Arianism was forced into nonentity at the point of the sword.”¹²³ The trinitarian

¹²¹ C. B. P., “Ancient Glimpses of the Spirit Land: Number Twenty-One,” 3; the *Banner* author apparently misquoted the title of “Essays and Reviews” (1860).

¹²² L. U. Reavis, “Renan’s Life of Christ,” *Banner of Light* 14, no. 25 (Mar. 12, 1864): 3.

¹²³ “Abstract of an Address by Thomas Gales Forster, Esq.,” 5.

understanding of Jesus was nothing more than a clerical distortion introduced well after his life and imposed by ecclesial authorities.

Cora Hatch took a moderate position and rejected the notion that Jesus was the son of God, but still maintained that he had fulfilled a divine mission through the crucifixion. Referring to the sayings of Jesus, she declared, “in no one of them do we find a sentence that would lead us to infer that he was the real God, save these: ‘I and my Father are one’—‘I am the way, the resurrection, and the life’—and ‘He that seeth me hath seen the Father also.’” These sentences, however, did not mean what orthodox Christians believed they did. Instead, these were meant in the sense that “persons, holy and pure themselves, whose sympathies are so united, whose feelings are so interwoven, might well say, ‘We and our friends are one.’”¹²⁴

Nonetheless, his death was part of God’s plan, “as God had designed Jesus to fill a great and important mission, he also planned the means by which it would be accomplished.” To think otherwise was to “say that he made a mistake when he created Jesus, for Judas betrayed him! If God designed the *end*, he also planned the *means* by which that end was to be accomplished.” Jesus’ mission was therefore unique, even if he was not. “Jesus was a type of all men,” she told her audience, and, as such, would regenerate the world. Reading the resurrection and ascension in moral terms, she believed that the world would follow his example: “And so true as Jesus arose and conversed again with his disciples before ascending to his Father, so true as he did at last ascend and is now in the perfection of beauty, so true this world which is crucified will arise, after its reign in darkness and ignorance, to beam forth in a perfect immortality.” Typifying all humans, Jesus’ “every action of glory and beauty is a type of that which is to come to every heart; and if in every heart there is a sepulchre of error, there will be a glorious resurrection of truth.”¹²⁵ As she indicated in another lecture later that year at the Melodeon, reported on by the *Banner*, a literal resurrection of a dead body ran counter to the laws of nature. It was more likely, she told the audience, “that Jesus was not dead, when taken from the cross and laid in the tomb,” rather he was in “a trance, or cataleptic state.” Foreshadowing the full-body spirit manifestations of the late-nineteenth-century Spiritualism and the astral projections of Theosophy and later

¹²⁴ Hatch, *Discourses*, 149.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 153-54, 156.

occultism, she explained that “his spirit, while his body was dormant, was ministering to those in prison.”¹²⁶

Nonetheless, the issue was contested, as seen in letters to the *Banner* that debated the matter. One correspondent, “M.,” asserted his position, writing, “we do not believe as many do, that he, in his natural material body, walked, ate, and drank, with his disciples after he had risen.” It was merely the case that he *seemed* to have done so with his spiritual body. To have returned in the body, M. felt, would have undermined Jesus’ exemplary power and “would show us nothing at all of the resurrection, and the Scriptures would not be fulfilled.” The meaning of Christ derived from the fact that “he was a man as we are—only more perfect.”¹²⁷

While agreeing that Jesus was the perfect man, and “a foreshadow of what *all* eventually will be,” a correspondent from Maine calling himself Bradbury took issue with M. “I cannot see the least grounds for M.’s believing as he does,” he wrote. Had Jesus not told his disciples “that spirits had not flesh and bones as he had?” Moreover, “he ate before them, &c., which goes to prove that he rose in his natural body.” Bradbury maintained that Jesus’ “spirit left the body; but it was not a dissolution of the spirit, or of soul and body, in death. Hence it could return to the body with as much ease as one wakes from sleep.” Echoing Davis, Bradbury further explained that, as “a very clear and superior clairvoyant,” Jesus was always in the “superior condition.” “His body was not material, like ours, but was in every sense spiritual, hence he could see with the spiritual eye.” Nonetheless, all humans would eventually attain this state. Employing Davis’ metaphysics with a more Christian inflection, Bradbury encouraged Spiritualists to believe “that the time will come on this earth when spirit and matter will have so far progressed, and become so spiritualized, that those born on the earth will not need to change the natural body for the spiritual. The natural body will be as ethereal and sublimated as our spiritual body of to-day.” This was because “spirit and matter” were “co-eternal” and, thus, “as spirit or mind progresses, so matter, co-existent with it, becomes refined and spiritualized.” Jesus, in following this path before other men, showed them that they “had an immortal soul within, which would live after the body was dead, and

¹²⁶ “Mrs. Cora L. V. Hatch at the Melodeon. Sunday Nov. 8, 1857,” *Banner of Light* 2, no. 8 (Nov. 21, 1857): 6; Albanese, *Republic*, 237.

¹²⁷ M., “Christ’s Mission,” *Banner of Light* 2, no. 9 (Nov. 28, 1857): 6.

retain its identity, and live in the mansions of God secure and blessed, exempt from sin, and worship the God of his spirit forever.”¹²⁸

Other Spiritualists chose to emphasize Jesus’ commonalities with other humans. The *Spiritual Age* noted that it was equally possible that people with unusual attributes were born according to a different natural law than others, thus the facts surrounding Jesus’ supposedly miraculous birth, even if true, did not necessarily prove that he was more divine than any other human. “It is the opinion of some,” the editorial ran, “that new and higher types of humanity have been from time to time introduced on earth, by seemingly ‘miraculous’ means—out of the usual order of ‘like producing like.’” This possibility could account for “the supposed myths relative to Chrishna, Boudha, Osiris, Pythagoras, etc., [which] may have had good foundation.” In such a case, there might be “a higher law of generation than that commonly recognized, whose operation is necessary to the introduction of successively higher orders of humanity.”¹²⁹

Like the Transcendentalists or denominations of liberal Protestants who took a moral regeneration view of the life of Jesus, Spiritualists saw the value of Christ in his example. The editors of the *Spiritual Age* noted, for example, the way that Jesus lived the teachings of true religion: “If Plato and others taught the Divine philosophy of self-abnegation and benevolent activity, Jesus *lived* it, thus evincing that it was with him a truth, not of the *head*, merely, but of the *heart*—of the whole being.”¹³⁰ He was a moral exemplar who, in a similar logic to evangelical Christians, went beyond intellectual assent to true doctrines and actualized these in his life. Jesus embodied a lived and “heart” religion, recast in Spiritualist terms. The general Spiritualist position on Jesus, Thomas Gales Forster asserted, was that “Christ stands forth as the individualised representative of a firm principle, . . . demonstrating practically what, he taught theoretically, reaching forth his arms in love to all humanity, regardless of persecution, and presenting a magnificent picture of moral courage in his antagonism to error— and in this light he is seen in a far more glorious aspect than if you

¹²⁸ Bradbury, “Christ’s Mission,” *Banner of Light* 2, no. 13 (Dec. 26, 1857): 5-6.

¹²⁹ “Spiritualism in Religion.—No. VII: The Christ,” *Spiritual Age* 2, no. 18 (Apr. 30, 1859): 2.

¹³⁰ “Spiritualism in Religion.—No. VIII: The Christ (Continued),” *Spiritual Age* 2, no. 20 (May 14, 1859): 2.

look at him as a God.” “Follow in the steps of Christ,” he urged, “and onward will be your course, more beautiful will be your conceptions of humanity and of God.”¹³¹

Characterizing Jesus as an enemy of priestcraft and a proponent of individualistic religion, another writer in the *Banner* declared that “While Alexandrian literature was attracting the Jewish intellect, the Galilean zealot was tearing the nation to pieces with the doctrine that it was lawful to call ‘no man Master but God.’”¹³² He thus exemplified the Spiritualist premium on individualistic and anti-creedal religion. An editorial in the *Banner* wrote that, in contrast to the fire and brimstone revivalist preachers of the nineteenth century, Jesus “never told his followers of a hell like this famous ‘orthodox’ hell; nor indeed of a heaven which was to be reached by the methods so much in vogue amongst those who trust they have an exclusive right to admission.” Salvaging the religion of Christ from the pernicious theology of the churches, the *Banner* engaged in a Spiritualist restorationism, declaring, “His religion was a pure religion. It is exactly what Spiritualism is preaching to the hearts of all men this blessed day.”¹³³

The Role of Scriptures

The issue of biblical inspiration was more contentious among mass Spiritualism than among the Harmonialists. Some Spiritualists followed Davis in his view that the Bible was no different from any other book and its teachings had to be evaluated on their own merits. Others were not so willing to abandon the Bible as inspired, though they reinterpreted it with a distinctly Spiritualist exegesis. As Ann Taves noted, the dichotomy between Christian and non-Christian Spiritualism should not be exaggerated and represents a continuum of attitudes rather than a clear division.¹³⁴ Nonetheless, whether the Bible maintained an elevated position vis-à-vis other books and scriptural texts, the timeless and universal nature of inspiration made it a given that other texts could contain divine truths and revelations from the spirit world.

¹³¹ “Abstract of an Address by Thomas Gales Forster, Esq.,” 5.

¹³² C. B. P., “Ancient Glimpses of the Spirit Land: Number Twenty-One,” 3.

¹³³ “The Work of the Creeds,” *Banner of Light* 2, no. 1 (Oct. 3, 1857): 4.

¹³⁴ Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 166-67, 401n3.

A spirit, speaking through Cora Hatch, warned her audience of potential historical issues with the Christian Scripture. In addition to the possibility that Constantine had personally tampered with the biblical canon for political reasons, the spirit picked up the concerns of modern philology and warned, “It is not at all probable that the ancient languages would compare well with, and always convey the idea of, the modern Bible.” In places, “The deeper religious element which pervaded the original is sometimes entirely blotted out.”¹³⁵ Thus, even according to one of the most indisputably mainstream star-mediums of the movement—or at least her familiar spirit—Scripture needed to be read critically and as a text subject to the forces of history and translation.

Some Spiritualists, like one writer to the *Banner of Light*, were defensive. “Spiritualists are often accused of disbelieving the Bible—but not so,” he wrote in 1857. “We believe we find more of worth and beauty there than those who read and receive the truths contained, in the letter, rather than the spirit.”¹³⁶ Thus, he maintained, Spiritualists simply read Scripture more accurately than Christians by not taking a literalist view. Nonetheless, other Spiritualists certainly sounded like they did disbelieve the Bible, or at least saw no particular cause to believe it.

A. E. Newton, writing about inspiration in the *Spiritual Age*, rejected the Bible as an inherent authority for religious truth. To those who took the Bible as the standard for evaluating truth, he asked, “Why receive that book blindly and on trust, any more than the Koran, the Shasters, the Zend Avesta, or the productions of modern Inspiration? Surely, no *rational* mind can do this. Some means of going behind *all* books and *all* claims, is a demand of our rational natures, and one which Deity, if a *reasonable* Being, cannot have failed to supply.”¹³⁷ The *Spiritual Age*’s comparative attitude towards scriptures was further exemplified by the way the editors juxtaposed quotations from different texts in order to highlight eternal doctrines. Writing on the attributes of the Deity, for example, the editors opened the article with a series of quotations “as samples of the ideas of expanded minds in different ages of the world—the essential harmony of which will, we think, appear as we proceed.” The *Vedas*, for example, described the Creator as “the incomprehensible Spirit, who illuminates all, and delights all: from whom all proceed, by whom they live after they

¹³⁵ Hatch, *Discourses*, 149.

¹³⁶ M., “Christ’s Mission,” 6.

¹³⁷ Newton, “The Test of Inspiration,” 4.

are born, and to whom all must return.” Pythagoras, understood as a prophet in a broad sense, wrote, that the Deity was the “Universal Soul diffused through all things eternal, invisible, unchangeable; in essence like truth;...not, as some conjecture, exterior to the world, but in himself entire, pervading the universal sphere.” Further quotations from Plato, the Book of Genesis, Jesus, St. Paul, and Emanuel Swedenborg followed. All of these inspired writings about the nature of God, perhaps somewhat skewed in their selection towards immanentism, were corroborated by the “Modern Spirits” now in communion with the world, and who described the Father as the Divine Man, whose body constituted the universe: “The worlds are arranged in such order that they form the habitation or body of this Being. As man occupies a mortal body, so does God dwell in the Universe.”¹³⁸ Scripture could thus be selected and compared for commonalities, suggesting the truth of a doctrine, but, at the same time, the agreement of a scriptural text with generally held Spiritualist opinions made it more attractive. In other words, scripture that seemed to confirm what reason and natural principles suggested was more readily seen as inspired.

