

SPIRITUALISM AND GENDER: QUESTIONS OF
LEADERSHIP & MASCULINE IDENTITY

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Chapter One

Introduction to Spiritualism and Historiography

A Brief Introduction to Spiritualism

In March 1848 Margaret and Kate Fox began to hear mysterious knocking sounds that family members and neighbors attributed to spirits of the deceased. The girls developed a national reputation for their mediumship. In the process they sparked an interest in Spiritualism. This phenomena spread throughout the United States fascinating Americans, especially in the Northeast, and encouraging many to join séances and explore Spiritualist philosophy. Despite its controversial nature, Spiritualism enjoyed great popularity in the United States from the 1840s into the early twentieth century. Drew Gilpin Faust argues that by the beginning of the Civil War about 240,000 people in New York State (6% of the total population) practiced Spiritualism. She further claims that even in the South, where the support of slavery precluded many people from associating with the Spiritualist movement and its abolitionist allies, sizable numbers of Spiritualists practiced. For example, about 20,000 professing Spiritualists

lived in Louisiana.¹ In nineteenth-century literature the word “spiritual” typically refers to interaction with spiritual entities, usually the dead. The term does not appear to connote the type of individual devotion that is associated with the term today. In this paper I will employ “spiritual” according to its nineteenth-century usage.

Spiritualism began with curious observers investigating mysterious sounds. It quickly developed into a religious movement of national scope in the 1850s. Spiritualism appealed to antebellum Americans because it provided a faith that aspired to combine religious conviction with intellectualism; it also facilitated activity in popular reform groups. A broader fascination with death and the afterlife in the era also contributed to the popularity of Spiritualism.

After the Civil War Spiritualism underwent substantial changes in character which lead to dissatisfaction among many first wave Spiritualists. Much of the movement’s historiography focuses on the performances of mediums and the circuit on which they performed. In this arena, Ann Braude convincingly demonstrates that women found opportunities to speak in public, be recognized as leaders of a religious movement, and advanced the cause of women’s liberation. I argue that, in contrast, men dominated the Spiritualist press and demonstrated that there were limits to the progressivism of Spiritualist men.

To explain the struggles and challenges that Spiritualists faced in the 1870s and 1880s, Braude argues that the assertions of male leadership prerogatives split and

¹ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 181.

weakened the movement. She acknowledges that these tendencies existed in the 1850s, but perceives them as greatly increasing after the Civil War.² It is my contention that, even early in the 1850s, men were using the power of the press, manly rhetoric, and male dominated organizations to marginalize women and wrest control of the Spiritualist movement. The practical assertions of male prerogatives were usually invoked by men who also vocalized strong support of the advancement of woman. This divide between the discourse of Spiritualist men and their actions illuminates the limits of gender progressivism in the Spiritualist movement, the experiences and motivations of male mediums, and the intellectual freedom enjoyed within the movement.

In his early study of the movement, *In Search of White Crows*, R. Laurence Moore defines Spiritualism as “a belief in communication with spirits through human mediums.”³ Brett Carroll in his work *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* expands this definition by noting that adherents to Spiritualism developed a “belief in communion with departed spirits, the bases for a distinct and thoroughly spirit-centered system of religious belief and practice.”⁴ Carroll notes that Spiritualism involved more than simply communication with spirits. He argues that Spiritualists also experienced the agency and presence of spirits who ministered to the faithful. The spirits ministered in a number of ways. Most commonly dead family members would console the living and assure them of the reality and goodness of the afterlife. In addition to emotional comfort, spirits

² Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 162-191

³ R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), Chapter 1 & 2

⁴ Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 1.

provided their faithful with spiritual and philosophical insights that often inspired political involvement, including efforts to abolish slavery. Spirits also ministered in more practical ways, often by healing the sick. Ann Braude, in her work *Radical Spirits* notes that medical mediums “examined patients in trance, dispensing remedies prescribed by spirit doctors.”⁵ All of the literature on American Spiritualism emphasizes the centrality of mediums and séances to Spiritualism. Mediums facilitated communication with the dead. Men or women could act as mediums, although, as R. Lawrence Moore argues, “this occupation was primarily associated with women.”⁶ The public tended to criticize male mediums for being overly feminine.

Historiography of the Second Great Awakening and Antebellum Spiritualism

I

A basic understanding of the broader culture of religious innovation and awakening are pivotal to understanding the development and significance of nineteenth-century Spiritualism. The movement embodied many traits common to the culture of religious innovation that permeated nineteenth-century America. The disestablishment of religion, America’s free market of ideas, and the Second Great Awakening combined to create a climate in which Spiritualism could flourish. The outpouring of religious energy and creativity, that in many ways characterized the antebellum period, has been studied extensively by historians under the name “The

⁵ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 146.

⁶ R. Lawrence Moore, *In Search of White Crows*, 103.

Second Great Awakening.” Second Great Awakening was a Protestant religious movement that emphasized a conversion experience and moral reform. As Daniel W. Howe argues in *What Hath God Wrought*, the movement should be understood as a “multitude of contemporaneous ‘awakenings.’”⁷ The awakening was facilitated by the disestablishment of religion which opened up a free market of religious ideas. Disestablishment happened gradually at the state level and was hotly contested. Lyman Beecher for one fell into a great depression when state support of the Congregational church in his home state of Connecticut ended. He felt that it was the greatest blow ever struck against the church and despaired as to how churches would support themselves, and how the moralizing work of Christianity would be carried out. After seeing the actual impact that the legislative changes had on his community, he changed his mind coming, to believe that disestablishment was the single greatest thing that had ever happened for the faith. Nathan Hatch, in his work *Democratization of American Christianity*, notes how, after disestablishment, the democratic ideals of the new republic mitigated conflict between different denominations.⁸ This ecumenical age in America lasted from the early nineteenth century until the slavery question shattered evangelical unity.

R. Whitney Cross, in his work *The Burned-over District*, explores the Second Great Awakening in Upstate New York. He argues that from the early nineteenth century

⁷ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 186.

⁸ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 9.

to its midpoint the region developed from religious youth to religious maturity.⁹ Cross associates emotionalism and heterodoxy with young religion, and associated stricter denominational lines and more intellectually rigorous doctrine with more mature religions. At the beginning of the century, religious enthusiasm abounded in the form of emotional revivals which attracted large numbers of converts. Charles G. Finney used the “New Measures” to ramp up emotionalism; he used everyday language from the pulpit to better reach his audiences and also organized interdenominational prayer groups to set the stage for and carry out revivals. At his revivals he also sat prominent members of the community that he felt likely to convert at the front, so others could see and follow their example. Unlike the leaders of the Second Great Awakening, revivalists of the First Great Awakening strictly viewed revivals as miracles from God. Finney explained that man could create revivals by combining biblical metaphor and scientific farming practices that were gaining popularity in the new republic. Just as a farmer can continuously obtain strong yields, Finney contended that evangelists could continually reap strong harvests of souls by using the proper techniques. Cross sees the enthusiasm of the evangelical movement as waning in the latter half of the century, and lays a foundation for the argument that some of Spiritualism’s success can be attributed to the fact that it supplied an engaging brand of faith that could captivate curious onlookers, as the evangelicals were becoming more structured and somewhat less dynamic.

⁹ Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Cornell University Press, 1950; New York: Harper & Row, 1965), ix.

In exploring five innovative Protestant movements—Baptists, Methodists, the Christian movement, Mormons, and the black church—in the early nineteenth century, scholar Nathan Hatch argues that the democratization of Christianity dominated the American religious culture.¹⁰ By using everyday language and emphasizing calling over clerical training evangelicals became more egalitarian and solicited more direct participation from believers. As a result, a new class of clergy, who understood how to appeal to ordinary Americans in the new competitive environment, came to the forefront of the religious landscape. Hatch's work provides an explanatory link between the democratizing trends in the religious culture and broadening democratic rights in the body politic. His framework has proven resilient. In these denominations he sees a movement toward greater denominational participation from the laity. He also contends that preachers and church leaders became more sensitive to the needs of their flocks. Hatch focuses on church leaders to craft his argument, but does not address the work of women in the church, which is a major shortcoming as the great majority of church members were female.

Hatch emphasizes that the evangelical movements of this era appealed to Americans from a variety of backgrounds thus making them more democratic. By arguing for the democratizing nature of the religious revivals, he challenges earlier claims by Paul Johnson that employers conspired to foster revivalism in an attempt to inculcate the working classes with virtues of sobriety, thrift, and diligent hard work in

¹⁰ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 3-17.

hopes of making the working class more productive in the work place.¹¹ In *What God Hath Wrought* Howe joins with Hatch in opposing Johnson's conclusions. Howe emphasizes that revivalist religions encouraged appeals to Americans because it increased their feelings of moral autonomy and provided opportunity for self-improvement on a variety of fronts. One of the points of emphasis among the clergy of the Second Great Awakening was individual moral autonomy. In the early nineteenth-century Americans moved away from a belief in "Old School Calvinism," which gave the believer little or no control over their own conversion. This belief system was challenged by New School Calvinism which undercut reformation doctrines of original sin. While evangelicals believed that all people sinned, they also contended that sin could be resisted and that through sanctification the Christian was perfectible.

Hatch's student, John H. Wigger, in his book *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America*, echoes many of the arguments of Hatch, except that he focuses his analysis exclusively on Methodism. Because of his more narrow denominational focus, he addresses his subject matter in much greater depth. Because of the greater depth, Wigger's work complements Hatch's work nicely. While Hatch focuses on leadership, Wigger pays close attention to the Methodist class meetings. Methodist preachers, who were called "circuit riders," traveled the countryside preaching and distributing Bibles while individual communities were often left waiting weeks or longer between visits from a clergyman. To sustain

¹¹ Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: American Century Series, 1978), 15-36.

themselves, and their denominational integrity, lay Methodists organized classes that met regularly between visits from the traveling ministers.¹²

By examining these classes meetings, Wigger gets a better feel for the religious experiences of the laity including the women. Classes were led by lay people and encouraged the active participation of women and African Americans. Class meetings were used to satisfy spiritual needs of congregations that were visited infrequently by clergy. They were characterized by prayer and study of the Bible. Because women and African Americans were participants in the class meetings, they gained experience in public speaking and gained respect in the denomination. Methodist clergymen, black and white, often began as class leaders then answered the call to enter the pulpit. In the process, class meetings created the basis for future congregations in rural areas, cultivated talented men and women to rise to the roles of formal and informal leaders, and sustained piety in the absence of clergymen.

Hatch's work emphasizes that Methodists did not formally train their pastors and thereby had a more egalitarian pulpit, but Wigger goes into greater detail explaining how men could rise to the ministry through participation in class meetings. In this way Wigger extends and strengthens Hatch's original argument. It is likely that Hatch encouraged his student to examine the experience of Methodists at the lowest level in part to answer criticism of his own work for excluding the experiences of rank and file members of the five movements he explored. Paul Johnson, author of *A Shopkeeper's*

¹² John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 21-47.

Millennium, offered a pointed critique of Hatch for focusing on church leadership at the expense of women and lower level participants. The fact that Wigger examined women and the laity and arrived at largely the same conclusions as Hatch underscores and strengthens Hatch's historiographical contributions.

Paul Johnson also describes how evangelicals, inspired by biblical notions of Christ's millennial reign, pushed for moral reforms, inspired by hopes of bringing on the 1,000 year reign of Christ on earth. Many evangelicals of the era believed "that if Christians united and dedicated their lives to the task, they could convert the world and bring on the millennium."¹³ For these believers "utopia would be realized on earth and it would be made by God with the active and united collaboration of his people."¹⁴

In contrast to Hatch's stress on the ways in which these emerging evangelicals captured the early nineteenth century's democratic ethos, scholars such as Paul Johnson have seen a more coercive and top-down approach to achieving the stunning rates of conversion. Johnson focused on Rochester, a hub of the Burned-over-District of western New York. This boomtown on the Erie Canal experienced rapid population growth and social challenges while Finney reached the height of his influence. Civic, business, and church leaders in this community attempted to use religious conversion to control disorienting elements of growth, immigration, alcohol, social stratification, and the separation of work from the household.

¹³ Johnson, Paul. *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*, 3-4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

Curtis Johnson, in his work *Islands of Holiness*, further fortifies Hatch's assessments of the Second Great Awakening. His study is a rural micro-history of upstate New York demonstrates that disestablishment created a religious marketplace which encouraged more democratic faiths.¹⁵ The region he studied was named the Burned-over District by Whitney R. Cross because the fire of revival was so frequently ablaze in this region. Upstate New York bustled in this time period because of the construction of the Erie Canal, which allowed people who moved west to ship agricultural produce east to market and otherwise fostered an economic boom in the region. Johnson believes that the people who moved west brought with them a predilection for religious enthusiasm. The zealotry of the culture was encouraged by an inundation of printed material that emphasized emotional religious conversion stories. Johnson's work runs parallel to the work of Whitney R. Cross who explores revivalism and emphasizes the popularity of Charles Finney's new measures, which included tent revivals, emotional preaching, inter-denominational revivals, and the anxious bench. Curtis Johnson's work adds a degree of nuance to Cross's initial evaluation of the region by giving more attention to the religious experiences of women and emphasizing a free market of religion in the region. Johnson also focuses more on rural communities of the Burned-over District than many of his predecessors who focused more on growing cities like Rochester.

¹⁵ Curtis D. Johnson, *Islands of Holiness: Rule Religion in Upstate New York, 1790-1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 13-22.

R. Laurence Moore, in his work *Selling God*, offers a thesis on the marketplace of religion that Curtis Johnson discusses and that also runs parallel to Hatch's argument about the democratization of American religion. Moore's contribution complements Hatch's work and casts it in a new light without contradicting it. Moore begins his work by notifying the reader that he wishes to challenge the Weberian "secularization theory." Nineteenth-century German intellectual Max Weber's opinions on religion have made an incredible mark on western academia and Moore believes that Weber's theory, while still embraced by many scholars, has proven to be dead wrong. Weber argued that as society evolved it became more rational and eventually secular, while becoming simultaneously less superstitious and less magical. Moore notes that, at least in America, the facts do not line up with Weber's predictions. Church membership, religiosity, and faith in an active God remain in the United States. Moore believes that American religion has thrived in the last two centuries (especially when compared to the decline of religion in Europe, which seems to confirm Weber's theory) largely because America has embraced a free marketplace of religion.¹⁶ In the American Constitution no federally supported church is established. Likewise, in the years following the Revolution, the states that had official churches began the process of disestablishment. The need to shore up public support provided great motivation and spurred the revivalistic spirit of the Second Great Awakening.

In this way, taking religion out from under the protective wing of government forced Christianity to become more democratic, if you accept Hatch's emphasis, or more

¹⁶ R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God*, 12-66.

commercially minded, according to Moore. Moore points out that, assisted by developments in the printing press, religious leaders began to inundate the public with tracts about Christian topics (also key to the argument of Curtis Johnson). As the novel gained in popularity, Christian novels came to compete with their secular counterparts and sold well. Preachers, in an effort to reach ever broader audiences, began integrating stagecraft learned from the long taboo theater to capture the attention of the public. They also used promotional techniques that would later be adopted by politicians, including Abraham Lincoln, and entertainers such as P.T. Barnum. In this way Americans' religious leadership melded church activities and entertainment in an area where diversions were scarce. The combination successfully drew large crowds of curious onlookers, as well as substantial numbers of converts.

I argue that Hatch's and Moore's arguments do not contradict each other largely because the development of democracy and the development of capitalism have been viewed as mutually reinforcing forces throughout American history and historiography. Historians have noted both the capitalist impulses of the antebellum period and the democratic ones. I believe they worked hand-in-hand to facilitate the Second Great Awakening. One way to see this in the Second Great Awakening is to look at the sale of books and tracts. There was certainly a commercial aspect to the sale of religious books, but because books were sold cheaply, and the preachers and colporteurs who sold them delivered sermons open to the public, a profit could be made while simultaneously engaging more people in Christian activity than before. In addition, those church leaders who outsold the competition gained religious authority by weight of their popularity. It

was no longer the case that theology was controlled in the seminaries. Theological ideas began to be submitted for consumption to the population, and Americans could vote with their dollars on which interpretations of the Bible they found most convincing. More Americans chose to affirm teaching that increased their individual moral autonomy and called on them to attempt self-improvement.

While Moore's work dovetails nicely with Hatch's, it also sharply curtails some of Cross's earlier conclusions. Moore contends with Cross's narrative of youth to maturity. Moore rejects the concept that religion becomes more rational until eventually becoming replaced by Enlightenment ideas. He believes that this secularization thesis has proved itself to be "dead wrong" in America. He instead explains that the shifts which occurred in the Second Great Awakening were market driven and the changes that some scholars have seen as "secularizing" were actually rooted in a process of religious commodification. Moore explains how improvements in printing made it easy for religious groups to disseminate their ideas. Likewise, promotional techniques allowed popular figures to translate popular approval into spiritual authority. Moore explains how tactics of stagecraft were borrowed from the theaters to promote revivalism and how the clergy, instead of lamenting against novels, began to produce Christian fiction. In this regards Moore argues that in the marketplace of religion almost anything could be stamped with a religious seal of approval and marketed to the faithful, thus making evangelicals able to more readily disseminate their message.

