THE PSYCHIC BRIDGE:
THE SPIRITUALIST MOVEMENT

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by

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Introduction

Early in the 21st century the paranormal is all around us. There are psychic shops that give tarot or psychic readings to tell patrons any number of things about the future. Major newspapers publish horoscopes, which tell individuals their fortune for the next day, week or year, depending on the date on which they were born. There is even direct access to psychic hotlines, where people can be directly connected to a psychic to answer all kinds of questions that could be haunting them. It is also possible to contact mediums on some of the 228 million results that appears from a cursory search of psychic reading on the internet. All of these methods seek to predict the future, or at least something people hope can guide or advise them on the matter. Today’s fascination with the paranormal does not stop there. When it comes to the paranormal, the dead are the real draw. There are numerous television shows, such as Ghost Hunters, Paranormal State, Ghost Adventures, Haunted Collector, Ghostly Encounters and Celebrity Ghost Stories, that all seek to prove the existence of ghosts by either science, or psychic phenomena.¹ The paranormal has even gone mainstream. The E! Network spin off Kourtney and Kim Take New York

brought in the well-known psychic, John Edward, to communicate with the
Kardashian girl’s dead father. Psychics also get their own shows, such as Long
Island Medium, or they can habitually appear on others shows, such as Sylvia
Browne, who appeared multiple times on The Montel Williams Show. These are
just a few examples of the paranormal appearing on so-called reality television. If
one were also to consider movies, and other forms of entertainment the amount
of references to the paranormal and psychics are astronomical. With such an
inundation of the paranormal, it is easy to forget that there is still a lack of
credibility associated with the paranormal, no matter how it is studied.

This was much the same problem that was encountered by the spiritualist
movement, which rose to prominence at the turn of the last century. Those who
called themselves spiritualists were a fractured group with only one unifying
tenant, mainly from the northern part of United States, who believed in the power
of psychic mediums to communicate with the dead. Supporters of the movement
sought to use medium’s impressions of the dead to validate their Christian
religious beliefs in life after death. Their goal was to bring religion and science
closer together, and in doing so acted as a sort of bridge between the past and
present, by taking the religion of the past and connecting it with the science of
their ever-changing present. In doing this, the spiritualists drew criticism for
their beliefs and practices from individuals, over fine religious points. To counter

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this, the spiritualists published a variety of works, advocating the movement’s ideas and the connection between science and the séance. But no part of the spiritualist’s movement was more important than the individual mediums who spread their beliefs across the country and around the world.

Today’s interest in the paranormal looks very much like the start of a new spiritual age, with both science and the supernatural; but while the spiritualists at the turn of the last century focused on science proving religion, the current phenomenon has moved away from the Christian religious connection. Now, instead of using ghosts to prove the validity of Christianity as the spiritualists did, two opposite methods, science or the paranormal, are used to prove the existence of spirits. The modern paranormal movement is strictly divided into two groupings: the scientific side and the paranormal side. The scientific side includes the many ghost hunters who use scientific equipment to pick up environmental abnormalities which have no immediate explanations and so are attributed to spirits. A popular example of this scientific ghost hunting are the members of The Atlantic Paranormal Society, who star in of the SyFy television show Ghost Hunters, which is known for its use of new technology. The psychic side of paranormal investigations accepts the validity of psychics and their impressions, and uses them to interact with spirits. The examples of the psychic evidence for spirits which often come directly from the psychic, as is the case with

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5 Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 2-5.
Michelle Belanger, who has been featured on several television shows, and has written numerous books. This change in focus, from science proving a medium’s validity to science proving a ghost’s existence, without any religious connection, is a major difference between the modern paranormal researchers and the turn of the century spiritualist mediums.

The early spiritualists sought to show scientifically the existence of spirits, (and Christian belief in life after death) by having science explain the experiences and phenomena of mediums while in contact with the dead. They produced numerous volumes on this topic, and tried to make this an accepted idea in the science of the time. The movement faced significant opposition to this point which resulted in a large amount of literature that argued that adding rational science to Christianity challenged faith and that the spiritualists were dealing with evil beings during their séances. It is perhaps this very opposition between the spiritualists and their critics that eventually led to the modern split between the psychic and science. One thing both the modern paranormalists and the turn of the century spiritualists had in common was their audiences and the viewers had divided opinions on the evidence both could produce. In both cases, individuals used the practices of the paranormal for their own entertainment. Perhaps the most prominent modern example of this occurred in the 1999 film

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the *Sixth Sense*, in which a young boy utters the iconic line, “I see dead people.”

This was a movie to be seen for entertainment, but it reflected back upon a phenomenon that a portion of society takes very seriously and did so in an earlier era. Chip Coffey, a self-professed psychic, travels around the United States interacting with children who have had paranormal experiences. He attempts to help the children come to terms with psychic experiences they may have had, and he guides the children, as well as their parents, on how to deal with any psychic abilities the children may possess. The spiritualists of the turn of the century ran into the same issues when tactics developed by spiritualists for séances were taken by the famous magician Harry Houdini and incorporated into his magic act. It is easy to see how the idea of turning the paranormal into entertainment reaches back to the spiritualist movement, and how this action on the part of Houdini could lead to a certain distrust of the paranormal because the psychic was seen simply as a form of entertainment. Yet, there is more behind this social fascination.

Modern mediums such as Sylvia Browne, John Edward, Chip Coffey and Michelle Belanger make their livings by doing psychic readings and writing accounts of their paranormal experiences, much like the mediums of the past. Perhaps the most famous of the early spiritualist mediums were the Fox sisters, a set of three sisters from New York state who, in 1848, managed to start the entire

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movement with their experiences. Two of the sisters were involved in the initial experiences, but eventually all three of these girls translated their experiences into fame and fortune, traveling from place to place to communicate with the dead in shows for paying audiences.\textsuperscript{13} This was a time where being a well-known medium could get you an invitation to the courts of Europe to perform for the aristocracy.\textsuperscript{14} Both the spiritualists and the modern paranormalists employed men and women in their practice. Gender impacted the turn of the century movement in many different ways, but one of the clearest divisions was the way in which male and female mediums used their talents. In general, the male mediums were more performance focused in the exhibition of their talents, while the women were more focused on helping as many people as they could. While the mediums of today reach fame in a more modern way, by appearing on television shows about the paranormal or through the internet, they have not quite reached the same level of acceptance that their forerunners were able to attain. Where once a medium could be known the world over for his or her talents, today the fame of mediums is a little more constrained to fans and believers.

Fame is often a curse, as the mediums of the spiritualist movement discovered. More so than the psychics of today, mediums of the past faced fierce opposition to their practices. This opposition often came in the form of religious

\textsuperscript{13} Howard Kerr and Charles L. Crow, eds., \textit{The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 70-93.
attacks on the movement as a whole, because of its attempt to integrate science and the paranormal into Christian beliefs. These critics wrote many accounts of the fraudulent practices and other acts with the movement.\textsuperscript{15} To address these attacks, the spiritualists gave speeches and wrote letters, and books about how helpful and truthful the practice of spiritualism could be to those during times of need.\textsuperscript{16} In short, the movement continued to function as normal, while under attack.

The debate between believers and non-believers came during a time of great change in American society. America was quickly modernizing and some religious leaders were looking for ways to modernize with their beliefs to fit this new society. Historian Jackson Lears, argues that this period of American history around the turn of the century, was a time when individuals were attempting to cope with revolutionary changes to society by looking backwards and finding ways to integrate positive attributes of the past with the best of the present.\textsuperscript{17} This dialectic frames the world around the spiritualists and their mindset as they attempted to connect their Christian ideas with the science of the day, in order to modernize their Christian beliefs.

The spiritualists were not alone as a new religious sect in this quest of merging the past and present. Many emerging religious groups were seen as odd,


different, or threatening by the more established churches. Religious historian George Marsden, examines the growing fundamentalist Christian tradition in America during the turn of the century and points out how the Christian Scientists, the Quakers, and the Pentecostals, among others were challenging to traditional Christians due to their unusual belief in direct revelation or scientific rationalism.18 The spiritualist movement was not alone in its desire to advance Christianity as that was the goal of each of these religious groups as well. The spiritualists set themselves apart from other Christian sects with its peculiar mixture of the paranormal and science, as a way to prove the existence of the afterlife.

The links from the spiritualist movement to the modern paranormal fascination are very clear. The same ideas are still being explored, but in new ways, and under new names: psychic mediums still exist, séances still take place, and people still try to ease the minds of the living by communicating with the spirits of the dearly departed. The ideas that made the spiritualists of the turn of the last century so unique have not been lost; the ideas have simply evolved over time to meet the needs of a new society. A belief in the existence of an afterlife, and specifically the proof of spirits, still drives many individuals to seek the other side, and allows a select few to become intercessors between the world of the living and the realm of the dead, just as they did back then.

The spiritualist movement had a unique set of circumstances that allowed it to develop in the ways that it did, composed of three major parts: its connection to Christianity, its connection to science, and the importance of the individual spirit medium. The movement, although not organized, had Christian connections that led to tensions between the movement and more traditional Christians, because the spiritualists challenged their views. By using science, such as electricity and psychology, the movement attempted to become more modern, but, this too, drew criticisms from a few of the more conservative Christian advocates.¹⁹ The use of psychic mediums within the movement allowed individuals to not only speak with the dead, but it also allowed the mediums to help people get through the trauma and grief that death can leave behind. Without the individual mediums the movement could not have taken the form it did because they were the intercessors between the living and the dead. These three points worked together to make the spiritualist’s movement a unique sect emblematic of a very unique time in American history. A group’s ideas and goals still exist, in some form or another, over one hundred and fifty years later.

¹⁹ Cooley, An Exposition and Explanation, 17.
Spectral Evidence:
The Spiritualist Movement and Religion at the Turn of the Last Century

In 1848, two girls, ages 11 and 15, from Hydesville, New York discovered a mysterious rapping sound inside their small home. The girls investigated and found that the raps responded to them by mimicking the numbers of finger snaps the girls made and eventually responded to questions they asked. The family home soon became a tourist attraction and the girls, along with an older sister, became known as mediums, through which contact with the dead could be made. These rappings, which came to be described as a form of spirit communication from beyond the grave, along with these girls, inadvertently set off a chain of events that led to a movement called spiritualism.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{20} Kerr and Crow, \textit{The Occult in America}, 82-3, and 79-93.
These young ladies were the Fox sisters, Margaret and Kate, and they became the first accepted mediums and celebrities of a spiritualist movement. Their celebrity became a starting point for many people who wanted to acquire fame and fortune for their ability to communicate with the great beyond. The Fox sisters, who drew both criticism and support for their experiences, captured the country’s imagination, and gave the spiritualist movement the impetus to become a major belief system by the 1880s.

The spiritualists were party to an unorganized movement which attempted to prove the validity of their Christian beliefs through the use of spirit communication and spirit mediums. The individuals who supported the movement believed that the ability to communicate with the dead proved the existence of life after death. The movement emerged in the northern United States in a period littered with many other new religious ideas, and it appealed to much of the newly formed upper class as they were often the clients of the mediums. As a belief system, spiritualism attempted to fuse Christian beliefs with emerging scientific methodology by using mediums, séances, and other forms of spirit communication - such as spirit rappings or levitations - to prove the unconventional ideas. There were mediums who rose to fame, but many faced opposition from mainstream Christian religious groups, who were set against spiritualism and its ideals. These critics called followers of the movement frauds, charlatans, and simply careless, arguing that the spiritualist’s irresponsible practices might be invoking evil spirits. However, the spiritualists were able to
practice, and even thrive, in America by maintaining a connection to Christianity and Christian history, and by using famous people, such as Abraham Lincoln, to promote their ideas. In general, the spiritualists found success by serving as a bridge between the ideas of the past and the new ideas at the turn of the century. The spiritualist movement became very well known American society, so much so that it was investigated by Congress, who held hearings on the topic in 1926. This hearing specifically looked into the practice of charging individuals sitting fees for their psychic services. A news story ran in the New York Times, and it described the scene at Congress as having, “resembled a tabloid convention.”

Mediums fought for their right to charge for their services, while other critical individuals argued against the practice of charging a fee. Harry Houdini was in attendance, and he argued against the specific spiritualists he believed were frauds. In the end, Houdini’s testimony helped to secure a $250 dollar fine, or six months in prison, for anyone in the Washington D.C. area who falsely gave readings, or advice, for money. The spiritualist movement eventually reached a level of notoriety that most religious sects never attain. This allowed the movements many platforms to spread its message, while also drawing criticism from many who would attempt to discredit it. While the movement had many critics who sought its downfall, it fought to be accepted as a sect of Christianity, which included the paranormal components to prove the existence of life after

\[\textit{Kerr and Crow, The Occult in America, 82-3, 79-93 and 79-106.}\]

Christians Speaking with the Dead

Many people in the United States at the turn of the century did not support spiritualism. The spiritualists attempted to make their beliefs acceptable to the general population by using Christian themes, and by emphasizing the notable individuals associated with the movement. The main arguments for the movement’s validity generally focused on connecting the movement to groups and individuals who were well-known at the time, like the Lincoln family. The Lincolns were so strongly linked with the movement that there were multiple accounts of the President not only being a believer, but also being a participant in numerous séances. One of the most focused of these accounts came from Nettie Maynard who recounted many instances of the Lincoln’s involvement with the spiritualist movement. President Lincoln was often connected to the movement because of the death of his son Willie after his election and Mrs. Lincoln’s habit of having séances. The spiritualists hoped that a connection to individuals, like Abraham Lincoln, accepted by Christians, would lead to the general population’s support, or acceptance of, the movement.

