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The Science of the Seance:
The Scientific Theory of the Spiritualist Movement in Victorian America

In 1869, twenty one years after the first “spirit rappings” were heard in the bedroom of two young girls in upstate New York, a well-known Spiritualist medium by the name of Emma Hardinge Britten wrote a book that chronicled the first two decades of a religion she characterized as uniquely American, and what made this religion exceptional was its basis in scientific theory. “[We] are not aware of any other country than America,” Britten claimed, “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.”¹ Britten went on to claim that, as a “unique, concrete, and...isolated movement,” Spiritualism demanded “from historic justice a record as full, complete, and independent, as itself.”² Yet, despite the best efforts of Spiritualism's followers to carve out a place for it alongside the greatest scientific discoveries in human history, Spiritualism remains a little understood and often mocked religion that, to those who are ignorant

1 Emma Hardinge Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism: A Twenty Years' Record of the Communion Between Earth and the World of Spirits*, (New York, 1869)

2 Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism*

of it, remains a seemingly paradoxical movement.

Although it might be difficult for some to comprehend today, prior to the Civil War, religion and science were not considered adversaries by any means, but rather, were understood to be traveling down a shared path, with ultimately the same destination. Scientists and men of religion alike considered themselves to be pursuing answers to the same questions regarding life, death, the nature of the surrounding world, as well as the world beyond.³ By the time the war had come to an end, however, it became evident that a significant cultural shift had taken place in the nation, in more ways than one. The considerable number of deaths that had come as a result of the war had led to a sudden, profound and widespread need for comfort, which many could not find within the traditional Calvinistic theology that had been prevalent throughout America for generations. At the same time, a handful of recent scientific discoveries suggested that, while religion and science perhaps shared the same purpose, they no longer appeared to share the same conclusions. It is no coincidence that, during an era in which a phenomenon known as a “crisis of faith” occurred – when the authority and influence of Calvinism was beginning to weaken and science was beginning to greatly affect the ways in which Americans understood life, death, and the nature of the universe – the Spiritualist movement boasted the largest number of adherents it would acquire during the relatively short span of its (observable) influence in American society.

Only in the last forty years have historians really begun to take a serious look at the Spiritualist movement. Prior to the research of historians such as R. Laurence Moore and Ann Braude, very little had been written on the topic since its days of prominence, as many people have dismissed the movement as a marginal religion at best, and a cult comprised of fools and frauds at worst, with little – if any – lasting impact on American culture. Through articles such as

3 Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 4.

“Spiritualism and Science,” and “The Spiritualist Medium,” as well as his book *In Search of White Crows* (1977), Moore provides what is perhaps the most extensive research on Spiritualism in recent scholarship, expanding on how the movement affected religion, science, and women's rights during the Victorian era. Over a decade after Moore's work, Braude's book, *Radical Spirits* (1989), developed on Moore's idea of a link between Spiritualism and women's rights, and how working as séance mediums empowered young women. More recently, *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull* (1998), by Barbara Goldsmith, reveals the extent to which Spiritualism was also tied to some of the most prominent (and notorious) members of American society in the nineteenth century. In the last forty years, historians have discovered the ways in which Spiritualism both influenced, and was influenced by, American politics, culture, religion, and science.

As historians have come to understand the movement better however, there has been debate over whether Spiritualism can be better understood as a religion or as a science. In *Radical Spirits*, Braude argues that Spiritualism was a religious response to the Victorian crisis of faith, a religion based on “scientific fact.”⁴ Moore, on the other hand, argues that while the war between science and religion had not yet been officially declared in the 1850s, “had a declaration been made, Spiritualists would have thought immediately that they belonged in intent and method with science.”⁵ While it is true that the Spiritualist movement's ultimate aim was to prove the immortality of the soul, and while it also propounded ideas of a supreme being and an afterlife – concepts typically associated with the domain of religion – its methods for doing so were far more closely aligned to science than to religion. Rather than appealing to an “inward illumination of mystic experience,” it called upon followers to draw conclusions based on

4 Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 4.

5 Moore, “Spiritualism and Science,” 498.

observed demonstrations of “scientific” phenomenon.⁶ Moreover, not only did Spiritualists not contest ideas of the “mechanical order of the universe which science had constructed,” (which obliquely contradicted religious notions of the natural world) but it went so far as to urge scientists to “recognize an extension of mechanical laws into unseeable worlds.”⁷

Still, many people find it difficult to reconcile the idea of a budding fascination with something as seemingly nonsensical as spirit communication at a time that was supposed to be increasingly subject to rational, scientific thought, and instead of delving deeper, most have appeared to dismiss it as a mere anomaly.⁸ Yet, is it so surprising that Spiritualism could thrive in an age of growing friction between religion and science? It is no coincidence that the years immediately following the Civil War saw the greatest rise in the number of adherents to the Spiritualist movement. Thousands of Americans had lost loved ones in the war and were in desperate need of comfort – comfort that they were not finding within evangelical Christian theology. At the same time, science seemed to be opening new pathways to previously unimaginable realities. In more ways than one, Spiritualism appeared capable of bridging the gradually emerging gap between religion and science. According to Moore, it thrived because it “satisfied man's craving for mystification and grew as a reaction to the encroachments of scientific naturalism.”⁹ In other words, it reconciled Americans' growing fascination of empirical science with their need for spiritual fulfillment.

The goal of this thesis is to examine how believers of Spiritualism attempted to legitimize the movement through the employment of scientific theory, rhetoric, and practices, in order to establish it as a “scientific religion.” It also aims to reveal the extent to which Spiritualists were consciously attempting to heal the growing antagonism between religion and science in the U.S.

⁶ Moore, “Spiritualism and Science,” 486.

⁷ Moore, “Spiritualism and Science,” 486.

at that time. This examination of Spiritualism will not only increase comprehension of the movement itself, it will also shed light on what happens when human beings' need for spiritual fulfillment and their need to understand and make sense of the world come into conflict.