Spiritualists commonly engaged in a particular exegesis that saw the Bible as rife with examples of spirit manifestations and communications. Such interpretations were aided by the ready conflation of angels and the spirits of the dead. Moreover, reading nineteenth-century spiritual phenomena in continuity with biblical miracles challenged the cessationist view that the age of miracles and inspiration had ended. As such, even if the Bible was acknowledged as a special revelation, ongoing revelation was certainly possible.¹³⁹ Moreover, most Spiritualists rejected belief in miracles as superstition, asserting instead that they could be explained by a fuller understanding of natural law. Thus, they read the Bible and its miracles as being reconcilable with natural law, properly understood. One correspondent to the *Banner* defined a miracle as “a phenomenal exhibition, which is not understood by the multitude, and no miracle can be wrought without a means by which to work it.”¹⁴⁰

The Bible, Spiritualists agreed, was rife with evidence of spirits. “All who are conversant with the Old Testament are well aware that it is abundantly supplied with accounts of spirit manifestations,” an article in the *Banner* asserted. From “stationing a spirit at the

¹³⁸ “Spiritualism in Religion.—No. III: The Father,” *Spiritual Age* 2, no. 13 (Mar. 26, 1859): 2.

¹³⁹ Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 186-87.

¹⁴⁰ Reavis “Renan’s Life of Christ,” 3.

gates of Paradise, with a flaming sword,” to the angel and spirit appearances witnessed by Abraham, Lot, Hagar, Jacob, Joshua, and Zachariah, “trances, visions, interpositions of angels, spirit voices, and healings of the sick, constitute the most prominent feature.” The New Testament was “equally supplied with evidence of spirit presence and power to commune with man on earth.” Since “God and his laws are *unchanged* and *immutable*,” the editorial continued, “we claim that ‘angels’ and ‘spirits’ have the same power to-day, and will exercise it if man on earth will allow them to.” Turning the objections of the clergy on their heads, the *Banner* positioned Spiritualists as the true defenders of the Bible, observing that the “clergy and all others who write or speak against Modern Spiritualism, *will apply with equal force to every instance of spirit manifestation mentioned in the Bible.*” The article concluded that it would be “well for our opponents to...move with cautious steps, lest in their zeal they trample upon what they admit to be the ‘Word of God.’”¹⁴¹

James M. Peebles took a similar approach to exegesis. The *Banner*, reporting on a Peebles lecture at the Melodeon in Boston, observed that the “exegesis he gave, did not differ materially from that usually given by Unitarians and Universalists, only that he considered Jesus, the great Judean *Spiritualist*, and the *apostles* excellent mediums.” There was a “harmony between ancient and modern spiritual manifestations, Deific laws being the same now as then,” Peebles informed the audience. Taking a continuationist view of the miraculous, he gave it a Spiritualist twist and “proved that the signs then promised still follow believers—that is, those who are influenced by the Christ-principle, and live up to the spiritual laws of their being. Pure, spiritual, and holy lives would hasten that heavenly baptism, sure to again descend, as in Pentecostal times.”¹⁴²

Even if the Christian Bible were considered superior, it was still one bible among many. Scripture, as a human production, was developed insofar as its author was opened to eternal truths. The *Banner*, reporting on another lecture by Peebles, told readers of how he “took the audience on a journey among European and Asiatic nations, searching their Bibles; but finally came back to the oldest *Bible* in the universe—*Nature*.” This was a bible that “required no new translation from men’s hands, for it was a transcript of the *Divine Mind*.” Thus, the scriptures of different nations were valid, but partial compared to the ultimate

¹⁴¹ “Bible Evidence of Spiritualism,” *Banner of Light* 1, no. 13 (Jul. 2, 1857): 4.

¹⁴² “Sunday in the Melodeon—J. M. Peebles,” *Banner of Light* 18, no. 6 (Oct. 28, 1865): 8.

revelation of the Deity in Nature. With the progress of history, the expression of eternal principles became shaper: “Our conceptions of *truth* changed with the soul’s unfolding,” the article reported. “God speaks as direct to souls now as in ancient times, and these translations of divine voices are our present truths.”¹⁴³ Past and present revelations would be surpassed, for the canon was not closed.

Nonetheless, many Spiritualists, even contributors to the more cautious *Banner*, were not shy about historicizing the Bible, sometimes unfavourably. An 1861 article observed that historical forces rendered the Scripture “a medley of legend, poetry, and oral tradition, compiled, remodeled [sic], and interpolated by a priestly order, centuries after the times of its supposed authors. And,” the author added, “this applies to the New Testament (though in much less degree) just as to the Old.” The Old Testament, in particular, was fraught with error. The “Pentateuch,” had been “shown to have been put together under the kings by the priesthood who recast, and perhaps fraudulently invented whole books.” Thus, priestcraft was responsible not only for corrupting the outward forms of religion, but had even had a hand in undermining scripture. With the prophecies and Psalms being of dubious and inconsistent quality, “the Old Testament is reduced to a very fragmentary and very untrustworthy collection of the literature of a certain Arab race.” While, the “process does not, of course, go so far with the New Testament, . . . it must suffer from the proximity of such a neighbor.” Attacking the authority of even the Gospels, he observed that the “Three first gospels were put together from the floating and variable traditions of the early church, no man knows how or when,” whereas the “fourth gospel on which so much is rested, is very late, and certainly not by St. John. Indeed the only thoroughly authentic portion of the whole Scripture seems to be the Epistles—those of St. Paul.” Nailing the oft-ignored Deist sympathies of Spiritualism to the mast, the author was not afraid to note “the powerful substratum of truth in the fierce invectives of Voltaire and Paine” regarding the Bible. To consider the Old Testament inspired was a travesty, the article noted in highly anti-semitic language. The “repulsive features” of “the Jewish national character” filled the Hebrew Bible’s pages with “morbid pride, egotism, and ferocity, inhuman hate and frantic fanaticism, superstition and hypocrisy [sic].” “[I]n spite of their monotheism, which they held in common with other Oriental races,” the Jewish character “poisons its wild mythology and the sanguinary annals, it stiffens the Mosiah [sic]

¹⁴³ Ibid., 8.

ritual into a debasing formalism.”¹⁴⁴ While the violence and immorality of the Old Testament was a common argument against its divine source and the supposed legalism of the Jews a frequent point of reproach, the venom of the attack was particularly pronounced.

The same author also quoted approvingly from liberal Anglicans of the “broad church” movement on the historicity of scripture in another article in the same series. Dr. Williams, the article observed, says:

We cannot encourage a remorseless criticism of Gentile histories, and escape its contagion, when we approach Hebrew annals; nor acknowledge a Providence in Jewry without owning that it may have comprehended sanctities elsewhere. But the moment we examine fairly the religions of India and of Arabia, or even those of Inimeval Hellas and Latinum, we find they appealed to the better side of our nature, and their essential strength lay in the elements of good which they contained, rather than in any Satanic corruption.¹⁴⁵

The inevitable result of advances in historical methodology was that sacred Scripture would be undermined in the same way. Similarly, there was no sound reason for confining the works of God to one place and time. An appreciation of the value of non-Christian religions further made the charge that other religions were demonic in origin implausible. Since “the history of nations extends back some thousands of years before the Mosaic chronology,” it made little sense to disregard ancient writings outside the Bible.¹⁴⁶

The *Banner* author was eager to agree with the suggestion that the apostles never claimed infallibility, denouncing “Biblicalotry, with all its outstanding nonsense,” as “the outgrowth of the ignorance and priestcraft of a later age.” Who could fail to notice that biblical interpretation was also fluid? “The unchangable [sic] Word of God,” he wrote, “is changed by each age and each generation in accordance with its passing fancy. The book in which we believe all religious truth to be contained, is the most uncertain of all books.” Given the Bible’s historical ambiguity, the author enjoined readers to “*Interpret the Scripture like any other book.*” It was an exercise in futility to attempt to reconcile the various books of the Old and New Testaments with each other, for “Each writer, each successive age, has characteristics of its own, as strongly marked, or more strongly, than those which are found in

¹⁴⁴ C. B. P., “Ancient Glimpses of the Spirit Land: Number Twenty-Two,” 3.

¹⁴⁵ C. B. P., “Ancient Glimpses of the Spirit Land: Number Twenty-One,” 3.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

the authors or periods of classical literature.”¹⁴⁷ Scripture, like anything else, bore the historical imprint of its age and possessed the idiosyncrasies of its authors.

Not every Spiritualist was willing to discard the Bible as the true revelation of God. J. R. Orton, writing in the *Spiritual Telegraph* denounced the efforts of Davis and others like him to discredit the Bible. “[T]he finger-marks of Thomas Paine are very clearly visible in many parts of Mr. Davis’ great work, ‘The Great Harmonia,’” Orton observed with displeasure.¹⁴⁸

Moreover, in the same way that the Christian Bible was reinterpreted to be compatible with Spiritualism, Spiritualists saw other scriptures as confirming the truths of spiritual phenomena. Uriah Clark wrote in 1863 that “The Bibles or sacred writings of all ages and nations are largely composed of phenomena, narrations, and teachings more or less in harmony with those of Modern Spiritualism. Wherever a living God or gods, demons, angels, spirits, so-called miracles, oracles, inspirations, or anything like super-mundane revelations have been recognized, there we find traces of the same spiritual philosophy now exciting the joy and wonder of the world.”¹⁴⁹ Different scriptures, despite their different circumstances, contained commonalities and phenomena that could all be reconciled through the rubric of Spiritualism. The germ of interior truth was always present, and the dissimilarities could be dismissed as the product of historical circumstances and less-developed culture.

A remarkable example of an eastern scriptural text being seen to contain profound spiritual truths, compatible with Spiritualism, can be seen in a 1866 article published in the *Religio-Philosophical Journal*, based in Chicago.¹⁵⁰ A correspondent by the name of “Soodra,” claiming to be a follower “of the religion of Brahm,” explicitly compared Davis’ writings to the *Vedas* as he summarized the “gems of Hindooism” in language highly reminiscent of the Harmonial Philosophy. For instance, the Vedic God was unitary, abstract, and all-powerful: ““There is one living and true God; everlasting, without parts or passions;

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴⁸ J. R. Orton, “Mr. Davis and the Old Testament,” *Spiritual Telegraph Papers*, vol. 1, 432-33.

¹⁴⁹ Clark, *Plain Guide*, 20.

¹⁵⁰ The *Religio-Philosophical Journal* ran from 1865-1907, the second longest after the *Banner*. According to John Patrick Deveney, the journal was not as popular as the *Banner*, but nevertheless featured articles from virtually every important Spiritualist at one time or another. Its pro-Davis leanings were apparent by its cover page, which featured an image of the Harmonial Philosophy radiating light down on the Bible, Koran, Shaster, and Zend-Avesta. John Patrick Deveney, “The Religio-Philosophical Journal,” IAPSOP. Retrieved 30 Aug. 2018. http://www.iapsop.com/archive/materials/religio-philosophical_journal/; Braude, “News from the Spirit World,” 403.

of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness;... He overspreads all creatures. He is merely Spirit without form, either of minute body or an extended one, which is liable to impression or organization. He is the ruler of the intellect, self-existent, pure, perfect, omniscient and omnipresent... He is the Supreme Soul.”¹⁵¹ The God of the *Vedas* thus was immanentist, the interior essence of all things, rescuing Hinduism from discrediting charges of polytheism. Placing a premium on interior experience of the divine, Soodra noted that “To know that God *is*, and that *all* is God, this is the substance of the Vedas.” Having offered up his samples of Hindu wisdom, Soodra asked readers whether these were “not worthy to be committed to memory by the children of the ‘Progressive Lyceums?’”—the name given to Davis’ reform-oriented alternative to Sunday schools. “It would gladden the heart of every member of our holy mother church,” Soodra wrote, “and of all true devotees of this our ancient religion, to know that which is the fact, that the foregoing immaculate principles are embraced, and being promulgated in good earnest by a large, intelligent, influential, and active class of the people of Christendom; to know that these vital and fundamental principles of our ancient religion are the foundation principles of that ‘Harmonial Philosophy,’ of which ‘Nature’s Divine Revelations,’ by A. J. Davis, is the text book.” Readers of the journal, he continued, should “rejoice to know that their hopes are grounded in so exalted a philosophy, and in the most ancient of all the religions faiths of mankind.” Indeed, he observed, “the principal doctrines of the Harmonial Philosophy, as disseminated through ‘Nature’s Divine Revelations,’ are tenets of the Vedas; that the more essential contents of the former book are the counterparts of the latter; that modern Harmonial Philosophy, in its essentials, is resuscitated ancient Hindooism.”¹⁵²

Part of the Spiritualist treatment of scripture was their willingness to historicize them, giving them a history as texts. Similar to how Davis had engaged in a popular genealogy of the “Primitive History” of the Old Testament from older eastern texts, later Spiritualists, too, conceptualized the Bible not as a special revelation out of thin air, but as a document with historical antecedents. A 1871 issue of the *Religio-Philosophical Journal* attributed Hindu influence to Christian Bible, informing “liberal-minded” readers that the “Bhagvat Geeta,” or “Hindoo New Testament,” “was written over four thousand years ago, and contains the basis

¹⁵¹ Soodra, “Gems of Hindooism—Extracts from the Vedas,” *Religio-Philosophical Journal* 2, no. 10 (Jun. 2, 1866): 2.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 2.

of the Christian's New Testament." The book was heartily recommended to "Every one who has any desire to know the truth in regard to the origin of the Christian religion, and the fact that KRESHNA of the Hindoos, in the day of their country's glory, three thousand years ago, was venerated and *worshiped*, precisely as Christ now is by Christians."¹⁵³

Hudson Tuttle noted in 1871 that all scriptures contained contributions to the spiritual history of man, but none were in of themselves complete:

You may take the sacred books of all nations,—for all nations have their sacred books,—the Shaster of the Hindoo, the Zendavesta of the fire-worshipping Persian, the Koran of the Mohammedan, the legends of the Talmud, and on them place our own Testaments, the Old and the New: you have brought together in one mass the spiritual history, ideas, emotions, and superstitions of the early ages of man; but you have not Spiritualism,—you have only a part of it.¹⁵⁴

Significantly, Tuttle saw scripture as normative, thus implicitly modelling religion off of Christianity. Nonetheless, all scripture would be transcended by the direct revelations of Spiritualism.