While Moore and other authors make it clear that cheaply produced print increased democratic tendencies in Protestantism, Ann Taves, in her work *A Household*

of Faith, demonstrates that improvements in printing and the sale of religious tracts do not necessarily guarantee greater democratizing of doctrine. For American Catholics the experience was quite the opposite. The Vatican used improvements in printing techniques to instruct its faithful in church doctrine and to clarify official positions. It also used the printed word to more closely describe appropriate devotional practices.¹⁷

II

Spiritualism can be seen as both a part and a continuation of the Second Great Awakening. Like evangelical ministers, Spiritualists used market appeal to engender interest in their beliefs and combined religious fervor with cutting edge promotional techniques. Like preachers they booked lecture halls to stage debates for the public, inundated the country with printed material, and encouraged the public to have personal experiences with the supernatural. Towards the middle of the century evangelical ministers began the process of reestablishing denominational boundaries and enforcing traditional hierarchies of authority. Spiritualists filled a market void that was gradually being left open by evangelicals. As evangelicals began establishing seminaries to train preachers, Spiritualists began allowing completely untrained individuals to bring messages from the spirit realm. Likewise, as the ecumenical spirit among evangelicals receded, Spiritualists put forth notions of harmony and universal salvation.

¹⁷ Taves, Ann, *The Household of Faith: Roman Catholic Devotions in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press. 1986), 1-14.

Like evangelical doctrine, the Spiritualists' belief systems were diverse and varied, a fact reflected in matters of organization and practice. Many Spiritualists remained in their churches while others removed themselves from what they believed were the corrupting influences of Christianity. Some Spiritualists tried to form hierarchical organizations and associations, while most shunned any perceived restraints on individual moral authority. The preeminent scholar of Spiritualism, Ann Braude, in her work *Radical Spirits*, claims that the greatest challenge regarding nineteenth-century Spiritualism is deciding what to study under that topic heading.¹⁸ For my purposes I find it useful to view Spiritualism as a movement that used spirit communication to synthesize the millennial aspirations of the age with Enlightenment rationalism.

Historians have long used nineteenth-century American Spiritualism as a lens through which to view nineteenth-century women, organizational structure, scientific culture, ideologies, and religious identities. The historical literature concerning Spiritualism begins with R. Laurence Moore, in his 1977 work, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture*. This book examines how America's cultural fascination with science drove the Spiritualist movement.¹⁹ Moore gives the topic two chapters of attention and believes that Spiritualism was an effort to integrate science and religion. In an age when the telegraph allowed for instant communication over distance, spirit rapping allowed for communication over spiritual distances. Moore

¹⁸ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 7.

¹⁹ Moore, *In Search of White Crows*, 1-64.

notes that Spiritualist mediums could be either men or women, but male Spiritualists tended to face belittlement from the general public as mediumship was perceived as a feminine occupation.

Another early work, Ronald Pearsall's 1972 *Table Rappers* focuses, on British Spiritualism but addresses transatlantic issues as well, because the Spiritualist movement, like the Second Great Awakening, enjoyed popularity on both sides of the Atlantic. In each movement, English and American leaders shared a strong kinship. Ideas were shared primarily by exchanges of literature and also by a number of leaders who went on transatlantic speaking engagements or revival tours. Nineteenth-century Spiritualism originated in the United States but sparked a strong parallel movement in England. Pearsall believes that Spiritualism appealed to the English in large part because the church was out of touch with its people. For his own part however, Pearsall believes the nineteenth century was an "hallucinatory age" and that believers in Spiritualism were misled, delusional, or experiencing "collective hallucinations."²⁰ He also believes that the English loved it because in this area everything from the United States "carried an additional kudos." (sic.)²¹

Pearsall's work suffered because he refused to take Spiritualism seriously. He advocated that it represented a moral retreat and that it did nothing to advance the human race. Pearsall's attitudes were strongly impacted by Max Weber's secularization theory. Weber believed that Catholicism would give way to religious forms that he

²⁰ Ronald Pearsall, *The Table-Rappers* (London: Michael Joseph, 1972), 139-154.

²¹ Ronald Pearsall, *The Table-Rappers*, 9.

believed to be progressively more rational: Protestantism, deism, and eventually a completely secular mindset. According to this teleological argument, Pearsall's interpretation of Spiritualism is warranted, in so far as it represents an atavistic retreat into superstition. Spiritualists, however, did not see it this way. Moreover, it has been forcefully argued by scholars in the last two decades that Spiritualists led the way in terms of moral reforms including women's rights, dietary reform, and abolition. Given the movement's impressive progressive credentials, it is nearly impossible for a contemporary scholar to write off Spiritualism as a moral retreat. And Spiritualists themselves certainly believed that they were progressing towards an ever more scientific understanding of religion, and thus their intentions cannot be denigrated as atavistic.

After the works of Moore and Pearsall, Spiritualism did not receive another important book length study until 1989 when it received two: Ann Braude's *Radical Spirits* and Alex Owen's *The Darkened Room*. These two works changed the light in which Spiritualism was viewed, pushing it from the fringes of religious history into the historiographical mainstream. Braude's work in particular gained considerable attention in the United States as it provided scholars with a new lens with which to examine female religious experience, and female leadership and reforms, as well as politically progressive religious agendas.

Braude's interpretation has become the dominant reading of American Spiritualism. She argues that Spiritualism was among the most radical religious groups in terms of consistently advocating for moral reform, the advancement of women, and the

abolition of slavery. Many members of mainline Protestant groups were disgusted that the likes of Charles Finney allowed women to pray and exhort in public. Spiritualism gave women even more prominent roles as public speakers and moral leaders. Likewise, while many Protestants defended the evils of slavery using the Bible, and some denominations split over the issues of slavery, Spiritualists were united against it. Spiritualists would go as far as denying the authority of the Bible when it seemed to justify moral evils. Advocates for slavery easily found passages of the Bible that acknowledged slavery and even seemed to condone it. Spiritualists claimed a direct connection to morally superior beings who could tell them directly that slavery and other troubling practices such as Indian removal and denying suffrage to women were in fact evil.

Ann Braude's work explains how mediumship provided women with a mode of expression that often led to public speaking appearances and involvement with political groups. Braude argues that Spiritualism and the woman's rights movement grew up together.²² It is portentous to her that the same table on which the Declaration of Sentiments was drafted also acted as a conduit of spiritual communication (in the form of table rapping) within months of the Seneca Falls convention of 1848. Both movements emerged in upstate New York where revival activities of evangelicals had, for years, fostered direct experiences with the divine, reform movements, and heterodoxy. Each of these three tenets manifested themselves in Spiritualism. To strengthen her argument that Spiritualism encouraged feminist reform, Braude points

²² Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 83-116.

out that Susan B. Anthony and Elisabeth Cady Stanton both explored Spiritualism, as did many other prominent woman's rights advocates. Woman's rights, abolition, and Spiritualism also drew many followers from the same trio of Quaker, Unitarian, and Universalist denominations.

Spiritualist women rose to prominence within the movement precisely because the reigning ideology of the day posited women as innocent and passive vessels. These traits supposedly made women the ideal conduits for spiritual communication. Many women, however, used the experience as mediums to develop their leadership skills as well as their personal or political agendas.

Alex Owens's study of British Spiritualism yielded similar results to Braude's. Owens agrees that women often served as mediums and that they used their prominence in the movement to advance the cause of women. He also notes, however, that many of the most well-known Spiritualists were men. He identifies how men's efforts as self-promoters brought them to the public eye and allowed them to reap financial rewards through Spiritualism.²³

Owen's conclusions about men advancing themselves in Spiritualism should not be considered particular to British Spiritualism. In two biographies of the Fox sisters (America's most well-known Spiritualist mediums), *Talking to the Dead: Kate and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism* by Barbara Weisberg, and *The Reluctant Spiritualist: The Life of Maggie Fox*, by Nancy Rubin Stuart, one can see that there were

²³ Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), xii.

a number of men who profited from the sisters, both in prestige and in cash. Men booked the sisters in lecture halls, collected fees, and kept most of the profit. Men also toured with prominent Spiritualists providing philosophical and scientific explanations of what the women were experiencing. While Braude persuasively argues that mediumship allowed women to speak in public, I will argue in Chapter 2 that women's mediumship could also leave female mediums' religious experiences to be interpreted by men.

More recently, in Brett Carroll's 1997 work *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, the historian draws attention to the need for spiritual order manifested in Spiritualist philosophy and cosmology, and explains how that need for order drove Spiritualists in their attempts to form organizations on earth.²⁴ Carroll examined Spiritualists' printed media and defined them as a "reader community" that maintained a bond of common interest through consumption of periodicals, despite the fact that many Spiritualists were geographically isolated from others who shared their beliefs.

David Chapin's work *Exploring Other Worlds: Margaret Fox, Elisha Kent Kane, and the Antebellum Culture of Curiosity* looks at the relationship of Maggie Fox and a prominent Arctic explorer, Elijah Kent Kane. The two were lovers who toured together on the lecture circuit appearing before curious audiences who felt that the spirit world and the North Pole were equally distant. In this way Chapin describes a "culture of

²⁴ Carroll *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 60-85 and 120-177.

curiosity” that allows both of his research subjects to become famous.²⁵ Fox’s reputation declined and was ruined over time partly because she and her sister struggled with alcohol and financial solvency, and partly because they were reported to have made claims acknowledging that their Spiritual experiences were hoaxes. Kane, on the other hand, experienced scientific acclaim and respectability.

To understand Spiritualism one must understand that its followers viewed it as a synthesis of science and religion. John Buescher in *The Other Side of Salvation* tries to understand why Unitarians and Universalists often joined the Spiritualist camp. He contends that they did so for three reasons: the influence of moral autonomy, affiliation with radical reform, and the attempt to reconcile religion and science.

In nineteenth-century America religion and science were often seen as complementary rather than in conflict. Leading scientists believed in what we today call intelligent design and most Americans believed that the study of the Bible and the study of nature revealed the same essential truths. Spiritualists took the synthesis of science and religion to another level. They used elaborate explanations drawing on the exciting new field of electromagnetism to explain how spiritual communication worked. They also conducted many varying experiments to prove the validity of their beliefs and experiences. In one respect, every séance was a scientific experiment where individuals were invited to come, see the phenomena, and judge for themselves. Other public demonstrations were more elaborate such as having mediums perform while sitting on

²⁵ David Chapin, *Exploring Other Worlds: Margaret Fox, Elisha Kent Kane, and the Antebellum Culture of Curiosity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 3-11.

lead floors or while surrounded by magnets. The new explanations of magnetic fields theory were as mysterious to most people as spirit communication, and many Spiritualists believed that spirits' invisible communication could be explained using theories of electromagnetism being debated by scientists. In these public demonstrations, female mediums, channeled spirits and men were selected from the audience to observe and come to a conclusion on both the validity of the experiment and the validity of the medium.

The most important recent work on Spiritualism is Molly McGarry's, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America*. In this 2008 work, McGarry extends Braude's arguments by contending that men as well as women transcended conventional gender norms during the séance. She notes that male mediums would often take on female mannerisms, patterns of speech, and even singing voices when they were engaged in mediumship. This allowed men a rare opportunity to escape the established gender boundaries of the day.²⁶

McGarry also revisits the conflicts that existed between professional medical doctors and Spiritualists, originally introduced by Braude.²⁷ Many Spiritualists performed healings, or channeled spirits who gave diagnoses of illnesses. Most diagnoses were nonintrusive and noninvasive, unlike the often harmful or even fatal interventions of antebellum medical doctors. Doctors tried to discredit spirit healers by uniformly diagnosing them as insane. The logic they used to arrive at this diagnosis, like their

²⁶ Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 94-121.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 121-153

treatments, would not pass muster for most modern readers. McGarry suggests that the male doctors were insecure and did not want to be challenged by women, or have their profession denigrated by women who were effectively acting as doctors.

McGarry also looks in detail at the séance table, and the gendered implication of the ritual. Spiritualists typically sat around the séance table with women and men spaced evenly. In an ideal situation, each woman would hold hands with only men and each man would hold hands with only women. If there were more men than women, a man deemed to be more feminine would take a woman's seat. The opposite would happen if there were more women than men. Spiritualists believed they had to balance masculine and feminine energy like one might balance positive and negative electrical inputs. This ritual, as McGarry explains, shows that Spiritualists initiated rather advanced discussions of gender, and distinguished gender from sex in a way that would not become popular until the twentieth century.²⁸

McGarry's work address issues of masculinity largely by exploring how men could use mediumship to step outside traditional gender roles and embrace femininity in a way that would have been unacceptable in almost any other antebellum context. She links her findings to queer theory and history. I explore how Spiritualist men used this movement to help define and defend masculine identity. Our research focuses are divergent but complementary as the diversity within Spiritualism allowed for men to operate on either end of the gender continuum. Brett Carroll uses print sources and explores the intellectual world created by (largely male) Spiritualist publishers. His

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 154-176

macro level analysis of Spiritualist intellectualism and community provides much of the context for my case study of R. P. Ambler and was subsequently quite helpful in my exploration of Spiritualist masculine identity.

The rise of enthusiastic religious expression, the development of the free marketplace of ideas, and the democratizing trends of the Second Great Awakening were hallmarks of the antebellum period. These trends set the stage for the rise of Spiritualism. Because Americans had come to expect to be engaged and entertained by preachers, Spiritualists attracted onlookers who enjoyed the spectacles provided by mediums. The involvement of evangelical women in reform movements also set the precedent followed by Spiritualists who advocated for all of the era's most popular progressive reforms. The following chapters will examine the limits of gender progressivism in the Spiritualist movement, the experiences and motivations of male mediums, and the intellectual freedom enjoyed within the movement.

Chapter Two

Finding the Limits of Gender Equality in a Progressive Movement

Spiritualists considered themselves a scientifically minded people. They maintained that the manifestations they experienced at séances proved the validity of their claims. In fact they considered séances to be scientific research. Articles such as “Facts of Spiritual Science” that present evidence for Spiritualism in the context of empirical investigation demonstrate the connection that Spiritualists perceived between science and their lines of inquiry.¹² Charles Partridge and Samuel B. Brittan, the editors of *The Spiritual Telegraph*, the New York based newspaper and main organ of the Spiritualist movement, packed the paper full of testimonies intended to validate the scientific claims of Spiritualists. Descriptions of tables moving during séances were the most common evidence reported in the paper. One such report came from S. H. G. Niles in Michigan who explained how “powerful movements of the table in various

¹ For this chapter I have examined large portions of *The Spiritual Telegraph*, an important weekly periodical that was distributed from 1853-1855. Each year the papers editors released two hard bound volumes of *The Telegraph* containing articles they deemed important and noteworthy. Citations for the majority of articles referenced in this paper will be to the bound editions.

² S. B. Brittan, ed., *The Spiritual Telegraph Vol. 2* (New York: Partridge & Brittan Publishers, 1853), 400.

directions” occurred only when “a certain young girl in the circle touched the table.”³

Spiritualists’ interest in science did not relate exclusively to spiritual phenomena.

Partridge and Brittan explained to their readers that they decided to include a weekly section in the paper on farming because they believed that a paper so committed to exploring the newly discovered truths in science and spirituality should also commit itself to exploring the more practical science of farm management.⁴

Spiritualism’s story, a story of a group struggling to form a scientific world view, allows the historian an interesting lens on nineteenth-century gender relationships and masculine identity. Historians have noted the influence that women held over the Spiritualist movement as well as the connection between Spiritualism and the women’s rights movement (as well as other progressive reform groups). Historians examining gender and masculinity also have much to learn from Spiritualism because it allows them a unique opportunity to ascertain how men reacted to female leadership.

Predictably, men outside the Spiritualist movement mocked, belittled, sexualized, and threatened mediums. Early in their career the Fox sisters had their lives threatened by an angry mob. Later, men would fill auditoriums to heckle the girls as they gave demonstrations. Other detractors would complement them for their attractiveness and suggest that beauty rather than mediumship made the girls noteworthy. In her book *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire*, Amy

³ S. B. Brittan, ed., *The Spiritual Telegraph Vol. 4* (New York: Partridge & Brittan Publishers, 1854), 289-299.

⁴ *The Spiritual Telegraph* (New York), July 1, 1854. (Indiana Historical Society Library John H. Armstrong Family Papers, 1828-1957. Collection # M 0410, OM 0112 Box III: Genealogies, Printed Material and Photographs, FF 11-g). See Appendix.

Greenberg associates this type of hostility with the aggressive mode of male self-definition that she identifies as martial masculinity.⁵ She defines martial masculinity as the belief that “the masculine qualities of strength, aggression, and even violence” best defined manhood. By employing Greenberg’s schema of antebellum gender identity, the historian can better understand these aggressive reactions. The behaviors of men sympathetic to the Spiritualist movement, however, allow researchers to ask new questions about masculine identity. Why did Spiritualists come to maintain the more liberal position on women’s rights? Once Spiritualist men adopted a progressive mind set, how did it play out? How did men who recognized the spiritual giftedness of women operate in a culture that so emphatically attempted to circumscribe the rights of women? Did men, in spite of the culture that enveloped them, give women equal opportunity as Spiritualist intellectuals and authors, and allow women to retain control over their spiritual experiences? My research suggests not. Spiritualist men, despite giving intellectual assent to the advancement of women, used personal influence, the power of the press, manly rhetoric, and male only national organizations to marginalize women and take control of the Spiritualist movement. Men, by and large, excluded women from the Spiritualist press, and as a result men took control over many of the intellectual aspects of the movement. Men assumed the responsibility of philosophically justifying and explaining the intuitive experiences of women, and while doing this they asserted symbolic and literal control over women. Men also boasted of

⁵ Amy S Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 12.

their ability to control women mediums and enjoyed spiritual prestige at the expense of young girls whom they asserted control over.