It is difficult to know the extent of Spiritualism's influence in America as an actual movement. Because emphasis was placed on an individual's ability to investigate and draw conclusions for oneself, there were no formal institutions to which adherents could belong, aside from a few regional or state societies.¹⁰ Estimates of the number of Americans who identified themselves as Spiritualists ranged drastically from just under one million to over eleven million.¹¹ Moreover, many Americans who were fascinated with spirit communication did not necessarily consider themselves to be Spiritualists. Yet, while Spiritualists may not have congregated in formal organizations, they did create a sense of cohesion through the use of the public press, and the amount of literature and newspapers produced by and for Spiritualists can provide a sense of Spiritualism's influence.¹² These publications linked small and isolated groups of Spiritualists across the country, creating solidarity. In 1871, the *American Bookseller's Guide* reported that one hundred thousand Spiritualist books and pamphlets were sold every year.¹³ By the end of the century, over a hundred periodicals had reported news of spirit manifestations.¹⁴

This thesis utilizes an assortment of works, including newspaper articles, pamphlets, and books, published between 1850 and 1895. The wide range of publication dates allows for a better understanding of how the topic of Spiritualism was discussed throughout the course of its prominence. Earlier publications focused primarily on explaining the nature and process of spirit

8 Moore, "Spiritualism and Science," 476.

9 Moore, "Spiritualism and Science," 477.

10 Moore, "Spiritualism and Science," 481.

11 Moore, "Spiritualism and Science," 481.

12 Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 26.

13 Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 26.

14 Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 26.

communication itself, while later publications became increasingly analytical, concerned with the meaning of the phenomenon and how it would affect the contemporary understanding of science, religion, and nature. While the reliability of the authors is certainly questionable, it is not the objective of this thesis to determine whether or not spirit communication was authentic, nor whether or not the authors believed in its legitimacy. Rather, it is to examine how these authors used scientific rhetoric to explain what was occurring in séance rooms. Moreover, a majority of the documents were written by authors living in New England, and consequently, do not give the reader a sense of how these arguments may have differed in other regions. This is a potential hindrance, given the diverse nature of Spiritualist beliefs. However, this essay focuses primarily on the New England area, where Spiritualism was most influential; and furthermore, because a majority of Spiritualist publications originated from this region, these ideas were influential in shaping Spiritualist beliefs throughout the country. For these reasons, the sources offer sufficient insight into the discussion of, and debate over, Spiritualism.

The idea of being able to communicate with spirits was far from new in nineteenth century America, but it had never before achieved the level of attention and fascination it did during the Victorian era. Indeed, certain elements of Victorian culture combined to create the perfect atmosphere in which Spiritualism could successfully capture the fascination of people across America. It might very well have remained a relatively insignificant movement limited to the New England region if it had not been for the profound number of deaths that came as a result of the Civil War.

The significance of the war's role in Spiritualism's prevalence cannot be overstated. The number of soldiers who died between 1861 and 1865 is an estimated 620,000 – a number equal to the American fatalities that resulted from the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, and the Korean War

combined.¹⁵ Further, according to historian Drew Gilpin Faust, this estimate does not include the civilians killed “as battles raged across farm and field, as encampments of troops spread epidemic disease, as guerrillas ensnared women and even children in violence and reprisals, as draft rioters targeted innocent citizens, as shortages of food in parts of the South brought starvation.”¹⁶ While infant mortality rates were high, if one reached young adulthood, he or she could expect to live at least into middle age, and by the beginning of the 1860s, the rate of death had begun to decline.¹⁷ As Faust states, the overwhelming presence and horror of death “touched Civil War Americans' most fundamental sense of who they were, for in its threat of termination and transformation, death inevitably inspired self-scrutiny and self-definition.”¹⁸

Understandably, the war had brought the subject of death to the forefront of American minds, and with it, questions of the existence and nature of the afterlife. Americans had to find ways to deal with the loss of more than half a million husbands, brothers, and sons, and many of those in mourning were not willing to wait for their own death to reunite them with their loved ones.¹⁹ The war had produced a nation of people in desperate need of comfort – a comfort that, for some, could not be found within Calvinist tradition.

The “crisis of faith” was, in part, a result of the rapidly waning appeal of Calvinism. In fact, many of Spiritualism's most ardent followers were those who had turned away from Calvinism. The Second Great Awakening, which had begun several decades prior, in the same region of New York where the Spiritualist movement was born, had led to the rise of a “watered-down” form of Calvinism, headed by the preacher Charles Finney. This revised form rejected the concept of predestination and emphasized the idea of conversion in order to achieve salvation. If

15 Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), xi.

16 Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, xii.

17 Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, xii.

18 Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, xiii.

19 Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 180.

an individual failed to achieve conversion, however, they would be condemned to endless suffering in Hell.²⁰ Understandably, this created an intense anxiety among those who were not only concerned with their own fate, but the fate of their loved ones as well. Particularly troubling, however, was the Calvinistic belief that children were the most sinful, having had the least amount of religious teaching, and thus being furthest away from experiencing conversion. At a time when childhood mortality was disturbingly high – in New York City in 1853, for instance, almost half of those who died were children under the age of five – thousands of parents, and mothers in particular, were haunted by the thought of their children being damned to Hell simply because they had not lived long enough to be absolved of their sins.²¹ Growing increasingly disillusioned by, and dissatisfied with, the comfortless (and often horrific) answers evangelical ministers offered to inquiries about life and death, more and more people began to distance themselves from Calvinism. Instead, some turned to more liberal theologies for answers, while others turned to science.

A substantial amount of progress had been made in the field of science over the previous few decades. During the 1840s, science developed greatly as an area of study, becoming more refined as it divided into specific disciplines, such as chemistry, physics, and biology.²² What was believed to unite these disciplines, was methodology: the process scientists employed for developing general truths based on carefully observed facts.²³ While it may be difficult for some to believe today, Spiritualism was well-received, “not only among the uninformed and credulous, but also among the respectable and educated,” and, according to historian Arthur Wrobel, the practice of Spiritualism “intertwined with all the major medical, cultural, and philosophical

20 Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 36.

21 Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 53.

22 Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*, 90.

23 Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*, 90.

revolutions in nineteenth-century America.”²⁴ In any era, what constitutes a “legitimate science” is greatly influenced and determined by contemporary politics, culture, and popular ideology.²⁵ Given the nature of scientific theory in America during the nineteenth century, Spiritualism would have appeared valid, because its methodology was securely grounded in Baconianism, which was based on the procedures set forth by Francis Bacon, a seventeenth century scientist. (Incidentally, Bacon's spirit sent several messages of consolation to Spiritualists throughout the 1850s for the hostility they encountered from professional scientists).²⁶ “Empirical rather than speculative, reasoning from experimentation and observations rather than a priori arguments, Baconianism universally came to be regarded...as 'the true philosophy.'”²⁷ Indeed, Spiritualists claimed that the séances they held were in essence experiments through which empirical evidence was gathered to prove the authenticity of spirit communication.