Three main tactics were employed by the movement, all of which worked to establish a connection between spiritualism and something thought to be credible by society at the time. The movement sought to establish a connection to

historical Christianity, to Christian ideals, and to famous individuals, or well-known groups, of the era. Critics, who hoped to undermine these efforts, based their arguments against the movement on its danger to the souls of the practitioners, as well as on the possible fraud associated with it. These critics attacked the spiritualists, but to no avail; the movement gained followers, and its ideas persisted. This persistence was because the spiritualists offered an explanation, of death and the afterlife, for Christians – an explanation that allowed individuals to bring to science their own religious beliefs, thus proving the validity of such beliefs. In the changing world at the turn of the century, this combination of old and new ideas drew many more followers than the critics could keep away.26

Most individuals who promoted the spiritualist movement were not members of spiritualist organizations, or practicing spiritualists themselves, but were interested observers who wanted to lend their voices to the defense of spiritualism. These writers often stated this very early on in their works, presenting themselves as observers. While spiritualists, themselves, were writing books to promote and defend their beliefs from attacks, these outsiders wrote similar pieces that advocated the validity of the spiritualist’s beliefs, and echoed the spiritualist’s explanations.27 These supporters actually took more time to

26 Moore, In Search of White Crows, 5-27.
explain the exact beliefs of the spiritualist than the members of the movement did. One such booster was James Hyslop, a man who had studied the spiritualists and their experiences in hopes of finding evidence to support or dismiss their paranormal claims. He wrote that the core concept holding all spiritualists together was the belief that “communication with the dead assumes the return of the discarnate spirit to the earthly life; and its temporary occupation of a human body in order to effect the communication.” While this explanation of the movement came near the end of his work, throughout he explained the movement and its beliefs by answering many of the common questions about the movement, and by discussing its origins. In this final summary, Hyslop did not directly deal with the many issues and complaints that the spiritualists faced, but explained the core reason for the divide between the critics and the spiritualists, describing the split between the spiritualists and the traditional Christians as one caused by the critic’s fear of mixing science and religion. The splitting of Christian beliefs was nothing new in America. Just a few years before the rise of the spiritualist movement there was a time of great religious fervor when church attendance, in general, drastically increased. There were many Christian sects that developed during this period including the Quakers, Shakers, Millerites and Mormons. These were all breakaway Christian groups that set a precedent in American society that the spiritualists were able to follow. None of these sects shared the belief in spirits that set the movement apart from traditional

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28 Hyslop, *Contact with the Other World*, 395, 3-202.
Christianity, but each of the sects had their own different take on Christian beliefs.29

One of the major arguments for the spiritualist movement focused on the history of the movement, in order to give it credence, and to make it seem as though the ideas of the movement were not new ones -- thus making the ideas seem less threatening. There was a growing body of literature criticizing the movement as being evil, so the spiritualists had to defend their beliefs.30 A spiritualist lecturer, and teacher, by the name of Benjamin Fish Austin published a collection of his lectures in 1917, and within this small book he connects the movement back to its earliest incarnation, “Modern Spiritualism is the old Spiritualism of the Prophets and the Apostles, a duplication of the Spiritualism of the New Testament, with its trances, visions, inspirations, angelic messages, prophecies and ‘Gifts of the Spirit,’ with adaptations and modifications suited to this age.”31 This more direct connection to Christian teachings, and history, connects the spiritualist movement, and its phenomena, to this critical point in Christian teaching. Austin attempted to legitimize not only the movement and its teaching, but also the phenomena itself, by claiming a biblical precedent for this type of paranormal activity to occur in a Christian setting. He then sets the date for its modern incarnation, “March 31st, 1848, the night on which a code of

31 Austin, *Self-Unfoldment*, 79 and 80.
communication between the two realms was discovered.” What Austin tried to establish was how the ideas surrounding the movement existed even before the Fox sister’s paranormal experiences started. This was an attempt to legitimize the movement by proving the religious ideas older and more seasoned than the majority of the spiritual phenomena and mediumship current to his time. He also established March 31, 1848 as the definite beginning date for the movement, which gave other supporters of the movement a definite date to show when the modern phenomena officially started so they could look back to the past to find ways to connect the movement, and its phenomena, to earlier times.

Hyslop also connected the movement to historical figures and ancient ideas. The spiritualist movement, he points out, was connected to one of the world’s earliest religions, animism. “It is easy to understand,” he writes, how “the accusation that psychic research is connected with fetishism, for its fundamental interest is in a doctrine that had its origin in what is known as animism, which is the spiritualism of savages, among whom it even took the form of regarding inorganic objects as animate.”

Hyslop links the spiritualists back to this early practice of animism as a way to show the legacy of the movement. By tracing the belief to pre-Christian history, he provided an ancient historical foundation, which would make the movement and its practices more acceptable. Perhaps he meant to show the un-Christian nature of the movement, but he actually echoed the believers who argued for a nearly pre-historic foundation for spiritualist’s ideals.

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32 Hyslop, *Contact with the Other World*, 4.
Another debate concerned the movement’s connection to Christianity. The connection with spiritualist’s beliefs and practices -- specifically those concerning trances, messages from beyond, and prophesy -- was mirrored with Christianity, and by occurrences in the Bible. In 1852, Benjamin Franklin Cooley, another man who examined the movement in depth, took this argument in a slightly less direct route, when connecting the movement to Christian phenomena, by avoiding, overtly, Christian terminology when discussing the benefits of spiritualism. He argued that the spiritualist phenomena of a medium or channeler, who was able to gain knowledge of the future through interactions with the other side, “may himself be the prophet to soar up and enter the prophetic realms and bring out from them, down to man, the mysteries of coming ages, and over the threshold of those realms may thousands pass, even at a time.” Many believed in the idea of prophecy, tied as it were back to basic Christian teachings, but not all Christians agreed prophecy still occurred. Cooley reminded his readers that:

The general idea respecting prophecy, seems to be, especially among many of the churches, that the day of prophecy has passed, and that we may never again expect anything farther from that source, because, say they, the heavens are closed and the prophets of old have passed from the earth, and left sufficient prophetic instruction for us, and for all coming time.

Cooley contrasted this mainstream Christian belief to the spiritualist’s beliefs, specifically that living individuals could still interact and receive messages from the other side. This was a major issue that the movement had to deal with when interacting with other Christians, so the movement had to understand these old
ideas and show how their ideas linked to the more common Christian ideology. He clearly identified the gift, and ability, of the spiritualists as an individual entity, but also showed how Christianity and spiritualism shared common ground. He also argued against mainstream Christians, who dismissed the prophecy and paranormal occurrences of the spiritualists, writing that: “If such low minds choose to adhere to the old heathen Mythologies let them do so.”

Cooley labeled those Christians, associated with out-of-date ideas, as conservative in order to counter the modern spiritualists, who were better able to speak to their changing era. This attitude towards the more traditional Christian ideas was a way to set the movement apart from them and show how progressive and modern the spiritualists were.

Many spiritualists were defensive about their beliefs. Wash A. Danskin, a practicing spiritualist, was very outspoken, beginning his work with, “The spirits of men and women who once dwelt on Earth could, and did, commune with mortals.” This basic tenant of spiritualism was one of the few constants in the varied and fractured movement. Danskin connected the spiritualists to the Christian religion, writing that, “Spiritualism, as it is termed, on the other hand, divests God of the dark mantle in which the church has enshrouded Him. In the light shed by angels upon the world, the Father is seen in His infinite perfection, and all the offspring of that Father, find peace and happiness within His boundless domain.”

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33 Cooley, An Exposition and Exploration, 52, 51 and 52.
34 Danskin, How and Why I Became a Spiritualist, 4 and 78.
religion than connect it back to its deity, and not only did Danskin connect the spiritualists to the Christian religion, but to their understanding of God. To him, the spiritualist’s paranormal experiences allowed them to better understand basic Christian beliefs and God. Connecting the movement to Christianity in such blatant terms showed outsiders the inherent Christian nature of the movement and worked to dispel any rumors or ideas of paganism that might have become attached to the movement. By presenting themselves as modern and Christian the movement was able to, in general, avoid the label of witches in the eyes of the general public because they did not follow the pattern of more nature based belief systems that the earlier witches were thought to have.

A non-practicing spiritualist contributor to the discussion was George Lawton, who took an entirely different approach. He kept Christianity out of his major arguments, and instead focused on the power of the movement to help individuals. Near the end of Drama of Life After Death: A Study of the Spiritualist Religion, after detailing the spiritualists and their impact on the world, he postulated in 1932 that “Should there be another great war within the next decade or two, Spiritualism will necessarily become one of the leading religions of the Western world, because man will find peace and profit only in another world.” 35 The spiritualists could help its believers cope with the specter of their deceased loved ones because they could still talk with them. Historian Jackson Lears argues that, during the turn of the last century, many people were looking for ways to make their loved ones’ transition to the afterlife easier to

35 Lawton, Drama of Life After Death, 574.
understand, and thus attached themselves to the spiritualist movement because it was a combination of both new and old ideas, and therefore easier to cope with. Lears also points out that, ideas like spiritualism served as a modern alternative for the current religions of the time, and served as a new, modern form of Christianity.\textsuperscript{36}

Lawton spelled out some of the major reasons why the spiritualists were in conflict with other major religions of the day. In examining the Catholic response to the movement, he wrote that:

The dogma of the trinity rests upon miracles performed by Jesus. Take away the miracles and the dogma collapses. This spiritualism does by showing that miracles are psychical phenomena occurring under natural law and not by distinct volitions of God. Thus the way is opened to revelations that contradict the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Essentially, spiritualism threatened Roman Catholicism because the movement challenged the Catholic belief, that only the son of God could have revelations. He presents the movement as more modern and logical, stating that, “Spiritualism unlike Catholicism does not need to be super-naturalistic and for this reason may be deemed a basic or ‘pure’ type of religious belief. Other types of religion had grown away from this basic type.”\textsuperscript{37} The idea of a pure religion - or a religion that is close to the natural way of the world - that could be proven positioned the movement differently than other religious arguments. It took the idea of religion and validated it by detailing the interrelatedness of both science

\textsuperscript{36} Lears, \textit{No Place of Grace}, xiii-116.
\textsuperscript{37} Lawton, \textit{Drama of Life After Death}, 583 and 577.
and religion. Lawton believed that the movement’s use of existing natural laws moved religion to its more pure form.

The final defense for the movement revolved around its connection to well-known individuals and groups to make the movement seem normal and acceptable. J. Malcolm Bird, an investigator of the spiritualist movement, became friends with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and participated in several séances with him and his wife. Bird took this friendship public when he had himself photographed with Doyle so that the image could be included in the book he was writing. Doyle was a well-known figure and including his participation in the séances lent some credibility to the occurrences.38

Frank Podmore helped defend the spiritualist movement by outlining its connections to some well-known individuals. “It is interesting...,” he wrote “that at a later period both Abraham Lincoln and William Lloyd Garrison professed their faith in Spiritualism.”39 Hyslop connected the movement back as far as possible, and included both famous groups and individuals in his

connection, “It is a curious fact,” he wrote “that most investigators connected with the English society for Psychical Research had associated modern spiritualism with the Fox sisters almost exclusively, though conceding, with Mr. Andrew Lang, that it has its roots far back in the earliest history of man.”

Hyslop links together the major figures of the movement, such as the Fox sisters and Andrew Lang a respected man who had many experiences with the spiritulists, to one of the major institutes for the study of paranormal phenomena, and used these prominent individuals to legitimize the movement. He used the reputations of these groups and individuals to give credibility to spiritualism. Not only that, but he connected the movement back so far while also associating them with the research of the day. This use of the past is central to Lears’ study, as he argues that many people at the turn of the last century looked to the past to find ways to incorporate ideas of the present, modern time.

This bridging between the past and the present was exactly what the spiritualists wanted people to understand when they sought to incorporate Christian ideas into their practice.

As a further attempt to legitimize spiritualism, Benjamin Austin made connections to other movements of the time. He attached the similarities of the spiritualist’s ideas to two contemporary groups during this time, the New Thought and Christian Science movements. Austin writes of certain Christian teachings, suggesting within the doctrine, it is possible to find “many of the same

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40 Hyslop, Contact with the Other World, 26.
41 Lears, No Place of Grace, 98-116.
teachings, under different names and with different interpretations.” Since these two Christian groups were relatively popular, by connecting the spiritualists to them, Austin made his group seem less outrageous, since they all had similar ideas and philosophies. By using the other Christian groups, Austin connects the movement back to a shared Christian heritage in order to make the spiritualists seem less threatening.

Arthur Edwards Waite, a man interested in the religious side of the movement, also hoped to make spiritualism more legitimate by connecting it to other Christian groups. He compared the movement to a group he saw as related to show the willingness of individuals to join these types of Christian organizations. “Another index of the mental condition of the country is afforded by the rise of the Shaker community, which a large class of spiritualists has agreed to regard as intimately connected with their own movement.” Waite attempted to show how both religions came from similar backgrounds and roots, paying special attention to the mindset of the country at the time that predated the spiritualists. While not fond of the Shakers, he pointed out the many similarities between the two groups, especially in their roots. He connected the Shaker’s religious rituals back to:

Priests of Osiris and Isis, Runic marches of Druids, and mad gallops of Bacchantes and Coryphantes, madder war-dances of Arizonas, processions of the Catholic Church and the Buddhist Lamasaries are all independent of one another, and yet all are alike in the recognition of a natural instinct of enthusiasm which finds vent in conventional motions

42 Austin, *Self-Unfoldment*, 80.
Like Austin, Edwards connected the spiritualist movement to other Christian groups as a way to show the normalcy of the beliefs and traditions of the spiritualists, and to make the movement’s own beliefs seem more normal and widespread. To him and many others, the Shaker’s ideas and practices were far stranger, and more rudimentary, than those of the spiritualists, and therefore the Shakers made the movement look less odd by comparison.  

Frank Podmore, a practicing spiritualist, outlined his own connections to the spiritualist movement. He made clear how, “The system of beliefs known as Modern Spiritualism— a system which in one aspect is a religious faith, in another claims to represent a new department of natural science—is based on the interpretation of certain obscure facts as indicating the agency of the spirits of dead men and women.” Podmore, like other spiritualists, viewed the movement as part of the science of the day. While not another religious movement, science was a belief system seen as acceptable at the time, and so was a logical comparison.

Everyone who wrote positively about the movement highlighted the parts of spiritualism that made it strong. Its associations with well-known individuals and organizations, as well as its overt ties to history and Christian ideology, led many people to see this as a Christian movement working to help society by bringing it closer to the dearly departed, as well the hidden truths of Christianity. Supporters argued for not only the validity of life after death, but for the

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provability of eternal life. The supporters of the movement did everything they could to help make it seem less threatening and more acceptable; however, there were a great many other individuals who were willing to do everything in their power to fight against the movement, and to fight against everything for which it stood.

The Spiritualists as Evil

These impassioned arguments for the validity of the spiritualist movement would not have been necessary, had there not been a great many voices attempting to disprove and show the unchristian nature of the movement. These arguments were as varied and numerous as those made in support of the movement, but the most common attacks saw spiritualism as fraudulent, evil, witchcraft, or of the devil. These attacks were designed to heighten fear by focusing on the spiritualist’s distortion of religious beliefs that were at the heart of the movement.

