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The Background: Spiritualism And Occultism

Established Christianity felt challenged in the second half of the nineteenth century. With the end of the Civil War, America had begun in earnest the shift from an agricultural to an urban, industrial society. At the same time immigration to this country increased massively. Between the close of the war and the turn of the century, almost ten million people came to this country. Not only did the church have difficulties adapting to an urban-industrial environment but science seemed to many to undermine Christianity. Much of this latter concern was focused on the controversy over evolution, which had begun in 1859 with publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. American scientists had supported it, and by the 1870s there was a growing pressure to harmonize religion with evolutionary theory.

Partly in response there were developments outside mainstream Christianity. A group that found even Unitarianism too constricting broke off to form the Free Religious Association. Its first president, Octavius Brooks Frothingham, wrote in 1872 a book that presented a free and scientific religion, *The Religion of Humanity*. Warren Felt Evans developed ideas about mental healing from Phineas P. Quimby into the New Thought movement. Evans was interested in occultism and believed in a sacred element in the person. Mary Baker Eddy, who had been cured by Quimby, combined elements from the healing movement with traditional religious ideas to develop Christian Science. Also, there was a revival of spiritualism. [9] An indigenous movement that began in 1848 and spread rapidly throughout the United States and around the world, spiritualism was the immediate context from which the theosophical Society emerged and thus worth further discussion.

Spiritualism was part of the movement away from Puritan Christianity in America, which has been termed the revolt against Calvinism. The gradual rise of a class of persons who were prosperous and to whom stern doctrines of Calvin were unappealing led to the development of Unitarianism in the early nineteenth century. The members of this group felt themselves to be masters of their own fate and not the helpless puppets of Calvin's God. A related movement was Universalism. A response to the Calvinist doctrines of predestination and eternal punishment, Universalism advocated the salvation of all men and denied the doctrine of eternal damnation.

The protest against Calvinism broke beyond the bounds of Christianity in the rise of the Transcendentalist movement in the 1830s. Formed particularly by persons to whom careers in the Unitarian ministry were not appealing, Transcendentalism drew on European idealistic philosophy and the romantic movement. American Transcendentalism represented a revolt against creeds and organized religion—Thoreau wrote that he preferred to hear

cowbells to church bells on Sunday morning—in favor of a universal religious experience. It viewed humans as divine and contrasted the demands of the Soul to the conventions of the world. The Transcendentalists, among whom Ralph Waldo Emerson is probably the best known, were greatly influenced by Oriental religion and often quoted Hindu scriptures. They reflected a number of themes later to surface in Theosophy: eclecticism, antipathy to religious organization and to Christianity, and sympathy for Asian religions.

Spiritualism emerged as part of the reaction against Calvinism manifested in the revivalistic enthusiasm of western New York state in the first half of the nineteenth century. From about 1825 to 1850 evangelism and conversion "seared" western New York and gained for the area the name of the "Burned-over District." In this climate, in which extreme positions gained many adherents, important religious movements such as the Mormons and the Millerites prospered, and Utopian [10] socialist doctrines gained followers. Spiritualism shared with revivalism notions of human perfectionism, anticlericalism, and antidenominationalism. Thus spiritualism was a variety of religious liberalism. In the words of Whitney Cross, it was a further step on the path to religious modernism of some variety.¹¹

In addition to these American roots, spiritualism depended on and gave expression to Western occultism. The occultist is one who operates outside established religion and has a concern for theories and practices based on esoteric knowledge. Occultism often includes the study of writings felt to contain secrets known to ancient civilizations but subsequently forgotten. A two-millennia-old alternative to Christianity, occultism has had several periods of florescence.

One of its greatest flowerings was in the Renaissance. Including activities and practices such as alchemy, astrology, and magic, occultism was expressed with great influence at this time in Hermetism. Associated with such figures as Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and Giordano Bruno, the Hermetism of the period was inspired by a large body of literature in Greek that was attributed to Hermes Trismegistus. The Renaissance magi believed these works to be documents of ancient Egyptian wisdom, though in fact they had been compiled in the early centuries after Jesus and contain Greek philosophical ideas of the period and some Gnostic themes. The Hermetica included both philosophical treatises and more instrumental works that were devoted to astrological, alchemical, and magical concerns. The former recorded the effort of individual souls to find personal salvation through a gnosis or wisdom rather than through the aid of a personal God or Savior. Most of the latter literature was highly practical. Procedures were given for the cure of disease, for longevity, for overcoming enemies, for success in one's undertakings, and for similar ends.