According to historian James Delbourgo, American science had already begun to place greater confidence in the “public's ability to make their own judgments about natural knowledge by relying on evidence supplied by their senses.”²⁸ To many Victorian Americans of the nineteenth century, who prided themselves on their ability to think rationally and draw conclusions based on objective observation, Spiritualism would have been extremely appealing. Initially, it asked observers to believe nothing, but to “divest the mind of prejudice, and be willing to accept whatever comes as evidently genuine, whether it [harmonized] with or [contradicted one's] perceived beliefs, theories, or feelings,” but to also “exercise a discriminating judgment in sifting evidence, and a prudent caution in accepting conclusions,” as

24 Arthur Wrobel, ed., *Pseudo-Science & Society in 19th Century America* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1987), 1.

25 Wrobel, *Pseudo-Science*, 2.

26 Moore, “Spiritualism and Science,” 486.

27 Wrobel, *Pseudo-Science*, 2.

28 James Delbourgo, *A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 243.

explained in *A Guide to Spiritualism* written by J. Tyreman in 1874.²⁹ Spiritualism encouraged Americans to become scientists themselves, to “investigate,” to conduct “scientific” experiments, and to observe the demonstrations of spiritual phenomena occurring in séance rooms across the country. Spiritualists, who unabashedly considered themselves to be scientists, “professed to let their conclusions emerge naturally from observed data.”³⁰ Séances, which Spiritualists claimed were carried out under proper scientific test conditions, were merely viewed as “public disclosures of fact.”³¹

By 1860, two scientific discoveries in particular had caused a noticeable fracture between scientific theory and religious doctrine. The first occurred in the 1830s, when British geologist Charles Lyell published *Principles of Geology*, which suggested that Earth was actually millions of years older than previously believed, based on new scientific methods of research using rocks and fossils.³² This theory directly contradicted Christian scripture, which suggested that Earth was a mere six thousand years old. The second scientific discovery to challenge traditional religious beliefs was that of evolution. In 1859, Charles Darwin published his study *On the Origin of Species*, which suggested that animals had not always existed in their present form, as the Bible claimed, (a theory that was soon applied to human beings as well) but rather had evolved over millions of years – an idea that also supported geologists' theory of the age of Earth.³³ Discoveries such as these had a twofold effect on Victorian Americans. On one hand, they further cultivated the sentiment of disillusionment with traditional religious beliefs. On the other hand, they sparked a growing fascination with science and new understandings of the natural world.

29 J. Tyreman, *A Guide to Spiritualism*, (Melbourne: E. Purton & Co., 1874)

30 Moore, “Spiritualism and Science,” 486.

31 Moore, “Spiritualism and Science,” 486.

32 Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*, 90.

33 Donald Worster. *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

The Victorian era marks a time in American history during which the general public was deeply captivated by the study of science, while simultaneously relatively ignorant of what “science” really meant. Nonetheless, the American people recognized that they were living in an age in which what had once seemed unimaginable was being proven as scientific fact and mysteries that had once seemed unsolvable turned out to be penetrable. More importantly, these advancements in both science and technology made anything seem possible. The discovery that perhaps contributed most to this attitude was that of electricity. Despite the work of Benjamin Franklin and several other researchers a century before, professional scientists during the Victorian era were still uncertain of what the causes, effects, and uses of electricity were.³⁴ Consequently, its nature remained peculiar enough for it to “lend believability to a variety of theories, and scientists and occultists alike invoked its name to explain otherwise mysterious occurrences.”³⁵ Causing further bewilderment as to the nature of electricity was the creation of the telegraph, invented by Samuel F. B. Morse in 1842. The device was used to send instantaneous messages invisibly across great distances – an idea completely incomprehensible to a vast majority of Americans (but would eventually become of use to Spiritualists, who employed it as a metaphor for communicating with the spirit world).

Another pseudo-scientific discovery that had a great influence on the rise of Spiritualism was mesmerism. Originally developed by an Austrian named Franz Anton Mesmer, mesmerism was a technique for healing based on the existence of a substance called “animal magnetism,” an invisible fluid that “constituted the etheric medium through which sensations of every kind – light, heat, magnetism, electricity – were able to pass from one physical object to another.”³⁶ By the time mesmerism reached America, however, considerable changes had been made to

1974), 161.

34 R. Laurence Moore, “Spiritualism and Science,” *American Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (1970), 491.

Mesmer's techniques. The most significant result of these changes was the “mesmeric trance.” Patients would fall into a sleep-like consciousness, during which time they were supposedly capable of amazing feats, including telepathy and clairvoyance.³⁷ Not only would Spiritualists draw upon these ideas to lend credibility to their own abilities, the mesmeric trance would eventually be understood as the very means through which mediums were able to pass on messages from the dead to the living. In short, the popularity of Spiritualism grew out of a culture in which science and technology had not only undermined traditional religious beliefs, thereby leaving an opening for new ideas to take their place, but had simultaneously made just about anything seem believable.³⁸

One year before the first spirit contact of the modern Spiritualist movement was made, a man by the name of Andrew Jackson Davis, who would later become known as the Poughkeepsie Seer, published a disquisition entitled, *Nature's Divine Revelations* (1847). In it, he claimed to have knowledge of the nature of the spirit world, which was purportedly based on information given to him by the spirit of Emanuel Swedenborg, an 18th century Swedish scientist and philosopher, while in a mesmeric trance. His description of the afterlife was heavily influenced by the writings of Swedenborg, who envisioned a spirit world that consisted of seven regions: three heavens, three hells, and an interim location to which all people went directly after dying.³⁹ In Swedenborg's version of the spirit world, those who had accepted God's love in life would eventually pass on as angels to one of the three heavens, while those who had only loved themselves and material possessions would go on to one of the three hells.⁴⁰ In Davis's own writings, he both elaborated and modified Swedenborg's vision, asserting instead that the seven

35 Moore, “Spiritualism and Science,” 491.

36 Wrobel, *Pseudo Science*, 207

37 Wrobel, *Pseudo Science*, 208.

38 Moore, “Spiritualism and Science,” 476.

39 Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*, 26.