Religious Concepts

As with Davis and the Harmonialists, Spiritualists as a whole tended to reinterpret traditional Christian concepts. In doing so, they universalized them, frequently reading them into other religious traditions, thereby making Christianity the implicit standard for comparing religions. Drinking deep from the surrounding culture of optimism and belief in the intrinsic holiness of humanity, Spiritualists challenged the Christian conception of God, Jesus as his incarnation, and notions of sin and salvation.

¹⁵³ "The Bhagvat Geeta—Hindoo New Testament," *Religio-Philosophical Journal* 10, no. 11 (Jun. 3, 1871): 4.

¹⁵⁴ Tuttle, *Arcana*, 427.

The Deity

As mentioned previously, the God of Spiritualism existed in tension between the distant Deity of Deism and the loving father of liberal Protestantism.¹⁵⁵ Unsurprisingly, then, discussions about the character of God were frequent in the Spiritualist press and lectures. Cora Hatch, speaking to a New York audience in 1857, described the Deity in shades of Davis. Dismissing the limiting notion that he could be the limited “God of Sectarianism,” Hatch described an infinite “God of Humanity,” proclaiming “this is the Central Soul, this is the Sun, this is the Heart, this is the Power, this is Deity.” Hinting at his indwelling presence in all humanity, she observed that “each human soul, being fashioned from his divine fountain,... claims that Deity is its Father, Mother, its Source, its Fountain, its Centre, around which it must for ever revolve.”¹⁵⁶

The *Spiritual Age* suggested in 1859 that “The idea of a Supreme Being, or of Superior Powers,... lies at the basis of every system of religion” and “that men’s conceptions of Deity correspond with their varying mental and moral conditions.” Indeed, the paper quipped, “If it be true that God made man in His own image at the first, it is equally true that man has been continually and necessarily making Gods in *his* own image ever since.” “Cruel, vindictive and unreasoning people” made “a vengeful and arbitrary God,” whereas “generous and lenient persons imagine a correspondingly benevolent and merciful God.” Evoking the ever-present motif of spiritual evolution and progress, the article argued that “as man himself becomes more expanded, exalted, refined and perfected, so will his ideal of God become enlarged, elevated, spiritual and perfect.” This did not mean, however, the author was quick to add, that God was merely a figment of the human imagination, merely that people had a false understanding of the Deity. Spiritualism was not to be taken to advocate atheism, Deism, or pantheism, though the author acknowledged that some less-developed Spiritualists and spirits unfortunately failed to acknowledge the truth of a personal God. The paper also took the opportunity to mock the childish believers in God as “a stern and frowning old man—sitting up aloft somewhere just out of sight, watching constantly over the actions of human beings in general, and of little children in particular.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 85-86.

¹⁵⁶ Hatch, *Discourses*, 36.

¹⁵⁷ “Spiritualism in Religion.—No. II: Ideas of God,” *Spiritual Age* 2, no. 12 (Mar. 19, 1859): 2.

Not all agreed on such an abstract portrayal of God. J. R. Orton, taking issue with Andrew Jackson Davis' revelations, wrote the *Spiritual Telegraph* to assert, "The Spirits with whom I communicate declare that in another part of the Spirit-world, diverse from that visited by Mr. Davis, God is visible in the *form of a man*; and that he exists there as a Father, surrounded by his children." Drawing the opposite conclusion from the *Spiritual Age*, Orton saw the child-like understanding of God as purer and more intuitive. "The dogma which reduces God to a mere operative principle in nature, is as unphilosophical and illogical as possible," he wrote. "The child intuitively regards God as a man—the Infinite Man; and he continues ever to do so, unless the desperate flimsiness of modern pulpit theology, or very strong influences from associates, tempt him curiously into atheistic speculation." The Spiritualists like Davis who conceptualized God as an abstract principle were guilty of hubris. Such an individual, Orton wrote, "casts God and his revelations to the four winds; takes refuge in his own intellectuality as the chief good, and goes to amusing himself with the attempt to construct a Supreme Power out of the external elements of nature."¹⁵⁸ As ever, Spiritualists were no monolith. The same potential for every individual to receive revelation and decide what to believe meant that there would be fundamental disagreements on doctrine. Seemingly, not even the spirits could agree.

Whatever specific conclusions different individuals might reach from the evidence, most Spiritualists believed that the true nature of the Deity was to be found expressed in Nature. Thus, the *Spiritual Age* suggested, "we are to know of the nature and qualities or attributes of this First Cause by observing the qualities and characteristics of what has proceeded from it, taken as a whole." Despite invoking the deistic language of a First Cause, the editor, probably Newton, affirmed that God was not just an "impersonal Force" or "a skillful Mechanic," but was also "a BEING, who may be loved and confided in" and "a PARENT, whom we must regard with at least all the reverence which can be inspired by that most intimate and mysterious of relations." The benevolent nature of God the Father, reminiscent of liberal Protestantism, could be inferred through "Reason and universal intuition" because if God were a parent, he had to reflect the best qualities present in man, "for though the intervention of second causes may have obscured and distorted the Divine image in most men, so as to make them in character *worse* than their Original, yet [it] is

¹⁵⁸ Orton, "Mr. Davis and the Old Testament," 430.

plainly impossible for the best to be *better* than He.” The article also took the opportunity to assert the perfection of Jesus by the logic that “the best, most harmonious or perfect man who has ever trod our earth must be to us morally the highest and completest likeness of the All-Father that our minds can contemplate.” “[W]e know of no character more worthy of this pre-eminence than that attributed to [Jesus] in the gospels, when rightly apprehended.”¹⁵⁹ The likeness of man to God carried radical implications for the doctrine of the Incarnation, traditionally ascribed by Christians to Jesus alone.

The Incarnation

As seen in the section on the historical Jesus, Spiritualists, while by no means unified on their views of Jesus, generally understood him to be a man, albeit a perfect, or nearly perfect, one. In reconceptualizing Jesus, Spiritualists did not necessarily do away with the doctrine of the incarnation, however; they simply broadened it, making it universal. An inevitable outcome of this move was that they viewed other religions through a distinctly Christian lens, even as they challenged Christianity’s claims to exclusivity. The Christian doctrine of the incarnation of God in the body of Christ was the partial expression of a universal truth that manifested itself cross-culturally. “Nearly every form of religion that has existed among men has recognized both the *need* and the *fact* of Incarnations of Deity,” wrote an editor of the *Spiritual Age*, probably A. E. Newton, in 1859. “The idea seems to have been intuitive that the Invisible and Incomprehensible One has embodied Himself for manifestation to man. There must be some truth underlying a sentiment so universal.” The Brahmins of India, believing that God required some sort of form to be comprehended and worshipped by humans, thought it necessary that “Brahm, the Incomprehensible Life, through His immediate emanations, Vishnu and Siva, has assumed various incarnate and invisible forms on earth.” Among others, these were “Chrishna and Boodha.” Beyond India, the article noted that “The ancient Chinese, Egyptian, Chaldean, Hebrew, Grecian, Roman, and even North American Indian mythologies, all have their Divine Incarnations and Mediators—special representatives of Deity to men.”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ “Spiritualism in Religion.—No. III: The Father,” 2.

¹⁶⁰ “Spiritualism in Religion.—No. VI: Incarnations of Deity,” *Spiritual Age* 2, no. 16 (Apr. 16, 1859): 2.

The *Spiritual Age* conceptualized the ubiquity of incarnations of the divine in explicitly Christocentric terms, even as the editors sought to relativize Christianity vis-à-vis other religions. “The essential idea involved in the term *Christ* and its equivalents, as used in the Christian Scriptures,” an editorial suggested, “we apprehend to be simply this—*The Divine in the Human*.” Having universalized the concept of Christ, the article posited a plurality of Christs, all with as plausible a claim to the title as Jesus:

The same idea, substantially, lies at the basis of all the Avatars, Messiahs, Divine Incarnations, Sons of God, etc., to whom humanity in all nations has looked for wisdom and salvation,—from the Chrishna of the Hindoo to the Hiawatha of the North American Indian. In all these it has been believed that the Supreme Deity has in some way incarnated and manifested Himself more fully than in common men.... Most of these so-called ‘heathen’ incarnations are represented as possessing characters and powers which the Christian world at once pronounces monstrous, impossible, and therefore fabulous; while *its* Christ, as often portrayed, no doubt, seems equally fabulous to the ‘heathen.’¹⁶¹

Particularly unusual was the inclusion of native American prophet as a Christ. On the one hand, it nicely demonstrates the exceptionally broad view of religion that some Spiritualists were willing to take, given that American Indian beliefs would not generally have been included in discussions of “world religions” on account of not having a sufficiently complex theology, as understood by European intellectuals.¹⁶² At the same time, however, conceiving of Hiawatha—the founder of the Five Nations Iroquois League—as a “Christ” was to also read him in a highly ahistorical way. While he was as plausibly an incarnation of God as Jesus, he was also implicitly forced into the Christian mould.

What was missing from common notions of the incarnation, however, was its universality. Most people, the *Spiritual Age* argued, made the mistake of confining it to special representatives. In addition to the avatars of the gods, the editorial chided, “the Hindoo also sees lesser incarnations of the Universal Life in the various objects in external nature, and in all vegetable and animal forms, *except man*.” Drawing from a Henry Ward Beecher sermon by way of comparison, the paper noted that Beecher defied “any man to have a conception of God, except through some form, and it was to meet this necessity of our nature, that Christ came in the flesh.” Both the Christian and the “Chrishnian” were

¹⁶¹ “Spiritualism in Religion.—No. VIII: The Christ (Continued),” 2.

¹⁶² Masuzawa, *World Religions*, 114.

unquestionably right in affirming the impossibility of any definite conception of a Being without form; but both equally fail to see a representative of that *form* in MAN universally.... Both agree in looking far back to some ancient, mythical, miraculous or monstrous personage—the Hindoo chiefly to the comely Chrishna—the Christian to the kindly Christ—as furnishing the only conceivable ideas to be had of such a Being.¹⁶³

Unlike Spiritualists, who saw the divine in all humans, Christians and Hindus clung to their special incarnations, while treating their fellow men with contempt. Hindus treated animals with sacred reverence, yet instituted a brutal caste system. Christians lacked the Hindu appreciation for the sacred in nature, but could also “treat their human brothers of differing sects or nationalities with a contempt and cruelty scarcely less than are manifested by the Indian devotees of caste.” So-called Christians, the editor wrote, “can mangle and torture the human frame for differences of belief; can buy and sell it in the mart—especially if it have a dark complexion—as a thing of merchandise, fit only to serve the interests and indolence of a stronger race.” The editor firmly took the stance that the difference of individuals like Jesus from others was merely a matter of “degree,” despite “whatever may be the belief of some Spiritualists and spirits upon the point.” The Deity could be manifested more fully in some than others, but was manifested in every human all the same.¹⁶⁴ Paradoxically, as Jesus was recast as a mythologized figure like Chrishna by the editor of the paper, they adopted the Christian theology surrounding the incarnation as a normative framework for interpreting the divine in man universally.