Ann Braude's influential book demonstrates how mediums, who claimed to speak to the dead, gained unprecedented amounts of influence in Spiritualist circles. Female mediums invigorated Spiritualism, providing the energy and mystery that appealed to many Americans. Braude also argues that "mediumship gave women a public leadership role that allowed them to remain compliant with the complex of values of the period that have come to be known as the cult of true womanhood."⁶ According to Braude the cult of true womanhood characterized women's nature "by purity, passivity, and domesticity."⁷ One aspect of Spiritualism that Braude does not examine is the role that men played in explaining and validating the spiritual experiences of women. Men produced most of the written defenses and explanations of Spiritualism. Brett Carroll argues that these men used their explanations of Spiritualism in an attempt to bring order to the universe. I argue that they used their position as Spiritualist philosophers to assert male prerogatives and take control of the movement away from women.

For this chapter I have examined large portions of *The Spiritual Telegraph*, an important weekly periodical that was distributed from 1853-1855. Each year the paper's editors released two hard bound volumes of *The Telegraph* containing articles they deemed important and noteworthy. As I will explore later in the chapter, the editors

⁶ Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 82.

⁷ *Ibid.*

included very few articles in these bound collections that were written by women. Each of these 350-450 page publications have survived intact, and are accessible to historians for research. Unfortunately few of the actual issues of the weekly paper are known to this author. While I have been able to consult seven volumes of the bound compilations, I have only been able to locate and review one copy of the paper itself. Before publishing *The Spiritual Telegraph* Samuel B. Brittan published a quarterly Spiritualist paper called *Shekinah*; I have been able to read several issues of this paper as well, but I chose not to explore it in great detail because it did not have as high a degree of influence as *The Spiritualist Telegraph*. I also examined a number of book-length philosophical and theological works on Spiritualism composed in the mid to late nineteenth century.

Charles Partridge was a wealthy match manufacturer who employed hundreds of people in New York and prided himself on his fair treatment of employees. After making an earlier acquaintance with the Fox sisters, Partridge entertained Maggie for a number of weeks in March 1851.⁸ During this time he held many séances in his home. His connection with the Fox sisters helped to advance his prominence in Spiritualist circles.⁹ Samuel Brittan began his career as a Universalist minister and converted to the belief in spirit communication during a period of illness. In December 1847 he became the editor of *Univercelum* which Carroll calls “the first of what soon became a swelling tide of

⁸ Barbra Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead: Kate and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2004), 131.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 147

short-lived Spiritualist periodicals.”¹⁰ The *Univercelum* folded in 1849. In October 1851 Brittan and Partridge came together and founded the highbrow monthly *Shekinah*, a highly influential journal that promoted Spiritualist ideas. In May 1852 the editors, inspired by the success of *Shekinah*, launched the weekly newspaper *The Spiritual Telegraph*. *The Telegraph* would become the longest running and most widely distributed Spiritualist periodical of the 1850s.¹¹

The bound volumes of *The Spiritual Telegraph* provide detailed one-year snapshots of the movement. The editors included articles selected for their significance to the movement. In this time Spiritualism enjoyed an established core of believers that had been growing considerably since 1848. *The Spiritual Telegraph* allows a study of the movement before its public discrediting in the 1870s when critics exposed many mediums as frauds. It also provides a view of the movement before many prominent devotees, including Samuel Brittan, left the movement dissatisfied with shifts in the Spiritualist movement that took place after the Civil War. Brittan became convinced that the “festive atmosphere at Spiritualist summer camp gatherings of the 1870s had overwhelmed all concern with human spiritual and moral betterment.”¹² Weisberg notes the influence that Partridge and Brittan exercised as publishers in 1850s.¹³ And the *Encyclopedia of Religion* ranks *The Telegraph* first in its list of influential Spiritualist

¹⁰ Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹² *Ibid.*, 179.

¹³ Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*, 147.

periodicals.¹⁴ *The Telegraph's* wide distribution guaranteed its historical importance as most other Spiritualist papers with smaller distributions areas.

Spiritualist periodicals helped Spiritualism's geographically scattered followers to forge into a community of believers. *The Telegraph's* richness as a historical source also derives from the diversity of its contributors. Men who represented different regional influences contributed articles. The editors also gave voices to men of modest education (judging by the editors' admonishments of their grammatical errors and lack of literary style) as well as medical doctors and university professors. This relatively open form developed the reader communities highlighted by Brett Carroll. *The Telegraph* often contained works not composed by Spiritualists. The editors would publish such articles if they believed the pieces forwarded claims supported by most Spiritualists. The editors also reproduced critiques of Spiritualism in order to argue against them.

The format, title, and layout of *The Spiritual Telegraph* revealed much about the attitudes and intentions of the editors. The title, according to Brett A. Carroll, "illustrates how Spiritualists used concepts of electrical interconnectedness and telegraphic communication to make their universe into a strong and tightly knit community."¹⁵ A philosophical work dominated the front page while the second and third page contained book reviews, short articles, and news stories relating to Spiritualism. Examples of titles include "Curios Proof and Spiritual Presence," "Floating on Air," "A Glimpse of Heaven," and "Goethe and Spiritualism." Other articles explored Spiritualist happenings in

¹⁴ Lindsay Jones, *Encyclopedia of Religion: Second Edition Vol 13* (Detroit: Thompson & Gale, 2005), 8717.

¹⁵ Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 69.

Europe, messages from beyond the grave, as well as discussions of Hinduism and Native American spirituality.

The third page of the paper contained a section on farm management and a book list for people interested in reading more about Spiritualism. In the original weekly issue accessible to the researcher, women's contributions only appeared at the very end of the fourth and final page. The two contributions by women were not accounts of spiritual experience or defenses of the belief. They were advertisements. Mrs. Mettler and her husband advertised their services as Psycolo-magnetic Physicians charging \$5 for in-person assessment, and \$10 for diagnosis done at a distance. For distance diagnosis patients were required to send Mrs. Mettler a lock of their hair, and payment terms had to be met "strictly in advance."¹⁶ "Mrs. Metter's Restorative Syrup" was also available for purchase for treatment of an "Impure State Of Blood," "Bilious Difficulties," "Nervous Headaches," and "Irritation Of The Mucous Membrane." Mrs. E. J. French also distributed a similar elixir and provided in-person and distance examinations at the same rates as Mrs. Mettler. French was more generous in her terms agreeing to supply her services and elixir "without charge, to all who may not have the means to pay for it."¹⁷

The *Shekinah* had contributions by women peppered throughout the paper. However, only 13 of the 116 articles I was able to examine from this publication were attributed to women. Only four of these thirteen articles were prose style arguments as

¹⁶ *The Spiritual Telegraph* (New York), July 1, 1854.

¹⁷ *The Spiritual Telegraph* (New York), July 1, 1854.

opposed to works of poetry. In the *Spiritual Telegraph* less than half of the articles published had authors listed, and of those listed about 21 out of 219 (poetry not included in either number) were contributed by women. If the anonymous contributions are factored in less than 1 in 50 prose articles were ascribed to women. For comparison's sake it is worth mentioning that in the two issues of the *The Spiritual Clarion* consulted only 2 of 28 articles contributed were written by women.¹⁸ In both *The Telegraph* and *Shekinah* numbers of poems contributed by men and women were roughly equivalent.

Many of the poems contributed by women do not appear to significantly advance or explore Spiritualist ideals, beliefs or rituals. These poems seem to have been included more for pleasure reading than aid in the growth or diffusion of Spiritualism. "I Think of Thee" is one such poem. Author Lizzie Linwood expresses daily longing for a departed but, while she mentions hearing "thy spirit's calls," the emphasis of the composition is on the contemplation of sweet memories.

I Think of Thee
By Lizzie Linwood

I think of thee when morning flings
Her Radiance o'er the dewy earth;
And when all bright and lovely things
Some burdened with a song of mirth.
When young gay birds from spray and bower,
Are warbling forth their notes of flee;
Then, dearest, in that joyous hours,
I think of thee, I think of thee.
I think of thee when twilight shades

¹⁸ *The Spiritual Clarion* Vol. I. No. 1. May, 1854 & Vol. I. No. 2. June, 1854. Ed Judge Edmonds, Dr. Dexter, O.G. Warren (published by Partridge and Brittan)

Are falling softly o'er the sea;
When from the west the daylight fades,
And earth is hushed in revery.
And when the dew is on the flower,
And silence sleep upon the lea,
Then, in that soft and dreamy hour,
I think of thee, I think of Thee
I dream of thee when gentle sleep
Upon my wearily eyelids falls;
And though I often wake to weep,
Yet still I hear thy spirit's calls;
And though we may not meet again,
And dark my future lot may be,
Yet still in grief, in joy in pain,
I ever think and dream of only – thee¹⁹

Some of the poetic contributions, including “A Fragment” by Laura Webb do engage topics more germane to Spiritualism. Webb begins her poem praising science and the laws that govern the universe, and then transitions into a discussion of the afterlife, phrased as “eternal shore.” This understanding of spirit communication being founded on scientific understandings is very much in keeping with Spiritualist beliefs. She also emphasizes the beauty of curious natural phenomena (auroras and Arctic rays) to the sublime nature of the spirit realm.

A Fragment
By Mrs. Laura Webb

See science ride, throned on her radiant car
Far as the utmost bound of distant star;
She knows its laws and counts its rapid flight,
And marks its course when here concealed from sight,
But ne'er has dared – though bold her flight – explore
One hidden sea, or on the eternal shore
To place her foot. But when, at utmost bound
Of sight, she turns, and slowly to the ground,
To all material objects fondly clings,

¹⁹ S. B. Brittan, ed., *The Spiritual Telegraph Vol. 3* (New York: Partridge & Brittan Publishers, 1854), 207.

And humbly, sorrowing, folds her trembling wings;
 Despairs to lose the portals of the dead,
 And to the living give the secretes dread
 Beyond the tomb, where a stern silence ever
 Has thrown her mantle as a dark, deep river!
 Who to the high empyrean shall aspire –
 Catching a halo of celestial fire—
 Proclaim to earth the light which heaven reveals,
 And see the spirits in their azure fields!
 Who with a stride shall pass the bounds of earth,
 And see the spirits in immortal birth!
 Boldly, Buchanan springs upon the car;
 Boldly his course pursues, on – on afar;
 Observes the head, and like a guiding rein,
 Catches the thread that form the human brain.
 Then on he soars beyond the Milky Way,
 Far as the polar beams their antics play,
 Where bright auroras round his pathway glow,
 And shed their cold and shimmering light below;
 And farther still, he in the Spirit-land
 Acquires new facts, and with a master's hand
 Weighs, groups, compares, until celestial sight
 The dark unfathomable glows with light.
 On, on pursues, not as by sudden chance
 Catching at trifles in a slow advance
 Of nature's laws he holds a powerful key
 And from the past sees what to come must be;
 Beyond the comet's track he soars alone,
 To the eerulean (sic) that surrounds the throne!
 Here must thou stop! For ne'er to mortal eye
 Shall be revealed that greatest mystery,
 Without beginning or an end of years.
 This as tomorrow, that as this appears;
 One as a thousand, as a thousand one,
 And yet eternity is ne'er begun²⁰

²⁰ Ibid., 267.

New York artist J.W. Orr produced the header for *The Spiritual Telegraph*, the graphic in which the publishers imbedded the newspaper's title. This header, steeped in imagery, provides the reader with a subtle backdrop intended to underscore the main functions of the paper. A depiction of the earth surrounded by dark clouds with light shining directly on only a small portion of the planet centers the header. In the picture the majority of the earth's surface exists without the benefit of light. The sun's rays are shining primarily on the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. This demonstrates that the editors viewed the area as a hotbed of Spiritualist activity and also highlights the primary distribution area of the *Spiritual Telegraph*. New York is apparently the center of this enlightenment. Most of North America, Mexico, and the northern tip of South America are all faintly illuminated. These other illuminated areas, and the degrees of their enlightenment, correlate roughly with the degree of Spiritualist activity ascribed to the areas by the editors. This further indicated that the editors intended that the header serve as a visual guide of spiritual enlightenment by region.

Europe is not represented in the image because of the orientation of the earth, but from the dispersal pattern of the light one can assume that it is in near total darkness. Asia and most of South America exist in such a total state of darkness that even the outlines of the continents are not visible to the viewer. This American-centric view abounded in the period in part due to the prevalence of Manifest Destiny. This ideology, however, was much more popular among Democrats than among groups of reformers. A defining characteristic of the picture is that it lets the viewer see the night. Usually depictions of the earth are oriented so that the viewer looks at the world with

the sun at his back seeing only the illuminated surface. The orientation used by the illustrator emphasizes the profound darkness of the vast majority of the earth and emphasizes the intensity of enlightenment focused in the American north-east, precisely the area in which Spiritualism enjoyed the most rapid growth.

On either side of the depiction of the earth are the words “Spiritual” and “Telegraph,” a leafy vine surrounded each of these words. The leaves on the vine surrounding “Spiritual” (to the left of the earth) appear withered. The foliage surrounding “Telegraph” (to the right of the earth) appear healthy and strong. The paper is formatted with five columns written from left to right. This makes the wilted leaves to the left, and healthy leaves to the right very interesting. As the reader moves from column to column, reading a philosophical justification for Spiritualism, an increasingly optimistic illustration at the top of the page greets him. The introductory segment of the tract, arranged to descend directly from the wilting leaves criticizes the state of modern religion and establishes the author’s argument in the conventions of western philosophy and history. As the argument begins to make its positive assertions for the value of Spiritualism it finds itself descending directly from the invigorated and healthful looking vine. This imagery, by associating life and fertility with the assertions about Spiritualism, aimed to reinforce the author’s argument in support of the movement.

The articles in *The Telegraph* demonstrate that Spiritualists prided themselves on maintaining progressive attitudes towards everything from the most efficient farming techniques to the abolitionist movement. Secondary literature confirms this progressive

mindset and identifies Spiritualists as exceptionally progressive on women's rights. Ann Braude notes that "the two movements [Spiritualism and women's rights] shared many leaders and activists," and goes on to argue that "all Spiritualists advocated woman's rights."²¹ Braude sees the connection between Spiritualism and the women's rights movement as a result of the prominence of female mediums, "while reformers talked about women's autonomy, mediumship cast women in a central public role in the new religion."²² She goes on to note that "In mediumship women's religious leadership became normative for the first time in American history."²³ While it is true that Spiritualists advocated women's rights, many Spiritualist men proved less progressive in their actions than in their ideologies.

Partridge and Brittan demonstrated a progressive-minded outlook on the advancement of woman when they wrote, in an article entitled "The Rights of Woman," that "there is everywhere an increasing disposition to concede woman her right to a place in the learned professions and various lucrative pursuits."²⁴ The non-combative phrase "concede woman her right" indicates that the authors assume a sympathetic audience. They rightfully assume a sympathetic audience because they are advocating that women have the right to join the professions, an argument that received almost universal support at the Seneca Falls convention. This argument also found wide acceptance among advocates of women's rights after the convention. As they did not

²¹ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 58.

²² *Ibid.*, 82.

²³ *Ibid.*, 82.

²⁴ S. B. Brittan, ed., *The Spiritual Telegraph Vol. 1* (New York: Partridge & Brittan Publishers, 1853) 351.

feel the need to use evidence and argumentative rhetoric to fortify their claim, they instead took the opportunity to praise and encourage woman activists. “She (Woman) has only to be firm, and employ such discreet and eloquent advocates as Miss Lucy Stone and Mrs. Elizabeth Oakes Smith to plead the demands of nature and justice, and must ultimately triumph.”²⁵

In “The Rights of Woman,” Partridge and Brittan also expressed a level of dissatisfaction with clergy not atypical for men of their time period. “We think there are many other gifted young ladies who would make excellent preachers, and that there are also a number of able-bodied men already in the ministry, who, if they have genius enough would make respectable farmers and mechanics.”²⁶ This questioning of clergymen’s ability to succeed in traditional male occupations does not present itself as a radical critique. In her work, *Without Benefit of Clergy: Women and the Pastoral Relationship in Nineteenth-Century American Culture*, Karin E. Gedge argues that elite men often criticized clergy for occupying a social space “somewhere between the feminine domestic sphere and the masculine public sphere.”²⁷ According to Gedge, Americans believed that many pastors failed to live up to established ideals for masculine behavior. By questioning the competency of pastors and suggesting that these individuals leave the pulpit and engage in the manlier career of farmer, the editors

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 351.

²⁶ S. B. Brittan, ed., *The Spiritual Telegraph Vol. 1* (New York: Partridge & Brittan Publishers, 1853), 351.

²⁷ Karin E. Gedge, *Without Benefit of Clergy: Women and the Pastoral Relationship in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 16.

of *The Telegraph* demonstrated that their perceptions of masculine identity did not differ significantly from those held by many Americans.

While Spiritualists' perceptions of clergymen and masculine identity may not have differed significantly from other Americans they proved far more critical of the church and its clerics than the average American. The editors of *The Telegraph* republished abridged versions of Universalist minister Theodore Parker's "Sermons of Theism, Atheism, and Popular Theology" because they exemplified the hostility Spiritualists felt toward clerics and the church, "The power of that institution that is called the Christian Church, the power of the priesthood of the Christian church – is assuredly in a state of decay."²⁸ Parker complained that the clergy had "separated its self from new science," and "new morality," and that as a result it became a force for the perpetuation of social ills. In his book, *The Spiritual Teacher Comprising a Series of Twelve Lectures on the Nature and Development of the Spirit: Written by spirits of the Sixth Circle*, medium and author R. P. Ambler makes a far less gentle critic of the church "the spirits clearly perceive that the Church has a religion and that religion has been the bane of the world"²⁹ Ambler goes on to levy specific complaints against the church including materialism, narrowness of sentiment, and skepticism. Ambler's critiques of clergy and the church are explored in the following chapters.