regions, or “spheres,” of the spirit world, in fact, constituted a series of successively more perfect heavens through which the spirits could progress, with the most enlightened spirits occupying the final heaven.⁴¹ Davis's assertions about the spirit world remained largely ignored, however, until a year later when a discovery made by two young girls became the catalyst for the Spiritualist movement, creating a desperate need for a philosophical explanation of what “investigators” of Spiritualism were witnessing (or hoping to witness) in the séance room.⁴²

Just a few miles from Rochester, New York, in the spring of 1848, two sisters by the names of Kate and Maggie Fox revealed to their parents a supposed ability to communicate with the inhabitants of the spirit world. For several days, the sisters claimed to have been hearing mysterious noises, or “raps,” during the night, whose cause could not be identified. On the night of March 31, however, when their parents came into their bedroom to investigate the loud sound of knocking, the sisters appeared to be able to communicate with the source of the noise, which had identified itself as the disembodied spirit of a peddler who had been murdered and buried in the cellar by the previous owner of the house.⁴³ Within the next few weeks, members of the community came to the Fox house to investigate the rappings, taking turns to ask the spirit questions that could be answered by the number of raps it produced, and each time, the answer was correct. By May, so many people had flocked to the Fox house to hear the rappings for themselves, Maggie and Kate were forced to flee to the homes of their older siblings nearby.⁴⁴ Within a few months, however, the sisters were performing private séances regularly, and soon they began touring the New England area, demonstrating their abilities to paying audiences in packed lecture halls. Indeed, although Spiritualism would have its followers throughout the

40 Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*, 26.

41 Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 40.

42 Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 35.

43 Goldsmith 28

44 Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 28.

country, it remained most popular in the region from which it originated.

Not surprisingly, Spiritualism originated from the same region of upstate New York that, at the time, was a hub of radical political activity. In fact, in July of the same year, just a few miles from where the first spirit rappings were heard, the Seneca Falls convention took place, and even the *Declaration of Rights and Sentiments* had been drafted on the very first “spirit table.”⁴⁵ Spiritualism lent itself easily to radically progressive movements. Reformists found that “the spirits” were quite progressive themselves, and advocates of both women's suffrage and abolition. Spiritualism appealed to reformers because of its individualist rhetoric, which stressed a rejection of external authority, and many Spiritualists became committed to overthrowing conventions “imposed by church or state between the individual and his or her God-given nature. They denounced the authority of churches over believers, of governments over citizens, of doctors over patients, of masters over slaves, and, most of all, of men over women.”⁴⁶ In fact, it was partly because of its association with abolition and women's suffrage that Spiritualism would never be embraced by most whites in the South.⁴⁷

Although fascination with spirit communication would likely have flourished on its own, it is possible that it would have been viewed as nothing more than a form of entertainment if it had not been for the neighbors of the Fox sisters, Isaac and Amy Post. The Posts were prominent Quakers who had close ties to the abolition movement, and leading abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison, publisher of *The Liberator*, and Frederick Douglass, were frequent visitors of the Post residence.⁴⁸ Thus, several of the earliest members of the Spiritualist movement were

45 Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 39.

46 Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 56.

47 According to Braude, Spiritualism shared similarities with some of the religions of slaves' ancestors, and while blacks did not identify as Spiritualists in large numbers until the twentieth century, there were several black mediums during the nineteenth century. Like women, African Americans were seen as intuitive and spiritual, making them susceptible to spirits, and thus successful mediums.

48 Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 29.

also leaders in both the abolition movement and the women's rights movement. As a consequence, even before Spiritualism started to gain momentum, it was already being inextricably tied to some of the most radical reform movements of the day.

Adherents to Spiritualism at the height of its popularity have gained reputations as either frauds, exploiting the fascination and desperation of those wishing to communicate with their deceased loved ones, or fools, easily deceived by the trickery of crafty mediums in the séance room. Spiritualism was far more than a mere fringe movement with only frauds and fools counted among its followers; it influenced and infiltrated the minds of reformists, writers, politicians, and even powerful businessmen. For instance, in 1870, the *New York Tribune* quoted Cornelius Vanderbilt as claiming he had “consulted the spirits,” when asked how he had made his fortune.⁴⁹ Horace Greeley, the owner and editor of the *Tribune* himself turned to Spiritualism, and, at his wife's urging, even invited Kate Fox to stay at his home for several months in order to communicate with their recently deceased son.⁵⁰ In a letter to Stanton, Susan B. Anthony confessed a desire for the spirits to turn her into a medium, and guide her in her speeches.⁵¹ Every noteworthy progressive family at this time seemed to have at least one advocate of Spiritualism.⁵² As previously noted, William Lloyd Garrison was an early convert. Charles Beecher and Isabella Beecher Hooker became supporters, while Harriet Beecher Stowe considered herself a serious “investigator.”⁵³ Women's rights advocates Sarah and Angelina Grimke also spoke to the spirits.⁵⁴ U.S. Senator Nathaniel P. Talmadge voiced support for

49 Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, xi.

50 Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*, 108.

51 Stanton and Anthony's embrace of Spiritualism, as well as Victoria Woodhull, a fervent Spiritualist and radical suffragist who advocated for free love and the abolition of marriage, created tensions within the women's suffrage movement. Despite the hopes of some Spiritualists, the association between Spiritualism and women's suffrage only hindered the movement's success.

52 Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 27.

53 Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 27.

54 Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 27.

Spiritualism as well, and New York Supreme Court Judge John Edmonds resigned from his position in 1851 to become a full-time advocate and medium. In 1854, a petition asking the U.S. Senate to appoint a scientific committee to investigate spirit communication gained enough support to reach the floor of the Senate.⁵⁵ In short, the Spiritualist movement was one that accumulated followers from all walks of life, and the prominence of some of its greatest supporters made it difficult for others to merely dismiss it as fraud.

As Spiritualism started to build a wider following, communication with the spirits during séances became gradually more sophisticated. A “séance” was a gathering typically comprised of a small group of people, seated around a “spirit table,” who wished to contact the dead through the assistance of a medium – a person thought to be capable of “conducting” the electrical currents believed to be sent by the spirit world, operating similarly to the telegraph. This person was often characterized as passive, intuitive, and sensitive. These were necessary traits since the success of a seance depended on the medium's ability to become an instrument for the spirits.⁵⁶ When the Fox sisters first began demonstrating their abilities to contact the spirit world, the spirits communicated by spelling out their messages using a series of raps, from one to twenty-six, which corresponded with a letter of the alphabet. Soon, however, Isaac Post devised a new way of communicating with the spirits, through speaking the letters of the alphabet aloud, while the spirits rapped when the appropriate letter was spoken.⁵⁷ Communication became even more efficient when it was discovered that Kate and Maggie Fox could fall into mesmeric trances and speak directly to the spirits, allowing the spirits to speak through them or take control of their hand to perform “automatic writing.” Quickly, others (most often young women) were discovering their own ability to communicate with the dead.