Ficino, who was ordered in 1460 by Cosimo de Medici to lay aside Plato manuscripts in order to translate Hermes, believed that Hermes was the origin of an ancient wisdom-tradition that led to Plato. Pico attempted to combine Hermetism with Kabalism. The Kabala was a speculative Jewish mysticism emerging in the Middle Ages. Its key terms and images, some derived from Gnostic sources, were taken over by Gentiles and [11] given new meaning. Bruno developed the hermetic tradition in a new direction, removing it entirely from any positive relation with Judaism and Christianity. While Ficino and Pico

attempted to define a Christian Hermetism, Bruno believed in the superiority of Egyptian religion and magic. He spoke of a *prisca magia* (ancient lore) and of a "temple of wisdom," which was built first by the Egyptians and Chaldeans, carried on by the Magi, the Gymnosophists, and Orphics, and appeared again, he claimed, in Albertus Magnus, Nicholas of Cusa, and Copernicus.

The roots of Hermeticism reach back to the Hellenistic Age, the three centuries that began with the conquests of Alexander the Great. The period was a time of many competing religious and spiritual groups, of which Christianity eventually became dominant. Hermetism and occultism had their roots in movements such as Neoplatonism, founded by Plotinus in the third century A.D. Plotinus presided over an academia and most probably had a private mystical practice. He taught an emanationism: that the cosmos is made of emanations from the One and that man can return to the One by mystical experience. Later Neoplatonists like Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus were concerned with theurgy, or the evocation of the gods.

Western occultism, the "alternative reality tradition" as Robert Ellwood has called it, manifested itself in several forms during the Middle Ages. It was reflected in heretical Christian movements such as Albigensianism in southern France, which was inspired by Gnostic Manichaeism through the Cathari. It was also expressed in alchemy—a symbolic rendering of the quest for self-transformation—and in ceremonial magic, both of which stressed the instrumental elements in the tradition. And the period also witnessed the development of the Kabala. A rich symbolic system with roots in Neoplatonism, the Kabala distinguishes between the absolute self of God, the Ein Soph, and the ten divine attributes, or Sephiroth.

Hermetism and occultism went underground in the seventeenth century in movements such as Rosicrucianism. The idea of a secret mystical group called the Rosicrucians made its first appearance in 1614 and 1615 in Germany, with publications of three anonymous treatises. The most important, the *Fama Fraternitatis*, told of a secret brotherhood founded by [12] Christian Rosenkreutz, a noble German youth who had traveled widely and studied occult lore. The brothers, or "adepts," were mysterious persons who possessed superior knowledge or powers. They were said to go about "doing good, shedding healing influences, disseminating knowledge, and bringing mankind back to its Paradisal state."¹² Recent scholarship has confirmed what was widely believed at the time: there never was a Christian Rosenkreutz. The tracts were a means for a group of Lutherans to present an apocalyptic message of universal reform. They formulated a Pansophia or theosophy, which they hoped might serve as a nonsectarian foundation by which people of differing religious views could live peacefully.

There were no actual Rosicrucian groups until the eighteenth century. But in the seventeenth century, even though the adepts were never seen, they were believed in by many. Descartes is said to have looked for them. One theory propounded that the brothers were so hard to find because they had all moved to India and Tibet. Rosicrucianism was popularized in the nineteenth-century fiction of Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton. A student of the

Neoplatonists, the alchemists, the romantics, and of such occultists as Paracelsus and Agrippa, Bulwer-Lytton presented Rosicrucianism as a remnant of an ancient lost wisdom associated with the Chaldeans.

Rosicrucianism was probably a strong influence on Freemasonry. Both combine an esoteric approach to religion, religious tolerance, an emphasis on good works, and attachment to Egyptian symbolism. The ideas of initiation and lodges, utilized later in the Theosophical Society and elsewhere, were developed by the Masons. The Freemasonic movement dates from 1717, when the Grand Lodge of London was established. Using the forms of the English guild of working masons, the new movement developed rituals of alchemical or Rosicrucian flavor, combined with a rationalistic ethics. The leader was John Desaguliers, an exiled French Huguenot clergyman and friend of Isaac Newton. Robert Ellwood has written that Masonry carried "the stamp of the great physicist's remarkable combination of rational science, Rosicrucian occultism, and biblical literalism."¹³ From England Masonry spread both to the Continent and to America. By the time of the French Revolution there were several hundred lodges in France with about 30,000 [13] members. The honorary Grand Master of the Grand Orient of France was a member of the royal family.