In addition to criticizing the church and clergy, Partridge and Brittan also state their support for female religious leadership within mainline denominations. "It affords

²⁸ S. B. Brittan, ed., *The Spiritual Telegraph Vol. 2* (New York: Partridge & Brittan Publishers, 1853), 444.

²⁹ R. P. Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher Comprising a Series of Twelve Lectures on the Nature and Development of the Spirit: Witten by spirits of the Sixth Circle* (New York: R. P. Ambler, 1852), 86.

us pleasure to report that fact that, Rev. Antoinette Brown has recently assumed the pastoral relation to the Congregational Church in South Butler, Wayne Co. N.Y.”³⁰ By supporting female clergy the editors cast their lot with women’s rights activists who a few years earlier, in the *Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions*, criticized female exclusion from the pulpit.³¹ This support for women’s leadership reinforces Ann Braude’s claim that women found their own voices through Spiritualism. Braude argues that mediumship provided women with a mode of otherwise unavailable religious expression arguing that “mediumship circumvented the structural barriers that excluded women from religious leadership.”³² In practice, however, Spiritualist women were not always welcomed as potential leaders in Spiritualist publications or in formalized Spiritualist organizations.

Partridge and Brittan’s advocacy for female pastors confirm that Spiritualist men expressed support for women in political and religious contexts as well as while women engaged in spiritual activity. Braude did note that some mediums emerged as independent public speakers.³³ Partridge and Brittan’s advocacy for female pastors, however, suggests that at least some Spiritualists proved even more supportive of female self-expression than Braude argues. Male Spiritualists not only listened to women when they transmitted enlightened messages from beyond the grave, but also paid heed when they spoke for themselves, and when they spoke from the pulpit. Male

³⁰ S. B. Brittan, ed., *The Spiritual Telegraph Vol. 1* (New York: Partridge & Brittan Publishers, 1853), 351.

³¹ *Declaration of Sentiments* Reproduced in Ellen Carroll Dubois and Lynn Dumenil, *Through Women’s Eyes: An American History With Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin, 2005) A 18- A 21.

³² Braude, 84.

³³ Braude, 98.

Spiritualists' progressive rhetoric often proved, however, to be more egalitarian than their actions.

Interest in science enhanced Spiritualists' arguments for the political equality of woman. In "Woman and Her Rights" Brittan introduced the argument that "The natural prerogatives of human beings in no way depend, for their existence and sanction, on the incidental circumstances of place, condition, or sex."³⁴ Brittan continues, stating that, "Indeed, we can conceive of no right inherent in human nature that does not belong as essentially to Woman as to Man." Brittan argues that the natural rights of women are so easily observable that they should hardly be worth mentioning. "It seems like a work of supererogation to defend the justice of her claim to equal rights with Man."³⁵

The editor's tone shifts abruptly in his discussion of women's expressly *political* rights. The disimpassioned observations about nature shift into vehement rhetoric attacking male prerogatives in politics. "Surely, none but the blindest worshiper at the godless shrines of a perverted social state, or soulless tyrant, who lives but to libel the mother who bore him, would venture to trample on the rights of Woman."³⁶ The aggressive tone suggests that the author anticipates that his arguments about women's political rights will be much more contested than his assertion in *The Rights of Woman* that women should have access to "learned professions and intellectual pursuits."³⁷ From this shift in the editor's style we may deduce that Brittan perceived his audience

³⁴ S. B. Brittan, ed., *The Spiritual Telegraph Vol. 1* (New York: Partridge & Brittan Publishers, 1853), 43.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁷ S. B. Brittan, ed., *The Spiritual Telegraph Vol. 1* (New York: Partridge & Brittan Publishers, 1853), 351.

to be far more likely to recognize the high intellectual capabilities of women than to support equal political rights for women. Brittan may anticipate hostility to the political section of this article because, even in the women's rights movement, advocating for women's suffrage remained controversial. Discussion of the vote created a great deal of controversy at the Seneca Falls convention and the inclusion of a petition for suffrage in the *Declaration of Sentiments* had threatened to split the convention.³⁸ Given their call for political rights and support for suffragette Lucy Stone, we can assume that they supported women's full political participation. Interestingly enough, however, they did not call directly for woman's suffrage. Perhaps the editors perceived that a limit to the progressive mindedness of their readership. If not yet ready to express support woman's suffrage, Partridge and Brittan certainly proved themselves willing to acknowledge the spiritual virtuosity of women. "In the great moral enterprises of the age she [Woman] is not admitted to be equal, when in fact, she might rightfully claim the preeminence."³⁹

While Spiritualists tended to maintain progressive minded ideologies about the place of women in society, historians must explore the practical treatment of Spiritualist women to understand how the *theory* of equal rights played out in everyday life. In her biography of the Fox sisters *Talking to the Dead: Kate and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism* Barbra Weisberg explains how men constantly called upon the sisters to

³⁸ Ellen Carol DuBois and Lynn Dumenuil, *Through Women's Eyes: an American History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005), 225.

³⁹ S. B. Brittan, ed., *The Spiritual Telegraph Vol. 1* (New York: Partridge & Brittan Publishers, 1853), 47.

prove the validity of their mediumship to skeptics.⁴⁰ R. Laurence Moore also explains how, at public performances, mediums often selected juries of men to judge the quality of their mediumship.⁴¹ The spiritual revelations of the Fox sisters and other mediums required validation from skeptical male authority figures. In addition to the juries that evaluated the validity of female mediumship, many mediums were accompanied by male lecturers who provided the audience with an intellectual framework through which the audience was supposed to interoperate the actions and claims of the female mediums.

One would expect that men within Spiritualist circles, who claimed to view women as men's equals, would treat women more fairly. Spiritualist men, however, often failed to live up to their lofty rhetoric of women's equality. The progressive-minded editors of *The Spiritual Telegraph* in their practical editorial decision frequently constrained women to traditional roles. Among the materials Partridge and Brittan chose to highlight in their compendium, they do not publish many articles written by women unless they were poetry. In this way *The Telegraph* is no more progressive than the majority of nineteenth-century periodicals that also consign women's contributions to back page sections relating to the domestic sphere.

Also, in the July 1, 1854 issue of *The Spiritual Telegraph* Partridge and Brittan published a book list and intended that this list serve as a guide for individuals interested in further exploring the intellectual side of Spiritualism. The editors' advocacy

⁴⁰ Weisberg, 41.

⁴¹ R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Paraphychology, and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 113-114.

for the equality of women and especially their belief that women should have opportunities afforded to them as intellectuals failed to produce a significant number of female authored books. Of the 64 books advertised, only 5 were ascribed to female authors.⁴² These books included *Shadowland* by Poet Elizabeth Oakes Smith, a memoir that explores Smith's dream life; Catherine Crowe's *Night Side of Nature*, a collection of ghost stories; Mrs. Tuttle's *The Clairvoyant's Family Physician*, which contains medical treatment and diagnosis information; *Amaranth Blooms: A Collection of Embodied Poetic Thoughts* and *Irene: An Autobiography of an Artist's Daughter*.

One might feel inclined to believe that publishers who rejected manuscripts submitted by women, not Partridge and Brittan, should shoulder the responsibility. Although this inclination can be quickly dismissed by the fact that Partridge and Brittan published over half the books on the suggested reading list, the possibility exists that the publishers chose to print works by women under men's names, or women could have submitted articles under initials to hide their identities.⁴³ This could be done to increase credibility and bolster book sales. However, if Partridge and Brittan did engage in pseudonymous publishing, it would still represent a significant break with their clear advocacy for the equality of women. Whether they hesitated to publish women's works or if they published them under men's names, Partridge and Brittan did not give equal press to women and therefore fell short of the progressive-minded rhetoric. One logical retort to this line of reasoning would be to argue that women did not submit books on

⁴² *The Spiritual Telegraph* (New York), July 1, 1854.

⁴³ *The Spiritual Telegraph* (New York), July 1, 1854.

Spiritualism for publication. This line of reasoning exonerates Partridge and Brittan proving them to be men who lived up to their progressive ideas. But, if one makes this argument, then it raises an important new question. Why, if they were truly the leaders of the movement, did women not write books on Spiritualism? An examination of male prerogative and masculine identity may bring us closer to answering this question.

As we have already seen, the Fox sisters and other mediums often required validation for their experiences from male authorities. They established their credibility by convincing men of their authenticity.⁴⁴ This pattern reveals an important aspect of nineteenth-century gender relations, in which men assumed the role of authenticator of women's experiences. Despite its progressive mantra Spiritualists appear to have embraced this cultural standard. This allowed Spiritualist men to live out an interesting dialectic. On one hand, they espoused radical ideas of women's equality; on the other hand, they, perhaps unwittingly, acquiesced to a cultural norm that marginalized the experiences of women. This cultural phenomenon helps to explain why Spiritualist publishers preferred to allow men to compose the vast majority of the philosophical works regarding Spiritualism.

In a broad sense Partridge and Brittan continually engaged in this type of validation. Each issue of the *Telegraph*, as well as most of the books they chose to publish, contained philosophical, theological, and scientific explanations for Spiritualism. In this way, they and their male contributors assumed the role of interpreters of female spiritual experiences. Female mediums may have facilitated spiritual encounters, but,

⁴⁴ Moore, *In Search of White Crows*, 113.

male intellectuals explained them. One article that clearly exemplifies this pattern appears in the form of a letter to the editor. The correspondent relates the following story:

On Monday, May 16, two young men, named Ball and Buttolph, were engaged in rafting at the "Big Boom," about three miles from this place. One of them lost his balance and fell into the water. Being able to swim, his companion went to his assistance, and both were drowned. At the same time, a little sister of Ball, four or five years of age, who was playing with other children at a neighbor's a short instance from her home, *but five or six miles from the scene of the brother's death*, suddenly commenced crying, and said that her brother was drowned.⁴⁵

The author of the letter seeks an explanation of this occurrence from the editors. He wants more than just the little girl's account. Perhaps the correspondent and others like him feel threatened by the spiritual access to which women and young girls appear to have to have access. Partridge and Brittan obliged the correspondent explaining the experience. "It is quite evident to us that either the spirit of that brother, or some guardian spirit, went to that little child whose simple guileless nature rendered her approachable."⁴⁶ The editors' explanation seems to validate the experience of the little girl and in the process reestablishes men as the authorities on Spiritualism.

While intellectuals asserted male control over the movement by providing the authoritative philosophical explanations of Spiritualism, other men took control of the movement in more tangible ways. These men sought to assert their dominance by controlling the conduits of spiritual communication. Honorable Judge Warren Chase wrote approvingly to Brittan on June 7, 1853:

⁴⁵ S. B. Brittan, ed., *The Spiritual Telegraph Vol. 1* (New York: Partridge & Brittan Publishers, 1853), 244.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 245.

The friends organized a circle here last fall; a few had previously given some attention to the subject, but had no phenomena, a medium was soon developed under the control of Augustus A. Ballou, son of Adin Ballou, who with another spirit (a German physician), has *controlled* her ever since, entrancing her whenever they choose.⁴⁷

The concept that men of good standing would need to reign in and control a medium (who goes unnamed) shows the need for these men to be in authoritative roles and so subject the experiences of women. It was not the medium in this case that came to fame but the men who were able to assume control of her.

Chase goes on to note that, under the supervision and control of the physician, the spirits have healed many illnesses. He also praises the numerous discourses Ballou has given through the medium. In this narrative Ballou emerged as a hero taking control of the medium and achieving a notable amount of local fame for his exploits. He establishes himself as a public speaker suggesting that men could co-opt the voices of female mediums. Chase also discusses the development of two other mediums in a nearby town and how men used them to heal the sick. Other articles published in *The Telegraph* feature men publishing revelations they have received through female mediums. The pattern continues in Partridge and Brittan's book list where a few of the male authors claim to have composed their books through their own mediumship or through a female medium.

The examples put forward by Chase and others demonstrate that Spiritualist men sought to control not only the philosophical constructions of the movement but also to subdue the individual women who provided access to the spirit realm. Even the

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 249.

Fox sisters had men who introduced them to new audiences, housed their séances, and promoted them. R. P. Ambler, who is discussed in great detail in the following chapters, was one of the promoters of the Fox sisters. Ambler also provided the philosophical lectures that accompanied the Fox sisters' demonstrations. Men, like Ambler and Ballou who succeeded in this task appear to have enjoyed a measure of prestige, and also to have found voices for themselves as speakers and authors.

Men also sought to control the movement in another way, by establishing a national organization devoted to the growth and direction of Spiritualism. In the summer of 1854 a group of politically prominent Spiritualists assembled in New York to form the Society for the Diffusion of Spiritual Knowledge. This group sought to defend Spiritualism from the attacks of its detractors. The Society also committed itself to defending the honor of influential male Spiritualists whose adversaries began attacking them for their beliefs with increasing ferocity. In the Society's first address to the nation (published in *The Spiritual Telegraph*) they claimed that the acceptance of Spiritualism by men established as leaders in churches, communities, business, and politics legitimized it. The address also called detractors into manly combat over the merits of Spiritualism. By asserting their successes in the manly realms of religion, business and politics, they make Spiritualism a field for masculine combat and self-definition. After asserting their dominance as men the authors challenge detractors to enter into manly discourse:

If it [Spiritualism] be a lie, Ye men of America, who have one thought toward the good of your fellows, it is your duty to come forward as one man, to tear the veil from thence of the lie, and expose it in all its hideousness. We challenge you as

men – as earnest men, as men desiring the good of your fellows – to come forth and meet us in the fight, expose our errors, draw the shroud away, and enable the world to see us as we are. We challenge you to come and do that thing.⁴⁸

By establishing a dialogue steeped in masculinity, the Society excluded women from participating in the debate. Women would not be respected if they attempted to engage in this type of manly rhetoric or argue their case based on theology or moral philosophy, and they could not make claims to authority based on their status in politics and business. As a result these men forced women into a state of dependence because women could not defend themselves in the arena of combat selected by the Society. In this way, through The Society for the Diffusion of Spiritual Knowledge, men marginalized women and reasserted themselves in the traditional role of paternalistic defenders of the movement, and by extension, its women.

Spiritualism allows historians to explore aspects of masculine identity that only manifest themselves in circumstances where women have access to positions of prestige and control. When examined closely, the sources reveal that many of the antebellum periods most liberal minded men did not emancipate themselves from all assertions of male prerogatives. They made practical decisions that undermined women. Despite the fact that they lauded the spiritual giftedness of women, Spiritualist men excluded them from publication and asserted intellectual control over the movement. As they took control of the movement, they also took control of the lives and spiritual experiences of women and young girls, bringing them into service as spirit

⁴⁸ *The Spiritual Telegraph* (New York), July 1, 1854.

communicators. These men enjoyed the prestige that came with exerting mastery over a female mediums.

Chapter Three

A Case Study of a Male Medium

R.P. Ambler and Masculine Spiritualist Identity

R.P. Ambler labored for Spiritualism for two decades as an author, publisher, lecturer, spiritual leader, and medium. He exerted a considerable influence on the movement and provides an interesting lens through which to analyze Spiritualist men. In one of his publications *The Spiritual Teacher: Comprising a Series of Twelve Lectures on the Nature and Development of the Spirit* he explained his experience of becoming a medium. He describes the process of first having his person taken over by spirits in vivid detail in his Chapter “Experience of this Medium.” He introduces the process as a series of “mysterious trials and sorrows” that were tantamount to “purifying fire.”¹

Laying on the floor and breathing heavily while covered in the sweet sweat of his exertions, R. P. Ambler enjoyed a sense of cosmic satisfaction. He had passed the ultimate test, achieving perfection, purifying his soul, and proving his manhood. He passed through circumstances that “were of the most painful and agonizing in

¹ R. P. Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher: Comprising a Series of Twelve Lectures on the Nature and Development of Sprit: Written by spirits of the Sixth Circle* (New York: R. P. Ambler, 1852), 9.

character.”² He rests secure in the knowledge that no act of spiritual, physical or mental assertion could more rightly prove his claims to the vigor of manhood. The spirits themselves “rejoiced when they saw that the soul was not crushed by the agony of the hour which was dark and fearful with portending grief.”³ He had just been touched more deeply than he could have ever hoped to be touched, and stimulated on a level that other men could hardly hope to achieve, as he “was involved in the deepest and most perplexing mystery.”⁴ The indescribable bliss he experienced while having his entire body and soul subsumed by the strong and undeniable love of the spirit forever changed his life. His climax combined an intensity of purely refined pleasure nearly beyond the scope of human experience with a deepest and most wrenching pain. The new plane of enlightenment he experienced “caused him to enter into a new and enlarged sphere of thought and feeling” in which “the faculties of patience, perseverance, independence of mind, and Spiritualists, were developed in the soul.”⁵

His convulsions were wrenching and nearly inhuman. But every ounce of pain brought him closer to that ultimate satisfaction. “To carry on this process as was desired, and as was essential to bring their medium to the required condition, the spirits operated directly upon both the physical and spiritual system, causing indescribable sensations of pain in the one, and the most intolerable agony in the other.”⁶ No single soul could have provided such a deep and varied experience to Ambler. No, it was the

² *Ibid.*, 12.

³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

host who came to him that was able to combine their experiences, their intensity of spirit, and their deep knowledge of the human body and psyche to make Ambler the most fortunate of men. Ambler never would have said that this seemingly limitless host of companions forced themselves upon him against his will. He was clear, however, that their strength and beauty were irresistible, and that once he relented to their supremely powerful advances, there was no turning back.