⁵⁵ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 27.

⁵⁶ Moore, Laurence R., “The Spiritualist Medium: A Study of Female Professionalism in Victorian America,” 202.

Although critics of Spiritualism had many reasons to be skeptical, the increasingly theatrical demonstrations in the séance room caused many to question the legitimacy of Spiritualism as a science. In the 1850s, public demonstrations of spirit manifestations became more and more of a spectacle than an emotional or informative experience.⁵⁸ Rather than sending messages to participants, the spirits would put on a show, so to speak, causing tables to rock or lift off the ground, objects to fly around the room, bells to ring, and instruments to play.⁵⁹ Critics chastised mediums and séance attendees for being more concerned with the performance than with the knowledge that could be gained from spirit communication. Moreover, once it became evident that deception was common among mediums (after the profession proved to be profitable, that is), arguing that Spiritualism could be considered a science based on “empirical evidence” became an even greater challenge, because it was hard to distinguish between what was (supposedly) real and what was fraud.

Nevertheless, the argument that Spiritualism was a legitimate science persisted, and even the very language employed in the explanation of how these séances should be conducted demonstrated an attempt to impose scientific theory and procedure on spirit communication. Leading Spiritualists produced guidebooks to help amateur mediums create optimal conditions for spirit contact to occur. A successful contact was thought to depend on electricity. In order to facilitate the transmission of electrical currents, it was necessary for there to be an equal (or close to it) number of men and women present, who were seated alternately around the spirit circle, with “the most positive and most negative persons occupying opposite positions in the circle.”⁶⁰ Women were generally considered to be “negative” and men “positive,” although this depended more on feminine and masculine characteristics than on the biological sex of the individual. The

⁵⁷ Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*, 60.

⁵⁸ Moore, “Spiritualism and Science,” 482.

more negatively charged the individual, the more susceptible to spirit contact he or she was; thus, mediums were most often women.

Many Spiritualists believed that the spirit raps and manifestations themselves were somehow produced by electricity. Skeptics of Spiritualism suspected so as well, although unlike Spiritualists, who believed spirits manipulated electricity to communicate in the same way the telegraph did, skeptics believed electrical energy was merely being *mistaken for* spiritual communication. In her book, *Modern American Spiritualism* (1869), Britten described the trials that Margaret and Kate Fox were forced to go through in order to prove that the “spirit raps” were genuine, including standing “with bare feet on pillows, glass, and other substances ([which were] supposed to be non-conductors of electricity.)”⁶¹ Yet, while the investigators leading these trials confidently concluded that electricity could not be the cause of the spirit raps, in his book *The Present Age and Inner Life* (1886), Davis explained the spirits' ability to communicate as follows:

We are *negative* to our guardian spirits; they are *positive* to us; and the whole mystery is illustrated by the workings of the common magnetic telegraph. The principles involved are identical. The spirits...sustaining a *positive* relation to us, are enabled through mediums, *as electric conductors*...and, by discharging, through the potencies of their wills, currents of magnetism, they can and do produce rappings, on principles strictly analogous to the magnetic telegraph.⁶²

For Spiritualists, the telegraph was the perfect metaphor for spirit communication: messages sent across great distances instantaneously through little understood, although provable, invisible means. In comparing the process of spirit communication to the operation of the telegraph, Spiritualists hoped to lend some credibility to the movement. By linking communication to

59 Moore, “Spiritualism and Science,” 482.

60 Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*, 24.

61 Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism*

62 Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Present Age and Inner Life; Ancient and Modern Spirit Mysteries Classified and*

electricity, albeit a “refined species of electricity” that through their “delicate organization” the spirits were able to produce,⁶³ Spiritualists were attempting to naturalize the idea of communicating with the world beyond.

Prior to the Victorian era in America, “the spirits” were understood to be supernatural entities, shrouded in suspicion and superstition, and often regarded with great fear. The Spiritualist movement, for instance, faced a severe backlash from its religious opponents, who attributed the spirit manifestations to the work of the devil. In *Spiritualism on Trial*, written in 1875, Reverend Frederick William Evans expressed the fears common among religious men of the time by asking, “What evidence have we...that the devil or some other evil spirit does not magnetize the medium, and will him to see a departed human spirit when there is no such spirit present?”⁶⁴ The fear among many was that by communicating with the dead, people would become susceptible to the control of evil spirits, or perhaps even the devil himself. The idea of deeming something mysterious or hard to comprehend, such as the supernatural (or “unnatural”), as evil was far from new. Perhaps for this very reason, Spiritualists endeavored to portray spirit communication as not a supernatural phenomenon, but as a natural occurrence created by natural causes – the suggestion here being that whatever can be seen as natural is considered good, while anything unnatural is evil.

While the Enlightenment as a movement had come to an end by the nineteenth century, the great strides in philosophy and science still had a significant influence on how Victorians understood the natural world. Enlightenment philosophy often found itself in conflict with established religion, because it encouraged people to become “progressively self-directed in thought and action through the awakening of one's intellectual powers,” which it was believed

Explained (Boston: Colby & Rich Banner Publishing House, 1886)

⁶³ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 5.

would ultimately lead to a better, more fulfilled human existence.⁶⁵ Enlightenment philosophy was dedicated to the idea of human progress, and “the advancement of the natural sciences [was] regarded as the main exemplification of, and fuel for, such progress.”⁶⁶ Scientific discoveries made in this age led to the conception of nature “as an orderly domain governed by strict mathematical-dynamical laws.”⁶⁷ In other words, scientists began to view the universe as a machine, perhaps initially set in motion by a supreme being, but ultimately left to operate of its own accord based on the “natural laws” that governed it. This perception of the natural world still held significant influence over scientists of the Victorian era, and in their attempt to legitimize spirit communication, Spiritualists evoked natural law to explain the cause of spirit manifestation, thereby placing Spiritualism within the realm of empirical scientific theory.