Affirming the potential of everyone to become Christs, the editor wrote, “Just in proportion as we renounce self, cast out self-love, and receive into our inmosts Divine Love as the energizing, moving principle of all our acts...so does the Father become incarnated in our humanity—so is THE CHRIST formed in us.” This, indeed, he argued, was “the whole aim of the New Testament” and “the sum and substance of real Christianity.” Invoking a primitivist argument, he invoked the Church Fathers, stating, “The early teachers of Christianity seem to have been fully possessed with the idea that it was possible for them to become *like* Jesus—in other words, to have *the Christ in them*.” Regarding the question of whether “Jesus of Nazareth” was “a more true and full embodiment of Divinity in Humanity than any and all other alleged incarnations,” which the paper was willing to possibly concede,

¹⁶³ “Spiritualism in Religion.—No. VI: Incarnations of Deity,” 2.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

there was still an element of cultural bias in play. “Had we been born in India or China, probably we might have thought otherwise; but being where and what we are, we answer most unhesitatingly in the affirmative.”¹⁶⁵

Sin and Salvation

As historians have noted, Spiritualist views on heaven and hell tended towards universalism and a naturalized conception of sin. Spiritualists took the anti-Calvinism of the Second Great Awakening and pushed it to its furthest extremes. As Ann Braude notes, “Spiritualism represented an extreme position in the liberal trend of theology that swept mainstream Protestant denominations of the United States far from their Calvinist or Reformed origins.” Though Spiritualists went beyond the Arminian theology of revivalists in embracing universalism, they shared with them a distaste for the wrathful God of Calvinism who predestined souls—including infants—to suffer for all eternity. The origins of mass-Spiritualism in the “burned-over district” of New York state—also a centre of the Universalist Church—placed it directly in the geographical centre of resistance to traditional Calvinism. Braude connects this anti-Calvinist impulse to the nineteenth-century women’s culture of sentimentality and domesticity, particularly pronounced in Spiritualism given its high number of female believers.¹⁶⁶ Nonetheless, Braude’s assessment should be qualified by the observation that many Spiritualist men, particularly the aforementioned Harmonialists, couched their beliefs in the language of self-reliance and reason, in opposition to servile, superstitious, and irrational orthodoxy.

Salvation was no longer washed away by the vicarious atonement of Christ, but was in human hands. Rather than a supernatural view of sin in which it had its own ontological reality, sin was a condition. To be sure, sin was punished, but only through the natural consequences of bad actions. As Hudson Tuttle put it, “There is no arbitrary decree, final judgment, or atonement for wrong, except through the suffering of the guilty....Hell and

¹⁶⁵ “Spiritualism in Religion.—No. VIII: The Christ (Continued),” 2.

¹⁶⁶ The Spiritualist overlap with the culture of evangelical women’s piety is exemplified by the case of Harriet Beecher Stowe, who, while not a professing Spiritualist, took an interest in Spiritualism and attended the séances of the Fox sisters. Tellingly, Spiritualists also organized large outdoor “picnics” which strongly paralleled evangelical camp meetings. Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 36, 38-42, 46, 173-75; Gutierrez, *Plato’s Ghost*, 13-15; Gutierrez, “Spiritualism,” 197-98, 205-206; Stephen R. Prothero, *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 21.

heaven are not places, but conditions of mind. Inharmony is hell; harmony, heaven.”¹⁶⁷

Another medium, a Miss C. M. Beehe of Boston, cast evil in relative terms: “All evil is the product of unfinished development, and disappears before the perfect man.”¹⁶⁸

A writer to the *Banner of Light* called on all people to accept their own sins in a spirit of self-reliance. “[T]hou must work out thy own salvation,” he wrote. “Thy old notions, that ‘Christ’s blood cleanseth thee from all sin;’ and that thou art saved by his righteousness, applied, are erroneous.” The only salvation he conceived of came from a progressive development and the discernment of natural law. Thus, he wrote, “Thy sins are thy own, and they will remain black stains upon thy soul until it is cleansed by thy own progression in love and goodness, and knowledge of God’s law.” Whatever stage of development one had attained on earth, the writer affirmed, would be reflected in the spirit land.¹⁶⁹

Cora Hatch criticized the doctrines of orthodox Christians on the grounds that they had nothing to do with the teachings of Jesus, and that they reflected the undeveloped minds of a more barbarous age. A *Banner* account of one of her lectures reported that she argued that there was “nothing to be found in the teachings of Christ” to support “the doctrines taught by theologians under the head of Christianity—total depravity, eternal damnation, vicarious atonement, a personal devil, and the torments of a seething hell.” “Shame, said she, on intellectual and moral institutions, shame on Christendom; it might be expected in a nation of heathen, having no true conception of God, no recorded teachings of a Christ, but not in Christendom.”¹⁷⁰ Christians were undeserving of the name because they did not follow the pure religion of their founder. Interestingly, she equated heathens with people who did not have knowledge of a Christ, which suggested that other nations might have true religion, so long as there emerged someone among them who was developed enough to preach pure doctrines.

Total depravity, Hatch affirmed in a lecture in New York on December 30th, 1857, reflected the nature of its inventor and had nothing to do with the true nature of God. “The idea of the *total depravity* of any of God’s children could have originated only in the most perverted and depraved mind,” she told her audience. “The conception which men form of

¹⁶⁷ Tuttle, *Arcana*, 14-15.

¹⁶⁸ “Lecture at the Melodeon,” 4.

¹⁶⁹ Bradbury, “Christ’s Mission,” 6.

¹⁷⁰ “Mrs. Cora L. V. Hatch at the Melodeon. Sunday Nov. 8, 1857,” 6.

each other and of God is an outbirth of their own mental and moral condition.” As with Davis and others—and foreshadowing William James’ belief in religion as reflecting “healthy-minded” individuals or “sick souls”—doctrines emerged in tandem with the personal development of the individual. Jean Calvin seemingly had much moral self-culture yet to do. Hatch was unsurprised that a man like Calvin, one “who could rejoice at seeing Sir Michael Servetus burnt to death by a slow fire,” would conceive of such a doctrine. In the same way, “Jonathan Edwards, when he pictured a God of such awful wrath and vengeance, only daguerretyped his own soul upon the minds of his hearers.”¹⁷¹ Typical of Spiritualists, too, was the reliance on technological imagery. In this instance, she invoked the daguerreotype, capable—like the spirit photograph, “discovered” by William Mumler a few years later in 1861—of capturing the soul’s true essence.

Hatch went so far as to reject evil in an absolute sense completely. “*Good and evil*,” she explained, “are simply relative terms, for there can never exist two *positive principles* which are diametrically opposed to each other. In a strictly philosophical sense, creation is a universal harmony. Were it not so, God would be in an unending war with himself.” On account of the highly immanent and unifying Deity of Spiritualism, all things acted concordantly. Thus, evil existed only in the sense that some individuals were more progressed and morally developed than others. “You do not say that the child, because it is yet a baby, does not possess the elements of a man. . . . The archangels may be said to be evil when compared with Deity; but they are not ‘totally depraved;’ neither is that brother who is the lowest in the scale of humanity.”¹⁷²

The absence of total depravity meant that all people could be regenerated, conceived of in naturalized terms. With strong Emersonian resonances, Hatch argued in one of her lectures that the true animating force behind religion was moral self-culture, which all were capable of. “There is no man or woman so depraved, that when you cultivate their moral nature, they will not be sufficiently religious,” she declared, both rejecting total depravity and asserting an innate capacity for religion that all humans shared in. “Education, knowledge, the brightening knowledge of history, of mankind, of the human soul, add grace and beauty to a man’s devotional feelings. Without them, religion is worthless, dead—something which

¹⁷¹ Hatch, *Discourses*, 309-10.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 311-12.

may be heard like a deep, sepulchral tone—like the rattling of dead men’s bones.”¹⁷³ Hatch’s view of human nature was highly characteristic of Spiritualists more generally. Humans were predisposed to do good and their innate potential had to merely be harnessed directed. This was the true essence of religion and the meaning of spiritual regeneration. Like evangelical Christians who differentiated between true and nominal Christians, Hatch saw a division between true religion, which was moral and animated, and the empty forms of religion, which were dead and contained no regenerative potential.

Hatch was far from being the only Spiritualist to conceive of regeneration as the act of developing one’s moral faculties. An article in the *Spiritual Age* rejected the doctrine of regeneration through a saving grace and instead embraced a variety of moral self-culture. The real new birth was not a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, but “*the conscious commencement and growth of the SPIRITUAL MAN within ourselves.*” Critically, it was conscious. Proponents of the new birth had “no rational philosophy for it—making it wholly a miraculous and unnatural process.” By contrast, true regeneration came from a concerted effort to live in accordance to natural law. More to the point, if the regenerate were to be known by their fruits, the fruits were rotten. Asserting the Spiritualist propensity for reform and practical religion, the *Spiritual Age* forcefully questioned whether the majority of Christians really showed any signs of regeneration as they wallowed in the evils of slavery and capitalism:

The reputed ‘regenerate’ men of our modern churches can hold and trade in the bodies and souls of their brethren,—can speculate in the necessities of life,—can monopolize God’s free earth, while thousands are starving for bread,—can immerse themselves in political strifes and worldly pursuits,—can engage in the petty competitions and tricks of trade,—can drive hard bargains and grind the faces of God’s poor,—can roll in luxury and live in sensuous pleasure,—in short, can sustain a social system which practically denies a human brotherhood and ignores the Christ-life,—with seemingly quite as great a zest as do their ‘unregenerate’ neighbors.¹⁷⁴

While true religion might be interior, its signs were decidedly not. Like Davis, who insisted that true religion express itself as good works and philanthropy, the paper’s editors sneered at the notion that regeneration could be anything other than deliberate improvement of oneself and society. While it may be true, the article acknowledged, that “professed Spiritualists, as a

¹⁷³ Ibid., 248.

¹⁷⁴ “Spiritualism in Religion.—No. XII: Regeneration,” *Spiritual Age* 2, no. 25 (Jun. 18, 1859): 2.

body, thus far, have exhibited little improvement upon this,” its principles were sounder. Thus, they enjoined readers, “Spiritualism must lead to a righteousness far exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees of our day, else it will be of little practical benefit to the world, and its devotees can in no case enter into the kingdom of harmony.”¹⁷⁵

Even spirits associated with one of the most sensationalist and dramatic demonstrations in the annals of Spiritualism—Koons’ spirit room—confirmed this view of regeneration. The Koons’ spirit room was built in the hills of Athens County, Ohio, by Johnathan and Abigail Koons—both mediums along with their children—at the behest and to the specifications of a large group of 165 spirits led by a spirit that called himself King Number One. The room was made to accommodate twenty spectators at a time, who made the hard pilgrimage to the backcountry to witness the display. King Number One, aided by his counterparts King Number Two and King Number Three, acted as master of ceremonies by speaking through a tin horn and cracked jokes or lectured as his mood dictated. The invisible spirit band, accompanied by Johnathan Koons on the fiddle, would play their floating instruments and fill the darkened room with a musical din that could reportedly be heard a mile away. Glowing phosphorescent hands prodded and shook the hands of the spectators.¹⁷⁶

Despite the apparently vaudevillian quality of the spirit room, J. Everett, writing to the *Spiritual Telegraph* with an account of his visit reported that the spirits taught that the “first and the last, the fundamental doctrine, is the belief in the existence, the worship, and love, of God; and of love to one another, and to all mankind without restriction; and that salvation is the total renunciation of error and wrong, and the reception of truth, love, justice, and wisdom.” True religion, even in the noisy frontier spirit room of the Koons family, was about a personal and inward relationship to God and the expression of one’s moral nature through one’s interactions with others. There was no supernatural regeneration, only the progressive development of the self. The spirits even questioned biblical authority, hinting that “the Bible is not precisely the book that many have supposed it to be.”¹⁷⁷ That the spirits

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 2.

¹⁷⁶ Brown, *Heyday of Spiritualism*, 192-95.

¹⁷⁷ J. Everett, “New and Astounding Facts,” *Spiritual Telegraph Papers*, vol. 1, 425-26. See also Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 126-27.

presented such a theology, even while providing borderline entertainment, speaks to the pervasiveness of liberal religious views among Spiritualists.