This mode of operation was utterly mysterious, and indeed literally dreadful to the medium affected by it, and in the torture of mind and body to which he was subjected, he cried even unto God for that mercy which he supposed had been denied by his ministering spirits. But he knew not the beautiful process that was taking place within the structure which writhed in suffering; he knew not that the spirit was being born into the world of interior life and light; he knew not, when the clenched hand was made to beat his brow, that the vision of the soul was thus being developed and expanded; he knew not that wisdom and goodness superintended the agonizing ordeal, though he prayed that the bitter cup might pass away from his lips.⁷

Ambler, like thousands of other antebellum men, was drawn to Spiritualism because it allowed him to explore a great range of intellectual, moral and religious concepts. It also provided energy and justification for popular reform movements, as well as an opportunity for Spiritualist men to assert their manliness through their faith. Being a preacher, and a man of a contemplative disposition R. P. Ambler, being judged by the standards of his day, could easily have been found to be lacking in manliness. As it is difficult for any man to be satisfied in himself when his manhood is in question, Ambler struggled with his sense of identity and determined to find an arena to prove

⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

himself. For Amber the life of a spiritual medium provided him a suitable outlet on which to base his claims for manhood. Ambler's use of mediumship to validate his manliness resembles how some evangelical men made piety and religiosity a basis for their claims to manhood.⁸

Men were drawn to Spiritualism for a number of reasons, some of which were specific to their gender while others were not. It has already been established by Molly McGarry that some Spiritualist men used their religious experiences to transcend their assigned gender roles. One of McGarry's most consistent themes is that men were able to explore feminine roles while involved in the séance. I believe that in addition to exploring their feminine sides, men also used the séance and experiences as a medium to explore and advocate for their own masculinity. By seeing how the gender pendulum swung both ways in Spiritualist experience we can gain a greater understanding of the movement's mass popularity, and also a better understanding of nineteenth-century masculinity.

McGarry's argument runs parallel to Ann Braude's claim that Spiritualist women enjoyed forays in masculine gender roles through their Spiritualist experience. Both of these claims are well established by their respective authors, and it is the project of this chapter to explore additional reasons why men were drawn to Spiritualism in an attempt to paint a broader and fuller portrait of Spiritualist men. Through this examination of Spiritualist men I hope to contribute to the broader historical discussion

⁸ Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 207-252.

of masculinity in antebellum America. Spiritualist men were interested in demonstrating a variety of manly virtues including personal success, rationality, and strength.

Examination of R. P. Ambler's *The Spiritual Teacher* provides an interesting window through which to view both the interaction between spirits and the male medium and the teachings of Spiritualism. Using Ambler as a model we can start to understand the great appeal Spiritualism held for men in the 1850s. Although other scholars have stressed Spiritualism's appeal as a coping mechanism for grief, such an argument fails to explain fully the growth of Spiritualism in the 1850s. If grief inevitably pushed people toward belief in Spiritualism then the existence of the movement would be a consistent feature in the landscape of American religious history. Likewise, if grief is the most potent catalyst to Spiritualist experience, then why was it the 1850s, not the Civil War torn 1860s, that facilitated the greatest developments in the Spiritualist practice. I contend that Spiritualism flourished among men in the 1850s because it allowed them to explore piety while defending their manliness in terms of personal accomplishment and strength.

E. Anthony Rotundo, in his work *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era*, contends that by the 1850s the majority of men looked to success in their chosen occupation to validate their manhood. While western men have long associated manliness with bread winning, American men took this concept to new heights as the market revolution drove the economic engines of the young republic. As the market economy emerged it created great optimism and much success. Many men also failed within the new economic reality, and even those

who succeeded needed to repeatedly demonstrate their success. According to Scott A. Sandage author of *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America*, the democratizing impulse that made all men equals likewise put all men on a competitive playing field which produced both winners and losers.⁹ Men in each category were anxious about their fortunes because even the successful often lived in fear of future failure. Without success one could not lay claim to manliness, leading to anxiety regarding their past failures and their future prospects. Success was especially important to men because failure often forced men into the care of their parents, which undercut any claim they could make to independence and self-sufficiency. This anxiety often led to depression and kept men from work forcing them to temporarily adopt the behavior patterns of boyhood. This condition, which derived from a failure to succeed and thereby earn a man's status, was dubbed Neurasthenia and forced men's lives to swing "between periods of productivity with nervous good health and periods of illness with restful recuperation."¹⁰ According to Rotundo Neurasthenia appeared most common in academics, artists, and the clergy.

Ambler embraced Spiritualism and found ways in which it could confirm his manliness. Indeed, Ambler embraced mediumship as a route to confirm his personal authority; he pointed to the physical rigors of mediumship to confirm his manliness. He pointed to the expansiveness of his mediumship to claim unlimited knowledge of the

⁹ Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005), 1-44.

¹⁰ E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood, Transformations in Masculinity for the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 186.

past and he posited that the present and near future held incalculable promise if only others would follow his advice. Furthermore, amid his effort to confirm not only his own mastery, but the masculinity of his followers through Spiritualism, Ambler provided a malleable set of beliefs. He could effectively meld an array of Protestant views and sensibilities—some of them often at odds with one another—in an effort to broaden his appeal. Ambler and his readers were in the high risk group for Neurasthenia and its accompanying feelings of failure. Spiritual exploration granted them an unprecedented opportunity for success. The fact that this success was Spiritual in nature made it all the more appealing for those, like Ambler, who had served in the ministry. While this appeal proved irresistible to Ambler, many other men would dismiss Spiritualism as superstition or otherwise choose other foundations on which to base their masculine identity. Ambler would attempt to debate and persuade these men, some were convinced and others were not.

Ambler Biography

Ambler resigned his Universalist pastorate at twenty-years old and, in 1850, began publishing a Spiritualist newspaper called *The Spirit Messenger and Harmonial Guide*. Five years later he published *The Spiritual Teacher Comprising a Series of Twelve Lectures on the Nature and Development of the Spirit*. As noted by John B. Buescher, the movement from Universalist to Spiritualists was a common one in the 1840s and 1850s.

Universalists lost more of its leaders to Spiritualism than any other denomination.¹¹

Several key values defined Universalism: all mankind would get to heaven; difficulty and punishment were only temporary; people and society developed over time. All of these tenets were common in Spiritualist circles, and integrated into Ambler's belief system after he left the Universalists to become a Spiritualist medium. Like most Universalists turned Spiritualist, Ambler did not see himself as turning away from his old beliefs but as progressing forward towards greater truth and truer revelation. Most Universalists who remained in the fold, however, regarded Spiritualism as a rival sect.¹²

Universalists discouraged but tolerated their members experimenting with spiritual communication, as did most denominations. There was a limit to their toleration, however, and public advocacy of Spiritualism or claims to mediumship could lead to expulsion from the Universalist fold. Ambler returned to the fold in 1862 sending a letter to a Universalist periodical to make his public renunciation of Spiritualism. He echoed the position long held by mainstream Universalists by arguing that Spiritualism worked to "destroy every sentiment of worship, to crush out all reverence for the sacred things of the past, to lay the axe at the root of all Christian institutions" and "to break down the barriers of moral restraint."¹³ Such harsh and public renunciations were not required for all Spiritualists who returned to the fold, but Ambler, after over ten

¹¹ John B. Buescher, *The Other Side of Salvation: Spiritualism and the Nineteenth-Century Religious Experience* (Boston: Skinner House, 2004), iiv.

¹² *Ibid.*, vii-xiv.

¹³ "Letter from R. P. Ambler," *The Christian Freeman and Family Visitor*, February 21, 1862.

years of being one of Spiritualism's greatest and most radical proponents, had some large fences to mend.

Ambler got his start in Spiritualism by visiting the Fox sisters in 1850 to investigate their claims. He then became their promoter in Albany, New York. Ambler provided lectures to the audiences who came to witness the Fox Sisters. These lectures provided philosophical context for the sisters' performances and put the onlookers into a receptive state of mind. Ambler became a medium in his own right and eventually moved to New York City.

While laboring for Spiritualism, Ambler's mediumship, lectures, and publications helped him to become an influential leader of the Spiritualist movement. Residing in New York City he became the leader and medium in residence of Dodworth's Hall, which was the home base for Spiritualists who opposed the integration of traditional Christian teaching into the movement.¹⁴ Throughout his career as a Spiritualist, Ambler opposed creeds and established structures of religious experience. He was likewise critical of professional ministers and Calvinistic orthodoxy.¹⁵

Ambler's book *The Spiritual Teacher* circulated widely among Spiritualists, and provides many insights into Ambler's influential teachings as well as his personal religious experience. The work is comprised of twelve lectures, which were authored by the spirits and transcribed by Ambler. The use of the word "lectures" in the book's title

¹⁴ Buescher, *The Other Side of Salvation*, 169.

¹⁵ Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 40-47.

may be a bit misleading here as the lectures were rendered in writing.¹⁶ It is possible that they were penned with the anticipation that they would be read to audiences, but this is never made clear by either Ambler or the spirits. Ambler may not have been an average Spiritualist man, but he was certainly an influential one. An examination of *The Spiritual Teacher* allows historians to make a detailed analysis of one Spiritualist man's lived religious experience. While examining one man's experience and inferring colorations in a broader movement presents the obvious pitfalls of any microcosmic study, the examination should be carried out as it is the best possible route for historical speculation on the lived religion of Spiritualist men.

Exploring the details of Ambler's experience gives a glimpse into Spiritualism as a lived religion. The exploration of Ambler is justified in part because of his influence on the movement, and in part by the fact that he left a rather large legacy of written material. While Ambler is one of many Spiritualists who had a penchant for printing, he is one of the few Spiritualist publishers who contributed large amounts of material explaining his own experience. Partridge and Brittan, as well as most other Spiritualist publishers, focused their energy on edited periodicals that relied on contributions from a variety of other individuals, and also frequently reprinted columns from other periodicals. This form of publication does not lend itself to a detailed analysis of a single individual's experience as readily as does Ambler's *The Spiritual Teacher*. It is my hope that, while I will not have numerous subjects to balance my observations of Ambler, I

¹⁶ When individual "lectures" are referred to in my research it would be better for the reader to think about them in terms of chapters in a book, as that is how they are presented in publication. Ambler may have read these lectures in public, but more likely the public performances were extemporaneous or spirit led.

will be able to contextualize his experiences in the larger movement by relying on other secondary literature.

Experience of the Medium

The Spiritual Teacher begins with a two part introduction. The first section explains the circumstances surrounding the composition of the book, while the second section discusses the experience of the medium. According to the first section the composition of the book was “wonderful and unexpected.”¹⁷ Ambler sat at a desk with only a pen and paper and fluidly penned the entire work in just four days. The practice of sitting and transcribing messages from spirits was known as trance writing and was one of the popular forms of mediumship. In the same way that a medium could channel a spirit and then speak to an audience, a medium could also channel a spirit and write the message down. Ambler’s *Twelve Lectures* documents that he transcribed using trance writing. Throughout this work I will ascribe authorship of the *Twelve Lectures* to “the spirits,” because Ambler himself only claimed to have composed the introduction. While Ambler and other Spiritualists regarded spirits to be the authors of this and other works, we can still examine the texts and assume that they resonated strongly with the mediums who presented them.

Other researchers may insist on ascribing authorship of the lectures to Ambler but to do this the academic makes an implicit value judgment on the validity of his subject’s religious experience, and I do not feel comfortable doing that. For my part I

¹⁷ Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher*, 5.

will approach messages from the spirits on the terms which Spiritualists themselves took them, and discuss them as being literally authored by the spirits. Ambler ascribed authorship to himself for a short introduction that precedes the lectures. Five witnesses to Ambler experience undersign another section of the introduction in which they explain what they saw while Ambler was in his trance.¹⁸

The second section of the introduction is entitled “Experience of this Medium” was undersigned by “the Spirits of the Sixth Circle” and discusses Ambler’s mental, emotional, and spiritual state before and during the spiritual transcription. In it the spirits aim to “illustrate the mode of operation with which the spirits of the circle employ for the purposes of enlightening and developing the human spirit.”¹⁹ For Ambler being selected by the spirits is a validating experience. The spirits explain that Ambler was selected as host because he had been “molded and influenced in such a manner as to possess the appropriate qualities of soul, which would be adapted to the mission that was held in view.”²⁰

In the introduction undersigned by the witnesses they explain the circumstance of the production of the text. It is the only section of the book to which he ascribes himself authorship. The rest of the book is attributed to the spirits working through him. They presents the rapidity of the composition as evidence of the higher powers at work. The 140-page work was composed “in precisely forty-three hours and forty-three

¹⁸ The authors of the introduction included two men and three women, one of whom was Ambler’s wife.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 10

minutes.”²¹ Those who witnessed the book’s composition were especially impressed by the fact that Ambler had not “previously investigated or even conceived” of the subjects discussed in the text “until they were gradually disclosed through the movement to which his hand was subjected.”²² Ambler considered this a “wonderful and unexpected” experience, his astonishment was in large part due to the fact that he “was accustomed to write quite slowly and always with considerable labor.”²³ In this introduction we start to see some of the liberation available to men who engaged as mediums.

Ann Braude has established that women used the experience of mediumship to transcend social limitations and assume roles as lectures and public speakers. Molly McGarry extended this argument to men and explored how they could find gender liberation when possessed with female spirits, taking on the mannerisms, patterns of speech, and even singing voices of women. McGarry makes a strong case that men could find reprieve from the expectations of male masculinity in possession. I would add that men could also find a release from their own feelings of intellectual insufficiency and self-consciousness as writers.

Many young writers struggle, as Ambler professed, to carve out artful and meaningful prose. One’s own critical eye as well as the critiques of a mentor can make writing a painstaking, slow and laborious task. It is difficult to imagine a fledgling writer who would not be “literally oppressed with astonishment” by the opportunity to transcend his own natural limitations and become a prolific author. This is the

²¹ *Ibid.*, 5

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

opportunity that the “spirits of the sixth circle” afforded Ambler.²⁴ Spirits who dwelled in the sixth circle were believed by Spiritualists to be the most morally enlightened spirits capable of being understood by mortal humans. Brett Carroll explains how “Following (Emanuel) Swedenborg, Spiritualists divided their spiritual universe into seven hierarchically arranged and concentric ‘spheres.’”²⁵ The center sphere was occupied by God and the outermost sphere was inhabited by mortal beings. The spheres between the 7th and the 1st were occupied by other spirits who were gradually perfecting themselves and moving towards the innermost sphere. To hear messages from the sixth circle was the highest spiritual honor a medium could hope to receive, and the messages from the sixth circle were considered to be of the greatest moral import.

It should be noted that while the spirits that guided Ambler’s hand helped him to knock out pages and tackle many interesting topics, they showed very little interest in many of the standard conventions of the English language. Perhaps this was part of the appeal for a young medium, not only would spirits allow him to pen many interesting philosophical arguments, they would also free him from laboring over the correct usage of the comma, semicolon and period. The spirits necessity to write in run-on sentences did not appear to bother Ambler or the books relatively wide readership. Perhaps the

²⁴ Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher*, 5

²⁵ Carol, *Spiritualism In Antebellum America*, 62.

concepts of the sixth circle were simply too momentous and sublime to be fit into sentences of less than twenty-five words.²⁶

In addition to transcending his own limitations as an author, Ambler benefited from a feeling of divine purpose. He explains that the book he produced will “serve to expand the reason, illuminate the understanding, and elevate the whole being of Man.”²⁷ This would be a lofty goal for a little known armchair philosopher. Modesty alone may have restricted Ambler from making such claims on his own authority. But the spirits that drove Ambler allowed him to boldly put forward this text. His belief in the spirits’ authorship allowed Ambler to place himself inside an acceptable narrative of moral progress in which he was essentially the messenger of enlightenment, and not the source. The status of messenger allows him to play a role in the development of mankind that is suitable to his own perceived station in life, while still allowing him to move beyond the usual restrictions of station and training.

The medium informs his readers that the spirits desired to establish communications “for the purpose of introducing truths, which have not been revealed not in all the ages of the past.”²⁸ For Ambler this opportunity to be a receptacle of spiritual endowments is exciting. He will be privileged not only with great wisdom, but also with new wisdom from a previously untapped source. His communion with the spirits is likely to have encouraged him to imagine himself as being in league with a

²⁶ Single sentences in the work often run as long as 70 and occasionally to over 100 words. This is why I only rarely quote entire sentences in my study. To convey the spirits meaning, without tripling the length of this chapter I have to extract clauses and briefly contextualize them.

²⁷ Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher*, 8.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

number of the philosophical, religious, and scientific heroes of western civilization. From medieval philosophers and Protestant reformers to the Founding Fathers of science, Ambler could perceive points of connection with many intellectual champions. In *The Spiritual Teacher* Ambler does not note specific contact with any of these heroes, but other male mediums made frequent contact with both the Founding Fathers of the United States, and foundational figures in science and philosophy.

If one accepts Ambler's claims of enlightenment, then one must acknowledge him (or at least the spirits he communes with) as an uncontested authority on matters of morality, religion, and spirituality. For believers, this likely put Ambler in a position historically parallel to the medieval philosophers who were privileged to discover the lost texts of Aristotle. Ambler's belief in his own access to this authority was empowering to him as well as to other mediums.