In 1850, Eliab Capron and Henry Barron issued a pamphlet entitled, *Singular Revelations: Explanation and History of the Mysterious Communion with Spirits, Comprehending the Rise and Progress of the Mysterious Noises in Western New York*, which made the very claim that spirit communication was a natural phenomenon. As historian Barbara Weisberg explains it, *Singular Revelations* was “intended specifically to remove the spirits from that shadowy realm of superstition and place them squarely within the sunny domain of scientific reason.”⁶⁸ In order to achieve this aim, Capron and Barron appealed to natural law. They argued that the material and the spiritual were intimately connected, and, reacting to a popular argument against Spiritualism, they mused that, theoretically, “It is no more proof that [spirits] are not thus about us because not seen, than electricity, or the numerous animalculae which we are constantly

64 Frederick William Evans, *Spiritualism on Trial*, (Cincinnati: Hitchcock & Walden, 1875).

65 William Bristow, “Enlightenment,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Last modified 2011.

66 Bristow, “Enlightenment”

67 Bristow, “Enlightenment”

68 Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*, 92

eating, drinking, and breathing, although unseen, do not exist for the same reason.”⁶⁹ Here, Capron and Barron refute the challenges of Spiritualism's opponents by reminding them that just because something cannot be seen does not mean it does not exist, or is not natural.

Even the very condition under which a proper séance was to be conducted was explained using the language of nature. In *The Religion of the Future*, written in 1893, the author, Samuel Weil, attempts to confront any doubts of the integrity of the séance. He remarks how educated men and women are often scornful of reports of spirit manifestation, believing that the darkness supposedly required for the manifestation to be successful only makes it easier for the fraudulent medium to deceive observers. Weil contradicts this idea by stating:

A little inquiry and thought would teach them that certain electrical sparks can only be seen in a darkened room; that in such subtle phenomena the vibrations of light are hindrances, just as the photographer excludes the light in his chemical manipulations, being only able to develop his pictures in a dark chamber. Every seed must be deposited in the dark soil in order to sprout. All living creatures are born out of darkness. Gestation proceeds in the dark.⁷⁰

Again, just like Capron and Barron, by using imagery of nature and biology, such as the seed growing out of the darkness of the soil, Weil seemed to prove that the need for darkness in order for spirits to manifest actually appeared to align perfectly with the process of development often found in nature.

In the later half of the nineteenth century, Spiritualists took their argument even further; not only did they claim that their beliefs adhered to natural law, they claimed that they, in fact, were *more* loyal to the concept of natural law than even professional scientists, for they believed that “all phenomena whatever are in accordance with natural law.”⁷¹ In *The Scientific Basis of*

69 Eliab Capron and Henry Barron, *Singular Revelations: Explanation and History of the Mysterious Communion with Spirits, Comprehending the Rise and Progress of the Mysterious Noises in Western New York* (1850).

70 Samuel Weil, *The Religion of the Future* (1893)

71 Epes Sargent, *The Scientific Basis of Spiritualism*, (Boston: Colby & Rich, 1880).

Spiritualism, written in 1880, Epes Sargent directly addressed critics of Spiritualism – who argued that events such as levitation, which commonly occurred in later séances, were impossible, because they defied the laws of nature, musing:

You assume that when a man is lifted to the ceiling by no known human means or appliances, the law of gravitation is violated. But, with a purely arbitrary indifference, you leave out of sight entirely the possibility that the levitation may be effected by the power of spirits, substantially organized though invisible to our coarse natural senses.⁷²

Here, Sargent, in a sense, “outdoes” scientists, by assuming that natural law not only dictates the events of the material world, but the spirit world as well, and goes on to speculate, “that man of imperfect science postulates 'an inflexible order of nature,' but how does he know that there are not higher laws of nature, which he has not yet discovered, but to which other laws are subordinate?”⁷³ Sargent sums up the purpose of his argument most clearly when he quotes Alfred Russel Wallace⁷⁴ in saying:

One common fallacy appears to me to run through all the arguments against facts deemed miraculous when it is asserted that they violate, or invade, or subvert the laws of nature. This is really assuming the very point to be decided, for if the disputed fact did happen, it could only be in accordance with the laws of nature, since the only complete definition of the 'laws of nature' is, that they are the laws which regulate all phenomena.⁷⁵

In short, the common claim that spirit manifestation was not possible because it appeared to disobey the laws of nature, was refuted by the (somewhat circular) theory that any event that transpires must be “natural,” by the very fact that it occurred. To Spiritualists, the problem was not that spirit communication seemed unnatural; it was that the current scientific definition of

⁷² Sargent, *The Scientific Basis of Spiritualism*.

⁷³ Sargent, *The Scientific Basis of Spiritualism*.

⁷⁴ Alfred Russel Wallace (1823 – 1918) was a British naturalist, biologist, anthropologist, explorer, and geographer, and was influential in conceiving the theory of evolution through natural selection.

“natural,” in their opinion, was far too narrow and inflexible, and did not lend itself well to the progressive philosophies.

Confronted by an endless stream of criticism from professional scientists since the conception of modern Spiritualism, Spiritualists found a way to not only reassure themselves that they were on the right path toward human progression, but also to construct a place for themselves alongside some of the greatest thinkers found within the historical narrative of science. In 1871, Charles H. Smith wrote a brief article entitled *On the Attitudes of Men of Science Towards the Investigators of Spiritualism*, in which he expressed the plight of the Spiritualist movement. Comparing Spiritualists to some of the most well-known scientists and philosophers of all time, Smith stated:

In the history of human progress, we look back in vain for a case parallel to the present one, in which the professed teachers of science have been right. The time-honored names of Galileo, Harvey, and Jenner, are associated with the record of a blind opposition to new and important truths. Franklin and Young were laughed and sneered at for discoveries which seemed wild and absurd to their scientific contemporaries.⁷⁶

This comparison demonstrates an understanding on the part of Spiritualists that spirit manifestation, although at the moment criticized and deemed absurd, would one day be considered a great discovery and a significant stepping stone in the progress of human knowledge, just as the discoveries of scientists such as Galileo and Jenner had been. Smith concluded the article by reminding both Spiritualists and their opponents, that scientists have always regarded “new and important discoveries” with contempt and derision, but that, “in every case in which the evidence has been even a tenth part of that...accumulated in favor of the

⁷⁵ Sargent, *The Scientific Basis of Spiritualism*.