The most common attack suggested that the spiritualists were frauds. Several of the famous mediums, such as the Fox sisters, either admitted fraud, or were shown to be lying about some of their experiences. The case of the Fox sisters, for example, shows the dangers the spiritualists mediums faced. All three of the family’s daughters became well known mediums, but they faced real world demons in their later lives. After Kate was arrested for public intoxication in 1886, her sister, Margret, met with reporters, and held a public demonstration to
show how the sisters had created the rapping sounds by popping their toes.\textsuperscript{45} Hyslop wrote that, “The best indication of the doom that awaits spiritualism is seen in the final results to some of its best credited representatives. The confession of one of the Fox sisters made it impossible to have confidence in their performances, even though some or many of the phenomena may have been genuine.”\textsuperscript{46} This was an extremely potent argument against the movement, considering the special place the Fox sisters held as the ones who initiated the movement. Incidents like the confessions of a Fox sister made for a perfect argument on why spiritualism was clearly fraudulent.

The recantation of the Fox sister was not the only challenge to the movement. Another detractor was Earnest Heart, who used the spiritualists own cases against them and argued that the spiritualist movement was both full of frauds, and that it was also a new form of witchcraft. Early in his work, he provided one of his first reasons for distrusting the movement, and for seeing it as full of fraudulent mediums:

Very early in life I was brought into contact with a well-known physician, the late Dr. Elliotson, who unfortunately for himself, was victimized by two characteristic specimens of that kind of hysterical impostors who delight in deceiving investigators of mesmerism, hypnotism, spiritualism, and the like, and whose great object is to become either centers of interest and notoriety or to make money.\textsuperscript{47}

Hyslop then detailed the case of an European gentlemen, known as Mesmer, a stage magician who produced many of the same phenomena that spiritualists did,

\textsuperscript{45} Kerr and Crow, \textit{The Occult in America}, 103-5.
\textsuperscript{46} Hyslop, \textit{Contact with the Other World}, 434.
\textsuperscript{47} Heart, \textit{Hypnotism, Mesmerism and the New Witchcraft}, 5.
who was willing to, and did, spill his secrets, and those of the fraudulent spiritualists, for a price. The movement was hampered by those individuals trying to cash in on the fame and fortune that came to some of the mediums. Frauds like these, and the recantation of the Fox sister and other mediums, hurt the credibility of the movement among outsiders, forcing spiritualists to better define themselves as well-connected, and as part of a long-standing religious movement.

The second set of arguments centered on the belief that the movement was evil, or that its practitioners were engaging in witchcraft. Earnest Heart begins his work by claiming the movement was made up of frauds, and ends his work by suggesting the believers in the movement were involved with something truly dark. His argument for fraud was based on experiments done by doctors whose experiments with forces, such as magnetism, made him question the validity of the phenomena. Heart came to the conclusion that the extreme reactions seen in some of the experiments pointed to fraud or suggestion on the part of the subjects. In one particular experiment subjects were exposed to opposite pole of a magnet to see how they reacted. It was favorable to the north pole and negatively to the south pole. This process was photographed and these images helped reinforce Heart’s ideas of fraud.48

This dual set of beliefs seems odd, but even individuals, such as Heart, admitted that there was some unknowable force associated with the spiritualists, a force that exhibited results far beyond the cheap, parlor tricks of the frauds. He considered hypnotism to be one of these forces, which he related back to the human brain, but offered no further explanation of the forces behind it. Heart even titled his third chapter, “Mesmerism and the New Witchcraft.” Heart’s faith in religion rested upon his belief that it took trust and faith, on the part of the believer, in order for the experience to be real – and the use of science to prove the beliefs of the spiritualists was directly opposed to this idea. Heart argued that the use of science did not require faith as other religions did, implying that because religion is based on faith, one should not require science in order to prove religion as valid. Thus, Heart found yet another way to dismiss the movement, “We do not say that all those who take to spiritualism are skeptics, but the tendency generally indicates a decaying faith in revealed religion.”

Heart believed that because the spiritualists had incorporated science into their

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49 Heart, Hypnotism, Mesmerism and the New Witchcraft, 56, and 57. Images of subjects under the effects of the north and south poles of magnets. The image on the rights shows the positive effect of the north pole of a magnet and the image on the left shows the negative effect of the south pole of a magnet.

50 Heart, Hypnotism, Mesmerism and the New Witchcraft, 7-8, 70-162, and 93.
beliefs, they had lost the faith that comes with other religions. This loss of faith meant that the spiritualists were less credible than other Christian groups, or perhaps that spiritualism had become something entirely different from a system of belief. In his argument, Heart does not explicitly call the spiritualists evil, or point to them as individuals who were dealing with much darker things; he simply attacks their loss of faith in Christianity.

This loss of faith, or rather the fear of losing it, was not limited to Earnest Heart. Reverend Giles Pugh worried about the effect of his encounters with the spiritualist movement might have had on him, as well as the effect it could have on the many others taken in. His 1857 book, *Spiritualism: An Old Epidemic Under A New Phasis*, was created as a way to help those individuals who fell prey to spiritualism, which he feared had, “increased from two to three millions, and being aware how rapidly any moral infection spreads where it meets with no ready-prepared antidote.” Pugh identified the movement, not as a paranormal evil, but like a disease that could harm individuals through contact with its ideas and philosophes. Similar to Heart’s fear of decaying faith, Pugh went one step further by comparing the spiritualist movement, and some if its prominent members, to “Satan’s agency in his determined conflict against God and Christ for the seduction and ruin of men.” Pugh goes beyond Heart by connecting the spiritualist movement directly with evil forces associated with the dark side of Christianity, yet both attack the movement on the grounds that its members
either fell from Christianity because of their dealings with spiritualists, or they were under the power of the devil.

Pugh wanted to stop people from having any interactions with the spiritualists movement to stop the spread of Satan’s power. At one point in his work, *Spiritualism* he cited a fellow reverend’s reply to a Christian lady who had been using spiritualist communications to help her cope with a loss. “You are not on God’s ground,” wrote the minister, “but on Satan's. You put yourself in Satan's power. Your prayer is a self-deceiving mockery; when you fly in God's face in the very act of praying to God, God gives you up to your own delusion.” For Pugh and his other reverend associates, there was no excuse for dealing with the spiritualists because of their communication with the dead, which Pugh calls, “necromancy” and condemns as evil, no matter the intent of the person attempting to make contact with the other side. 51 These critics saw this as something too dark and dangerous to be utilized by anyone, for any reason. For Pugh, the movement and all its trappings were evil, and were to be avoided because they were of the devil. He connected the spiritualists to the power of the devil, but stops there. Other detractors were convinced that the movement was dealing with something much darker then the influence of the devil.

Critics like Robert Brown and Heneritta Kimball linked the movement back to demons and magic from the past, much in the same way the spiritualists

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connected themselves to Christian history, only now they were associated with the exact opposite. Robert Brown believed the spiritualists were indeed having paranormal experiences, but he argued, much like Pugh, that the experiences were not with harmless spirits of dead relatives, but instead with classic devils, such as Satan, bent on destroying the lives of these poor individuals:

It was different, however, in the year 1848: for then the demons found a people ready to be deceived by them; and since then "Spiritualism," so-called, has made fearful progress in the world: and it ought to be specially noted that the means which the demons then adopted for making their presence known, and thus inducing men to communicate with them, were precisely the same, as those which they adopted in the time of Charles the 2nd, as well as in the days of the Wesleys!

He linked the devils directly to the Fox sisters’ first experiences, and essentially counters the Hyslop argument because he did not count the recantation of the Fox sister as valid. For Brown, these demons affected the lives of mortals throughout recorded history, and the spiritualist movement was simply a version of the same demonic tale. The movement was evil, and not Christian, no matter what its practitioners thought.

Brown went on to argue that the non-Christian nature of the movement would be traced back to single demons at work. For example, he looked at levitation, which he believed actually happened thanks to demonic influence. He recounted two occurrences of levitation that he collected from writings or accounts of others, which were reported by different individuals in different locations. He linked them together because of their shared phenomena of having a medium in connection with the spirit levitating for periods of at least twenty
minutes. In one of these cases, a medium who went by the name Grovindaswasmi produced many such phenomena for a French patron. The one that stood out most to Brown was when the medium had one hand on a cane and was floating ten feet in the air. The second case he cited had a young lady by the name of Astarte being levitated. In this case, there was a master mesmer controlling the actions of his assistant; during the demonstration however she levitated while laying down with only a hand to support her. The only connection between these two occurrences was that the levitation was observed by several independent witnesses. For Brown, this phenomena of levitation was more than enough to link the two cases together as the workings of a single demon affecting the lives of many different spiritualists. “The greater number of my readers will, I doubt not, be able to fathom it—i.e., that it was produced by the very same demoniacal power, that suspended ‘the beautiful Astarte’ in mid air.” He takes the accounts of the levitations as truly legitimate and in doing so shows his belief in the power of the spiritualists: “people present seemed awe-struck; and that they all retired from the building in silence, as if they had (as she herself felt that she had), seen something weird and supernatural: as no doubt they had.”

These encounters were dangerous to him and threatened demonic interference in the lives of humans because of the amount of power the spirit showed when it was able to hold up living individuals physically for extended

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periods of time. The spirit was dangerous because it was an unseen force that could do harm to individuals who had interactions with it.

Brown was not alone in his recognition that, even if the activity was evil, it was producing true and legitimate phenomena. Heneritta D. Kimball also accepted this phenomena and associated the movement with nothing short of witchcraft. In her work *Witchcraft Illustrated*, which focused on the Salem witch trials, she argued that “Spiritualism, hypnotism, magnetism, mind-reading, were all recognized under the old appellations of prophecy, magic, and possession.”

In line with Pugh, she pointed to Satan’s hand in the movement, especially when referring to the possession-like state that many trance mediums in the movement entered into, in order to connect to the dead. She also saw similarities between the spiritualists and the past, just as Brown did, but she believed it was a type of witchcraft, as opposed to the widespread actions of a single demon. But she did not abandon the demon idea completely. She saw possession as indicative of a demon taking over the body of an individual. Heneritta Kimball singled out other groups like the spiritualists, namely the hoodoo, voodoo, and anyone who worked to explain occurrences such as magnetism. In Kimball’s strict definition of witchcraft, the spiritualists and many other groups were guilty of practicing witchcraft. She was not, however, the only one to argue that the spiritualists were practicing witchcraft.

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53 Heneritta D. Kimball, *Witchcraft Illustrated* (Boston: George F. Kimball, 1892), 73. Sony Reader e-Book
Samuel Gardner Drake, a critic who examined many forms of witchcraft in America, wrote a volume on witchcraft in 1860, and saw the movement as a major player in witchcraft’s modern incarnation. He argued that legitimate phenomena happened with the spiritualists, but that it came from an evil place and was just as bad as other forms of witchcraft. “Fortune-telling is as much a Branch of Witchcraft as Spirit-rapping, Table-turning, or any other of the ‘occult Sciences.’ These are the legitimate Progenitors of Ghosts or Apparitions.” For Drake, witchcraft was anything that produced a paranormal or unexplained occurrence, but he also linked it to the older practice of fortune-telling. Drake and his fellow critics based their arguments on the legitimacy of the paranormal experiences of the spiritualists, the same experiences that the movement used to prove their beliefs scientifically were seen as clear signs that the devil was at work. According to the critics, these experiences were not consistent with Christian beliefs.

Drake was not content to simply call the spiritualists witches. He went one step further by including a summary of a sermon from an unidentified preacher who dealt with the spiritualist movement. This sermon summed up the arguments made by all the individuals, in that it revealed that the spiritualists were experiencing real activity, while it also was warning his flock of believers of the dangers in spreading word of the movement’s beliefs:

In an Attempt to controvert the Theories of modern Spiritualist, a Preacher tells us that “what was Falsehood and imposture in the Days of the Hebrew Commonwealth, has not become by the mere Lapse of Time, a great and beneficent Discovery, opening new Fountains of Knowledge.” At
the same time he tells us that Spiritualism “is a branch of the Art of Divination practiced in the Old World from Time Immemorial.”

This preacher agreed with the arguments made by many of the critics. To him, not only was the movement connected to the evils of the past, but it employed the same practices condemned by Christians for ages. At the same time, Drake and the unnamed preacher hint that there were true occurrences happening in and around the spiritualists. Both see the spiritualists as dealing with dangerous forces, not because they were frauds or deluding themselves into believing something that was not there, but because they were dealing with legitimate and, by Drake’s opinion, highly evil forces that were not good for anyone. He, like the preacher he quoted, wanted people outside the spiritualist movement to know the great danger of dealing with things of the spiritual nature, as they were the same evils seen in earlier times.

The arguments made against the movement attacked it as a fraud, evil, or at times, both. While many of the critics had different reasons for the spiritualists to be evil, they agreed that the movement was not Christian because of some basic flaw in the movement’s beliefs, be it fraud or Satan. They made their arguments in public ways: publishing, printing, and distributing their material in an attempt to halt other individuals from becoming involved in the spiritualist movement. Many of the same individuals who were warning people

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of the movement understood there were real supernatural happenings associated with the movement, but they wanted to save people from getting into something that could be dangerous. This was also true of the individuals who called the spiritualists frauds. They saw the sham mediums as dangerous and wanted to warn people away from them before they, too, fell victim to a scam. This distrust for new sects of Christianity was not only reserved for the spiritualists, it had been seen just a few years earlier in the 1820s with the rise of evangelicalism and the traditionalists attacks on some of the new sect’s preachers.55

**Christian or Not?**

In the end, only one thing is clear about the spiritualist movement: it divided people. It attracted members with its promise to prove and contact the dead, and inspired fear from its critics for the very same practices. The movement represented an attempt to bring the past and present together for people in this changing era. Historian Mark Summers’ argues that if one takes “away (religion) from a history of the Gilded Age, ... the times lose their meaning.”56 The importance of religion at this time helps to explain why there were so many arguments both for and against the spiritualists. The movement not only overcame its detractors, it attracted followers and spread its paranormal ideas by using the beliefs and symbols of the Christian religion. While its critics did not agree with the movement or its ideas, the spiritualists believed they were

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based in Christian ideas and teachings. Both the arguments for and against the movement freely used Christianity and its teachings as parts of each of their cases. Those who argued for the movement based their arguments on the connections between their movement, and movements of the past. They also believed that the key individuals in the movement, and their unflagging Christian faith, made their movement stronger. Those against the movement pointed out the many frauds, and the possible demons, associated with the activity reported around the movement. While eventually the spiritualists’ power and influence as a group waned, critics who attacked the movement had little success curtailing the popularity of the movement. This reveals the strength of the movement, and its ability to deflect these attacks on their movement, while still protecting their Christian identity.