The occult tradition was had an importance in Western history which is often not recognized. It was a source of inspiration for such figures as Bruno and the other Renaissance Hermetists, Goethe, and the Protestant mystic Jacob Boehme. It has had a curious, two-sided relation to science. Though science developed against an alleged irrationalism of occultism, such figures as Descartes, Kepler, and Bacon were immersed in occult attitudes, and the figure of the Magus gave an example of man acting to change the world. Alchemy and astrology are in some senses the predecessors of chemistry and astronomy

Esoteric and mystical sources have been identified as of the intellectual background for Hegelian and Marxist thought. Also, there was an influence of the Jewish mystical tradition on Sigmund Freud, and Carl Jung was deeply indebted to Gnosticism and alchemy for the development of his thinking. Secret societies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which drew on the symbols of occult conceptions of reality, led to the establishment of political regimes in several countries. Important in this regard are Freemasonry in France, the Carbonari in Italy and France, Mazzini's Young Italy, and the Bavarian Illuminati. Both Bolivar and Garibaldi were steeped in Masonic ideals. Many of the founding fathers of the United States were Masons.

Spiritualism drew specifically on those parts of occultism known as Mesmerism and Swedenborgianism. The Austrian physician Franz Anton Mesmer is best known as the developer of hypnotism. While studying for his medical degree at Vienna University in the eighteenth century, Mesmer developed ideas about the existence of a subtle fluid pervading all bodies. He believed that nervous disorders resulted when the balance of this fluid was out of harmony with the universal rhythm. Mesmer first tried his theory by applying magnets to the body of sick persons and attempting to control the fluid with a wand. Later he believed

that the fluid was transmitted even better by persons ("animal magnetism") and developed new techniques. They included stroking, suggestion, and seancelike sessions in which patients sat around a barrel of acid while [14] holding hands or touching the afflicted parts of their bodies with iron bars. Mesmer's theories were rejected by medical authorities of the time, but his work with hypnotism was one of the foundations of psychosomatic medicine and the unconscious. Those of occult leanings were attracted to the implications of his work for extrasensory perception and the evocation of latent human powers.

The second figure, Emanuel Swedenborg, has had such an influence that he might be called the father of modern occultism. A Swedish scientist and mystic, Swedenborg was born in 1688, the son of a Lutheran prelate. He was later a member of the Swedish Board of Mines and made notable contributions to metallurgy and mining engineering. On the basis of inner experiences in 1744 and 1745, however, he turned to religion. In his decisive vision, a man appeared to him who identified himself as the Lord God. He told Swedenborg to write about the spiritual meaning of scripture, and he showed him the spirit world and heaven and hell.

Swedenborg wrote many works of theology and scriptural exposition in which he developed the idea of correspondences: that there are higher, invisible analogues of visible things. Robert Ellwood has noted the drive in Swedenborg to put sacred things in scientific form. "Swedenborg was looking for a language to express relations between the infinite and the finite which would have mathematical and scientific exactitude; this he found in correspondences."¹⁴ Swedenborg's works also contain accounts of visits to the world of departed spirits and angels and, that being so, he was the immediate predecessor of spiritualism.

In the 1840s both Swedenborgianism and Mesmerism were popular in the United States. The Swedenborgian Church of the New Jerusalem went back in fact to colonial times, while the phenomena of trance had more recently been introduced and had influenced people such as Phineas Quimby. The twin influences of Swedenborgianism and Mesmerism were combined in the person of Andrew Jackson Davis, called the philosopher of spiritualism. Davis, the "Poughkeepsie Seer," was a shoemaker turned clairvoyant. He had practiced Mesmerism and quickly developed the power to make medical diagnoses while in a trance. His life took a new turn when, before the age [15] of twenty, he had a series of mystical experiences, including a vision of Swedenborg. Shortly thereafter he began to dictate in trance a series of revelations published in 1847 as *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and A Voice to Mankind*. His amanuensis was William Fishbough, a Universalist minister.

The work runs to eight hundred pages and is divided into three parts. The first two trace the evolution of the universe by a gradual process of differentiation from a primal fire mist into systems of suns moving around the Great Eternal Center. He describes the solar system and the gradual progression and development of the geological cycles of the planet Earth, ending with a vision of the early history of man and a vision of his future. The third section is a mixture of social-reform ideas with a simple socialistic theory. There was a great

deal of controversy about how a man so young—he was then just twenty—could have acquired such learning as the book exhibited. The book contained a mixture of ideas current in that day and suggested a skilled retentive memory. Long passages were no more than paraphrases of Robert Chambers's *Vestiges of The Natural History of Creation*, of Swedenborg, and of Fourierist writings. The book conveyed an enthusiasm in tune with the optimism of the country.