To an aspiring moral philosopher what could be more desirable than a direct connection to dependable arbiters of right and wrong, especially to an individual, like Ambler, who maintained many radical views? Brett E. Carroll has noted that Ambler, a formal Universalist minister, bemoaned the way that "ministers echoed the opinions of their parishioners rather than following their consciences and therefore lacked the moral power required to inspire the laity to spiritual growth."²⁹ To Ambler spirit communication was a method by which he could venture to correct the conservatism and moral weakness of the clergy. This license to challenge the conventions of American clergy motivated and inspired Ambler. In this light he could imagine himself as akin to

²⁹ Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 41.

heroes of the Protestant reformation, fighting for a more just religious practice while criticizing the existing power structures.

Ambler was also excited that his spiritual revelations could be the impetus to reforms in science and natural philosophy. Carroll has also pointed out that Ambler felt that science needed to move past the “realm of physical being” and come to “disclose the true science of the soul” if it was to penetrate “the sanctity of the soul.”³⁰ As a scientific reformer Ambler could identify himself with the heroes of the scientific revolution. Brett Carroll notes the frequency with which Francis Bacon and Benjamin Franklin appeared to Spiritualists as evidence of their preoccupation with science and their feelings of association with its heroes.

For Ambler, being selected as the vessel of transmission for the *Twelve Lectures* allowed him to complete his own narrative of moral development and personal achievement. He recounts with pride his early fascination with philosophy, his ascension to the “pulpit at the age of fifteen years,” his visions of the future, and rapid moral progress as a young Universalist minister. The conclusion of this narrative before this encounter with the spirits would have been his leaving the church, an anticlimactic end for sure. But his Spiritualism allows his personal story to climax with reaching “the point of spiritual development and enlightenment which was adapted to the revealment of a more complete and immediate intercourse on the part of his invisible friends.”³¹

Ambler’s interchange with the spirits testified to his spiritual and moral advancement,

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

³¹ Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher*, 11.

and validated his choice to step down from the Universalist pulpit. This choice is further reinforced when the spirits deliver their damning verdicts on both ministers and the state of the church.

While this was personally edifying for Ambler it also opened the door of hope for his readership as he explains that the work illustrates “the mode of operation which the spirits of the circle employ for the purpose of enlightening and developing the human spirit.”³² With this in mind Spiritualists who hope for similarly enlightening experiences can attempt to develop and prepare their own persons for such an event. Ambler emphasizes that readying oneself for such an experience is difficult, and that the experience itself can be painful to the point of emotional trauma. His discussion of the strong physical constitution required to endure the tests of the spirits is an assertion of both his own manliness, and the manliness required to become a medium. This is an important twist because it demonstrates Ambler’s concern that mediums not be conceived of as effeminate men. This was especially important to Ambler because, as E. Anthony Rotundo argues, ministers were perceived as effeminate and as a result ministerial roles “conferred lower status on a man than other nineteenth-century professions.”³³ Ambler desired that mediums be seen as more powerful and manly than preachers, and thereby garner greater respect from other men.

The uncharted intellectual territory, which the spirits freed Ambler to explore, holds a predictably strong attraction to the man. Michael B. Oren, in his work *Power*,

³² *Ibid*, 9.

³³ Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 205.

Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East 1777 to Present, explains how Americans were tantalized by stories of the unknown mysteries of the Middle East.³⁴ Likewise, Amy Greenberg, in her work *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire*, explores how men were fascinated with the idea of strange lands and new frontiers.³⁵ Exploring and conquering new regions provided men with an opportunity to test their strength and fortitude against the wild. For men who did not excel in the typical arenas of the northeast, frontiers provided an alternative proving ground. David Chapmen's work *Exploring Other Worlds* emphasizes the importance of exploration to Spiritualists conceptualizations of themselves, as well as popular appeal of mediums such as the Fox sisters.³⁶ Explorations of the Arctic, the West, South America, and the Middle East were all filled with tales of American male bravado and hard-fought frontier victories. For Spiritualists the exploration of their new frontier was no less challenging and no less manly.

While peace and harmony were the ends to which the spirits purportedly acted, they also compelled the medium to endure considerable physical pain to prepare him for his sacred task.

The spirits, having gradually obtained control of the physical system of the medium, proceeded to test the powers and qualities of the spirit by placing him in such circumstances as would have a tendency to exercise to their utmost capacity the inward energies of his nature. These circumstances were of the most painful

³⁴ Michael B. Oren, *Power Faith and Fantasy: America in the Middle East 1777 to Present* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 4-9.

³⁵ Amy Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1-47 and 88-123.

³⁶ David Chapin, *Exploring Other Worlds: Margaret Fox, Elisha Kent Kane, and the Antebellum Culture of Curiosity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 3-11.

and agonizing character, and were designed as a means of trying the real strength which was possessed by the inward being.³⁷

Ambler, by emphasizing his physical trials and the purification process he was required to endure to become a medium, contradicted the prevailing notion that mediumship was for women and unmanly men. As noted by R. Laurence Moore in his work *In Search of White Crows*, the popular perception of male mediums in the nineteenth century was that they were of feminine disposition. Molly McGarry, in *Ghosts of Futures Past*, demonstrates that many male mediums themselves confirmed that popular perception by displaying feminine behavior while possessed by spirits.³⁸ Braude notes that women were seen as ideal candidates for mediumship because their inherently passive nature easily facilitated or even invited possession.³⁹ Ambler was aware that male mediums were often associated with weakness and femininity, and he was determined to show that being a medium did not undermine his masculinity.

To Ambler the requirements for mediumship included healthy vitality as well as toughness of mind, body, and spirit. The faint of heart could not endure the purifying trials he had faced, and the weak-minded would be unable to comprehend the moral greatness of the spirits. Critiques of Spiritualism could dismiss Ambler's claims easily enough, but to Ambler and other Spiritualists mediumship could be understood as a manly achievement.

³⁷ Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher*, 12.

³⁸ McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*, 154-173.

³⁹ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 82-85.

By emphasizing physical hardships Ambler seeks to prove his masculine toughness and purification in the process. To men who subscribed to notions of restrained manhood, this type of mediumistic torture would allow them to at once pursue peace and enlightenment while simultaneously embracing the competing cultural notion of martial masculinity. Supernatural torture, at least to those sympathetic to the movement, might prove a much greater test of strength and fortitude than even military service.

In this way Spiritualism allowed for a synthesis of competing visions of manhood. Mediums could dedicate themselves to spiritual and moral advancement, and establish themselves as warriors of a higher calling. It is important to note that Ambler believes that his real strength was tested. It is likely that the medium would have regarded martial proofs of strength as mere bravado compared to his “real” strength and courage. Of course it is doubtful that a man who bought his masculine self-identity with a musket and bayonet would accept Ambler’s argument, but that was not important to Spiritualists. What was important was that Ambler and his readership believed that the tested medium “stood up in the pride and dignity of his nature, and bid defiance to all the powers of heaven,” and their faith made it a reality for them; if not for their rivals.⁴⁰ Ambler’s efforts to equate masculinity with mediumship parallel efforts by early nineteenth-century southern evangelical clergymen to establish their masculinity through religious exertions. As Christine Heyrman notes in *Southern Cross*, southern clergymen who would not engage in conventional proofs of southern manhood such as

⁴⁰ Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher*, 12.

dueling, drinking, and fighting crafted alternate methods for demarcating masculinity. For example, public debates came to replace dueling as preachers would challenge scoffers to compete in the manly arena of discourse.⁴¹

Spiritualists, while defending their masculine identity, were often embroiled in any number of political, religious, or scientific conflicts. While they did not seek to define themselves as men through acts of physical violence, they did however strive to establish themselves as champions of justice and equality. Like the Americans who fantasized about the Middle East, or Latin America, Spiritualists desired to explore new and fantastic worlds. Only the worlds they chose to explore existed beyond the physical realm. David Chapin explores the connection between the Antebellum American Spiritual and Geographical curiosity in his work *Exploring Other Worlds: Margaret Fox, Elisha Kent Kane, and the Antebellum Culture of Curiosity*.⁴² In this work the author argues that to most Americans the afterlife and the Arctic were equally unreachable, and that in the public eye the exploration of each was met with wonder and curiosity. The scientific community may have rejected Fox while embracing Kane, but the public was fascinated by each figure.⁴³ Ambler, who had acted as a spokesperson for the Fox sisters early in their career, aspired to explore this new world as well, and perhaps garner the popular acclaim and scientific recognition enjoyed by Kane.

Whether the public accepted the terms on which Ambler staked his manhood via Spiritualism or not is not a question I have attempted to answer. But Ambler himself,

⁴¹ Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 246-248.

⁴² Chapin., *Exploring Other Worlds*, 3-11.

⁴³ Chapin, *Exploring Other Worlds*, 4.

and his audience of avowed Spiritualists, saw Spiritualism as an opportunity for achievement by which to validate his own masculine self-identity. They could prove their toughness, establish claims to scientific and spiritual enlightenment, explore new frontiers, and stand assured of their moral rightness.

Spiritualism provided for many of the emotional needs of its practitioners, including the desires of men who wished to lash out at portions of society that appeared to be more well-established. Spiritualists were usually associated with the most radical of reform movements, and had a hard time establishing credibility in the larger religious and scientific communities. The great interest shown in Spiritualism provided some comfort, but Spiritualists still generally felt like an embattled minority on the fringes of American society. Ambler himself had left a promising career as a Universalist minister to focus on Spiritualism, and he felt the sting of rejection from many of his former colleagues. Spiritualism provided an excellent platform from which to attack popular notions of success, an important development for many men who had trouble measuring up by accepted patterns of manhood. While launching these attacks against conservative forces and better established faith groups, Spiritualists made it easy for people to accept the new faith by using the shared religious language, and narratives of emotional transformations familiar to evangelicals.

The spirits provide Ambler and his readers with validation for resentments, jealousy and bitterness felt towards the most successful segments of the general population. In the lecture “worldly Happiness” the spirits discuss how people debase themselves and degrade humanity by striving for worldly success. The spirits explain

how even when worldly happiness is achieved, it remains “but a gilded show – an appearance which could deceive the external eye and inflame the earthly mind, but which contains no real or substantial joy.”⁴⁴ For Ambler and his readers those who have “the golden trappings glittered on their person” are not truly happy because “misery and wretchedness have crept into the place where the rich man reclines upon his couch, or eats his costly viands.”⁴⁵ In this worldview the rich and successful can be dismissed as deceived wretches.

The spirits gave Spiritualists a safe vantage point from which to criticize and cope with a cultural shift towards the emphasis on accumulation. Scott A. Sandage in his work *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* notes “a recurrent sense of collective mania and individual anxiety during the century when aspiration became a way of life.”⁴⁶ Sandage notes the tremendous difficulty people experienced in trying to keep up with the new lifestyle and the cultural crisis it produced. The market economy was new, and the first major economic down turns created widespread panic partially because of the real financial hardship they created and partly because there was no precedent for these virulent recessions. Unlike capitalists of latter generations, antebellum Americans did not grasp the inevitability of market fluctuations in a free and increasingly global economy. Bankruptcy was often claimed multiple times by the same aspiring young man and was treated by some as a perverse rite of passage. Spiritualism provided a coping mechanism though which modest means combined with spiritual enlightenment could

⁴⁴ Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher*, 7.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 7.

⁴⁶ Sandage, *Born Losers*, 14.

be defended as being more respectable, and as providing truer happiness than the wildest economic gains.

It is interesting though that Spiritualists use this familiar moral imagery to define economic gain with the lower order. By doing so they are responding to the cultural crisis outlined by Sandage who asserted that “Ambition was the holy host in religion of American enterprise.”⁴⁷ Sandage explains how “low ambition offends Americans even more than low achievement.”⁴⁸ Given this reality the framework provided by Spiritualism offered a safe place for those who either had not succeeded in business or experienced feelings of guilt over their lack of ambition.

When explaining the misguided nature of the pursuit of worldly happiness the spirits seemed especially keen on addressing men in particular. Throughout the twelve lectures captured in *The Spiritual Teacher* the author only very rarely uses gender specific pronouns. After the introduction to the work the word “he” is rarely used except in reference to either The Supreme Being, or another spirit. Uncharacteristically though, in the section discussing the pursuit of worldly happiness “He” is used 14 times in just a few paragraphs along with other gender specific markers to emphasize how far off track men are with their desires for worldly success.

The truth is, that man upon the earth had not properly realized the nobleness and dignity of his own nature; he has not appreciated the image of the Divinity which is impressed upon him; he has not understood the relations in which he stands to

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

the supreme Being, and he has not felt the deep and thrilling joy which wells up from the depths of the interior nature.⁴⁹

Given the scrupulousness with which gender specific markers are avoided by the author it is safe to conclude that the message about ambition and worldly success was tailored for the male readership. Given Sandage's emphasis on the burden placed on men to succeed, it seems that the Spiritualist message of release from ambition would have been a strong inducement for men to explore Spiritualism.

The spirits attacked men's faith in the Bible along gender specific lines. Again invoking the use of a rare masculine pronoun the spirits explain how "Men" have fallen into idolatry and clung to the Bible "as a child clings to its toy."⁵⁰ The spirits explain how mankind has allowed the Bible to enforce "boundaries of human thought."⁵¹ The implication of the authors is that men have been deprived of intellectual manhood by their faith in the Bible, and that as long as they cling to their toy they will be unable to grow to fulfill their rational intellectual potential. The spirits lament that "the most exalted and expanded faculties of the godlike should have been cramped, bound, and chained by the imaginary lines of truth which are supposed to be established in the word of God!"⁵² The imagery of bindings and chains further undermines the manhood of Christians by comparing them to either slaves (who were denied claims to legal manhood) or chained animals. This tragedy of the human condition which "fills the

⁴⁹ Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher*, 9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*,

⁵² *Ibid.*,

bosoms of angels with sentiments of the most profound pity” and “causes the spirits to labor with increased earnestness in the work of human emancipation.”⁵³

While exploring Ambler it is fair to ask how representative this one man was. When comparing Ambler’s experience with Spiritualism with secondary literature probing various aspects of the movement, one can see that, while Ambler was a more prominent and probably a more extreme example, his experiences were, in many ways, consistent with those of other Spiritualist men. Braude, McGarry, Carroll and others note the importance in Spiritualism of linking religious, moral, and social reform. Ambler firmly fits this bill. McGarry additionally explains how spirit communication helped Spiritualists to imagine new social possibilities and redefine established gender norms. Ambler’s Spirit communication helped him imagine a morality without the Bible, and also to define and defend his masculinity through spiritual encounter. With all this in mind, it is clear that while Ambler was unique as an individual his experiences and attitudes were in keeping with broader Spiritualist practice.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 42.

Chapter Four

Intellectual Freedom: A License to Criticize and an Invitation to Heterodoxy

One of the appeals of Spiritualism for men like R. P. Ambler was that it afforded the opportunity to explore a broad range of religious thoughts and feelings. Spiritualism also provided a platform from which to criticize elements of the broader culture of which the Spiritualists disapproved and also the freedom to embrace logically irreconcilable positions. The footing from which to level these critiques was derived from the intellectual freedom enjoyed by Spiritualists. With no consensus about central beliefs or governing documents, members of the movement could postulate endlessly and find evidence in trance or séance without fearing reprisal or censure from organizational leaders. R. P. Ambler emphasizes the value of intellectual freedom in the introduction to the first issue of his semi-monthly newspaper *The Spirit Messenger*: “As its name imports, it is the vehicle of free thought – the faithful messenger and representative of the heart.”¹

¹ R. P. Ambler and Apollos Mun *Spiritual Messenger* Vol , No 1 pg 4 Springfield Mass August 10, 1850 “Introductory”

Spiritualists sometimes embraced and sometimes condemned various tenets of other faith groups. Such an unsystematic approach to religious belief even allowed Spiritualists to simultaneously borrow and dismiss ideas from other religious groups. Ambler, for example, could attack widespread reverence for the Bible, while also relying on scriptural language to reinforce his arguments. “So deep and fixed has been the reverence which this (the Bible) has inspired, that it has amounted to absolute idolatry.”² The piecemeal evaluation also allowed Spiritualists to ally with other individuals and groups to achieve goals of the reform agenda regardless of their views on other issues.

The intellectual freedom and heterodoxy of Spiritualism allowed its practitioners to engage deeply in two of the three religious tendencies delineated by Catherine L. Albanese in her work, *Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of America Metaphysical Religion*. Albanese breaks American religious traditions down into “three major forms of religiosity whose interplay and, in many cases amalgamations have worked their way through the nation’s history.”³ She identifies these three forms as evangelical, favoring “the cultivation of strong emotional experience”; liturgical, emphasizing “communally organized ceremonial actions”; and metaphysical which “turns on an individual’s experience of ‘mind’ (instead of ‘heart,’ as in evangelicalism).”⁴ In her exploration of American religious history Albanese places Spiritualism in the

² R. P. Ambler. *The Spiritual Teacher: Comprising a Series of Twelve Lectures on the Nature and Development of Spirit: Written by spirits of the Sixth Circle*. (New York: R. P. Ambler, 1852) 41.

³ Catherine L. Albanese. *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007)5.

⁴ Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 6.

metaphysical category, and as if to prove her point, Ambler's spirits separate themselves from evangelical and liturgical forms of worship. Ambler professed himself to be a medium and a trance writer. The spirits referred to in this chapter are those whom Ambler believed to have taken control of his hand for four days in March 1852 so that he could transcribe their thoughts in *The Twelve Lectures*. The spirits do not identify themselves by name, but claim to carry the highest level of moral authority. The spirits accuse their rivals of practicing superstition and of crushing the masses with "burdening chains which have been placed upon the minds and hearts of all past generations."⁵ While Albanese correctly places Spiritualism in the Metaphysical category it also shared many tendencies of antebellum evangelicalism.