Spiritualist believers and their detractors never came to an understanding, but both groups saw the movement as serving a major role in the late nineteenth century, either bringing evil or enlightenment to the people it reached. Lears and others point out the fact that there were many outside factors influencing both the spiritualists and their detractors, but the most direct influence was that of modernization. The example of modernization that was most common in the works of the critics and supports alike was the new scientific breakthroughs. Perhaps the most pertinent of these modern inventions was that of the telegraph. The spirit communication of the spiritualists was compared to this invention, and

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57 Lears, *No Place of Grace*, x-xiii.
was seen as a sort of telegraph to the dead. The movement directly linked itself with the technology of the day as a way to explain exactly what it was that they were doing when they communicated with the dead.

Individuals advocating spiritualism also wanted to be linked to modern science to make its more traditional ideas tie in with the new and changing ideas of the turn of the century. Those who opposed the movement wanted Christian religion to stay what it had always been, a system of beliefs that was based on faith, not proof and this desire led to more conflict between the two groups. The spiritualists challenged established Christian beliefs, and attempted to modernize Christianity by bridging the gap between the living and the dead and incorporating science into religion. The critics of the movement feared this challenge to traditional beliefs and recoiled against the spiritualists. The movement’s goal was not to alienate itself from the mainstream Christians of the day, but to be accepted as another branch of the Christian faith. The emphasis on the changing environment around the turn of the century helps to explain evolving ideas, and world views which were driving the supporters and critics of the movement. The changing world also helps to show why the spiritualists were attempting to modernize an ancient belief system to better integrate it with the world around them.

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The Spiritualist Movement: Science versus Religion

The turn of the twentieth century saw a great many changes in American society, outlining the transition to a more secular society. The spiritualists, a Christian-based aggregation and a movement that incorporated science into a system of supernatural beliefs, were one of the most interesting groups to emerge from this changing society. Theirs was a belief that attempted to connect better with the modern world. Many people came to accept, or at least were willing to consider, their ideas during this period of transition. But not everyone agreed with them, and the dialogue between believers and nonbelievers outline the complexity of the larger social debate between scientific methodology and Christian religious belief.

Spiritualism was held together by one major unifying tenet: the spirits of the dead could be contacted through mediums or séances. These men and women, who had the ability to commune with the souls of the dearly departed, became a sort of celebrity. There were a number of them, including the famous Edgar Cayce, and the Fox sisters, Margaret and Kate.59 The spiritualist movement was held together by one, unifying tenet: to reinforce the validity of

59 Spellings of Margret Fox vary from source to source. They all refer to the same Fox sister, not the older sister who joined the movement later.
Christianity by proving the existence of ghosts by using science and mediums – and yet, despite a common objective, it was as diverse as the people who were involved. One of the many spiritualists writing to explain the movement, before the onslaught of detractors, was J. M. Peebles. His *What is Spiritualism, Who are these Spiritualist, and What has Spiritualism done for the World?*, published in 1903, examined the people involved in the spiritualist movement, as well as what it meant to be a spiritualist. The people, as Peebles characterizes them, “Constitute the thoughtful brains of the world. I repeat, the brainiest people of the world to-day are straight out-and-out Spiritualists, or favorably inclined to Spiritualism.” It is clear that he had a high opinion of the people involved in the movement, but this also points to the people the spiritualists were targeting as well as hoping to gain some legitimacy by associating it with the top echelon of society. The audience and participants were not only the middle class of society, spiritualists wanted to attract the best that society had to offer. By linking the spiritualists to the top class of society, he hoped to draw more wealthy patrons into the audience and by doing so increase the wealth of the movement. Peebles defined the spiritualists as, “Rationalistic idealists, [who] see the potency and promise of all life and evolutionary unfoldment in Spirit, which Spirit permeates and energizes the matter of all the subordinate kingdoms, mineral, vegetable, and animal.”60 They saw themselves as connected to everything and able to interact with the Spirit, most importantly, which set them apart from other religious

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60 J. M. Peebles, *What is Spiritualism, Who are these Spiritualist, and What has Spiritualism done for the World?* (Battle Creek: Peebles Institute Print, 1903), 12 and 5.
groups, and allowed them to believe they could contact the dead to help them understand their world.

Central to the medium’s power was their belief that contact with the dead was corroborated not only by the manifestations around the séances and mediums, but also through various scientific methods. The belief that modern science could prove life after death reinforced their Christian faith, for if there was an afterlife, there was a God. Modern science allowed mediums to prove the existence of spirits not only to believers, but to outsiders as well. Some scientists tried to explain the medium’s phenomena with magnetic fields and electricity. The mediums sought to legitimize themselves in this way, yet this scientific exploration put the spiritualists in direct conflict with individuals who felt spiritualism was dangerous. Their perceived fears were as numerous as the types of scientific techniques used to prove the existence of spirits, but focused mainly on the danger to the practitioner’s soul. The people who opposed the spiritualists came from both in and outside the movement. Arguments made against the movement were based in faith; spiritualists, by proving their paranormal beliefs, were endangering people’s spiritual welfare. The critics felt their points could only be made through the use of religion, even if they were fighting against scientific evidence.

The debate between the spiritualists and their opponents was the product of a changing world at the turn of the century. Historian T. J. Jackson Lears, in *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Heart*, Hypnotism, Mesmerism and the New Witchcraft, 56-70.

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Culture 1880-1920, argues that people involved with the antimodernist movement were looking for different types of experiences to better understand the rapidly changing and modernizing world around them. He writes, “Particularly its dominant form – the recoil from an ‘overcivilized’ modern existence to more intense forms of physical or spiritual experience supposedly embodied in medieval or Oriental cultures.” This reaction to the modernization of their world helped drive the spiritualist desire to communicate with the dead, as they sought to combine the religion of the past with the science of the present in order to bridge the gap between past and present.

Lears also argues that men after the 1880s attempted to regain the masculinity they felt they had lost in the modern, urban world. This new world also forced many spiritualists to look to the past, particularly to the medieval knights to find this lost masculinity.62 The spiritualists, like the men in the Lears example, felt as though they had lost something, so they took the present, in the form of science, and combined it with the past, in the form of religion, to make a belief system that could, in theory, prove its own validity. The early spiritualists played upon and tried to bridge a gap between the ideas of their time, and their own belief in spirits. Lears’ work sets the tone for the world that the movement entered into; a place where groups attempted to balance the ideas of the present with the beliefs and traditions of the past.

Spiritualism and its practitioner honed their ideas both before and after the Civil War. Spiritualist Wash A. Danskin’s 1858 work, How and Why I

62 Lears, No Place of Grace, xiii and 98 -116.
Became a Spiritualist, chronicles his journey to become a spiritualist, and recounts the reason that he actually joined the movement, “The phenomena presented for my observation were clearly supra-mundane; were evidently produced by invisible, intelligent agents; and, not fearing to express my convictions, because they were unpopular, I, after careful scrutiny, announced my belief, that the spirits of men and women who once dwelt on earth could, and did, commune with mortals.” This convincing evidence led him to the conclusion that spirits of the dead were real. In his case, these extraordinary experiences were found around the séance table, in the way that many others had also been drawn to the movement.

During one of the countless séances he was attended that helped to convince him of their authenticity, he heard rapping noises from the table, then saw the heavy table move, flip over, hurl a basket across the room, move from the room to the hallway, indicate a missing card, hug one of the sitters by sitting on edge with the legs of the table on the woman’s shoulders and then while hovering near the ceiling, write out the names of individuals with one of its legs. All of this occurred before one of the mediums present channeled the same spirit and commenced to write, “If the previous manifestations had been surprising, this was not less so, for the chirography corresponded with his, and the signature was almost a fac-simile of that which I had so often seen him write.” While not his first séance, this extraordinary account only drew him deeper into the spiritualist movement.
Danskin’s reason for joining the movement was to understand what he had seen, and to understand that which had greatly affected his beliefs. Spiritualism, he wrote, “Divests God of the dark mantle in which the church has enshrouded Him.” Danskin’s idea that spiritualism led him to understand God, in terms that he found different from those of any other group, demonstrated how the spiritualists set their movement apart from other belief systems because, to the movement, God was knowable, real and tangible. This also became the favorite criticism used by detractors of the spiritualists, who believed their practices brought them closer to God. Critics believed the science within the movement would drive a believer from God, and that God was not an entity to be tested. Danskin went on to explain that, “the Father is seen in His infinite perfection, and all the offspring of that Father, find peace and happiness within His boundless domain.” The feeling of connectedness and knowledge of God, contrasted to his paranormal experiences which made him a believer. Even if his paranormal experiences were the main reason he came to the movement, he found the religious benefits to be important upon arrival.

In this era of change and bridges between the past and present, the spiritualist movement arose and came to prominence. Historian Robert Lawrence Moore’s In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture, which looks at the development and changes in spiritualism from the nineteenth century into the 1970s. Moore’s broad overview of the spiritualist movement, as well as his attention to the subject of some of the

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63 Danskin, How and Why I Became a Spiritualist, 3, 17-20, 20-1, 78, and 78.
earliest spiritualist mediums, like the Fox sisters, suggests that the influence of science on both spiritualism and psychical research was strong. He concludes that the spiritualists feared a loss of credibility, stating that “Spiritualists feared that anything science would not investigate would in the modern world become a matter of indifference.” This fear led the spiritualists to employ their own scientists to examine their phenomena. Men such as Michael Faraday, a physicist, studied the physical phenomena of table movement and eventually became hostile to the movement when he could find no new scientific force at work. Other scientists, such as Karl Baron von Reichenbach, claimed to have found evidence of just such a force and used it to explain many spiritualist phenomena.

Bret E. Carroll’s more recent *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* concurs, arguing that spiritualism was a legitimate belief system, even if some of the practices, and people involved, were less than legitimate due to the scientific nature of its practice. He further argues the movement gave people proof that ghosts, or spirits of the dead, did exist, thereby justifying the belief in a Christian afterlife through the use of mediums and science. Carroll’s book spends a great deal of time connecting how the spiritualists integrated the science of the day with their own Christian beliefs of the afterlife, detailing the validity of spiritualism as part of their religion, justified by science.

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64 Moore, *In Search of White Crows*, 26, 27 and 30-1.
65 Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 2-5.
The spiritualists felt that the dead had useful information for the living, and this is why it was so important to contact them. This is a subject that Cathy Gutierrez’s *Plato's Ghost: Spiritualism in the American Renaissance*, which argues that the spiritualists manipulated their Christian ideas of the past in order to work with the changing scientific ideas. Gutierrez also suggests the spiritualists incorporated older, Platonic ideologies, which advocated the idea of regaining the knowledge that you had had before you incarnated, and of having the knowledge that a person gained upon death. Gutierrez explores the concepts of death and the disembodied soul, and the idea that a person who dies has divine knowledge which could benefit, and bring peace to, the living. The idea that the dead have some divine knowledge gave the spiritualists yet another reason to contact the dead. This Platonic idea led them to believe there was knowledge to be gained, that while all people had it innately, only the dead could truly recover it, and reveal some of the secrets of the universe.66

The Danger of Playing with the Dead

People who opposed the movement did not always base their disagreement on religion; often times, they achieved the same goal by dissuading people from becoming involved with spiritualists by tarnishing a medium’s image. These individuals who sought to criticize the spiritualists used three separate attacks on the movement: the dangers of evil entities to the unprepared, the Christian fear of demons, and the fear of being able to lose your soul. Simone

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Natale’s “Spiritualism Exposed: Scepticism, Credulity and Spectatorship in End-of-the-Century America,” explores how many people tried to discredit the spiritualists at their public exhibitions. Natale concludes that people who attended these spiritualist’s events knew that they were an audience and were willing to participate as part of the entertainment or show, much like watching a magician perform. Thus, participants understood what they were getting into, and while they may not have taken seriously the spiritualists or their practices, they did not attempt to disrupt the performances, much as one would see at a modern magic show.

The people who criticized the spiritualists were a varied group that not only included outsiders and ex-members, but current ones as well. With a movement as large as the spiritualists, it would be impossible for everyone in the group to agree at all times. The common theme among these critics was the perceived danger of the movement. This danger ranged from summoning demons, to moving farther away from God and being a part of some medieval black magic, to being controlled by evil spirits. James Henry Fletcher, warned in 1915, against this very occurrence in the most blatant terms: “It is a very undesirable thing,” he wrote, “for any medium to allow themselves to be controlled by pernicious spirits everywhere awaiting just such opportunities. Beware of such!” Even though he warned people of the potential danger, he did not steer people away from the movement. He, like others, simply cautioned

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people to be aware that the motives of all spirits were not good, and one should be cautious when dealing with the dead. Fletcher himself was a practicing spiritualist, meaning that he believed in the spiritualist ideas, but he did not act as a medium and contact the dead. He had been a spiritualist for some time before writing on the pros and cons of the movement. His work, *Spiritualism: Its Truth, Helpfulness and Danger*, actually praises spiritualism and how helpful it can be. He spends four chapters explaining how helpful spiritualism can be for consoling the grieving, for making people unafraid of death, the usefulness of spirit healing, and even the way the movement forces advances in science and experimentation.

But he gave warnings as well. His concern was not one about fraud, or losing one's soul, but of the type of spirits one might encounter: “Frequently,” he wrote, “spirits returning bring messages, so far from truth and wisdom that one could easily imagine them being the very father of lies and denizens of the blackness of darkness, therefore the necessity of testing the spirits to see if they be of God or not.” Fletcher went on to give an even more dire warning of its dangers, writing, “Oh, my! If spiritualism holds in its ranks such spirits as these, the untruthful, dishonest and evil, I will have nothing to do with it.’ Let me tell you it does hold just such spirits as these.” He cautioned readers that demons could be raised in the practice of spiritualism. As if this was not enough to scare most people, he continued, “Your refusal to believe it and decision to remain in darkness or ignorance does not protect you from the attack of these spirit
vampires, but makes you a more easy prey to their vicious and damaging attacks.” Because Fletcher was an authority within this Christian spiritualist movement, he knew to warn other Christians of entities thought to be in league with the devil. His warning pointed to the prominent fear of darker, devilish types of entities that could be contacted accidentally.