Spiritualism broke on the scene a year after the publication of Davis's work with the "Hydesville Rappings," a series of spiritualistic phenomena occurring to the Fox family in upstate New York. The Fox girls asked questions, and a spirit they named Mr. Splitfoot rapped replies. Spirits were soon communicating through other means. They used automatic writing and slate writing; they produced effects such as raising tables, sounding invisible musical instruments, or making objects fly mysteriously; and they spoke through a medium's voice as "spirit guides." All these phenomena were taken by spiritualists as proof of life beyond death and of the ability of spirits to have intercourse with the living. One of the most popular spirit guides of the time, John King, was to figure in Theosophical history. Messages received in spiritualist groups both in America and in Europe were attributed to him.

One observer of the early years, perhaps exaggerating but nonetheless reflecting common views of the impact of spiritualism, wrote that it was "depopulating churches, desolating [16] homes of faith, scattering communions, burying shrines, and covering the fair gardens of religion with heaps of ruin";¹⁵ indeed for membership was spread through all classes of society. The members came, one historian noted, from "the outlying fringes of orthodoxy, the Churches in which, under the powerful solvent of intellectual freedom, the sharp outlines of dogmatic Christianity were already beginning to disappear."¹⁶ The leadership was composed largely of religious liberals, persons who had been Universalists, Unitarians, and Quakers.

The number of participants at the height of the spiritualist movement around 1855 has been estimated at between one and two million. The population of the United States was then about twenty-five million, and only one in seven Americans was officially a member of a religious group. Thus, even though only a small portion of those who participated in spiritualism were ever officially part of a formal spiritualist church, the level of participation in the movement is a significant fact of nineteenth-century American religion.

The exposure of wide-scale fraud led many to leave the movement and is probably the major cause of its decline after about a decade. In addition, the association with unpopular causes such as free love proved embarrassing. There were other reasons as well. The informal leadership of the movement was removed by the Civil War, and the movement suffered from the lack of structure and leadership. Spiritualism during this period did not develop any organizations beyond a few local and temporary associations. Spiritualists also failed to develop a common ritual, and were not able to establish the movement as clearly and unambiguously religious. While some thought it a faith, others viewed it as merely offering scientific proof for survival after death.

Spiritualism and the general religious background of the 1870s manifested a number of tendencies inherited by the Theosophical Society. In order to understand the new movement, it is important to examine the forces that shaped it. One was a contemporary expression of an issue several centuries old: the drive to integrate religion with science. Natural science had challenged the biblical understanding of human life. It gave rise to a mechanical philosophy in which nature was conceived as a law-bound system. This view conflicted with a [17] belief in miracles and with the Hebrew and Christian ideas of events being understood in relation to the will of God. Also, the progress of science and technology fostered confidence in human reason, and gave credence to belief in progress. These developments challenged an understanding of man which emphasized sinfulness and depravity, the control of God, the need for grace, and preoccupation with the hereafter. Byproducts of these developments were deism and debates between advocates of natural religion and revealed religion.

Darwin's evolutionary theories represented a culmination of the conflict between science and religion. Recent progress in astronomy, geology, and paleontology had undermined the static view of nature that had been taken for granted by both Christians and deists. In this development, "Darwin played a last-minute but decisive role; he convinced the scientific world that the whole array of nature's species had evolved from simpler forms during vast periods of time."¹⁷

The application of scientific methods to religion itself had important unsettling effects. Not only did explaining events by natural causes challenge the interpretation of some events as miracles, but subjecting the Bible to historical and literary analysis demonstrated that the books were a collection of history, folklore, discourses, poetry, and prophecy brought together over a period of many centuries.

The relation of science and religion was publicly debated during the 1870s. John William Draper published in 1873 a book central to one side of the controversy, *History of the Conflict Between Religion and Science*. He argued that the two were fundamentally in conflict. Making a historically simplified argument, Draper claimed that the church was always opposed to free inquiry and that in the battle of science and religion Christianity would disappear, leaving science triumphant. Various attempts at accommodation were made, as well. The well-known popular lecturer and sometime Harvard professor John Fiske argued that the hostility of science and religion was apparent rather than real. His influential *Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy*, published in 1874, attempted to assimilate Christian assumptions to the social Darwinism of the day.