Spiritualists relied on the language of evangelical reformers and also allowed for life-changing emotional conversion experiences that were typical of the Second Great Awakening.

The faculties of patience, perseverance, independence of mind, and spirituality, were developed in the soul by the influence of certain conditions, which were unavoidable as they were unanticipated: and these faculties, in their exalted and sublime action, invited the lessons of heavenly wisdom which could not have been otherwise received.⁶

The fact that many of the conventions of evangelicalism could fit under the large tent of Spiritualism made it easy for curious evangelicals to explore the new faith. It also allowed them to engage in the practices and adopt some of the beliefs of Spiritualism without being required to leave their churches or denominations (at least not by the

⁵ Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher*, 40.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

Spiritualists themselves). Needless to say the attacks on clergy and religious traditions that rely on the Bible did not endear Spiritualists to evangelical leaders. Most evangelical leaders (then and now) would vehemently deny that Spiritualists were a part of their movement. Spiritualists did, however, incorporate many evangelical aspects that typified the Second Great Awakening. This latitude allowed Spiritualists to draw from both the “metaphysical” and “evangelical” dynamics identified by Albanese, and allowed them to broaden their appeals to many stripes of Americans

The spirits identified the Bible and evangelical tendencies as major cultural forces, and while being intensely critical of each, relied on the both biblical language, and the experience of evangelicals to make those claims. The spirits choose to address the authority of the Bible “not because it is possessed of that intrinsic importance which would demand a labored argument, but because it has been a subject which is made prominent and conspicuous through the force of human ignorance and bigotry.”⁷ The spirits attack both the “bigoted emotions of the religionist in reference to this book” as well as those who “attend to the external forms of worldly worship, communion, and baptism, as the means of saving their souls from hell.”⁸ In this argument Ambler’s spirits attack three separate bases of religious power: the first and most obvious is the Bible itself, the second the evangelicals (with their “bigoted emotions”), and the third are the liturgical churches (with their “external forms of worship, communion and baptism”).⁹

⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

The spirits explain how at a time “when error, and bigotry and superstition, were the natural results and concomitants of the low state of spiritual development, the reverence for the Bible, of which the spirits have spoken, had its origin and its birth.”¹⁰ They contend that since this time reverence for the Bible has grown “as a noxious plant” to the point where “it has been appealed to as a true and reliable standard of thought on all subjects which pertain to the interests of man.”¹¹ The spirits bemoan that people who have questioned the divine origin of the Bible “have been denominated infidels and heretics, and have been treated as the vilest sinners.”¹² Those who questioned the goodness of the Bible have been told they are in “extreme danger of being subjected to the consuming fire” for their irreverence.¹³

The spirits surmise that the end result of the disproportionate growth in reverence for the Bible is “absolute idolatry, and has even superseded the reverence which should have been entertained for its supposed author.”¹⁴ Albanese, in her work, emphasizes that metaphysical religions (typically without creeds, established hierarchies, or centralized meeting houses) rely on a shared language of religious experience. It is interesting that the spirits use the language of the Bible (by invoking the first commandment) to condemn reverence for the Bible. This indicates that while the metaphysical Spiritualists attempted to separate themselves from mainline Christianity, they could not do so without falling back on a shared heritage of Christian teaching. The

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹² *Ibid.*, 39.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

fact that many Spiritualists criticized Christianity, while at the same time appealing to its language, led to confusion and conflict within the Spiritualist movement. Many Spiritualists wanted to maintain close ties to Christian teachings and churches, while others such as Ambler, wanted to cut ties with Christianity altogether. For those who had major disagreements with Christianity and its teachings, the spirits provided convenient new authorities on which to challenge the traditionalists.

Despite its challenge to evangelicalism, Spiritualism drew on evangelical language and experiences to bolster their faith and its mass appeal. In their critique of worldly happiness the spirits state that the happiness of the world “is the happiness which belongs entirely to the animal and earthly nature.”¹⁵ Spiritualists often reinforced the orthodox Christian dichotomy between the lowly physical or animal nature of man and the higher order of the mind and spirit. The spirits make an even more pointed allusion to the orthodox Christian dichotomy when they argue that “having sowed to the flesh, he has of the flesh reaped corruption.”¹⁶ The Spiritualist vocabulary of flesh and spirit would have not only rung with familiarity for biblically steeped antebellum Christians, it would also have provided interesting new explanations for New Testament references to the flesh, like Jesus’ statement that “It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.”¹⁷ Regardless of whether Spiritualists interpreted biblical passages such as this along traditional lines or as indicating that Christ was in fact an early Spiritualist

¹⁵ Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher*, 9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁷ Holy Bible, John 6: 62-64 (KJV)

medium, as Ambler was inclined to believe, Spiritualists engaged antebellum Americans with a shared religious language.

In his discussion of the experience of mediumship, Ambler explained that to invite a spirit one needs to maintain a “healthy and harmonious constitution” and “irresistibly seek the divine inspiration which flows from nature and the Spheres.”¹⁸ If selected as a vessel of enlightenment one could expect to be purified as through by fire before being greeted by “angelic praise and love by the host of the heavenly-born.”¹⁹ This must have been a strong aspect of the draw to male mediumship. Who would not want to be praised by heavenly-born spirits and endowed with unprecedented moral authority?

The scene depicted would have had an especially strong pull in the Burned-over district where Spiritualism flourished most greatly. Whitney R. Cross, in the concluding chapter of *The Burned-Over District*, argued that by the 1850s disillusionment with the Millerite movement and a decline in enthusiastic religious experience in churches created a fertile environment for the growth of Spiritualism.²⁰ William Miller had predicted the second coming of Christ to occur in 1844. With this message Miller built a large interdenominational movement that worked vigorously to prepare the nation for the return. Many of Miller’s followers left day-to-day obligations untended, even going so far as to leave crops unharvested in anticipation that the world would be ending. When Miller’s predictions proved false and Miller publically apologized for his mistakes

¹⁸ Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher*, 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁰ Cross, *The Burned-Over District*, 341.

many believers had a hard time coping. The Millerites had a loose organization pulling from a variety of Christian denominations that allowed followers to retain membership in their own churches, while pursuing Millerism as an auxiliary belief. As these believers were left picking up the pieces of their lives, Spiritualism provided new and alluring teachings that, for many, replaced their faith in Miller's predictions. While Miller's predictions were based in a careful study of the Bible, and Spiritualism claimed a completely different source of authority, both movements had radical and dramatic teachings that captured the attention of many Americans.

Ambler describes heavenly hosts singing to him in a way that closely mirrors biblical accounts familiar to his readers. American Protestantism was largely a religion of the book to which reading the Bible was central. Americans often learned to read either in the home, where the only book was often a Bible, or in Sunday schools. The American Bible Society worked hard to disseminate Bibles throughout the United States, and were able to make great strides on that front largely thanks to the developments in the printing process that made printing quicker and much cheaper.²¹ The American Bible Society led this initiative as they strove to place a Bible in every American home. Those with a biblical education and Christian sensibilities common to antebellum America, and especially keen in upstate New York, would associate Ambler's invocation of the birth scene of Jesus Christ, with the greatest infusion of positive moral teaching in all of history. To one who accepted the claims and implications of Ambler's experience, and

²¹ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 227-228

who was desperately waiting for the next great source of religious hope, it would have been difficult to regard it with anything but admiration, excitement, and enthusiasm. The narrative of providence in the work also appealed to the evangelical environment in antebellum America.

With silent whispering of thought they guided and controlled his steps; with sweet and thrilling inspirations they cheered and animated his spirit, and by a powerful molding of circumstances and conditions, they introduced him by degrees into that expansive sphere of thought and labor which they had designed he should enjoy.²²

The familiar imagery of a small whispering voice would be comfortable territory for Protestant readers, while holding a special appeal for many Quakers who were growing disillusioned with the diminishing emphasis on the “inner light” in meetings of the Friends. The Quakers were struggling with internal divisions in the antebellum era with many Quakers being gradually influenced by the evangelical mainstream. Quakers who resisted the impulse to be enveloped by evangelical trends rallied around leader Elias Hicks and came to be known as Hicksites.²³ Individuals from both groups of Quakers who explored Spiritualism could find similarities to their own religious traditions. Mediumship resembled the direct communication between man and a higher power characteristic of traditional Quaker practice. Likewise the liberal stances taken by Spiritualists on issues such as abolition and woman’s rights were familiar to Quakers of either school.

²² Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher*, 10.

²³ Thomas D. Hamm. *The Transformation of American Quakerism: Orthodox Friends, 1800-1907* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988) 34.

Ambler's example of an individual who could discern messages and lessons from a higher power and openly discuss the impartation of otherworldly wisdom pulled many Quakers and former Friends into Spiritualist circles. In this way we can see that Spiritualism appealed to men as well as women because it was so strongly infused with common scriptural themes and imagery. It is important to remember that many individuals who practiced, or experimented with Spiritualism, felt no compulsion to leave their Protestant churches or denominations. For many of those who accepted Spiritualism it was seen as an addition to their faith, not as a contradiction. This experience was not universal as many Spiritualists, including a disproportionate number of their leaders, pursued Spiritualism to the exclusion of other religions.

Ambler's presentation of his physical trials again employs biblical language and imagery that would have been familiar to his contemporaries. In the heat of the torture he cried out to God and "prayed that the bitter cup might pass away from his lips."²⁴ This allusion to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, presents the medium as a Christ-like figure asking that a bitter cup pass by him.²⁵ Like Jesus, Ambler passes through his trial, and like Jesus, waking his sleeping disciples, Ambler returns with a message to awaken a sleeping world.²⁶ What is the attraction of Spiritualism for men? In part, the ability to achieve a level of holiness comparable to that of America's most revered religious figure.

²⁴ Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher*, 14.

²⁵ Holy Bible, Matthew, 26:39 (KJV) "And he went a little farther, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt."

²⁶ Holy Bible, Mathew, 26:40 "And he cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them asleep, and saith unto Peter, What, could ye not watch with me one hour?"

The physical trials faced also made Spiritualism more accessible to evangelical readers because of the suddenness and completeness of Ambler's purification and metaphysical rebirth. While Catherine L. Albanese distinguishes between evangelicalism (specifically its "cultivation of strong emotional experience that is felt as life-transforming") and metaphysical religion (which "privileged the mind in forms that include reason but move beyond it to intuition and clairvoyance"), I contend that Spiritualism maintained a dual identity.²⁷ Ambler's experiences were emotionally charged causing an "enlarged sphere of thought *and* feeling."²⁸ The strongly emotive and transformative aspects of mediumship gave Spiritualism a far more familiar feel to evangelicals than other metaphysical religions. It also allowed for an emotional high that could replace the disappointment and disillusionment in post-Millerite America.

The text of the *Twelve Lectures* are filled with emotionally charged images, even the sections written about experiences of the mind are written with a strong sense of emotional excitement, anticipation, and liberation. The spirits overpowered Ambler in a way that directly paralleled the evangelical conversion process with its sudden transformation. The fact that Spiritualism maintains a dual identity in Albanese's framework goes a long way to explaining the inordinantly strong pull of Spiritualism. Other forms of metaphysical religion did not hold an appeal for individuals with a taste for emotionally intense evangelical experiences, but Spiritualism could. Ambler and other Spiritualists attracted evangelicals by speaking the same religious language as

²⁷ Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 5-6.

²⁸ Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher*, 13.

them. They alluded to biblical imagery, quoted from the Bible, and allowed highly emotive religious experiences.

One way that Spiritualism differed from evangelicalism was that it did *not* require an emotional conversion. In Ambler's case there were five witnesses who were apparently unaffected by the spirits. This may explain part of the draw of the séance: different participants could have different levels and modes of participation. On one extreme a medium could mirror the experience of Ambler; on the other, a curious onlooker could merely observe. It was common to have varying levels of participation in antebellum religious participation. Evangelical camp meetings attracted the devout as well as curious onlookers and those who came to enjoy a social event. In the evangelical camps, leaders tried to pressure onlookers to fully participate in the enthusiastic elements of the faith. With the Spiritualists this was optional. The ability to remain on the sidelines held a special appeal to men who would not want to be seen as losing control. It is interesting that Spiritualists began to incorporate elements of the camp meeting as evangelicals started to distance themselves from the practice.

Spiritualism afforded its practitioners a great deal of intellectual freedom because the movement never developed a common systematic worldview or theology. In addition to freedom, it also provided mediums instant access to hitherto unrecognized authorities. As a result, aspiring theologian-philosophers could explore a virtually unlimited range of concepts without being expected to conform to the standards of any particular denomination or discipline. This intellectual flexibility allowed men such as Ambler to combine mutually exclusive religious ideals and

concepts. Spiritualism's heterodoxy allowed it to flourish as it cut out internal disputes about doctrinal points, and spared adherents the intellectual labor of trying to assemble a coherent theological system. One might interpret this toleration of non-sequiturs and logical contradictions as signs of intellectual weakness, but it served Spiritualists well by allowing their thoughts to be as haphazard as the realities of life experience.

Ambler criticized the majority of religious institutions who enforced strict creeds that did not reconcile themselves to peoples' experiences and advances in knowledge. He believed such churches made efforts towards the "suppression or perversion of all truths in natural or spiritual philosophy that do not strictly harmonize with the teachings of the creed, and the preconceived views of its sectarian supporters."²⁹ He declares that Spiritualists on the other hand have "burst asunder the straight-jackets of creeds in search of higher truths."³⁰ He intended to use his independent paper *The Spirit Messenger* as an outlet for "honest inquirers after truth" to "express their thoughts."³¹ He boasted that "We are bound to no sect or creed, holding our opinions, at all times, subject to the reversal that the discovery of new truths may demand."³²

Ambler and other Spiritualists wanted open discourse that could advance human understanding of natural and philosophical science. *The Spirit Messenger* columns were boasted to be "open as the medium through which the thoughts of all unfettered minds

²⁹ R. P. Ambler and Apollos Mun *Spiritual Messenger* Vol , No 1 pg 4 Springfield Mass August 10, 1850 "Introductory"

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

may flow.”³³ The editors adopted the motto “Brethren, fear not; for Error is mortal and cannot live, and Truth is immortal and cannot die.”³⁴ By publishing the free thoughts of correspondents, ‘without fear’ the editors encouraged correspondence to strike new intellectual territory and to take risks. The prevailing assumption was that if an article that was printed contained untruth, the untrue part of it would die and have no negative impact, while the truth would live and exert a positive moral influence on the readership.

One of the great draws of Spiritualism was that it allowed men a direct connection to an authoritative source of wisdom and afforded great latitude for intellectual exploration. With a direct line to spiritual enlightenment, young men no longer needed to immerse themselves in the study of religious, historical, and philosophical texts hitherto esteemed as authoritative. The spirits mock the concept that wisdom can be “attained by the profound study of ancient books, by poring over antiquated doctrines and theories, and by introducing into the chambers of the mind the rubbish which the learned of the past ages have been engaged in collecting.”³⁵ The spirits condemned traditional routes of study as being “stagnant, and dead and worthless” when judged against “the beauty and grandeur of the wisdom which resides in the spiritual world.”³⁶ The spirits maintain that there is a true wisdom which “is the

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ R. P. Ambler and Apollos Mun *Spiritual Messenger* Vol , No 1 pg 5 Springfield Mass August 10, 1850 “Our Motto”

³⁵ Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher*, 13.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

wisdom of God” that “rests upon the eternal mind.”³⁷ Having a direct line to the mind of God had many benefits for young men who aspired to be religious leaders, not the least of which was that it released them from the need for deep study and allowed them to instantly become authorities on any subject.

The circumvention of traditional study for religious leaders was not unprecedented in the antebellum period or unique to Spiritualists. Methodists, for example, were famous for opening the pulpit to young men without a formal education. These men used vernacular language, humor, and skills in the pulpit, widening their appeal to the ordinary classes of Americans from which they sprung.³⁸ It is difficult to gauge if the de-emphasis on formal education in Spiritualism helped to grow the movement in the same way that it bolstered Methodism, especially considering that many of the most prominent Spiritualists were already educated by the time they began focusing energies on the new movement.

The direct connection to spiritual authority served to embolden Spiritualists in their arguments against established theologians, philosophers, and scientists. Spiritualists held established authorities responsible for social injustice arguing that worldly wisdom “brings crime, and war, and inequality,” and “causes all the evils that are felt and endured by the mass.”³⁹ Reform-minded converts to Spiritualism could be energized by learning that false wisdom and poor moral teaching were to blame for the

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁸ John H. Wigger. *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998) 5.

³⁹ Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher*, 16.

harsh economic realities of an emerging industrial economy and the brutalities of slavery. Temperance reformers were quick to blame alcohol and other vices for precipitating the economic downfall of individuals. Ambler and the spirits extend what is defined as vice and condemn biblically based religion, capitalism, and the slave system as predicated failure in America.

Embracing the Spiritualist world view gave hope that the “wisdom which delights in the oppression of the poor, in the suffering of the needy, in the wails of the broken-hearted, in the sighs of the sorrowing, and in the tears of the mourner” could be overcome by spiritual education.⁴⁰ In part this may help to explain both the rapid rise and rapid decline of Spiritualism. Early on Spiritualists could imagine their new faith being an engine for reform. However, as their various reform movements struggled to achieve their aims, and the arguments of spiritual authority came to be dismissed, the initial energy provided by these arguments about worldly wisdom waned and with it the movement lost its influence.