Spiritualist Utopias

The conceptual equivalence of the historical religions did not mean they were equal. Like all things from the lowest particles of matter to humans as the crown of creation, religion advanced in tandem with societies and the inward development of individuals. As we have seen, outward religious forms were subject to the natural forces of history and were altered as they were transmitted. Different religions expressed the culture they emerged from and such culture, as shown in the section on revelation, was mediated through the inner religious sense of individuals. Consistent with the nineteenth-century optimism about progress, the development of individuals, and therefore culture and religion, was ever onward and upward. Frequently, as with Davis, a popular understanding of evolution provided a mechanism for such progress.

As seen in the section on the historical religions, Spiritualists saw the different religions as having emerged throughout the course of history from older forms. Spiritualism was the culmination of this process: the most perfect expression yet in an infinite chain of progress. One writer to the *Banner* went so far as to suggest “that those mighty ‘angels’” of the late spirit rappings had “been sent forth by the Lord Jesus Christ” himself. Driving the world towards a millennial and utopian destiny, they would “not slacken their coming till every minister of a creed has learned that he can no longer preach error for gold; till hypocritical forms of worship are superseded by the genuine worship of the Father.”¹⁷⁸ In his 1863 *Plain Guide to Spiritualism*, Uriah Clark quoted Spiritualism’s favourite Transcendentalist, Theodore Parker, who approvingly noted that “The Spiritualists are the only sect [not a sect, but a people] that looks forward, and has new fire on its hearth; they alone emancipate themselves from the Bible and the theology of the church, while they also seek to keep the precious truths of the Bible and all the good things of the church.”¹⁷⁹ Aside from the word “sect,” which Clark took issue with in the interjection, Parker’s assessment fit

¹⁷⁸ Bradbury, “Christ’s Mission,” 6.

¹⁷⁹ Clark, *Plain Guide*, 30. Brackets in original.

well with the Spiritualist self-understanding as a religion of the future, free from the old trappings of dogma and superstitious theology. With some strategic editing, however, he failed to include Parker's caveat that Spiritualists focused too much on ghosts and the things beyond humans rather than within themselves.¹⁸⁰

Spiritualists shared a widespread expectation that historical progress had brought them to the cusp of a utopian age wherein past error would be vanquished along with the stifling skepticism of scientific materialism. Samuel B. Brittan, Davis' early associate, continued to be a prolific member of the Spiritualist discourse community more broadly and became the editor of the *Spiritual Telegraph* in 1852, supported financially by Charles Partridge.¹⁸¹ Opening the first issue with an "Address to the Reader," Brittan proclaimed that, in light of the new facts of Spiritualism, the "old Materialism is startled and driven from its dusty abodes" and "Science is overwhelmed with images...of a new world and another life, now opening as the great theater of its future and its final triumphs." The *Spiritual Telegraph*, he explained, would serve as "an earthly channel of communication" that was "familiar and generally accessible" for "this great awakening" that was presently occurring.¹⁸² The *Spiritual Telegraph* reported with satisfaction that an uprising in China had awakened "the sleepy brains of its inhabitants to a little free thought," suggesting to the editor that "there is no other enslaved or sleeping country for whose mental awakening hopes may not be entertained."¹⁸³ With the same post-millennialist intonations that he had written with in the *Univercœlum*, Brittan saw the dawning of a new age when science and religion would be synthesized. Rejecting a metaphysics where the spiritual existed separately from the material, Brittan saw spiritual phenomena as empirical evidence that science could no longer ignore; messages along the "spiritual telegraph" were establishing these as facts.¹⁸⁴

A spirit of no less importance than former President John Quincy Adams, speaking through the mediumship of a Mrs. Lowe, promised nothing short of a "Spiritual reformation."

¹⁸⁰ Parker, *Revival of Religion*, 11.

¹⁸¹ Charles Partridge, "The Publisher to his Patrons," *Spiritual Telegraph* 1, no. 1 (May 8, 1852): 1.

¹⁸² Brittan, "Address to the Reader," 2.

¹⁸³ "China Awakening," *Spiritual Telegraph Papers*, vol. 1, 146.

¹⁸⁴ The metaphor of the spiritual telegraph was popular among Spiritualists and spoke to their belief that spirit communication operated along similarly scientific principles. In the same way that the telegraph collapsed the distance between cities, the spiritual telegraph (embodied by the medium) bridged the gap between the living and the dead. The sacralized quality of technological advance in the popular imagination is apparent in the first intercity message sent in 1844 between Baltimore and Washington: "What hath God wrought?" (Numbers 23:23 KJV). Gutierrez, *Plato's Ghost*, 50; Albanese, *Republic*, 262.

Adams encouraged readers of the *Spiritual Telegraph* with the news that “the dim twilight has passed away, and the bright spiritual sun is shedding its rays abroad on the earth.” Despite “ignorant minds” and “deceptive spirits,” who might “support all the popular evils of the day,” including “slavery,” “war,” “established church organizations,” and “corrupt government,” Adams was hopeful. By evaluating everything “in strict accordance with the principles of sound reason and philosophy,” “the slumbering germs of immortality [would] be kindled into life and activity.” “Before this tribunal alone,” he urged, “enlightened by divine impression, will you be able to determine what is true and what is false.”¹⁸⁵ The exercise of reason would inaugurate the new era, whatever hurdles there may be.

Concrete reform efforts were critical for the Spiritualist notion of progress. As with Davis’ Fourierist plans for the perfect society, Spiritualists envisioned a utopia wrought by human hands, with the help and guidance of angels from the spiritual spheres. This shared impulse was attested to by the numerous utopian projects that Spiritualists undertook.¹⁸⁶ Like the associations of the angels in the spiritual spheres, Spiritualists attempted to put Fourierist principles of harmony and association into practice with communes such as Adin Ballou’s Hopedale or Harmonia near Battle Creek, Michigan, notable for having Sojourner Truth as a resident. Another Harmonia was founded in western New York by John Murray Spear, supposedly—as spirits informed him—above the ruins of a long-lost city. More controversially, Thomas Lake Harris, the former associate of Davis, co-founded the apocalyptic and authoritarian community of Mountain Cove in western Virginia in 1851, which lasted for a couple of years before dissolving. Unsurprisingly, most other Spiritualists were quick to denounce the project.¹⁸⁷ Moreover, like evangelical Christians who believed that the regenerate would be known by their “fruits,” Spiritualists believed that progressed and enlightened souls were filled with benevolence and a philanthropic spirit. Thus, there

¹⁸⁵ “Encouragement and Caution. Communication from the Spirit of John Q. Adams, Through Mrs. Lowe, Medium,” *Spiritual Telegraph Papers*, vol. 1, 101-102.

¹⁸⁶ Spiritualists were far from unique in their interest in Fourierism and communitarian experiments. Fourier’s theories were actively promoted in the United States by Albert Brisbane and Horace Greeley. Fourierist phalanxes abounded during the antebellum period, including the Transcendentalist Brook Farm and Fruitlands. Over the course of the 1840s, approximately forty phalanxes existed in the U.S.—six in western New York state alone. The craze for phalanxes peaked from 1842-1843, with most failing financially, though a few persisted for several years after. Gabay, *Covert Enlightenment*, 171-75; Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, vol. 1, 166.

¹⁸⁷ Albanese, *Republic*, 267-69.

existed a synergy by which reform uplifted society at the same time that the most refined members of society drove reform.

The reform impulse of Spiritualism could at times assume parallels with the traditional Puritan view that good works were the fruits of true religion, though reform was presented as the truer expression of religion than faith. As one spirit, channelled by the *Banner's* resident medium, Mrs. J. H. Conant, put it, "My dear friend, do you suppose it was the simple belief in Christ that was to save mankind, or was it the works that would follow that belief? Man shall not live by *belief*, we say, but by the offspring of belief.... What is the good of belief if it bring not forth works?" Nonetheless, the spirit affirmed that true belief would bring forth good works, and that true belief was in Spiritualism. "Again we say, he that believeth in Spiritualism, the same shall be saved. We do not simply mean if you believe that these manifestations are from spirits out of the form, you will be happy here and hereafter. But if you believe, you will live holy, god-like lives; you will benefit mankind, and walk in the footsteps of your divine master, as near Christ as is possible for you to do." Christians, on the other hand, the spirit informed readers, were like "the fig tree, which bore no fruit."¹⁸⁸

Achsa Sprague put it bluntly in 1861: "Spiritualism is useless—is as nothing—unless it does its work in the world."¹⁸⁹ As a complete system that went beyond the partial historical religions, the principles of Spiritualism would put an end to the ills of society. "If the grand principles of Spiritualism were put in universal practice to-day," wrote Hudson Tuttle in 1871, "in three generations there would not be necessity for an asylum, a jail, a penitentiary, a lawyer, a judge, a reverend, in the wide land."¹⁹⁰ Echoing Davis, he asserted that "While the churches descant on the efficacy of prayer, Spiritualism teaches that one good deed is worth all the formal prayers since Adam's time."¹⁹¹

One correspondent to the *Spiritual Telegraph* presented the optimistic advice of a spirit with regards to dealing with wrongdoers. Advocating something like a modern-day intervention, the spirit advised:

¹⁸⁸ "Belief and Works," *Banner of Light* 1, no. 13 (Jul. 2, 1857): 7.

¹⁸⁹ "Miss A. W. Sprague at Allston Hall," 8.

¹⁹⁰ Tuttle, *Arcana*, 402.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 410.

When one gets drunk, abuses his family, libels his neighbor, or commits any other outrage against the peace and well-being of society, his immediate neighbors, ten, twenty, thirty of them, as the case may be, should arise, and pour in upon the offender in a body, and say to him, ‘Sir, this will never do. You must not conduct in this way. You injure us, and destroy yourself, and insult the Just Being in whose image you are made.’ Plead with the wrong-doer. Substitute the law of Love in place of the law of Force. Few would be willing to subject themselves to a second visitation of this kind.¹⁹²

Relentlessly optimistic about human potential, Spiritualists, and even the spirits, envisioned a world where a morally-oriented community could come together to peacefully correct wrongs through education and mutual support, rather than through penal retribution. Evil did not exist in the human heart, but was the product of circumstance, which could be corrected by the collective efforts of society.

Central to Spiritualist reform efforts was education. As reported in the *Spiritual Age*, Samuel B. Brittan, speaking at the 1858 Rutland Free Convention, noted the necessity for the “proper education of the young” as “a subject which should immediately engage the serious attention of every Spiritual Reformer.” “The Catholic Church and the Sects of Protestant Christendom have not been unmindful of the strong influence and lasting consequences of early impressions,” he warned. “They have chiefly depended on the force of education to sustain their arrogant and unholy claims to authority over the reason and consciences of men.” In particular, Brittan was concerned about the method of education that privileged rote memorization rather than understanding principles. “The pupil is required to deposite [sic] the entire verbal contents of his class-books in his brains;” Brittan lamented, “but comparatively little effort is made to secure a thorough comprehension and a ready application of essential principles, without which learning is a buried and useless treasure.”¹⁹³ Such an emphasis was consistent with the frequent Spiritualist conflation of uncovering and applying natural laws with the practice of true religion.

With similar concern for the education of youth, the *Banner of Light* ran notices in 1865 lauding the efforts of Andrew and Mary Fenn Davis to promote their “Children's Progressive Lyceums, many of which are springing up in various sections of our country,” which the *Banner* hailed “with a great deal of pleasure.” “The mission of teaching the dear

¹⁹² J. R. Orton, “How to Deal With Evil-Doers,” *Spiritual Telegraph Papers*, vol. 1, 278.

¹⁹³ Samuel B. Brittan, “Spiritualism and Education,” *Spiritual Age* 1, no. 29 (Jul. 17, 1858): 2.

children the grandest religion ever vouchsafed the people of earth, and of relieving the necessities of the poor, is a noble one, and should not languish for lack of material support,” the paper chided. “We do sincerely hope, therefore, that the Spiritualists of this country will amply sustain our brother and sister in their efforts to benefit humanity.”¹⁹⁴

The spirit of voluntarism and activism present in American religion more generally—much-noted since Alexis de Tocqueville observed it in 1835—was strongly exemplified by such Spiritualist reform efforts.¹⁹⁵ A *Banner* report on a James M. Peebles lecture later in the issue struck a similar note when it described how Peebles “desired to see not only free church edifices erected, congregational singing encouraged, Progressive Lyceums established, and regular meetings sustained, but more of the *devotional element*, and a kind, charitable, religious culture growing up in our midst.”¹⁹⁶ Again, reform promoted self-culture, but such development would also bring about more fruits of reform. Indeed, Peebles was an ardent advocate of public education, admonishing even Davis to be more active on the lecture circuit. “I consider it a moral obligation resting upon *me*, to attend, and take an active part in every Lyceum session,” he wrote to the *Banner* in 1865. “Cannot Bro. Davis be induced to visit every Progressive Lyceum now organized?” Peebles invited Davis, the “good shepherd,” to use his “personal presence, happy suggestions, and kind words, [to] feed the lambs.” Sharing Davis’ distaste for those who did not put their principles into action through concrete reform, he added, “bring, also, a tremendous *threshing-flail*, neither silken-ended nor flower-wreathed, for those easy, shiftless Spiritualists, that, knowing the will of the angels, do it not—come *quickly*.”¹⁹⁷

The optimism of Spiritualism bordered at times on the promise of ascension to godhood. As Hudson Tuttle wrote in 1871, Spiritualism “takes man by the hand, and, instead of telling him that he is a sinful worm of the dust, . . . it assures him that he is a nobleman of nature, heir to the Godhead, owning all things, for whom all things exist, and is capable of understanding all. He is not for to-day; not acting for time, but for eternity; not a mushroom

¹⁹⁴ “The Lyceum Herald,” *Banner of Light* 18, no. 6 (Oct. 28, 1865): 5.