Many other ex-spiritualists warned of the dangers to anyone who became involved with spiritualism. Coulson Kernahan’s 1920 Spiritualism: A Personal Experience and a Warning, was concerned with what experimenting on religion could do to faith. Unlike Fletcher’s piece, Kernahan detailed his early experiences with spiritualists, and then argued for why people should not get involved. Kernahan, as an ex-spiritualist, wanted to stop others from associating with the group because he found it to have hidden dangers. With spiritualism being popular among Christians, it made sense that his major argument for not getting involved was religious. “I am sure,” he wrote, “that the lesson of the Garden of Eden has a deep meaning for Christian people of to-day who allow themselves to be drawn into spiritualism, or are weakly drifting towards experimenting in it.” By using words like “experimenting,” she utilizes scientific language, thus exemplifying the goals of the movement: to incorporate science into the movement. Many people believed these scientific elements to be dangerous because there was no guarantee as to how the experiments would turn out, or what they might prove or disprove. This was a very prevalent fear to him,
and she relates this fear to God, writing that, “Spiritualism seems to me to begin in doubt and to end in disobedience.” This was yet another plea for people to not join the movement, and to stay away from disobedience to God. These fear tactics also kept people from experimenting with disbelief, thus finding God did not exist.

Strangely enough, with all of Kernahan’s warnings to stay away from spiritualists, he did not venture so far as to say the movement was wrong or false, but implied that unholy forces could well be behind the movement, or befall anyone who becomes involved. He went out of his way to be clear on this issue, “I do not for an instant question the honesty or the sincerity of spiritualists, nor should I like to imply that for them there is sin in what they do.” Even with not wanting to offend the spiritualists, he believed that it was not a good choice to become at all involved with the movement because of the danger involved. He was unwilling to compromise his Christian beliefs, but clearly took issue with the spiritualist’s use of science, and what the use of science did to faith. His work demonstrated the divide between science and religion, a view most of the spiritualists did not share.

Jane T. Stoddart, a vocal critic of the movement, on the other hand, attacked the movement, the mediums, the manifestations of the dead, and their religious beliefs. More importantly, she used science to defend her argument. Stoddart criticized every aspect of spiritualism, especially the defining tenet of

summoning spirits, and worked to make it sound as evil and as vile as she possible. In doing so, she used the same type of arguments that the spiritualists used in their attempts to prove the existence and validity of their beliefs. In perhaps her most outspoken attack, Stoddart links spiritualism to necromancy, “a practice hated in all ages by sober and reverent minds.” She then connected the movement to sorcery, mediaeval magic and, “an abhorrent and detested branch, belonging exclusively to the domain of black magic.” She used the religion spiritualism was based upon to keep people away from it, and any hidden dangers in it, by appealing to these same religious ideas, to scare people into avoiding spiritualism.

Near the end of her work, Stoddart moved away from the religious arguments and began attacking the movement using the science of the time. Drawn mainly from medical science, she recounted experiments done by men in the medical profession to explain certain physical phenomena created during séances. One such explanation concerned a scientific, medical cause for the famous table tipping during séances. In the cases examined by these men, the sitters of the séance all placed their hands on a table, and the table moved. The scientists decided that this movement was due to unintentional movement on the parts of the sitters: “In 1853 a committee of British Medical men held an investigation on table-turning. They decided the table-motion was due to muscular action, mostly exercised unconsciously.” Even though these

70 Necromancy- conjuration of the spirits of the dead for purposes of magically revealing the future or influencing the course of events. Merriam Webster Online Dictionary, “necromancy,”
individuals did not intentionally rig the séance, these unintentional movements called into question the veracity of the occurrences. Here Stoddart, like the spiritualists, used science to lend more credence to her view. She relied on the science of medicine, incorporating an accepted science to give yet another reason why individuals should not become involved with spiritualism. Nowhere in her work does she agree with the movement, and her arguments against them are particularly aggressive. The assertion that these spiritualists were witches or necromancers was especially harsh, seeing as the spiritualists themselves were Christians, and the accusation had a definite, negative connotation for them. Like the spiritualists, Stoddart responded to the changes around her, and attempted to keep her religion pure - untainted by science. But she took her cue from the spiritualists and looked to the past to help explain her current situation, and she looked to the past to find ways of attacking them.

These few examples of challenges to the spiritualist movement detail the many different ways people tried to keep people out of spiritualism, and away from whatever darkness might have been found there. While Fletcher was not against the movement and just wanted people to be prepared, Kernahan tried to warn people off, but did not attack the group outright. Stoddart, however, suggested that anyone associated with it was deviating from the true path of righteousness and Godliness.

Science and the Séance

Public opinion was divided regarding the movement. There were just as many authors attempting to prove to the public the safety of spiritualism as there were detractors - more, in fact. Two historians, Richard Hofstadter’s Social Darwinism in American Thought, and T. J. Jackson Lears’ Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920 both discuss how secular belief was changing the world of the spiritualists. Both illustrate the changes in society that helped the movement reconcile the old world with the new. Hofstadter in 1944, explains why the spiritualists believed that the spirits of the dead could be contacted in modern language, stating that “Science, it was believed, had now drawn the last line in its picture of a self-contained universe, in which matter and energy were never destroyed but constantly changing form, whose varieties of organic life were integral, intelligible products of the universal economy.”71 This potential energy is parroted throughout spiritualist’s texts, giving them a scientific basis for their ideas. In 1852 Benjamin Franklin Cooley went so far as to put electricity as the most important element in spirit communication, “We see by experiments in Electrical Psychology, that the medium through which impressions are conveyed from the operator to the subject is electricity.”72 Lears suggests that with the advent of the X-ray, and other scientific breakthroughs, the odd and paranormal nature of science appeared natural to people of the time.73

This onslaught of new technology lent credibility to the spiritualist movement

71 Richard Hofstadter, Social Darwinism in American Thought (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944), 36.
72 Cooley, An Exposition and Explanation, 17.
73 Lears, Rebirth of a Nation, 220-227.
because their practice added to the current trends by attempting to explain their phenomena with science.

One of the leading motivations of the spiritualist movement was to associate their phenomena with science. This would not only help to combat their opponents, but make them more legitimate to the public. The spiritualists believed that the existence of spirits, and other phenomena, could be proven with science. Some individuals, like Benjamin Franklin Cooley and Thomas Jay Hudson, tried many different ways to make their séances and spirit communications legitimate through the study of magnets and electricity. They hoped that by proving their craft using science, spiritualism would be made more acceptable. They explained what happened during the different spiritual manifestations, using as many scientific words as they can, such as electricity, energy, and magnetism. Benjamin Franklin Cooley’s *An Exposition and Explanation of the Modern Phenomena Called Spirit Manifestations* is one of the milder versions of these “scientific” texts. He explained the many different forms of spirit manifestations, and gave them a vaguely scientific slant. He included a short explanation of electricity, and its role in conducting something from one point to the next, implying that this could be an explanation for some of the psychic phenomena of the movement. “The medium through which impressions are conveyed from operator to the subject, is electricity.” The most common science he relied on is psychology, or as it was referenced, electrical psychology. When discussing manifestations in general, he pointed to the cause
being the ease of manipulating the medium, “A large portion of these ‘Manifestations’ are caused by the electrical condition of the person called the ‘medium,’” Séance manifestations, such as moving a table or ringing a bell, and other séance manifestations that physically affect objects around the medium, are explained under the theory that the mediums are able to manipulate the electricity around them to create these physical phenomena. Cooley uses the mystery associated with electricity to explain how a spirit medium produced certain phenomena such as “rappings,” or object movement as simply the ability to control, or effect, the electrical energy present during a séance, and use it to affect the world around them.

Cooley claimed that mediums were easily controlled by a force called “Electrical psychology.” In Cooley’s work, the term electrical psychology is used to characterize the medium’s ability to manipulate the world around them, and receive messages from the other side. This phenomenon’s connection to electricity, and the use of the medium’s mind during any phenomena, is a way Cooley uses ‘psychology’ to show “that the person who becomes the medium, the first in the circle, that sits together for the purpose of getting what are called ‘spirit communications,’ is in a psychological or partially magnetized state.” By adding magnetism, Cooley added yet another element of mystery to a seemingly scientific principal as an explanation of how a medium performed their feats. Cooley used the long-held wonderment about magnets as a way to offer proof to nonbelievers that what a spiritualist medium did was real and proven by science.

74 Cooley, An Exposition and Explanation, 17, 16-8, 35, 35-46 and 35.
Since magnetism and electricity were impossible to see and therefore discreditable, his use of these terms as scientific evidence could hardly be refuted by detractors. Thus it becomes true because it cannot be proven false.

The same logic was used by a spiritualist bent on proving the existence of life after death. Thomas Jay Hudson’s *A Scientific Demonstration of the Future Life* linked the spiritualist phenomena with medical science. Hudson focused mainly on the existence of what he called “the dual mind,” or the idea that all people have two minds - one that we use while living, and a second one that emerges once a person dies. He backed up this claim by using several different types of science, such as medical surgery, anatomy, and hypnotism, to validate the existence of the dual mind, “This has been abundantly demonstrated by the facts of experimental hypnotism, cerebral anatomy, and experimental surgery.” Hudson did not limit himself to any one sort of science, but includes the medical sciences and anatomy, along with the more psychological aspects of practices, such as hypnosis, in order to give the spiritualists a stronger claim of validity. By incorporating more branches of science, and more evidence from these branches he made the case for the movement stronger.

Hudson’s work ends with the story of Lazarus and a connection to Christian faith. In this story, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead and communicated with him. Hudson used this to tie the spiritualist’s actions back to biblical accounts of Jesus’ miracles. “That conclusion is that the facts of psychic science fully and completely sustain the religious philosophy of Jesus of
Nazareth, demonstrate his perfect mastery of the science of the soul, and confirm every essential doctrine of the Christian religion.”  

He reinforced the basic principals of spiritualism, namely that science could explain it, and he connected the principals back to Christian beliefs. While the movement attempted to prove the existence of ghosts with the use of science, their ultimate goal was to provide concrete proof that Christianity was the true faith. If they could prove that spirits of the dead existed using science, then they were well on their way to showing that Christianity and all its teachings were real. They wanted to prove the existence of an afterlife, proving Christianity as the one true faith.

Not all authors were so pious. Some authors chose to refrain from connecting their names to their works. These anonymous authors wanted to protect their identity, or perhaps the decision was just a personal choice to create mystery on the part of the author. One of these mysterious authors wrote under the initials D. F. G. and attempted to uncover the science behind spiritualism.  

His work attempted to tie everything back to chemicals, and their reactions both inside, and outside, the human body. He suggested that all people are influenced by chemical reactions, calling the reactions mesmeric effects. In a section on hypnosis and trances, he suggested how individuals were affected in these states, and how they received messages from more natural forces. “But who knows as a fact that, with scarcely an exception, all human beings may produce and experience mesmeric effects.”  

He linked spiritualism to universal scientific law,  

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which states natural rights applied equally to everyone. D. F. G. chastised the scientific community for not giving spiritualism its due: “To put himself in opposition to a class of persons who blindly refuse to investigate such phenomena, because, owing to a curious mental perversion, they do not wish to be persuaded and convinced of their existence.”76 His attack on scientists pitted him against at least some portion of the mainstream scientific community that did not feel any need to study spiritualist phenomena. By using scientific terms, such as “chemical,” and linking the spiritualist occurrences to universal law, he hoped to influence some people into viewing this type of science as a legitimate. He also built his argument on ideas that the outside world already accepted, namely that one should be willing to look at anything that might expand the knowledge of their world.

The people who attempted to prove the tenets of spiritualism, such as life after death or the validity of their Christian ideas, through science each chose a different type of science to back up their claim, but their arguments were similar. They all believed it possible to prove the existence of spirits, and the afterlife, with the use of science. Authors like D. F. G., Hudson, and Cooley attempted to encourage the scientific community take notice of their work and ideas. They also wanted the recognition from their fellow spiritualists concerning their ideas, and the larger meaning of spiritualism in America.

The spiritualists and their detractors both fought for the public’s support on whether or not spiritualism was legitimate, good, or evil. Overall, there is no indication that the detractors had any effect on the popularity of the movement. In fact, the opening line of Jane T. Stoddart’s work against the movement states, “Expert writers believed twenty years ago that Spiritualism was declining.” 77 This book was published in 1919, implying that the decline began around the turn of the twentieth century, which obviously did not happen. In fact, spiritualism was at its apex at the very moment Stoddart wrote her book. In her 1921 work, Mary S. Vanderbilt, A Twentieth Century Seer, author Mary E. Cadwallader traced the life of celebrity medium, Mary S. Vanderbilt, who boasted elite clientele, including the Czar of Russia, who was known to be fond of this type of individual. Rasputin, a famous monk known for his influence over the Russian queen, had peers with similar types of extrasensory skills, such as a magician known as Papus, and another spiritualist by the name of Madame R. – all individuals who had been to the Czar’s court before Vanderbilt arrived. 78 “Late in 1906,” Cadwallader wrote, “by request of the Czar, she went to Russia and held several séances with the imperial family, and afterward appeared in several European capitals.” 79 Vanderbilt’s international reputation was good enough for her to be summoned to entertain the crowned heads of Europe. Her story also

77 Stoddart, The Case Against Spiritualism, 17.
shows spiritualism was far from being a declining movement – after all, it still had friends in very high places.

Right at home in America, spiritualism had many famous supporters in its day. For example, T. J. Jackson Lears points out that Harry Houdini, while not necessarily part of the movement, used some facets of spiritualism for his acts. One trick in particular involved Houdini being tied to a chair, and Lears points to this act as one developed by mediums: “They managed to play pianos and other musical instruments while tightly lashed to chairs, all the while alleging that the real musicians were spirits they had summoned from the other side.” While this is not an endorsement for the movement, or for the people involved, it does show one of the ways it integrated into the society of the time. Lears ties all the discord of the time together and examines the commonality between Houdini and the movement, “Houdini brought magic from spiritualism to strenuousness, an appropriate strategy for the Age of Roosevelt, when ‘overcivilized’ office men sought regeneration through exertion more avidly than ever before.”

Houdini is a different sort of example of how a person could join the old and the new to create something appealing to the public of the time. Houdini’s amalgamation of spiritualism and showmanship illustrates that the ideas of the spiritualists were influencing all types of people. Houdini’s tacit acceptance of the manifestations of the spirit, and his association with the movement, perhaps served to validate the spiritualist’s claims that there could be a way to communicate with the other side.