⁷⁶ Charles H. Smith, “On the Attitudes of Men of Science Towards the Investigators of Spiritualism,” *The Year-book of Spiritualism For 1871*, (1871).

phenomena of Spiritualism, they have *always been in the wrong*.⁷⁷

To Spiritualists, the ability to come in contact with the spirit world was evidence of natural human progress. Keeping in line with Enlightenment beliefs, Victorian Spiritualists were confident in man's ability to progress forever upward and onward toward the perfection of humankind. The ability to communicate with spirits seemed to demonstrate a development in natural human faculties. As Weil explained in *The Religion of the Future*, "Man's mind has grown gradually, from the infantile intellect of the savage, to the attainments of civilized modern thought. In his future progressive growth he will develop new, hitherto unsuspected faculties."⁷⁸ These ideas lie in accordance with Darwin's theory of evolution, and once again, it becomes apparent that Spiritualists were attempting to frame their movement through the use of scientific thought. Weil goes on to say that "what was hitherto called abnormal is seen to be a normal product of evolution. The thing, or phenomenon inexplicable to the orthodox science of our time, from the standpoint of scientific text-books, is simply an effect of a cause, as yet unknown; it is governed by a force or law not yet discovered in the old ways of research."⁷⁹ His language, of course, implied that scientists *would* discover the cause of spirit communication eventually, almost rendering it inevitable.

Similarly, in *Singular Revelations*, Capron and Barron explained man's newfound ability to communicate with another world as a sign of intellectual development, stating:

The why of its appearance just at this time, or the reason why it has not become more extensively known before, we are as unable to tell as we should be to tell why all the great discoveries in science were not made known to man at once, instead of waiting the slow development of the intellect of man, and thus prepare him for the gradual reception of the mighty changes which have taken place from the early stages of human development to the present time.⁸⁰

77 Smith, "On the Attitudes of Men of Science Towards the Investigators of Spiritualism"

78 Weil, *The Religion of the Future*

79 Weil, *The Religion of the Future*

80 Barron and Capron, *Singular Revelations*

Thus, Spiritualists contended, spirit communication was the result of a definite step toward perfecting human capabilities. In so doing, they not only demonstrated how their beliefs were well within the realm of scientific theory, but they also portrayed themselves as leaders of it by claiming that they had actually progressed *beyond* contemporary scientific understandings of the natural world, and were merely waiting for scientists to catch up.

Spiritualists believed that the path to human perfection depended on the progress of science. While at the height of its popularity, Spiritualism might have been seen by some as a mere form of entertainment, passionate Spiritualists stressed the ways in which it could be the means through which humanity could discover the “truths” of the natural world. In *A Guide to Spiritualism*, Tyreman offered advice to those who were genuinely interested in conducting “investigations” into Spiritualism of their own, advising them to, “above all, seek to prove the truth of Spiritualism, not as a means of gratifying idle curiosity, but as a motive to a higher and better personal life, and as an agency of increasing good to the world.”⁸¹ In short, he portrayed Spiritualism as not only a *consequence* of human progress, but a *cause* of it as well, as it “[made] man good by gradually bringing all the powers and faculties of his physical, intellectual, and moral nature into healthy and harmonious operation.”⁸² And when this was achieved, the man in turn would do his best to “expose the shams and uproot the evils in society, and bring about a more equitable and happy state of things throughout the world.”⁸³

Spiritualists understood spirit communication as a way for the spirits to pass on their superior knowledge to the material world, much like how “philanthropists exert themselves to elevate the lowly, the undeveloped; and great minds devote themselves to the noble task of

81 Tyreman, *A Guide to Spiritualism*

82 Tyreman, *A Guide to Spiritualism*

ameliorating the condition of the toiling masses of the poor and oppressed.”⁸⁴ Taking this into consideration, it is no surprise that one of the most frequently contacted spirits during the Victorian era was that of Benjamin Franklin.⁸⁵ Indeed, some of the greatest leaders who were closely associated with the ideas of rational thinking that came out of the Enlightenment were the most common spirits to visit the public séances held in lecture halls across the country. In fact, in 1851, Isaac Post wrote a book entitled *Voices From the Spirit World*, which documented the contact he had made with the spirits of George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson, among others. Just one year later, Charles Hammond wrote a book (although claimed that merely his hand wrote it, through the guidance of the spirits, and none of the ideas expressed were his own) titled, *Light From the Spirit World*, in which he documented the journey of Thomas Paine through the seven spheres of which Spiritualists believed the spirit world was comprised. Not surprisingly, these great men expressed enthusiastic support for Spiritualism. According to Hammond's book, the spirit of Paine even recalled something a companion of his in the spirit world had said to him shortly after he died, apparently foreshadowing the rise of Spiritualism:

Progressive developments of wisdom will appear, when the dark cloud of superstition shall be removed, so that the light of heaven shall not involve those on whom it falls in the trouble of wicked men. The spirits of this sphere have waited for the coming of that day, and come it will, when opinions shall not triumph over facts, and truth shall not be rejected because it disagrees with the error of religionists.⁸⁶

The use of the phrase “the dark cloud of superstition,” to represent ignorance, as well as the employment of the word “light” to symbolize the revealing of knowledge were common in the

83 Tyreman, *A Guide to Spiritualism*

84 Weil, *The Religion of the Future*

85 Emma Hardinge Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism*

86 Charles Hammond, *Light From the Spirit World; The Pilgrimage of Thomas Paine, and Others, to the Seventh*

writings of Spiritualists, and they believed this “light” would come from an understanding of the universe and of the afterlife based on empirical scientific evidence.

While most historians who have studied and written on the subject of Spiritualism regard it as a religious movement, in the nineteenth century, when the popularity of Spiritualism was rapidly growing, its opponents actually perceived it as a threat to religion, because of its supposed basis in empirical scientific theory. Again, while the line between science and religion had not yet been solidified, this fear that Spiritualism would undermine traditional religious beliefs suggests that a divergence between religion and science was already observable. Nonetheless, Spiritualists responded to these claims with reassurance that Spiritualism would not destabilize the importance of religion in society, nor render it obsolete, but would in time come to take the place of Christianity as the next dominant religion. Indeed, in *The Plain Guide to Spiritualism* written in 1863, Uriah Clark compares contemporary objections to Spiritualism to the preliminary hostility to Christianity, which had once been regarded as “the archest heresy and infidelity.”⁸⁷ In pointing out this similarity between Spiritualism and Christianity, Clark attempted to do what other Spiritualists had done when they compared Spiritualism to some of the greatest scientific discoveries in history: suggest that Spiritualism was the next step forward.