¹⁹⁵ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 165-70; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America and Two Essays on America* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 595-600; Hatch, *Democratization*, 9-15. For a thorough treatment of Spiritualist reform activities, see Ann Braude’s *Radical Spirits*.

¹⁹⁶ “Sunday in the Melodeon—J. M. Peebles,” 8.

¹⁹⁷ James M. Peebles, “Letter from J. M. Peebles,” *Banner of Light* 18, no. 9 (Nov. 18, 1865): 4.

of a night, but a companion of everlasting worlds.”¹⁹⁸ Peebles similarity posited that Spiritualism’s “philosophy spanned the realms of matter and mind, and its aim was to perfect humanity.”¹⁹⁹ As one writer to the *Banner* proclaimed, Christ had come to demonstrate that “the Christ-principle doth prevail in every heart, and all are equal unto him. He can *then* no longer be Lord, for shall *all* be lords.” Man was “not born to pass a few short years in a life of sin and degradation, and sink into oblivion.” Quite the contrary. “[H]e had a high, noble, and God-like destiny to fill.”²⁰⁰

The progressive emphasis of Spiritualism, as we saw with Davis and the Harmonialists, dovetailed nicely with notions of American exceptionalism. Hudson Tuttle, remarked that Spiritualism “was born on American soil, and has all the tendencies of the American mind.” It was thus superior to the Semitic religions of Islam and Judaism, onto which Christianity was “a graft.” Semitic religions, Tuttle asserted, “however grand, partaking of the visions of the Orient, are foreign to us. The new is internal in its growth, practical, and has the coolness and calmness of the West.” Balking at the applicability of the old religions to Americans, he wrote, “The Semitic race, the harsh Jew, the Arab, dictating morals to us! We have taught the world a lesson in government: it is ours to send back to Palestine a new and superior religion.” America, with republican government and a modern and democratic religion was an exemplar to the world. Observing the humble origins of Spiritualism and its lack of an ecclesiastical hierarchy, he noted that “Spiritualists are the only people who have this fire on their altars; who by religion are democratic.... It never has had a leader; yet its aim and its doctrines are remarkably consistent. The refined and educated medium, enjoying the advantages of the city, and the boy-medium of the backwoods, receive communications enunciating the same great truths, and embodying the same philosophy. All over the land such communications are received, in substance identical.”²⁰¹ Samuel B. Brittan similarly identified Spiritualism with the Protestant right to individual conscience and American republican ideals of freedom. Those who intolerantly attempted to silence the views of their opponents, such as the journalists who ridiculed Judge John Edmonds, were

¹⁹⁸ Tuttle, *Arcana*, 426.

¹⁹⁹ “Sunday in the Melodeon—J. M. Peebles,” 8.

²⁰⁰ Bradbury, “Christ’s Mission,” 5-6.

²⁰¹ Tuttle, *Arcana*, 428-29.

“the enemies of religious liberty” and “utterly hostile to the true spirit and genius of republican institutions.”²⁰²

Perhaps the most dramatic expression of the utopian impulse of Spiritualism came from the Universalist minister and Spiritualist medium, John Murray Spear and his New Motor, or New Motive Power. Spear, an avid reformer, was co-editor of a prison reform journal *The Prisoner's Friend*²⁰³ and an associate of William Lloyd Garrison. Spear converted to Spiritualism in 1851 after reading Davis and saw his hopes for a utopian society seemingly on the brink of realization when he was contacted by a group of spirits in 1853 calling themselves the “Association of Electricizers.” In 1854, the group, led by none other than Benjamin Franklin, presented Spear with the plans for a perpetual motion machine that would inaugurate an era of peace: a mechanical messiah. Issues of the *New Era* announced and described the device in elaborate detail. Constructed over nine months from two-thousand dollars worth of wood, copper, and zinc on a hill overlooking Lynn, Massachusetts, “Heaven’s last, best gift to man” was to be brought to life through the agency of a spirit birthed by a woman known simply as the Mary of the New Dispensation following an infusion of magnetic energies of Spear’s followers, organized from least to most refined. Notably, the parts of the machine, through the logic of correspondence, were intended to match the human body in the same way that the universe corresponded to the body of God.²⁰⁴

While Spear and other enthusiastic promoters like A. E. Newton triumphantly announced that the machine had moved, other Spiritualists were less enthusiastic. One writer to the *Spiritual Telegraph* was skeptical of the new motor’s ability to even turn a coffee mill. Davis, somewhat more diplomatically, acknowledged Spear’s good intentions, while ultimately declaring the project a failure. After moving the machine to Randolph, New York, Spear subsequently claimed that it was smashed by a mob in a martyrdom befitting the new messiah.²⁰⁵ The incident showed in extreme form the way that Spiritualists conceptualized technological advancement in millennialist terms and, in part, pinned such hopes on guidance from the spiritual spheres would help spur this advancement.

²⁰² Samuel B. Brittan, “Freedom and Intolerance,” *Spiritual Telegraph Papers*, vol. 1, 271-72, 273-75.

²⁰³ Buescher, *Other Side of Salvation*, 171.

²⁰⁴ “History of the New Motive Power. The Great Spiritual Revelation of the Age. Number Two: The Machine—Continued,” *New Era: or, Heaven Opened to Man* 2, no. 28 (May 10, 1854): 110.

²⁰⁵ Gutierrez, “Spiritualism,” 202; Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, vol. 1, 298-99; Gutierrez, *Plato's Ghost*, 61-64; Brown, *Heyday of Spiritualism*, 178-89.

A startling vision J. Wolcott described to the *New Era* put the millennial hopes some Spiritualists had for the New Motive Power in very concrete terms. Spirits at a séance, Wolcott reported, presented him with a vision of the machine being mocked by contemptuous onlookers. As the machine began to grow and spawn replicas of itself, however, doubt took hold of the mockers. The clergy, naturally, denounced it as the work of Satan, but were soon literally swept aside as the machines ran “over and through those temples, completely demolishing them to heaps of worthless rubbish.” As the “worshippers in those churches bemoaned, most piteously, the destruction of their sacred edifices,” “a vast multitude of people, who were slaves to no sect or creed, but whose minds were free and open for the reception of any and all new truth...hailed the new revelation with shouts of joy and acclamation.” Christ himself then appeared to announce that the Philosopher’s Stone had been discovered at last.²⁰⁶ Here technology was imbued with sacred meaning and physically rid the world of sectarian religion. The outward forms were purged from the earth to make way for the realization of the true religion on earth.

Despite the Spiritualist premium on progress and scientific advancement, Spiritualists did not entirely escape the ambiguities that came from the latest developments. Darwinian evolution, for instance, presented a greater threat to the Spiritualist worldview in which a harmonious nature reflected the benevolence of the Deity. Older linear models of evolution, as seen in Davis’ writings, were easily reconcilable with a divine First Cause who permeated all matter as unrealized potential. By contrast, survival of the fittest, with the ruthlessness and chaos that it implied, was fundamentally at odds with the sacred and orderly vision of nature that Spiritualists embraced. When it came to Darwinism, certain Spiritualists, such as Cora Hatch, went on the defensive.

In 1874, Hatch—Mrs. Tappan by this point—dismissed “the weak points in the Darwinian theory” as “easily found out by the student of science or natural philosophy.” In particular, she disputed that “the theory of selection and evolution account for the existence of different types.” This was “most erroneous,” in her view. Never in nature had “one type of existence” been “merged into or becom[e] another type. There is no change going on in the lower orders that are said to resemble man by which it is possible that they may become future men. The gorilla and the ape, though resembling man in appearance, fail to resemble

²⁰⁶ J. Wolcott, “A Vision of the New Motive Power: The Philosopher’s Stone Explained,” *New Era: or, Heaven Opened to Man* 2, no. 36 (Jul. 5, 1854): 141.

him in any distinctive qualities of expressed intelligence, and there has never been known in the history of the world a specific change from the lower to the higher degree of existence.” “[E]volution,” she asserted, applied “not to the change and transition from one type to another of existence, but to the perfection and development of the type already formed.”²⁰⁷ Nonetheless, it is clear from her criticism that Hatch was still trying to read Darwin in teleological terms in which humanity was the *a-priori* end goal of evolution. While she criticized the theory, she was seemingly unaware of its full potential to undermine the Spiritualist worldview of orderly and guided creation.

²⁰⁷ Quoted in Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, vol. 2, 135.

CONCLUSION

Fractures and Legacies

1893 was a significant year for Spiritualism as a “religion.” First, Cora Richmond—formerly Hatch—became the vice-president and one of the founding members of the National Spiritualist Association (NSA)—the first truly national Spiritualist organization. This marked a reversal of decades of anti-institutionalism among Spiritualists. Then she submitted a paper on behalf of Spiritualists to the World’s Parliament of Religions.¹ Speaking to the founding convention for the NSA, Richmond affirmed her belief “that the blessing of the spirit world is upon this assembly,” as well as “upon the assembly here in Chicago, of all nations; we believe it is the beginning of a new outpouring of the spirit of truth upon the world to mark an epoch that shall one day stand as the beginning of a new truth, or a new presentation of truth to the world.”² Though she presented both events in millennial and universal terms—divinely sanctioned assemblies that would bring about the realization of true religion in the world—her optimism belied deep divisions within Spiritualism and its decline in the closing decades of the century.

It seems a fitting irony that in the lead-up to the Parliament, with its ecumenical spirit and millennial hopes for a universal religion, Spiritualists would be driven to institutionalize, albeit mostly as a result of external pressures. While the universalized understanding of religion that Andrew Jackson Davis and the Harmonialists had bequeathed in popularized form to the Spiritualist movement remained a central impulse, by 1893 Davis and the

¹ Ann Braude, “Richmond, Cora L. V. Scott Hatch Daniels Tappan (1840-1923),” in *American National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Retrieved 27 Aug. 2018. <http://www.anb.org/view/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.001.0001/anb-9780198606697-e-0801893>.

² *Proceedings of the National Delegate Convention of Spiritualists of the United States of America. Held in Chicago, Illinois, September 27, 28, and 29, 1893* (Washington, D.C.: Stormont & Jackson, 1893), 12.

majority of Spiritualists had undergone an acrimonious divorce. Nonetheless, even without the presence of Davis in their ranks, Spiritualists retained the same basic formulation of religion—as an unchanging and natural essence that had been partially (or falsely) expressed in various historical forms, but would one day soon be realized in history—that Deists, liberal Protestants, and Transcendentalists had espoused with different, and more elite, inflections, and with varying degrees of sophistication. However, the tensions between inward, outward, and utopian expressions of religion played out in the dynamics of institution building and ecumenicalism.

The Divorce

Perhaps as an inevitable result of their lack of a unifying creed, Spiritualists—and subsequent scholars—drew a distinction between those, like Davis, who emphasized the philosophical and reform element in Spiritualism, and those who were more interested in spiritual phenomena and séances. How real this division was in practice has been a matter of scholarly debate, similar to the question of Christian and non-Christian Spiritualists raised in the previous chapter. While many historians have followed the lead of Robert Delp in the 1960s in maintaining a distinction between “philosophical” and “phenomenal” Spiritualists, Ann Taves has suggested that the separation may be more a reflection of Davis’ attempts to separate his Harmonial Philosophy from Spiritualism in the late nineteenth century and that he had never had difficulties identifying with the movement before that.³

While the difference may well be overblown, there were signs of such tensions almost from the very outset of American Spiritualism that some commenters noticed. Even in 1852, Samuel B. Brittan expressed his disgust with “*sign seekers*” and their “love of monstrosities.” This type of Spiritualist, he complained, were quickly bored unless they were provided with ever-greater wonders.⁴ In 1857, Dr. Benjamin Hatch saw it as a division between “the Christian spiritualists and the harmonialists, so called.” While the former focused on “reverence,” the latter embraced practical reform and saw reverence as “only a manifestation

³ Delp, “Prophet of American Spiritualism,” 51-52; Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 400n1; Albanese, “On the Matter of Spirit,” 3; Albanese, *Republic*, 188.