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80 Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 229-230 and 231.
These two examples document the popular appeal of the spiritualist movement by demonstrating how many individuals were exposed to its ideas. The spiritualist methods and skills, used by both Houdini and Vanderbilt, helped attract audiences, and gain notoriety for the spiritualists. While the audiences for these two individuals may have been diverse, they both produced spiritual and magical feats that allowed them to educate, and entertain, their patrons, from every class. The broad-based appeal of spiritualism stretched well beyond these two isolated examples, suggesting that people participated in the spiritualists movement for a great many different reasons. Some sought proof of their faith, which they hoped could be found in communicating with spirits, while others were drawn to spiritualism by curiosity. But the individuals who came in contact with the movement were not necessarily believers. Some merely frequented gatherings, and made their own decisions on what it was they were seeing. Not everyone who came to the spiritualist movement did it so for reasons of faith or experience; some were merely curious. J. Malcolm Bird recorded his adventures while experimenting with the spiritualist movement across the U.S. and Europe. On his trip he noted, “Physical phenomena which I have witnessed, there are many for whose fraudulent production, under the given conditions.” He, like Danskin, referenced his experiences around the séance table as where his expertise came from. Unlike Danskin, he saw some phenomena that he could deny based on the evidence he saw, but he still continued attending séances to see what might happen.\footnote{Bird, My Psychic Adventures, 54-275, and 304.}
Bird was very thorough when he recorded his experiences at the séances. He went beyond most of his peers when he included in his account of the séances drawings of the rooms to help the reader visualize the setting, and how the phenomena took place in the rooms. This also allowed him to place, not only the mediums but the sitters and any other objects in the room that might have been influenced during the séance.

Bird’s experiences at the séances did not end with simple drawing or general statements. Aside from the experiences that he discounted, there were others he could not dismiss easily. During one sitting, Bird was allowed to search the medium’s person and clothing for anything out of the ordinary before the séance, as well as wash the medium’s hands to be sure there was no trick there, and tie the medium to a chair and pillar. Additionally, Bird was allowed to proceed while having his feet on top of the medium’s, and the medium was still able to produce phenomena. This medium was a cabinet medium, meaning he used a large enclosed area to produce various full-bodied apparitions capable of

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interaction, or even walking among, the sitters. The apparitions could touch the sitters, as well as make flowers move, and bells ring. Bird concluded that “there are many for whose fraudulent production, under the given conditions, I can conceive no possible way.” His admission that some experiences, which he never fully details, could not be explained was not a total endorsement of the movement, but it came from a person who was not a spiritualist – thus adding Bird to the ranks of non-spiritualists who, in part, credited the movement as legitimate. There were many people, like Bird, who were not in the movement, but who frequented spiritualist gatherings, and drew their own conclusions on the evidence they witnessed. These individuals did not believe all the criticisms of the movement, but they held enough respect for the critics to be unwilling to join the movement – and yet, they did interact with spiritualists.

These three examples show that even with detractors, people were drawn to the movement, and that the movement was still able to make believers out of outsiders. These individuals were from a time period when the movement was supposed to be in decline, but it still had followers producing pro-spiritualist literature, and joining the movement. Spiritualism continues to be relevant, as the many horoscopes, psychics, and paranormal television shows of today can attest. Some of the ideas of the spiritualist movement are still functioning in modern society, more than 150 years after the founding of the movement. The prior examples help to show the ineffectiveness of the detractor’s arguments.

83 Bird, My Psychic Adventures, 166-84, and 305.
While people might have asked a few more questions, the questions were not based in religion, or in losing one’s soul. The questions were about the possibilities of fakes.

**Conclusion**

One of the spiritualist movement’s strongest tactics in defending itself was the use of science to prove its phenomena. Overall, these writings on the views of the detractors of spiritualists, the spiritualist’s attempts to defend themselves, and the people who joined, or frequented, the movement all illustrate a group that was able to maintain their appeal to the general population, even with detractors attempting to tear them down. All of these documents attempted to make one point: that their view on the spiritualist movement was correct. The spiritualists and their detractors attempted to use science to support their side in this debate, but each side also incorporated their own religious beliefs, and interpretations, in attempt to see the other.

They took ideas from the past, their religious conviction in Christianity, and their beliefs in a spiritual realm, and then melded these with the new ideas of science to create a belief system that found a balance between the two extremes of science and religion. In doing so, the spiritualists set themselves up to be able to prove the existence of God, and the afterlife, with the use of many different techniques of newly emerging science. This setup proved to be one of the biggest points of contention that the group had with the outside world, because if they did not believe in science, then they had a hard time accepting the validity of the
spirit communications. And if detractors could accept the spirit communication as coming from the other side, the manifestations were generally seen as coming from demons, or some other evil entities. Even with these hurdles in place, the spiritualists overcame the detractor’s attempts to show the movement as fraudulent and evil for many years.

This tenacity shows how prevalent the spiritualist’s ideas were, and how divided people were on the inclusion of science in religion. No matter how destructive the rhetoric against them, spiritualists were still able to keep a following of believers together, and were still able to attract the attention of the public at large. Their ability to hold onto followers in the face of adversity shows the emotions that believers had for this system. It allowed them to contact the dead, and know there was something after death. Even though detractors thought the spiritualists were risking their souls, encountering demons, and risking damnation, people were still drawn to the movement and willing to experiment. The decision of truthfulness was left up to the individual believers, and it was a decision that relied just as much on faith as anything else. But it seems that, at least for some, the spiritualist movement was the perfect blend of old and new, science and supernatural, to create the right religion.
Mediumship was a topic that permeated the literature at turn of the last century. Detailing the accounts of medium’s powers, some works were even written by “ghosts” when mediums were in trances, and there were even novels on the topic of spiritualism.\textsuperscript{84} Generally, the medium’s role was to act as the conduit between the living and the dead, and to deliver messages, healing, or information from those who had passed to those who were still living. This was accomplished by the medium’s use of a spirit guide, a helpful spirit who often spoke through the medium, or helped the medium interact with the other side. The partnership between the medium and the spirit guide was integral to the spiritualist’s idea of how the medium interacted with the other side.

While there were many factors that went into creating the spiritualist movement, none was as important as these individual mediums. Without the mediums like the Fox sisters the movement could not have started or formed the same ideas because they were the direct link between the living and the dead. The men and women who acted as a bridge between the past and the present, connecting the living and grieving with the dearly departed, allowed them to

\textsuperscript{84} Richard Harding Davis, \textit{Vera the Medium; ‘Miss Civilization’} (New York: Charles Scribner’s and Sons, 1911) and Nora Ray, \textit{The Child Medium: A Spiritulistic Story} (Gloucester: Procter Brothers, 1878).
escape the normal everyday lives led by most people, and gave them a chance to
explore the world, and become world famous. Each medium dealt with their
fame in different ways -- some were hurt by it, while many others thrived on the
attention and money their pursuits earned them. The entire movement was
founded on the experiences of two young girls from New York state, setting the
standard at the beginning of the movement for just how much of an impact
individual experiences had on the spiritualists. The contribution these
mediums made to advancing the popularity of not only themselves, but of the
movement itself can be seen in the activities of each individual medium. Some
performed séances for European royalty, others visited and enchanted Australia,
and still others toured inside the United States to further their reputations at
home. Their methods of communicating with the spirits were not always the
same -- some were trance mediums, some test mediums, and others exhibited
more paranormal feats; yet, all played the same role, and acted as a sort of
telephone for the dead to communicate with the living. This chapter will outline
several of the leading spiritualist mediums in order to show the importance of the
individual medium to the movement, and to show the deep, underlying, Christian
connection between the mediums and the spiritualist movement.

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Charles H. Foster

While many spiritualist mediums were female, Charles H. Foster represents one of the few successful males in this trade. Foster was born in 1833 and eventually became a world famous traveling medium. What we know about him came as a result of a popular biography called *The Salem Seer*, published in 1891, six years after his death, in 1885 by his friend, and business manager, George C. Bartlett who had collected the newspaper articles, personal accounts, and his own recollections to create a work that chronicled Foster’s life. Bartlett’s work was written in response to requests he had received from individuals wanting to know more about the famous medium he had befriended. As a medium, Foster lacked business sense, which is where he and Bartlett connected, but Foster’s mind landed him in an asylum for the insane before his death. But earlier, Bartlett convinced the then unknown Foster that his talents were worth more than what he was being paid for them, and he should increase the price of a seat at a séance from two dollars to five dollars. As his manager, he continued to help Foster by using his personal connections to place ads in local newspapers, and eventually securing press coverage from all across the United States and beyond. The pair

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traveled together and Foster became quite a major attraction throughout the United States.

Foster made his name as a séance medium, who did public and private readings, and also a test medium. These were mediums who allowed themselves to be put to any number of tests by the sitters who came to their séances. Foster used this talent as a way to draw in clients “Mr. Foster was advertised and known the world over as a test medium. He was willing to give his séances on bare floors, with uncovered tables; willing to go to any house, studio or hotel.” This helped his credibility because it allowed the individuals who came to see his exhibitions to become involved in the séance, and help dispel their doubts by addressing the specific concerns of each sitter. This tactic also expanded his clientele by appealing directly to those who wanted to disprove the mediums claims and to those who were skeptical of the phenomena to begin with. Bartlett promoted Foster abilities, and his willingness to be tested by new audiences and customers at every stop in their travels, both in the United States and abroad, increased his crowds and finances.

One of the more inventive ways Bartlett helped Foster to spread his knowledge was in his policy towards the clergy. Foster was already in the habit of meeting and discussing his abilities and experiences with religious officials, but Bartlett pushed him to make this a more common occurrence. “Many clergymen called upon him, and he was always pleased to receive them. I proposed that we should insert in our advertisements that all clergymen could have the privilege of
investigating this subject through him free of charge.” By doing this Foster made himself available to entirely new groups of people who could help his credibility and make his actions, like communicating with the dead, seem more Christian. This also allowed him to be connected to the church without actually being a priest or other type of religious official. This tactic worked and Foster gained many contacts in the clergy and gave numerous sittings for any church officials, which gave them the chance to test Foster’s validity. He continued this work all over the county and abroad, and the men of the clergy became one of his favorite types of client.

During his travels with Bartlett, Foster gave readings to many individuals from many walks of life, including the Governor of the Utah Territory. He could produce the name of the dead individual that the sitter wanted to communicate with, and the means of death. Many times these trances were not in English. His ability to speak in many languages helped support his claims of legitimacy, and mirrored the Christian phenomena of speaking in tongues. Foster and Bartlett decided to tour Australia in 1897, and from Bartlett’s account, Foster made quite the impression down under. “He landed in Australia, a stranger, unknown. In two months he sailed away leaving many friends—known, written and talked about in every city and village in Australia.” The rapid popularity and fame that Foster achieved came as a result of his abilities as a medium and showman, but also pointed to the appeal this type of entertainment had for individuals of this
time period. He gained such a following because he performed under extreme circumstances, and still produced phenomena that excited his audience.

For all of his success, Foster did not fare well in the fame he created for himself. Shortly after his return from Australia, he decided to take a break from his mediumship. During this time off he became seriously ill, and Bartlett rushed to be with his friend. “I heard of his severe illness, which proved to be an attack of brain fever. He became delirious, and after the fever left him, although health came back to his body, his mind remained diseased.” The man who had been able to charm Americans and Australians alike had fallen prey to his own mind, and was never able to fully recover. His condition was so severe that eventually he had to be removed from his home to seek more specialized doctors. “By the physician’s advice, he was removed to the Danvers Insane Asylum, where he was thoroughly examined, and pronounced to have a softening of the brain, and was thought to be incurable.”

Though he lived for several years after this diagnosis, he never again used his talents as a medium. He had escaped ordinary life as a young man by becoming a world renowned medium, but by the end of his life had completely lost touch with reality, and had become a victim of his own body, succumbing to disease.

Mary S. Vanderbilt

Female mediums were much more common and one of the better known was Mary S. Vanderbilt. Much as was the case with Bartlett writing a memorial

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<sup>87</sup> Bartlett, *The Salem Seer*, 3, 152-54, and 6-14. 110, 90, 90-95, 42-5, 162, 162, and 162.
work to Foster, Mary Vanderbilt was memorialized by her friend and companion, Mary E. Cadwallader, two years after she died. Vanderbilt, born in 1867, started her career as a spirit medium in her early childhood and became a preacher for a spiritualist congregation, and finally became a world traveling psychic, and a favorite consultant of European royalty. She is the ultimate example of the heights a talented medium could attain, and how this gift could allow a medium to become a trusted friend and confidante of the highest ranks of society. As opposed to writing her account of Vanderbilt’s abilities as a response to the requests of others, as Bartlett did, Cadwallader’s motivations were more personal and sentimental: “The preparation of this volume was the labor of love—of one to whom the friendship of Mrs. Vanderbilt was a rare boon—and whose appreciation of her mediumistic gifts was second to none.” Cadwallader set herself apart from other medium’s companions, such as Bartlett, here by focusing on how important Vanderbilt’s mediumship was to her, as opposed to Bartlett, who took the role of business manager. She justified why she wrote the piece by connecting it to Vanderbilt’s mission in life, which was to bring love and peace to individuals who were having hard times in their lives. Cadwallader said of her own work, “May it prove an inspiration to sorrowing hearts as it goes forth on its mission of love.” This mission to inspire and spread comfort, follows that of Vanderbilt, who at one time was a spiritualist preacher, and Cadwallader’s attempts to help those in need also serves to cater to the same sort of audience that Vanderbilt’s work drew in during her life.
Vanderbilt’s first paranormal experience began when she was fifteen and a ghost appeared at her bedside. “I had retired, but still was wide awake. I became aware of a human form in the room, near the bed...There was something about it that differed from the persons I knew...and I screamed.” The family had had some experiences with spiritualism, so they investigated further, and found that Vanderbilt had a knack for spirit communication. This single event led her family to explore more fully her paranormal abilities, discovering not only her spirit guide, a dead Indian child she called Bright Eyes, but also her ability to channel people who had died. This early experience, though not of her choosing, showed her the power, and she felt she had to act as a bridge between the living and the dead as a way to help individuals, on both sides, cope with the loss.

While other mediums allowed themselves, or their séances, to be tested directly, Vanderbilt proved her prophetic ability, or that of Bright Eyes, through her ability to locate lost items. This ability was testified to by the many letters written to her describing how she had helped people find lost objects, and had the ability to reveal the names of long dead individuals. One such occasion, a spirit communication from Bright Eyes helped an individual to find a lost ring. Being able to assist in the finding of objects helped her credibility

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immensely, because little could be done to cheat. Bright Eyes became a major part of Vanderbilt’s life because of the feats she helped Vanderbilt accomplish.  