Fiske's approach reflected that strain of thought that attempted to rethink Christianity. Another approach to the conflict of science and religion was reflected in the British [18] biologist Alfred Russel Wallace. Wallace accepted natural selection as an explanation of evolution, but was not convinced that the theory explained all there is about man. He wrote that he could not account within evolutionary theory for man's "higher feelings of pure morality and refined emotion, and the power of abstract reasoning and ideal

conception."¹⁸ Wallace joined Darwin as co-author of a paper on natural selection delivered at the 1858 meeting of the Linnean Society. Unlike Darwin, who was an agnostic, Wallace was a religious man. He practiced his religiosity outside Christianity and later gravitated to Theosophy.

Spiritualists entered the debate by proclaiming that they had bridged the chasm between science and religion with empirical proof of life after death. They believed they were making a contribution to empirical science by their seance experiences, and they appealed to what they believed were objective data. "Transforming a concern for man's inward spiritual nature into an empirical inquiry into the nature of spirits, they built a belief in an afterlife upon such physical signs as spirits from another realm could muster."¹⁹

Theosophy also inherited an occultist interpretation of another idea then current in America: a conviction of the existence of free will and progress. American religion in general had developed a belief in individual responsibility and the efficacy of human effort. The roots of that belief probably lay in the Calvinistic emphasis upon activism and the importance of individual striving. But, as noted earlier, the attitude took expression in America in Unitarianism and other forms of religious liberalism. "American life had demanded recognition of the meaningfulness of human striving and the freedom and worth of the individual."²⁰

These convictions took expression in the optimistic view of spiritual progress evidenced in occultism. Spiritualists rejected the idea of grace or redemptive sacrifice and felt that the responsibility for self-improvement rested on the shoulders of the individual himself. They believed in progressive development toward ultimate individual moral perfection. The soul was felt to be immortal, and it was held that it would progress gradually here and in the higher spheres beyond. "Salvation, as Spiritualists defined it, was not a static state of being that one either achieved or did not achieve. It was a [19] process of progress through a series of heavenly spheres (seven was the most common number given in spirit messages) corresponding to higher and higher states of moral perfection."²¹

Theosophy was influenced also by the new knowledge of Asian religions. For Christianity, information about Oriental religions brought through missionary work and also through the translation of scriptures was part of the threat to orthodoxy. Through knowledge of Oriental religions, Westerners "learned that Christianity and religion were not coextensive, that all good was not monopolized by their own system of belief."²² Discovery of the variety of doctrines in the various religions of the world led some to the hope that the content of religious faith could be reduced to a few simple tenets that had been accepted in all times and places. The occult milieu reflected the new Orientalism. The well-known C. W. King book *The Gnostics and Their Remains*, for example, suggested that Gnosticism had originated in India and that the East was the source of a "Secret Wisdom."

Other tendencies present in religious liberalism generally and in spiritualism in particular at this time were democratic individualism and anti-institutionalism. Spiritualists of this era, for example, were not able to make a firm statement of beliefs and shied away

from any stand that would suggest an organization's dictating beliefs to its members. To qualify as a spiritualist one had only to believe in the individual's survival after death and the ability of the dead to communicate with the living. A declaration of sentiments adopted at an 1859 convention of Spiritualists in Plymouth, Massachusetts, stated that beyond these two beliefs, "on questions of philosophy, morals, theology, reform, etc., we profess no full agreement and take no responsibility for each other's opinions or acts."²³

Closely related to this theme was the idea of opposition to traditional orthodox Christianity. Spiritualists shared with liberal Christians an aversion to ideas of human depravity, predestination, vicarious atonement, and a final judgment. But they went further than most liberals in their conviction that their movement was a rival force to Christianity. Spiritualism was referred to as the "New Dispensation."

The last theme important for its effect on Theosophy was [20] the association between nontraditional religion and liberalism. Spiritualism was often associated with liberal social ideas of the time and was a home for many seeking a new and better world. Spiritualist publications argued for fairer treatment of American Indians, the abolition of capital punishment, prison reform, equality for women, higher wages for workers, and the right of labor to organize. Spiritualist communes were organized on Fourierist lines, and there was a belief in the equality of the sexes, which sometimes overflowed into advocacy or "free love."

Thus the American social situation from which the Theosophical Society emerged was one of great upheaval and the religious situation was one of challenge to orthodox Christianity. The forces that had surfaced in spiritualism included anticlericalism, anti-institutionalism, eclecticism, social liberalism, and belief in progress and individual effort. Occultism, mediated to America in the form of Mesmerism, Swedenborgianism, Freemasonry, and Rosicrucianism, was present. Recent developments in science led by the 1870s to renewed interest in reconciling science and religion. There was present also a hope that Asian religious ideas could be integrated into a grand religious synthesis.