⁴ Brittan, “The Shekinah,” 86.

or an expression of what should be a universal religion.”⁵ Davis himself seemed to suggest that he considered his philosophy to be a higher expression of truth with his “Pantheon of Progress” in the *Great Harmonia*.⁶ While praising the Poughkeepsie Seer, Emma Hardinge, too, noted in her 1869 history that Davis’ system was “not the origin of or immediately connected with the phenomenal movement called Modern Spiritualism” and that there were “lines of separative demarcation between them.”⁷ Whether significant at the height of Spiritualism’s popularity during the antebellum period or not, by the late nineteenth century these fault lines opened into fissures. Davis’ frustration over what he perceived to be a lack of philosophical rigour among believers brought him into increasingly open conflict with other prominent Spiritualists.

The “sign seekers,” however, showed little sign of abating. While séances always had straddled an ambiguous line between entertainment and religious edification, in the decades following the Civil War, the appetite for more dramatic displays of mediumship only increased, and with them spectacular instances of fraud. The spirit rapping, trance lectures, and automatic writing of antebellum Spiritualism gave way to the spirit photographs of William Mumler, the escape act of the Davenport brothers, mediums who could secrete “ectoplasm,” feats of levitation, “fire-test” mediums, and full-body manifestations of spirits. Equally disturbing was the turn of some mediums towards magic and the occult, such as in the case of Helena Blavatsky and her Theosophical Society, founded in 1875.⁸ If the practice of true religion was moral self-culture and the implementation of natural law in society, one can readily appreciate how vaudevillian sensationalism or a focus on hidden knowledge would be threatening to the utopian project of establishing such a religion on earth.

Davis’ consternation over “mercenary” mediums, “Fortune-telling,” and “treasure-hunting” festered as he increasingly quarrelled with the other attendees at Spiritualist

⁵ B. F. Hatch, in *Discourses on Religion, Morals, Philosophy, and Metaphysics*, by Cora L. V. Hatch (New York: B. F. Hatch, 1858), 143.

⁶ Davis, *Great Harmonia*, vol. 5, 239-77; Albanese, *Republic*, 218.

⁷ Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 27.

⁸ In one particularly damaging episode in 1875, the celebrated reformer Robert Dale Owen was publicly humiliated by giving his endorsement to the materialization of the spirit “Katie King” through the mediumship of Mr. and Mrs. Nelson Holmes, only for them to be discredited days before his article ran in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Equally damaging was Kate and Margaret Fox’s public confessions to fraud in 1888, which Margaret tried to recant after the exposé tour failed to turn a profit. Many Spiritualists were content to blame the confession on the two women’s rampant alcoholism. Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 175-82; Gutierrez, *Plato’s Ghost*, 66-67; Albanese, *Republic*, 223-24; Brown, *Heyday of Spiritualism*, 198-214, 245-268; Bennet, *Transatlantic Spiritualism*, 6-7; Isaacs, “The Fox Sisters and American Spiritualism,” 104-105.

conventions over issues of reform and unrestrained mediumship. His frustration boiled over in 1870 with his publication of *The Fountain; with Jets of New Meanings*. Lashing out against unphilosophical mediums, Davis asserted that Spiritualism was “radically incapable of becoming a practical religion.” When “reduced to practice,” it served no purpose beyond “immediate gratification” and providing “assurances that ‘angels will take care of you.’” Devoid of the need for activism and self-development, Spiritualists became passive and complacent “like an opium eater.” Consistent with his contempt of the outward forms of religion, Davis flatly stated, “communicating with spirits, however delightful to the better feelings, is not the practice of religion.” While Spiritualism had value as a demonstration of mortality, it did not uncover natural law for the betterment of society: “Ideas and indestructible Principles, and *not* the wonders of communications with persons residing beyond the tomb, are the seed-causes of progress and reconstruction.” True religion bore fruit in good works. Reiterating that the essence of religion was the personal appropriation of divine law in one’s life and actions, Davis wrote, “A true religion, independent of all tricks and mysteries,” caused a person “inwardly, with reverence and affection, to look up to the Infinite Perfection”; “to rise to the universal love of mankind, and to deal justly, truthfully, and peacefully with every living being”; as well as to “to strive to live physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually, according to that standard of supreme excellence to which the immortal spirit naturally calls and points all mankind.”⁹ Spiritualists who focused excessively on practice and outward forms failed this test.

The backlash was swift. Other Spiritualists were quick to denounce Davis and deny that he was a Spiritualist at all—a charge he publicly countered, asserting his identity as a true Spiritualist and medium. Matters became more personal after Davis publicly criticized Emma Hardinge Britten and Helena Blavatsky’s “magical spiritualism” in 1878. Later the same year, he formed the First Harmonial Association of New York in an attempt to disassociate from mass Spiritualism, but as Ann Braude observes, “his philosophy without spirit manifestations proved no more viable in 1878 than in 1848.”¹⁰ Matters only became worse for Davis’ reputation when, after twenty-nine years of marriage to his now terminally-ill wife Mary Fenn Davis, he decided that theirs was not a true “conjugal” marriage between

⁹ Davis, *Fountain*, 210-14, 223-25, 227-31; Delp, “Andrew Jackson Davis and Spiritualism,” 107-108; Taves, 401; Moore, *White Crows*, 66.

¹⁰ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 181-82.

soul mates and was therefore immoral. Davis divorced Mary Fenn—a popular Spiritualist and reformer in her own right—in 1884 amid rumours of adultery with a younger woman, Della E. Markham, whom he married the next year. Though Fenn, true to her reform principles, accepted the divorce, Spiritualists responded with anger. Emma Hardinge Britten wrote to the New York *Herald* that Davis had always been contemptuous of Spiritualism and refused to identify with it. Davis shot back that he was in fact a better Spiritualist because he grounded his practice in philosophy, but soon he and his new wife retreated from the limelight to Watertown, near Boston, where he again practiced clairvoyant medicine. Though Davis passed from notice for the rest of the nineteenth century, his writings did enjoy a slight resurgence in popularity during the decade before his death in 1910, particularly in Europe.¹¹

The National Association of Spiritualists

Despite his complete estrangement from Spiritualism by 1893 when the National Spiritualist Association was founded in Chicago, the marks of Davis' philosophy on the assembly, as well as on their six principles, adopted in 1899, were apparent. While Spiritualists were notable for their anti-institutionalism, circumstances had changed by 1893. In a three day convention—September 27th to 29th—against the backdrop of the World's Columbian Exposition, Spiritualists elected officials and drafted a constitution for their organization. The stated objectives of the NSA were facilitating organization, collecting accurate statistics for the Census, raising funds, and encouraging more uniform training for mediums, including the ability to ordain them like the ministers of other denominations. Most importantly though, in Cora Richmond's opinion, the NSA was needed for "mutual protection" from "aggressive legislation" that required mediums to be affiliated with a religious denomination or face legal restrictions as "fortune-tellers," or that maintained that the "divine art of healing" was the exclusive purview of professional medicine. The loss of believers to the competing movements Christian Science, New Thought, and Theosophy—all of which borrowed heavily from Spiritualism—and exposures of fraud from psychical researchers also contributed to the need to organize. While Spiritualists may have aspired to a higher essence of religion than

¹¹ Emma Hardinge Britten (she married William Britten in 1870) briefly joined the Theosophical Society in 1875, but soon parted ways with Blavatsky. Delp, "Andrew Jackson Davis and Spiritualism," 108-17; Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 118; Albanese, *Republic*, 218-19.

outward forms, political and social realities were making it necessary to demonstrate that Spiritualism was in fact a religion to a public and government that generally failed to recognize them as anything other than fraudulent conjurers and “jugglers.” In a supreme irony, the markers of a religion that Spiritualists were forced to adopt were the very ones they had helped construct, even as they rejected them.¹²

Previous attempts to organize at a national level had been short-lived, and Richmond—Scott at the time—had been a vocal opponent of such efforts, declaring in front of a Spiritualist National Convention in 1865, “I am *bitterly* opposed to religious organizations of any kind—to anything that fetters or binds the human mind.” Other mediums decried attempts at organization as an attempt to restrict the individual prerogatives of mediumship and as a “positive” and “masculine” endeavour that would inhibit spirit communication. Nonetheless, the American Association of Spiritualists—initially called the National Organization of Spiritualists—emerged out of the Convention in spite of such protests, but only lasted from 1865 to 1873 with little to show in the way of accomplishments. Philosophically-minded figures within the organization like Andrew and Mary Fenn Davis pushed for a reform agenda, tried to sideline mediums from leadership positions, and to encourage the Association to condemn fraudulent mediums and phenomena like full-body manifestations, while mediums in turn sought to thwart their efforts.¹³ In 1893, however, Cora Richmond acknowledged the reality of the situation, arguing that the question was “not shall we organize sunshine or fresh air, or whatever blessings are given, but is it necessary to organize to prevent them from being taken from us?” Voted vice-president, with Harrison D. Barrett as president, Richmond assumed a leadership role in the institutionalization of Spiritualism.¹⁴

¹² David Walker observes, for example, the contempt with which most comparative religion scholars treated Spiritualism. The garbled and often uninspired quality, not to mention the ritualized aspects, of many spirit communications drew unfavourable comparisons to the primitive practices of “barbarians.” *Proceedings*, 5, 12, 27-29; Moore, *White Crows*, 67-68; Delp, “Andrew Jackson Davis and Spiritualism,” 112-13; Walker, “The Humbug in American Religion Ritual Theories of Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism,” 53-55, 72-73; Bret E. Carroll, “Spiritualism,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, vol. 4, Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams, eds. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2010), 2138.

¹³ The organization eventually foundered due to poor attendance and the refusal of many alienated mediums to participate in an organization increasingly dominated by men and non-trance speakers. The unexpected election of the controversial reformer and suffragette Victoria Woodhull as the NSA’s president in 1871 further antagonized members who believed that she had opportunistically hijacked the organization in order to bolster her U.S. presidential bid. Moore, *White Crows*, 66-68; Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 164-73.

¹⁴ *Proceedings*, 10, 154-55.

Institutionalization sat in uneasy tension with how Spiritualists understood true religion, however. One of Barrett's first proposals was that the NSA build a "national library, in which the inspired poems of Elizabeth Doten, the scientific writings of Andrew Jackson Davis, Hudson Tuttle, . . . and a host of other equally-gifted authors may be placed for the enjoyment of future generations." Thus, institutionalization almost immediately brought suggestions of giving official sanction to a canon that had been previously established by a community of readers. Ironically, his proposed inclusion of Davis as a key figure in his quasi-canonical library came dangerously close to reverence for particular books that the seer so detested. While stopping short of establishing an authoritative Spiritualist scriptural canon, Barrett seemed to be implicitly gravitating towards the signs that would mark Spiritualism as a "world religion."¹⁵

Still trying to resist the compartmentalizing tendencies of modernity, Barrett affirmed that "Spiritualism is a religion," which bound phenomena, science, and "the philosophy of life . . . together in a system of thought that transcends everything the world has yet produced, and shall in time supplant every cult now in existence." Significantly, Spiritualism had subtly shifted into a "system," rather than an individual and inward relation to the divine. Barrett's eagerness to make Spiritualism intelligible as a religion was further underlined by his observation that Spiritualists were frequently "asked where are our charitable institutions, our schools and colleges, our professors and savants." He tried to deflect this charge with the claim that Spiritualist theology had entered "every church in Christendom" and "liberalized the religious sentiment of the thinking people of the world" and that Spiritualists were too self-reliant to need charity. Yet, he acknowledged that care for aging mediums and "indigent Spiritualists ought to be considered, and he hoped the convention would "lay a sure foundation and erect a spiritual temple that shall reflect credit upon us as a body."¹⁶ With the anticipated universal religion still unrealized, the interior essence of true religion that transcended time and sectarian boundaries was being forced once more into a partial and

¹⁵ What would likely have been more disturbing to Davis was his inclusion as one of the "founders" of Spiritualism in the *Spiritualist Manual*, first published in 1911 by the NSA as a "discretionary" handbook for Spiritualist ministers and believers. The *Manual* includes a sermon to be given on "Founders Day" which, along with other prominent Spiritualists, extols the virtues of the "remarkable late day Prophet," acknowledging that "the foundation of Spiritualism rests upon the philosophy of Andrew Jackson Davis." Perhaps more palatable to Davis, the NSA continued his Children's Progressive Lyceum. *Spiritualist Manual: Issued by the National Spiritualist Association of Churches of the United States of America (A Religious Body)* (Cassadaga, FL: NSAC, 1980), 13, 145-48; *Proceedings*, 29.