Like Foster, Vanderbilt was eventually a well-known individual who traveled the world to perform séances and deliver messages given to her from Bright Eyes. Her most famous client was the Czar of Russia and his family, with whom she stayed for several weeks in 1906. She was so well received by the Russian royals that, upon her departure, she was given an extra token of appreciation:

Remaining for several weeks as the guest of the Russian royal family, when the time of her departure came one of the ladies of the household brought her a tray of jewels, saying it was their desire that she take something with her as a more expressive token than mere words could possibly be, but they preferred she should make her own selection. She selected a beautifully wrought gold cross, set with six or seven large rubies and a number of small diamonds. Its money value has been estimated at several thousand dollars. It is the jewel she has often worn before public audiences.

Her ability to use her skills as a medium to charm and befriend the upper reaches of society served her well, and allowed her to expand her audience from American high society to beyond, each with their own monetary rewards. This token was prized by Vanderbilt, and showed just how much the Czar’s family thought of Mrs. Vanderbilt and her talents as a medium. While Cadwallader’s account does not go into detail about what she did for the Czar while she was in Russia, it does describe the test he put her to before she was invited to his court:

It was about the year 1906 when Mrs. Pepper received a letter from a literary member of the royal family of Russia. In the envelope addressed to

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89 Cadwallader, Mary S. Vanderbilt, 12-4, 10, 10, 19 and 18-20.
her was a letter enclosed in another envelope sealed in wax with the royal Russian seal, and the request that she answer the letter in the sealed envelope and return the answer with the seal unbroken.

This was a common test for a medium of her type, to see if Vanderbilt was indeed psychic. Upon receiving the letter, she would use her spirit guide’s knowledge of the letter to allow her to write an answer without ever seeing the question asked. She passed this test for the Czar, and several months later was invited to be his family’s guest, during which time it can be assumed that she performed many similar feats for the royal family.

After her time abroad, Vanderbilt returned to the United States and continued preaching in spiritualist’s churches and camps full time, as well as demonstrating her abilities. “It is a grave mistake to suppose that all spirits who return after death are bad spirits. This is a thought which will turn people away from God. The character of spirits depends on the lives they led before leaving their material bodies.” She set about teaching others about her gifts, and the spirits she interacted with, to show them how she was able to act as a bridge between the living and the dead. The spiritualist churches were much like other churches with sermons and lectures, while the camps were self-contained entities that focused entirely on the spiritualist’s ideas and developing one’s connections and skills. She also found, at these churches and camps, willing audiences and participants for her séances. Her first full time job of this sort came when she was given the role of leader in a spiritualist church in New York, “From 1904 until 1906 (inclusive) she officiated in the pastorate of the First Spiritual Church of
Brooklyn.” Vanderbilt only left this job when she was asked to Russia by the Czar. This position allowed her access to believers across New York, and the constant ability to spread her version of Christian Spiritualism.

After her return from Russia, she did not return to fulltime preaching in spiritualist churches. Instead, she became heavily involved with the spiritualist camps. Vanderbilt started with the Lake Pleasant camp, and eventually transferred to Camp Etna, where she was the president. She stayed here for the rest of her life and had many more responsibilities than she had had as the leader of a church. “Since this presidency meant that, in addition to her seances and addresses, she must preside at all large meetings, and serve as ex-officio chairman on all committees.” She was constantly involved with helping others understand, and learn to become spiritualists and mediums, while still preaching her Christian beliefs. She was very careful in these lectures not to offend other major braches of Christianity:

She never assailed the churches, either Catholic or Protestant. This attitude tended to attract members of churches to her meetings, and in thousands of instances she convinced them of the truths she was teaching. She made her meetings religious services really, and people went from them filled with a desire to do better work for humanity. ⁹⁰

By not alienating individuals from other churches, Vanderbilt expanded her flock and drew more people into the movement. Camp Etna was in Maine and offered people from the east coast a centralized place to go to learn about the movement, hear messages from spirits, and learn how to develop their own mediumship talents. This camp, with the help of Vanderbilt, was very successful, operating

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throughout the year as weather permitted. Not only that, this camp is one of the few spiritualist camps still in operation today, it possesses same mission it had when Mary Vanderbilt ran it.\textsuperscript{91}

Vanderbilt became ill while working at a spiritualist camp and after a short rest returned to work. She died a short time later of influenza in 1919. Her ashes were spread one the grounds of her precious Camp Etna.\textsuperscript{92} She did not waver and her reputation did not wane in the last years of her life. She continued to act as a bridge between the living and the dead, with the help of her spirit guide, Bright Eyes, she connected people with those they had lost. She also taught and brought comfort to those she saw as being in need of it. By doing, so she continued to uphold her reputation and keep her clients and students interested and engaged until she died.

Laura F. Share

Laura Share wrote her own account of her life and the paranormal phenomena she experienced. She, like Vanderbilt, worked to convince others of the power of spiritualism. She wanted to show that speaking with the dead was actual proof that God existed. “My object in doing this, is to give the people who

\textsuperscript{91} Cadwallader, \textit{Mary S. Vanderbilt}, 6. Image of Mary Vanderbilt later in life.

\textsuperscript{92} Cadwallader, \textit{Mary S. Vanderbilt}, 66-7.
read about the demonstrations given through mediumship and find some other cause than spirit power to account for the phenomena, (which all people today admit does occur), an easy way of studying my progenitors, prenatal tendencies and early environments.” Share wanted to help people, much like Vanderbilt, but traced her gift though her family, and documented how she became such a talented medium by recounting stories of the paranormal activities among her relatives. She wrote that a female family member had helped a gentlemen reconnect with his deceased wife over a series of trance sessions. “The third visit Mr. R. made, he had a long talk with his spirit wife, who spoke, using Francis' voice.” Thus, Share was raised in an environment that encouraged her spiritualist beliefs, and allowed her to grow up with many family examples of successful mediums. She soon followed in the footsteps of these family members, and eventually became a successful practicing medium.

One of the major differences between Share and most other mediums accounts is her references to, and stories about, spirits who frightened her. “The boy was cursing and repeating ‘I'll get him yet, he murdered me.’ Such eyes as the boy had! He pulled my dress, clutched at my hands until I thought I would have to run from him.”93 This is one of the few times that a medium admits to being scared by a spirit. From her accounts, as well as those from the other mediums, it appears as though most spirits, when they actually manifested, chose to do so in non threatening manners, and that there were very few that appeared in this sort

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of threatening manner. Leslie Rule, a modern psychic well-known for her collections of paranormal experiences, explains that being dead does not change the disposition of the person, so a kind person will continue to be kind, and an angry person will continue to be angry. This seems to be the case with the experiences of the spiritualists of turn of the century, as well as their modern counterparts.

Share was pursued by many people to become a spiritualist preacher, or to preside over a spiritualist congregation, much as Mary Vanderbilt had. One group offered her the money to build a church while another offered a plot of land to build it on. But, she refused. “(They) offered to give me free, a ninety-nine year lease on a centrally located corner on which to build the church. All this was very gratifying to me, but it did not change my determination never to go into public work.” Share refused to become a working woman, either in charge of a congregation, or by being paid for her mediumship, but she was still committed to helping people in any way she could. “I was willing to heal the sick. I was willing to give comfort to the bereaved, by proving to them that the loved ones they mourned were not lost, only gone on to wait for them until their earth work was finished.” She was determined to do the same job Vanderbilt had done, without becoming a fully public figure with all the responsibilities Vanderbilt had been forced to assume when she because the head of this type of organization.

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Share’s talent lay in her ability to heal and developing the talents of other young mediums. She wanted to help people “who were obsessed by spirits, either in or out of the physical body,” normally other mediums. By her own count she had helped several hundred learn to use their gifts and she became a well-known figure in the spiritualist’s world as a result. Interestingly, her desire to help the next generation of mediums came with no fee, as she refused to be a paid medium. Share was very successful at helping other mediums and produced several well-functioning mediums. “We have been blessed in being able to help the truly gifted ones to reach solid ground, where together we have brought about perfect mediumship, giving to the world different phases that would bear the light of severe criticism.” Her acts in training mediums to be test mediums shows just how connected she was to the larger spiritualist scene as well as the practicing mediums of the time. To do this she acted as a mentor to the young mediums and helped them with any issues they brought to her.

Share outlined how to deal with those individuals who did not get what they wanted from a paid medium. She coached them on exactly how they could go about communicating with their dearly departed without the aid of an outside medium:

To you I say hold in loving thought the one you want to hear from for days, attune your mind to spiritual harmony, forget self and material perplexities, go alone into your closet filled with the calm and quiet of a sanctuary, where God or Good only is, and I know you will be blessed with the knowledge that will come to you, when you make such conditions for your loved ones to reach you in response to the cry of your heart.95

95 Share, The Life of a Spiritualist Medium, 92, 93, 93, 93, 93, and 111.
Here she takes a stance that most other mediums did not; she believes that most individuals could possess the ability to communicate with the dead in some small ways without the aid of a medium. Her willingness to teach any outsider how to be a bridge between the two worlds sets her apart from all of her peers and is also why she was such a popular figure. This stance mirrors that of the Protestant Church when it broke away from Catholic Church, in feeling that nothing was needed outside a person to have a connection to God. Except in this case the individuals could all communicate with dead to varying degrees. She like all other spiritualists was attempting to form a bridge between the past and the present, so she took a tactic that had worked in the past and applied it in this new situation.

**Frances Ann Crowell**

While many mediums made their names through their séances or public demonstrations, there were other phenomena mediums claimed to be able to manifest. Frances Crowell, for example, dictated nearly an entire book under the possession of a spirit during a trance. While her biography is primarily about her life and all of the paranormal experiences she had, it was dictated by her spirit guide and written out by a friend. Crowell describes having her first interactions with the other side in her early childhood. As her mother lay on her death bed the young Crowell ran to find the doctor but fainted. When she awoke
she saw a “luminous form” of a gentleman and she promptly passed back out only to awaken on the doctor’s doorstep. 96

Her family was very involved in spiritualism even before her mother died. She had witnessed her mother speaking to one of her dead children to learn whether or not the sickly Crowell would survive. Over time, she developed the ability for automatic writing, or the ability to channel a spirit or multiple spirits to use her body to relay messages to the living world. She was so talented at this that she could write two messages at once from two different entities using both hands as one of her long-time friends noted. “The writing phase of Mrs. Conant’s mediumship now became very strongly marked. She would frequently transcribe the thoughts or desires of two invisibles at the same time — one using her right, the other her left hand.” This was a rather remarkable talent and led to a great many people taking interest in her and her abilities which increased the demands she placed on her spirit guides. Finally they instructed her to stop all work because the constant work was using up the part of her they fed upon. “Her invisible guides now gave directions to Mrs. Conant that she must discontinue manual labor in any form; proscribing even her sewing for herself.” She stopped working and concentrated on the spirits who accompanied

her and the messages they wanted her to relay to the living. This allowed her to focus solely on being a bridge between the realms abandon her normal female duties. From this point on, she devoted herself to her mediumship and concentrated on many aspects, until eventually, she came to the conclusion that she needed to teach others. She returned to her home city of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, to teach the finer points of the spiritualist’s beliefs, but not mediumship skills. She never headed a spiritualist church, as Vanderbit did, but she, like many other mediums became teachers of spiritualist ideas to help ensure that they got passed along. Conant was raised Christian and had attended church steadily throughout her life, in the process no doubt fusing her spiritualist ideas with her Christian religion.

During this time, she was approached by a relative of Andrew Johnson to do a private sitting with her. During this private sitting she went back to her early talents and wrote out instructions for the woman. “The medium was then entranced, and so continued for upward of an hour, at the expiration of which, the lady declared herself perfectly satisfied with what she had received, and said that the spirits had requested her to wait a few days longer — they having further advice to give.”97 By doing this she ingratiated herself with the top tier of American society and gained a wider acceptance by helping someone who was so well connected and so well known.

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97 Parker (Spirit), *Biography of Mrs. J.H. Conant*, 26-8, 27, 25-6, 65, 74, 131, 24-8, and 139-143.
Bringing them all Together

These mediums represent the diversity that could be found among the spiritualist mediums. Those detailed here are just a few of the hundreds who used their skills as both male and female, test, prophetic, healing and trance mediums, to allow those who had died to communicate with the living and to help the living communicate with the dead. This illustrates just how varied and popular, not only the movement itself was, but also have much the individuals it was based on varied from specific individuals to individual. The binding idea of all mediums was their connection to the dead and their ability to connect others with their deceased relatives. These connections took many forms, but in all cases they were meant to help the living deal with the prospect of death and assure them that their loved ones were fine in the afterlife. Another common thread in all of the mediums is their connection to the spiritualist movement. Because the movement had few tenets or ideology, outside of believing that in contacting the dead they proved the existence of God, each individual was able to interoperable their interactions with the dead differently but still fall under the same set of beliefs. This binds all the mediums together on a large scale, and it gives them a common language. Each of these mediums inspired confidence in their own individuals abilities in different ways, from being tested in a séance to speaking other languages, to coming up with names and details that the medium had no way of knowing. Individuals like these spread the practice of the spiritualist movement and their mediumship across the world and across the
Conclusion

The men and women who acted as mediums overcame their everyday lives, as well as any adversity they faced, to prove that they were able to make contact with the dead. In doing this, they became a bridge to the past, and at the same time, freed themselves from the mundane, ordinary lives that others led at the time. All of these mediums were offered trips abroad, teaching opportunities, and congregations of their own. While not all of them accepted the offers, it shows the amount of trust and faith outsiders, and other individuals, placed in these mediums. It was the mediums uncanny ability to convince people they were, in fact, in contact with the dead that allowed them these extra freedoms and responsibilities.

Without these individual mediums, the spiritualist movement would have broken down, or never even started at all. Some of these individuals trained others how to become mediums, while others simply recorded their experiences so that others could later read about them. The spiritualists could not have existed without individuals such as this to go out and prove to the masses that spirits could, indeed, be contacted by the living, and that these individuals could relay messages back and forth between the two realms. This sort of idea of communication with the dead never went away after the initial movement, and attempts to communicate with the dead can still be seen today in numerous paranormal television shows, professional psychic readers, and the few pockets of
spiritualists, like Camp Etna, that still exists. But none of this could have existed without the mediums that carried the spiritualist movement throughout this period, and laid the groundwork for what was to come next.