In Ambler’s lectures about happiness and wisdom, the spirits present a very low view of human nature, understanding, and institutions. They, however, present a wildly contradictory view in their discussion of the human spirit. The author opens the chapter “Nature of the Human Spirit” by explaining that mankind “has no realizing sense of the brightness and purity of that interior spirit which is the image of the ‘residing Mind.’”⁴¹ Likewise, humanity “has no just thought of the beauty of that inward mirror which

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher*, 22.

reflects the countenance of Deity.”⁴² The spirits revealed to Ambler the “intrinsic purity and sacredness of the inward being” and praised the intrinsic goodness of all mankind. Impressed by the goodness of the human soul, the spirits insist that the “internal consciousness of individuals” is “the only safe and reliable guide of human thought and action.”⁴³

Ambler’s spirits maintain views of humanity’s intrinsic moral worth, or lack thereof, which are logically irreconcilable. The spirits attempt to bridge the gap by arguing that the human spirit is incorruptible and remains pure no matter the actions of its host or the worldly circumstances that surround it. In this interpretation the soul is a seed that is hosted in the body and will blossom into an “immortal flower” at death.⁴⁴ This presentation of the relationship between the body and the soul is problematic and poorly developed. To accept it as presented, the reader must first assume that this world and this life have no tangible influence on the development or state of the soul, an idea elsewhere contradicted by the narrative of moral corruption and degradation and a separate narrative of moral progress.

While these contradictions are problematic from an intellectual point of view, historians can begin to understand why Spiritualists embraced these contradictions when emotional aspects of religious experiences are considered. The enthusiastic religious world of the Burned-over District and the exertions of Methodist circuit riders provide a context for the analysis of Spiritualist religious experience. The revival cycle in

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

the Burned-over District pushed the converted as well as the faithful to new heights of emotionalism before letting them down into periods of emotional burnout which contributed to “back sliding.” Likewise, the circuit riders, charged with conviction and feelings of purpose, pushed their bodies so hard that they often fell ill before breaking to recover, making the sickly minister a well-known caricature. Riders who did not break for their health often perished as a result. Spiritualist experience presented a wide range of emotional experiences to its practitioners. Ambler’s spirits explain the wide range of emotive experience and energy levels, experienced when souls who are still contained within earthly bodies attempt to probe the depth of spiritual knowledge.

When the mind searches for that which is thus beyond its reach, it becomes faint and weary because it can find no resting place on the plane of sensuous being; it soars away into the heavens by the aid of strength and of excited fancy, but returns with tired and drooping wing, and mourns that it is dark, and blind, and weak.⁴⁵

The above passage represents an emotional boom and bust cycle familiar to religious people and common to many creatively minded individuals of the era.⁴⁶ With this in mind, the historian can understand why the logical contradictions were embraced by Spiritualists. On an emotional level, Spiritualists needed hope and faith in the beauty of the human spirit as much as they needed a belief system that would allow them to descend into bitterness and resentment when coming down off of the emotional roller coaster highs of spiritual experience.

⁴⁵ Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher*, 23.

⁴⁶ E. Anthony Rotundo. *American Manhood, Transformations in Masculinity for the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993) 185-193.

Adherents to Spiritualism saw no need to develop a systematic theology of Spiritualism, and as a result practitioners could hold on to conflicting religious ideals without being confronted by the logical impossibility of reconciling those views. The fact that they did not have to reconcile their views to fit existing theological systems, the Bible, or even other Spiritualist teachings allowed intellectual creativity to flourish. The license for unbounded creativity in the new belief system encouraged Spiritualists to write continuously, and allowed them to find satisfaction in the creative process. Ambler, for example, published a biweekly journal called *The Spirit Messenger* from 1850-1853 and published two books in that time, while also working as a lecturer. One could argue that his prose style suffered in his haste to publish. Ambler makes plain the excitement and edification he feels during the process of composition in the introduction to *The Spiritual Teacher*.

The intellectual freedom afforded by Spiritualism also allowed for a faith that could tolerate the coexistence of premillennial and postmillennial viewpoints. These contradictory, and mutually exclusive, interpretations of scripture inspired nineteenth-century Christians to very different ends. Postmillennialists believed that human efforts could bring about moral and societal improvements that would eventually create a perfect society and prepare the way for the return of Jesus Christ. This view inspired religious people to drive many of the moral reform efforts of the century. Premillennialists advocated the view that the human race was incapable of improving itself and that only after the return of Jesus Christ would a perfect society come into

being. Individuals who embraced this view lived in hope of receiving an infusion of supernatural aid that would counter the corruption of man.⁴⁷

Spiritualists allowed Postmillennialists to inspire their reform movements and also embraced the moral pessimism of Premillennialists. Thus Spiritualists enjoyed the energizing optimism of Postmillennialism, but could also rationalize despair for the corrupt nature of humanity and society. This is another logical contradiction that Spiritualists were content to overlook. As with their conflicting notions of original sin, the lack of theological consistency among Spiritualists allowed for followers to content themselves with conflicting worldviews and provided rest from doctrinal debates.⁴⁸

In the first lecture “Address to the World,” the spirits describe the world as a morally dark place where the “soul has been sunk for ages” and the “race has groped with no guide but the feeble light of earthly wisdom.”⁴⁹ This hopeless world concept was a familiar one for antebellum Americans. Joseph Smith, William Miller, and other religious leaders built strong followings on the assumption that the world was broken and morally bankrupt, needing new directions and sources of authority. Joseph Smith, after receiving divine revelation and recording it in the book of Mormon, led his followers in a retreat from corrupted society that took them farther and farther west until they eventually settled in Utah with the hopes of creating a holy civilization that

⁴⁷ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*. (Oxford University Press, 2009) 285.

⁴⁸ Carroll *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 102.

⁴⁹ Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher*, 2.

did not depend on corrupted worldly society.⁵⁰ For Smith, as well as the Spiritualists, the new moral authority came from direct encounters with the supernatural.

While being metaphysical in its emphasis on enlightenment from beyond the grave, Spiritualists also spoke the language of the millennialists. The spirits wrote that “the great world is awakening to its glorious destiny” and that the angels taking control of the world “will cause the tears of men to flow not more” and “turn the doleful cries of suffering into the anthem of universal joy.”⁵¹ They also “praise the brightness of the spiritual Era.”⁵² The result of this awakening for Spiritualists is that “life shall breathe out as sweet incense unto god.”⁵³ All of this imagery is written in the language of evangelical awakening and ultimate salvation. With this in mind, we can see how the spirits appealed to Americans by speaking a familiar religious language, while at the same time offering a new religious product.

Spiritualism appealed to men who were deeply dissatisfied with the state of their society. Ambler’s spirits argued that the evils experienced by men were the result of “wrong institutions, the unwise regulations, and the perverting influences of existing society.”⁵⁴ For Spiritualists reform was inevitable. When discussing the positive changes that they will bring, the spirits assure Ambler and his readers that “none shall be able to

⁵⁰ Howe, 312-319 and 723-731

⁵¹ Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher*, 2.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵³ Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher*, 3.

⁵⁴ Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher*, 20.

stay its progress or arrest its triumph.”⁵⁵ With this assurance the reform minded faithful in the Spiritualist camp could continue to labor energized with hope and expectancy.

Carroll notes that Spiritualists have a low estimation of the individual’s moral capacity. He argues that “they sometimes sounded almost Calvinistic in suggesting that the people of earth were incapable of improving themselves and required help.”⁵⁶

Ambler’s spirits prove this argument when they speak of people “pursing nothing but gratification of their own selfish passions and desires.”⁵⁷ They provide another example when discussing “an absence of all hope – an utter desolation of the spirit—a state of terrible and unbroken darkness.”⁵⁸ This discussion of religious darkness preceded Ambler’s release of control to the spirits after which the spirits “obtained control of the physical system of their medium.”⁵⁹ This description is roughly congruous with the Calvinistic recognition of depravity before a new believer acknowledges God’s control over every aspect of his life. The main difference for Ambler’s experience with the spirits is that they returned control to him when he completed the task they requested of him.

The agency that is returned to the medium appears limited, however, as elsewhere the spirits explain that “angels have now gained a strong and irresistible control over the world, and they have decided to accomplish the purpose which they have conceived.”⁶⁰ Carroll believes that this predilection for predestination among Spiritualists was born from their feelings of inadequacy and inability to affect the types

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵⁶ Carroll *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 101.

⁵⁷ Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher*, 5.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶⁰ Ambler, *The Spiritual Teacher*, 3.

of social change they envisioned. Carroll's interpretation merits consideration but does not seem to match all the facts. Spiritualists were too energetic in their travels, speaking, public appearances, and publications for their faith to merely "serve as a failure mechanism for its adherents."⁶¹ Surely partial truth exists in Carroll's argument as all religions can be viewed as providing comfort to believers, but Spiritualism was no opiate. Spiritualists may frequently have been soothed by the belief that spirits approved of and encouraged their work and that the work had already been completed in the afterlife, but they were also energized by their Spiritual encounters.

Spiritualists' low estimation of human morality must be combined with their narrative of moral progress if we are to understand one of the strong pulls to Spiritualism. People could be both Calvinistic and democratic. Carroll notes that Spiritualism "Constituted a combination of two religious moods often postulated as opposing and mutually exclusive categories in analyses of antebellum culture."⁶² He points out how Spiritualists were at once optimistic and postmillennial, assuming the "human being to be capable of contributing through their efforts to the gradual achievement of the perfect society or millennium prophesied in the Bible," and pessimistic and premillennial, assuming the human race to be "incapable of substantially improving the world" without "imminent infusions of supramundane aid to reach the millennial state."⁶³ Spiritualism afforded followers a faith that did not require them to make tough-minded decisions between valid interpretations of a text. Coherent

⁶¹ Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 103.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 102.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 102.

intellectual rigor was simply not required. To many people this simple fact could serve as a comfort as they were neither required to pay lip service to theological constructs they did not understand, nor to attempt to comprehend obscure doctrinal points.

Regardless of whether the intellectual freedom enjoyed by Spiritualists was employed to attack existing institutions, reform society, or allow people to reconcile themselves to their own acceptance of contradictory doctrines, Spiritualism ultimately empowered its followers to be comfortable with their own beliefs and assumptions. It provided them a source of authority that was relevant to their needs and flexible enough to accommodate a variety of viewpoints. This source of authority was also open to all, as it required no special training or education to become a medium. The tendency to heterodoxy within the Spiritualist movement appealed to believers who had enjoyed the ecumenical mindset that was common early in the Second Great Awakening, but which had begun to wane by the late 1840s when Spiritualism began its rise in popularity.

While some evangelicals recoiled from the claims made by Spiritualists, others were fascinated, and their exploration was made easy by Spiritualist leaders who invoked evangelical language and held no fixed standards of doctrine. This freedom appealed to most individuals from faith traditions that did not emphasize doctrinal unity, and also to those reformers who rejected the conventional views on reform issues such as slavery and woman's rights.

Spiritualism provided antebellum Americans with a form of religious expression that advocated for the rights of women and encouraged considerable, but limited,

advancement for its female practitioners. For men the movement provided an escape from gender norms and an alternative form of male identity, as well as a great deal of freedom for the exploration of moral and religious ideas and sentiments. While some evangelicals recoiled from the claims made by Spiritualists, others were fascinated, and their exploration was made easy by Spiritualist leaders who invoked evangelical language and held no fixed standards of doctrine. This freedom appealed to most individuals from faith traditions that did not emphasize doctrinal unity, and also to those reformers who rejected the conventional views on reform issues such as slavery and woman's rights.

The movement enjoyed a brief but strong appeal before the Civil War, but was not successful in coalescing into a sustained movement afterwards. The great deal of intellectual freedom enjoyed by Spiritualists likely made it difficult for the movement to consolidate itself in a meaningful and lasting way. Efforts to perpetuate the movement were also troubled by frequent (and sometimes well founded) charges of charlatanism. While the portrait of American Spiritualism, through the combined efforts of several historians, has been complicated considerably since Ann Braude brought the movement out of the historiographical back pages, it remains a movement that, in her words, can "illuminate the elusive connections between religious and political radicalism in American culture."⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 4.

Epilogue

Spiritualism faced challenges after the Civil War that lead to major changes in the character of the movement. Ann Braude argues that “the paradoxes and tensions within Spiritualism” finally came to a point in the 1870s and 1880s.¹ She points to the debates surrounding efforts to organize the movement as precipitating irreconcilable conflict. In this conflict female trance speakers typically opposed organization while male leaders and some female mediums, “who had the same leadership qualities as men,” pushed for it.² She argues that “the debate took place in a men’s arena, and their position triumphed.”³ According to Braude by the 1870s and 1880s male opportunism led to the “suppression of women within its (Spiritualisms) own ranks.”⁴ She acknowledges that the roots of this suppression could be traced back to the 1850s. It is my contention that this suppression was much more active in that period than Braude implies. While acknowledging Braude’s argument about how the debates around organization divided the movement, Brett Carroll argues that “Antebellum Spiritualist who watched the evolution of their movement in the latter decades of the nineteenth

¹ Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 163.

² *Ibid.*, 167

³ *Ibid.*, 166

⁴ *Ibid.*, 163

century seemed less concerned with its intensifying organizational thrust than with the growing dominance of sensational mediumship over religious ideology.”⁵

My research reinforces Brett Carroll’s observations about post-Civil War Spiritualists being less concerned with masculine impulses towards organization than then they were about the popularity of sensational mediumship. I have found that, virtually from the beginning of the movement, men cast themselves as interpreters and controllers of female mediums. Men also used their control of the Spiritualist press to control much of the discourse about the meaning of Spiritualism and its philosophy. In early efforts to organize, men invoked masculine prerogatives and framed debates in masculine terms that by implication excluded women.

Spiritualist men also found ways to use their new faith as well as the experience of mediumship to define and display their masculinity. Their use of Spiritualist experience to reinforce notions of manly control, mastery, and virtue laid the groundwork for further assertions of male prerogatives in the post war era. The intellectual freedom and heterodoxy enjoyed by Spiritualists in the 1850s also set the stage for the battles over belief and religious authority that would rend the movement in the 1870s and 1880s. Examining the roles that men and masculine identity played in shaping antebellum Spiritualist practice strengthens Carroll’s assertion that sensational mediumship had the greatest impact on the growing dissatisfaction of first-generation Spiritualists later in the century. It was the popularity of sensational mediumship that

⁵ Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 1. 178

separated post-Civil War Spiritualism from its antebellum counterpart, not actions of men who sought to control and marginalize women within the movement.

It was sensational mediumship that attracted later adherents to Spiritualism. Mary Todd Lincoln is probably the most well known in this group. Biographer Jean Harvey Baker speculates that Mary Todd was “attracted to the sensual atmosphere of the séance room.”⁶ Baker also explains that Mary Todd became fascinated with the “chilling melodramatic fiction of spiritualism” that was “full of eerie effects and victims to be rescued.”⁷ Mary Todd’s Spiritualist experience was rooted more in sensationalism and an emotional need to connect with deceased loved ones than the ethos of scientific inquiry. This set her apart from the Spiritualists who were at the heart of the movement in 1850s. It should also be noted that, while she may be the most well-known individual to dabble in spiritualism in the post-Civil War era, she is not representative of the movement in the fact that her spiritualist experiences seemed to be rather dark and painful, while many spiritualists in the 1870s and 1880s looked to spiritualism as an enjoyable form of diversion.

The debates over organization as well as growing dissatisfaction with the carnival atmosphere that increasingly surrounded Spiritualists meetings, contributed to the defections of many of the most prominent antebellum Spiritualists. Ambler left the movement altogether and Samuel Brittan’s engagement with the movement declined as he bemoaned the lack of seriousness at Spiritualist events. Scandals involving prominent

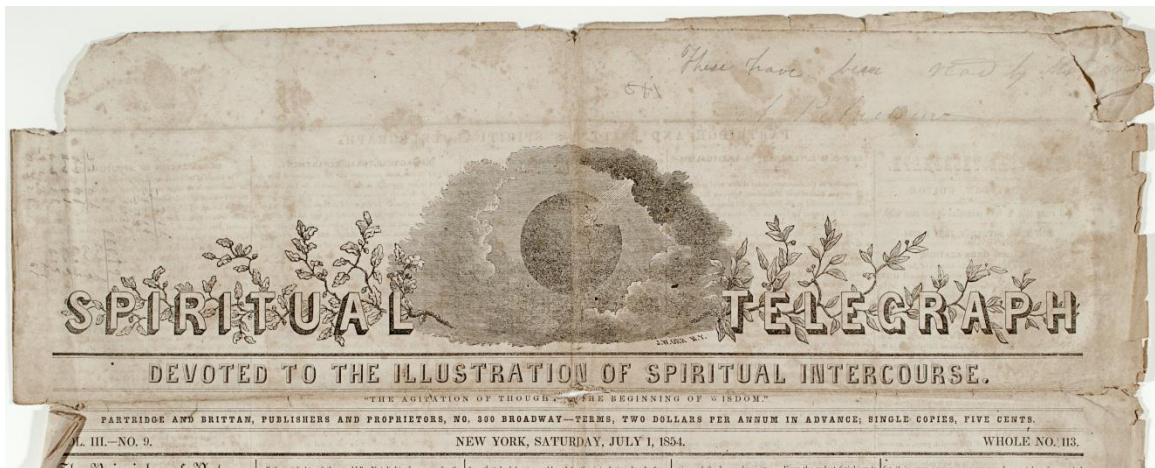
⁶ Baker, Jean Harvey. *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 221.

⁷ Baker., 291.

spiritual communicators also damaged the general public's view of spiritualism.

Spiritualism continued to survive and even enjoyed resurgence in the 1880s. However, it might be best to think of the late nineteenth century version of the movement as 'spiritualism' rather than 'Spiritualism' since it came to be more a form of entertainment than a religious movement.

Appendix



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