In *The Scientific Basis of Spiritualism*, Sargent explained how Spiritualism could be understood as both a religion and a science. He began by defining religion as “the sentiment of reverence or of appeal, growing out of a sense of the possibility that there may be in the universe a Power or powers unseen, able to take cognizance for our thoughts and our needs, and to help us spiritually or physically.”⁸⁸ Spiritualism fit this definition not only because the spirits could be considered “powers unseen,” but because Spiritualists believed that the spirits were attempting to

Circle in the Spirit World (Rochester: Lee, Mann & Co, 1852)

87 Uriah Clark, *The Plain Guide to Spiritualism*, (Boston: William White & Co, 1863)

communicate with the material world in order to aid in human progression. In fact, one medium claimed that the spirit of Benjamin Franklin had asserted that “the scientific advancement on earth depended on the interest and cooperation of scientifically inclined spirits like himself.”⁸⁹ Sargent then went on to say that the purpose of science was to “[take] cognizance of phenomena, and [endeavor] to discover their laws,” and because this was exactly what Spiritualism purported to do, Sargent concluded that it must also be a science. The fact that it was both a religion and a science was, to Sargent and many other adherents, what made Spiritualism unique. As Sargent asserted, “it is the glory of Spiritualism that its appeal is to the reason through science; that it gives us the elements of a religion, old as the world, and at once rational, scientific, and emotional.”⁹⁰

Sargent's argument, and indeed the argument of many spiritualists, for Spiritualism as a blend of both religion and science was partially in response to the idea that religion and science were becoming increasingly divergent – and perhaps even that eventually, science would surpass religion, and ultimately come to replace it entirely. In an American journal devoted to Spiritualism, one correspondent remarked:

Religion will eventually become science; but in doing so it will cease to be religion. Alchemy lost its identity to chemistry; astrology gave way to astronomy; and religion, like both alchemy and astrology, being a system which is composed mainly of supposed facts and their imaginary relations, must pass away and be forgotten just as fast as the real facts are discovered and their true relations understood.⁹¹

Sargent countered this claim by contending that religion was, and is, more than just a system of supposed facts, but that it is, in fact, “the very culmination of all truth and all knowledge; it is

88 Sargent, *The Scientific Basis of Spiritualism*

89 Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 5.

90 Sargent, *The Scientific Basis of Spiritualism*

91 Sargent, *The Scientific Basis of Spiritualism*

science 'flushed with emotion.'"⁹² Thus, he was suggesting that not only was Spiritualism both a religion and a science, but that religion itself was science.

To Spiritualists, it appeared that the future of religion lay in the hands of science. In *The Religion of the Future*, Weil described the sort of people drawn to Spiritualism perfectly as “those who are perplexed by doubts and misgivings concerning religion, and who are anxious to find out what is true and what must be rejected;...those who seek present evidence; who are not satisfied with the evidence of ancient times;...those who seek a basis for religion, not in faith, but in knowledge, knowledge verifiable by themselves.”⁹³ Note how he was not claiming that these individuals disillusioned with religion were seeking to replace their religious beliefs with science alone, but rather, a religion based on scientific evidence. According to Weil, what made Spiritualism unlike any other religion was that “it [required] no faith, no acceptance of any doctrines or propositions on mere authority. For its fundamental facts it [had] a solid basis of irrefutable evidence, evidence accessible to all, evidence of the senses.”⁹⁴ Similarly, Britten described Spiritualism as “a religion, separate in all respects from any existing sect, because it [based] its affirmations purely upon the demonstrations of fact, science, and natural law.”⁹⁵ And, as Britten pointed out, not only did Spiritualism captivate the minds of the masses, it also appealed greatly 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.”⁹⁶

It cannot be ignored, however, that to many, séances were nothing more than a grand performance, and the carnival-like nature of Spiritualism would turn out to be its ultimate downfall. In October 1888, Maggie and Kate Fox confessed to producing the “spirit raps”

92 Sargent, *The Scientific Basis of Spiritualism*

93 Weil, *The Religion of the Future*

94 Weil, *The Religion of the Future*

95 Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism*

96 Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism*

themselves by cracking the joints of their toes, since childhood.⁹⁷ While this was considered the “death blow” to Spiritualism, fraud among mediums had been sparking debates and controversy, not only between Spiritualism and its opponents, but between Spiritualism's followers as well, for over ten years. By the 1870s, many séances had become little more than spectacles, with mediums producing “full-form materializations” of spirits who walked among the séance attendants.⁹⁸ A document that instructed mediums on how to produce the desired effects when impersonating a ghost was discovered, and soon other tricks were revealed as well. As séances became more sensational, fraud became much easier to prove. While incorrect messages could be attributed to ill-intentioned spirits, “nothing could remove the guilt from a medium who donned a wig in a spirit closet to impersonate a beloved deceased parent or child.”⁹⁹

Understandably, faithful Spiritualists were angered when they discovered that mediums had intentionally deceived them. These revelations caused Spiritualism's rapid deterioration, with mediums accusing one another of fraud and some followers criticizing other Spiritualists for becoming more concerned with the spectacle of spirit manifestation than with the knowledge and comfort that could be gained from spirit communication. By the 1890s, the modern Spiritualist movement had effectively come to an end.

The notion that human beings were capable of communicating with the spirit world was not a new concept in nineteenth century America, but it had never before achieved the same level of fascination or number of adherents that it did during the Victorian era, nor did it ever come so close to being recognized as a legitimate science or religion. Spiritualism would likely not have gained the rapid momentum it did, had it not emerged at the precise moment when the people of New England seemed to not only be ready for such a movement, but to need, and desire it as

⁹⁷ Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*, 240

⁹⁸ Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 425

well. The events of the 1860s created the perfect environment in which Spiritualism could successfully rise to capture the attention of the American people. The Civil War had produced an entire nation of mourners who were desperate for comfort and contact with their loved ones who they had lost. Contemporary developments in science had contributed to the “crisis of faith,” yet, simultaneously, the advancements in science and technology had created a sense of limitlessness when it came to understanding the nature of the universe and how it functioned – almost anything seemed possible. And at a time when people were beginning to notice a gap growing between religion and science, Spiritualism seemed capable of bridging the divide.

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