¹⁶ *Proceedings*, 29-30.

historical form. Half a century after the birth of their movement, the very discourse of religion that Spiritualists had helped construct threatened to eat them alive.

Perhaps reflecting an anxiety that the form not be substituted for the essence, an 1898 resolution of the NSA took pains to emphasize that Spiritualism existed independently of organizations or ordained ministers.¹⁷ The next year, however, in a move that seemed suspiciously like adopting a creed to some,¹⁸ the NSA defined six principles of Spiritualist belief:

1. We believe in Infinite Intelligence.
2. We believe that the phenomena of Nature, both physical and spiritual, are the expression of Infinite Intelligence.
3. We affirm that a correct understanding of such expression and living in accordance therewith, constitute true religion.
4. We affirm that the existence and personal identity of the individual continue after the change called death.
5. We affirm that communication with the so-called dead is a fact, scientifically proven by the phenomena of Spiritualism.
6. We believe that the highest morality is contained in the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."¹⁹

While principles four and five are standard Spiritualist fare, of particular note are the first three principles. The first two points together established the theory of correspondence—Nature, and all her productions, as a direct reflection of the Divine. The third defined the true essence of religion in the same way that Davis—and the Transcendentalists and Deists before—had. True religion was uncovering divinely-inscribed natural law and, through an individualistic and inward moral-self culture, living one's life according to it—in short, religion was identified with true ethics, the sixth principle being simply the highest expression of it. Even as Spiritualists adopted a "confession" and a formal ecclesial structure

¹⁷ Richmond added a similar disclaimer at the close of the 1893 convention. *Proceedings*, 173-74; Moore, *White Crows*, 67.

¹⁸ In particular, some Spiritualists balked at the use of the word "believe," which seemed too credal. Various articles in the *Banner* article justified having a Declaration of Principles, for instance, on the grounds that it would make it easier to convince courts that Spiritualism was a religion, entitled to legal protection. Another saw it as the only way to disavow frauds. "A Crisis in Massachusetts," *Banner of Light* 85, no. 26 (Aug. 26, 1899): 4; E. W. Gould, "Are Spiritualists as a Sect in Any Way Responsible for Fraudulent Mediumship?" *Banner of Light* 86, no. 5 (Sep. 30, 1899): 8; "The Declaration of Principles," *Banner of Light* 86, no. 11 (Nov. 11, 1899): 4.

¹⁹ These principles, plus three subsequently added ones, are still used by the National Spiritualist Association of Churches (NSAC) today. "Declaration of Principles," National Spiritualist Association of Churches. Retrieved 31 Aug. 2018. <http://nsac.org/what-we-believe/principles/>; Walker, "Humbug," 54. Several alternatives for the NSA to vote on were published in the *Banner* during the lead-up to the convention. See, for example, "A Declaration of Principles," *Banner of Light* 86, no. 7 (Oct. 14, 1899): 4.

—assuming, in the words of Robert Delp, “the character of traditional evangelical churches”—they resisted its implications by reasserting that religion was individual, moral, eternal, and universally discoverable through natural revelation. Still, the centre would not hold. Beyond being perpetually short of funds, controversies, such as the uniqueness of Christ, the doctrine of reincarnation, or church polity, led to schisms in the NSA as smaller groups broke off—the Progressive Spiritual Church in 1907, the National Spiritual Alliance in 1913, and, in the 1940s, the Churches of Spiritual Revelation Association and the Spiritualist Episcopal Church.²⁰ But, before these fractures occurred, Spiritualists remained optimistic about the utopian potential of a universal religion, even at the same moment as they coalesced into a denomination.

The World’s Parliament of Religions

At the same 1893 convention which gave birth to the NSA, the assembled Spiritualists discussed with great interest another major event occurring in Chicago during the World’s Columbian Exposition: the World’s Parliament of Religions, which had convened on the 11th of September amid great fanfare and ran for seventeen days.²¹ The Spiritualists saw in the Parliament a reflection of their own utopian dreams of a universal religion and a liberal attitude that treated different religions as equivalent expressions of a single underlying impulse. Indeed, the Parliament’s vision was so compatible with their own that they were prepared to take credit for it. Cora Richmond mused to the NSA convention, “It is not too much to say—and we have the sanction of Dr. Barrows, the chairman of the Parliament of Religions, for what we are saying—that the spirit world has made it possible for a Parliament of Religions to be held, and it is not too much to claim that Spiritualism has been the means, in the hands of the spirit world, for bringing it about.”²² There was a problem, however. Like the Mormons and other “sectarians,” Spiritualists had not been invited.

While Richmond acknowledged that many at the convention might feel “surprised and pained, neglected and slighted” at the lack of representation, Spiritualists had “no one to

²⁰ Moore, *White Crows*, 68; Carroll, “Spiritualism,” 2138; Catherine L. Albanese, “Metaphysical Movements,” *Cambridge History of Religions in America*, vol. 2, 448-49.

²¹ Seager, *World’s Parliament of Religions*, xxv, 43.

²² *Proceedings*, 10.

blame except ourselves.” Speaking about her own local Spiritualist society in Chicago, Richmond confessed that they had considered pursuing the matter, but “did not know the particular routine necessary to gain a hearing in the Parliament of Religions,” and the issue had been allowed to slide. Another delegate also blamed inaction, stating that had Spiritualists “made the slightest attempt...to organize several years ago and brought forward our claims for recognition in all the discussions in reference to religion, science, and spiritual things in the Parliament of Religions, I am positive we would have received our place of honor with the rest.” Not all delegates agreed, however. A Professor Loveland of California was of the opinion, having consulted the president of the World’s Congress Auxiliary, Charles C. Bonney, that Spiritualists would not be able to meet the criteria needed “in order to secure representation there.” To qualify as a religion, they “must be believers in God,...and also have some form of worship, and some statement of principles of belief as well as of action.” Loveland stated that not all Spiritualists believed in God, nor did they have a form of worship. Richmond countered that the issue of God could be covered with the phrase “Universal Intelligence,” and that the inclusion of scientific organizations like the Society for Psychical Research indicated that Spiritualists would not have any difficulties qualifying.²³ In light of such debates, it seems no mere coincidence that the convention to found the NSA occurred at the exact same time as the Parliament, which was prominent on the convention’s agenda. Invisible churches do not get invited to ecumenical gatherings.

Fortunately for the Spiritualist assembly, while it was too late to actually present a paper before the Parliament, the organizers were willing to accept one after the fact to be included in the proceedings “as if it had been read before the Parliament of Religions.” Cora Richmond was tasked with hastily drafting a paper, which she did with the help of her spirit guides, particularly Ballou the younger. In it, she acknowledged that as “Spiritualists have no sectarian creed, articles of faith, or statement of belief excepting the truth as perceived by the individual,” there were different classes of Spiritualism—Christian Spiritualists, those who understood “the word ‘religion’ in the broadest possible interpretation of its meaning,” and those “who believe Spiritualism to be a new dispensation of religion,” rather than “as a new statement of old revealments perpetuating the good in all past religions.” Spiritualism, she explained with echoes of the Harmonial Philosophy, was the ultimate synthesis of religion,

²³ Bonney was a member of the Swedenborgian church. *Proceedings*, 15, 42-45; Seager, *World’s Parliament of Religions*, xxx.

science, and philosophy, particularly in light of its empirical grounding in observable spirit phenomena.²⁴

With the universalist aspirations of the Parliament in mind, she was quick to downplay the sectarian appearance of the newly formed NSA, explaining that it was for legal protection only, and instead identified Spiritualism with the essence of true religion. “Its authority is truth wherever found,” she declared, and it drew from the “sacred books...of every age.” Its only creed was “the unwritten law of knowledge, wisdom, truth and love,” and its “ceremonials the service of a noble life.” Affirming an eternal truth that took different expressions, Richmond announced that “Seers and prophets, inspired anew, reveal again the forever old, forever new, immortal theme.” As Spiritualism cleansed the world of all crime and sin, it would gradually inaugurate a utopian era of human perfectibility. “The whole world touched, awakened, thrilled, aroused from the lethargy of material propositions and dogmatic assertions,” Richmond concluded, would turn “toward this new day-dawn saying, ‘Is not this the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world?’”²⁵ True religion was an eternal essence that had left its mark on the revelations of all times and peoples. Now, at the closing of the century, Spiritualism, blessed by an outpouring of inspiration and guidance from the angels themselves, would express these natural truths as reform and human flourishing, and would sweep aside all sectarianism and cold materialism forever.

Reflections

It need hardly be observed that the universal Spiritualism that Richmond and the NSA imagined did not emerge, and that the millennial hopes of the Parliament were frustrated, though the *Chicago Tribune* remarked optimistically that the gathering had demonstrated that “all are searching for the truth, though in different ways,” and “that Christians shall recognize

²⁴ *Proceedings*, 42-46; Barrett, *Life Work of Mrs. Cora L. V. Richmond*, 658; Cora L. V. Richmond, “Presentation of Spiritualism. To the World’s Parliament of Religions, Chicago, October, 1893,” in *Proceedings*, 178-81. The presentation is also replicated in Barrett’s *Life Work of Mrs. Cora L. V. Richmond*, 659-85, allegedly due to the favourable letters about it from across the country.

Prof. J. S. Loveland also produced a paper that had a much stronger emphasis on religious evolution, but it was not submitted because he had assumed it would be rejected. Loveland ended the paper with the explanation that “Religion, in its universal sense, is the experience of humanity...All existing religions are only the prologue to the coming drama of spiritual evolution. They are the preface to the vast volume yet to be written.” *Proceedings*, 188-98.

²⁵ Richmond, “Presentation,” 185-87. The Bible verse is John 1:9 KJV.

there are no longer pagans and heathens.”²⁶ It was an observation that by 1893 would not have struck most Spiritualists as strange. For half a century, Spiritualists had been championing an understanding of religion wherein the eternal and inherently moral truths of nature were progressively revealed in historically contingent forms around the world, but which would soon pour across the world in their millennial glory.

A complex discourse of religion—encompassing, among others, the rational natural theology of Enlightenment Deists, historical criticism of liberal Protestants, and the Romantic understanding of revelation as inspiration of Transcendentalists—had found its way into the hands of common people like Andrew Jackson Davis. Once appropriated by Davis and his growing network of associates, they reshaped this discourse in the “ferment”²⁷ of Jacksonian America, with its fiercely democratic and individualistic ethos, faith in progress and the limitless potential of empirical science, and anti-authoritarian and experimental religious culture set loose in the context of the Second Great Awakening. Their intensely experiential, yet rationalistic and progressive, view of revelation was perfectly situated to merge with widespread interest in haunting phenomena. Once linked into a much larger, and quickly growing community of Spiritualists—connected by an army of itinerant lecturers and a flood of cheap books and periodicals—their popularized version of liberal ideas of religion could spread like never before when they existed in the high-brow discourse world of Unitarians, Transcendentalists, and the religious academy.

By the time that the World’s Parliament of Religions convened in seeming vindication of their views, Spiritualism was already in serious decline, though its influence lived on in popular culture, other new religious movements, and parapsychology. With many of their number diffused into competing movements, weakened by internal divisions, and discredited by fraudulent mediums, Spiritualists found themselves largely marginalized from the grand expression of universal religious impulse that they felt responsible for having created. While their understanding of religion as a universal human phenomenon with many different examples had gained enough currency for the Parliament to actually take place, they struggled to convince others—even their own most prominent “prophet”—that they qualified as a religion at all, much less *the* religion. The rise of the social sciences and professional

²⁶ Seager, *World’s Parliament of Religion*, 160-62.

²⁷ Moore, *White Crows*, 5. The phrase is originally from Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom’s Ferment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1944).

bureaucracy further rendered their efforts at reform antiquated, depriving them of the central practice of true religion: the realization of natural law in society.²⁸ Faced with legal persecution and these other challenges, the gravitational pull of institutionalization became too much to resist and exposed the tensions in their understanding of religion. Unable to convince the world to embrace the true essence of religion—or even agree on it themselves—they gradually assumed the outward trappings of an organized religion instead, even as they tried to deny it. The “future and interior world” Davis had announced in 1847 would have to await the coming of a yet higher revelation.²⁹

²⁸ Moore, *White Crows*, 100-101; Albanese, *Republic*, 266.

²⁹ Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 339-40.

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