The spiritualists, as a group, defined their beliefs and their science against the attacks of critics, but the mediums of the movement often times focused on their own lives, helping others, and passing their knowledge on to the next generation, as opposed to defending their beliefs from attack. The mediums left the job of defending the movement to others, who had the ability to focus on this, as opposed to looking after the well-being of the movement’s followers. The scientists and defenders of the movement attempted to prove the validity of the experiences had by the mediums, so it was important for the mediums to focus on their work. The critics of the movement attacked the spiritualists as frauds because of their supposed interactions with the devil, but the mediums focused on trying to help people, living and dead. The mediums discussed are but a few of the hundreds of well-known spiritualists who had little trouble from these critics, and had fruitful careers in their chosen fields.

It is important to understand the spiritualists to be able to understand the prevalence of the paranormal in today’s culture. The spiritualist movement is when the paranormal was brought into the mainstream consciousness, and is the defining moment at which it was first acceptable to be Christian and believe in the dead. Today, with the world’s paranormal television shows, tarot card readers, and numerous telephone psychic networks, the ideas of the spiritualist
movement persist in ever-changing forms. People are still attempting to connect to their lost loved ones, they still want proof of life after death, and are still trying to make all of these variables fit into Christian ideas. The prevalence of spiritualist goals points to American society trying to be able to understand death, and to their desire to bridge the same gap the spiritualists were, the gap between the living and the dead. The Christian aspect of such goals are less emphasized now, but people are still trying to understand the paranormal in a scientific manner, and they are attempting to understand how such mysteries apply to their lives. Americans are still searching for answers, just as they were at the turn of the last century.

The changing world at the turn of the century is the focus of historian Steven J. Diner’s *A Very Different Age: Americans of the Progressive Era*. The changing era that the spiritualists lived through, Diner argues, was characterized by the fear held by many Americans, “that they had lost control not only of their society but of their own lives.” While he was not directly mentioning the spiritualists, his fear is the sort that drove the movement to find ways to make spiritualism relevant, and for the spiritualists to have control over the explanations of their spiritual experiences. This idea of control was seen throughout the spiritualist movement; the mediums were constantly putting themselves to examinations put forward by critics to prove their phenomena as illegitimate. This practice required critical control over mediums and the séances they performed.
Diner goes on to discuss the three main goals that most individuals had in life: economic security, personal autonomy, and social status. 98 By being a medium involved with the movement, individuals could easily gain all three of these if they were an accomplished at their art. This profession gave women more control and autonomy than society normally gave to them, by allowing payment for their work, and by making it possible for female mediums to support themselves, and to connect to the top ranks of world society. The spiritualists were an extraordinarily successful group which dealt with subjects pertinent to the changing society, and such success started with individual mediums.

The mediums of the movement attempted to bridge the gap between the living and the dead. This idea of bridges between the past and the present is the main concept in historian Jackson Lears’ No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920. He argues that individuals at the turn of the century were desperately trying to hold onto parts of their past in order to make sense of the changing world, and to make it seem less threatening. 99 The spiritualists, by using mediums to contact the dead, were able to prove the existence of life after death; because life after death was proven a reality, then their Christian faith was proven a reality. This gave them a way to deal with not only the changing world, but also with the ever present fear of death.

99 Lears, No Place of Grace, 98 -116.
The changing world that the mediums lived in allowed them to bridge the gap between the living and the dead, while still holding true to their Christian beliefs. This profession opened up countless opportunities for advancement and monetary gain. In addition, the lifetime job of being a medium brought the ability to comfort to people in their times of need. The mediums discussed here all chose to use their gifts in different ways: some as public figures and leaders, some as quiet and well-known teachers, and others as flamboyant, world-traveling personalities. The variety of roles available to the mediums of the spiritualist movement points to the sheer number of mediums who were alive and practicing at this time. These four mediums all did what they could to not only advance their own lives, but also help those in need. Mediums were able to incorporate their Christian faith into this seemingly unchristian enterprise of speaking with the dead, and in doing so, show the importance of the individual mediums, and their Christian beliefs.
The Spiritualist Movement: Past, Present and Always

The spiritualist movement kept its power for many years, but eventually it, like many other groups, lost its mass appeal. While the spiritualists lost prominence, the movement and its ideas did not die. There are still working spiritualist mediums, camps, and churches to this very day. In the end, the spiritualist works on incorporating science into religion, and connecting the movement to Christianity, along with the help of the turn of the century mediums, laid a foundation for a movement that could overcome all the criticism that it faced. No matter the argument the critics leveled against the movement, the spiritualists were able to find ways to counter the issues, and restore the faith of the general population. The spiritualists created a way of dealing with the paranormal and religion that is still functioning one hundred and fifty years later, and its ideas of the supernatural and science have taken on new meaning with modern paranormalists.

In today’s media, you will often see the movement referenced in different ways, especially on scripted television shows. Often these show the main characters as skeptical of the phenomena and some secondary character believes it to be real. This generally ends up with the main character still skeptical, but with some questions that could not be answered, implying that there may
have been something extraordinary going on. There are many examples of this on television shows dating back many years, with episodes of this sort appearing on *The Vampire Diaries, Dark Shadows, Star Trek,* and *Supernatural* just to name a few. These mainstream television shows detail the length of time this trope has been used on television, and just how popular as that it continues to be used over and over again.

Today, there are at least ninety spiritualist’s churches still in operation and at least thirteen camps active across the United States. These organizations are members of the National Spiritualist Association of Churches, the largest, still functioning, spiritualist organization. This membership does not count all of the independent churches and camps that operate in the United States. One of the last major strongholds of the spiritualist faith, and the headquarters for the National Spiritualist Association of Churches, is a religious community located in Lily Dale, New York, and is referred to as the Lily Dale Assembly. This was a spiritualist community that, during the height of its popularity packed its sermons and classes with believers and the curious.

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While the height of Lily Dale’s popularity has past, it is still a functioning community of spiritualists. Everyone who currently lives or owns property in Lily Dale must be members of the Assembly and many of them are mediums who offer readings, sittings, or other services at any point in the year. Lily Dale goes one step further with its mediums by having certain ones become registered through the assembly as true and legitimate spirit mediums. In Lily Dale, there are still daily summer spiritualist activities including workshops, healings, sermons, and classes just as there was at the turn of the century. While these few organized, spiritualist groups do not equal up to the notoriety and influence

103 Lawton, Drama of Life After Death, 306-307. Image of a crowd at an assembly inside the Lily Dale compound around the turn of the century.
that the movement had the turn of the century, they make it clear that the movement has not died.

The spiritualists who organized themselves with larger associations are not the only remnants of the movement to still exist. Camp Etna, the spiritualist retreat so special to Mary Vanderbilt, still functions as a camp for the movement during the summers, and continues the work that she did there so many years ago.107 This camp makes clear the legacy of the individual medium, as Vanderbilt is one of the few individuals from the past that the camp still advertises as having worked there.108 These few unchanged examples of the spiritualist movement still in operation are dwarfed by the ways the ideas of the movement have been accepted into modern society. Today, the concept of the paranormal is accepted by a wide variety of individuals, and there is a growing movement to attempt to find ways to prove the validity of the supernatural by either psychic or scientific means. Authors Robert M. Schoch and Logan Yonavjak, in their 2008 work, tie this modern interest in proving the paranormal directly back to a group, The Society for Psychical Research, who tried to prove spiritualists’ phenomena at the turn of the century.109 The spiritualist movement has made a lasting effect on the modern world by making claims about the paranormal that still puzzle and fascinate researchers and believers today. But the psychics of today have not

forgotten their connections to the movement and still embrace some of the movement’s favorite ways of contacting the dead. During events hosted by the stars of the show Paranormal State in 2010 at the Hotel Conneaut, Pennsylvania and 2011 in Salem Massachusetts, Michelle Belanger led classes on the spiritualist practice of table-tipping, connecting the popular modern paranormal movement with the spiritualists of the past.\footnote{Michelle Belanger, March 20, 2012, text message to the author.}

One of the main reasons that the movement was able to make such an impact on the society of today is that in its own age, its practitioners were not ashamed of what they were doing. The mediums of the movement did not hide their practices away from the eyes of outsiders, but often invited individuals to come and try to disprove their phenomena. With mediums like Charles Foster and Mary Vanderbilt who allowed outsiders to test their abilities, the movement set a public standard which showed people that the mediums were not afraid to be challenged, and that they could pass the tests offered. \footnote{Bartlett, The Salem Seer, 6-14. Cadwallader, Mary S. Vanderbilt, 39-41.} This confidence to be public with what they were doing, as well as allowing them to be tested, shows the faith that the mediums put into what they were doing.

Members of the movement, in general, dealt with criticism on a regular basis, but they were able to overcome this with their own proof, and continue on with their practices without shame. Even when supporters were not mediums themselves, they were still willing to publicly support the movement and its beliefs. There were many individuals who attempted to demonstrate the
scientific nature of the movement, like Benjamin Franklin Cooley and Thomas Jay Hudson who both offered their own versions of scientific explanations for spiritualist phenomena. These explanations helped the movement retain its credibility, despite the critics. It was the support from both believers and mediums that allowed the movement to become secure enough in its own practices that its critics could not stop the practices they found objectionable. The movement inspired confidence in its adherents because it did offer both paranormal and scientific proof of its claims of life after death.

The critics of the movement based their arguments on the ideas of fraud and supernatural danger. Men like Earnest Heart even made both arguments at the same time, but no matter what evidence was used to support these ideas they were never able to gain enough momentum to dissuade individuals from associating with the movement. By appealing to the religious ideas and natural questions about what happens after death, the spiritualists were able to survive the attacks made against them and retain their followers and even attract new ones. This ability to combat the arguments made against the movement was a defining trait of the movement and made most all of the arguments made against them useless.

The movement became a popular phenomenon, drawing interest from all levels of American society, but it was the wealthier members of society that the

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113 Heart, *Hypnotism, Mesmerism and the New Witchcraft*, 7-162.
114 Hyslop, *Contact with the Other World*, 3-202.
spiritualists really appealed to. The movement, at the turn of the century, became well-known by involving the elite of society. By doing this, the spiritualists, not only gained wealth for themselves, but also the fame that often accompanies riches. Mary Vanderbilt, for example, traveled to the court of the Russian Czar, and returned to the United States with an expensive token of the family’s appreciation. By gaining clients like this, mediums were able to flaunt this connection, and the fascination that came along with it, in order to find other new clients, and increase their own personal wealth and fame. This was important for the movement because being associated with well known-figures allowed them a certain level of acceptance and impunity that would go along with their client’s fame.

Important to most all mediums was the money they could gain from rich clients. While many mediums wished to help people in need, they often found themselves in sittings with the upper classes of society. Charles Foster found the upper class when his sitting was visited by the living Governor of the Utah Territory. While not a Czar, upper class individuals were common in spiritualist sittings, and connected the movement with the money of the area. This money allowed many of the spiritualist mediums to travel across the country, or around the world, just as Foster did. This travel increased their fame and is a commonality with the modern medium, who will often travel for readings. Some of today’s well-known mediums, like Sylvia Browne, have been so successful that

115 Cadwallader, Mary S. Vanderbilt, 46-7.
she is on her fiftieth anniversary tour.  

Another of the goals that many mediums mentioned was the desire to help the next generation of mediums, which would continue the spiritualist traditions. The major champion of this was Laura F. Share, who spent most of her time helping new mediums deal with their gifts. Hers was a goal to help the next generation of mediums, and it was a goal that the spiritualists succeeded at. By helping the new mediums during their lifetimes, and then leaving their written works for later generations, the mediums were still able to influence individuals long after their deaths. These mediums set out to ensure the future of their profession, and they did so: spiritualist mediums still exist across the country.

Turn of the century mediums were extremely successful in passing on their knowledge, in either written or first-hand experience, from one generation to the next.

Even with all of the support the spiritualist movement received, from its members, students, and their clients, the movement could not retain all of the fame and power it once had. The economic and social world, that the spiritualists were part of was one of drastic changes. It was a transitional time that bridged the gap between the ideas of the past and of the current age, but eventually this world of change and technological innovation came to a halt. With this change, the movement slowly lost prominence, as its followers had their own issues to

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118 Share, The Life of a Spiritualist Medium, 90-99.
deal with. By the 1930’s, the number of spiritualist publications began to decline and never recovered. It seems as though, when the Great Depression hit the United States, the spiritualist movement was never able to recover its popularity. Eventually, the movement fell out of the newspapers, except for an occasional mention, and became relegated to a few remaining stronghold of the movement, like Lily Dale.\textsuperscript{119}

In the end, the spiritualist movement was not able to sustain its strength and power over time, but it was able to make a lasting impact on modern society. The paranormal movement of today would not have the ideas and basis it does without the foundations the spiritualists laid. The modern psychics, paranormal investigators, and spiritualists all can tie their ideas directly back to the movement. The spiritualists around today are carrying on the traditions started by the turn of the century movement. Many psychics, not associated with the spiritualist churches of today, still try to prove the existence of the afterlife and their own paranormal abilities by the validity of the impressions they receive. The modern paranormal investigators follow in the footsteps of the group mentioned in the Schoch and Yonavjak piece, The Society for Psychical Research, which originally started out testing the spiritualist phenomena.\textsuperscript{120} Even though the spiritualist movement lost its mainstream fame and appeal, its ideas clearly never died. They have been kept pure, expanded, and mutated into forms that the turn of the century mediums could never have predicted. It still offers a

\textsuperscript{119} Moore, \textit{In Search of White Crows}, 57-85.
\textsuperscript{120} Schoch and Yonavjak, \textit{The Parapsychology Revolution}, 15.
profession lucrative for mediums and spiritualists -- and otherwise, a chance to scientifically prove the afterlife, provide help to those in need, and to provide entertainment for anyone who goes to the movies, or turns on their television sets, and watches supernatural entertainment.

By combining the arguments for the Christian aspects of the movement and the proof of paranormal phenomena, along with the influence of the mediums, the spiritualists tried to successfully modernize Christianity. For some, this change was so successful that branches of this organization, which are still in existence, still focus on these three points.¹²¹ The movement was successful not only in transferring its beliefs directly through its own ranks, but also by starting ideas and organizations that would lead to the modern paranormal movement. The spiritualists faced criticism for their every action, but in every case the movement was able to overcome these attacks and still attract followers and believers. The spiritualists originated in a time of change, when it was important to meld the past and the present together. This combination of past and present, living and dead, was very powerful, and it continues to inspire the next generation through modern times.

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**Secondary**


