

Occult City: Alternative Spiritualities in an American Metropolis 1880-1940

I want to write a major book on America's alternative religious traditions as they were manifested in one key metropolitan area - namely, Philadelphia - during what I have called the first New Age, c.1880-1940. This project grows naturally out of research that I have undertaken over the last decade or so, and which I presented in my book *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History* (Oxford University Press, 2000). In this work, I traced the development of alternative religious traditions (occult, mystical, esoteric, theosophical, metaphysical, communitarian) through American history from colonial times to the present. So abundant was the evidence for such ideas and movements that, in the American context, it is difficult to see these themes as truly alternative or deviant: instead, they should be seen as significant and enduring themes in the nation's religious story. At different times and places, such "fringe" ideas can even be seen as mainstream.

Nor can esoteric religion be seen as a social or intellectual backwater, in which we find only the intellectually or socially marginalized. Recent scholarship on movements like Spiritualism and New Thought has powerfully suggested that these intellectual currents did much to popularize and assimilate new scientific and psychological insights into the social mainstream. This was especially true of evolutionary thought. In presenting spiritual and religious ideas in a heavily feminized form – and in sects commonly led by entrepreneurial women - these groups were critical in shifting gender attitudes during the era of suffrage reform.

When researching *Mystics and Messiahs*, I became aware of some substantial lacunae in research on alternative religions. Much of the extant work might be described as linear, in that it traces the activities of particular individuals or movements over time. We have virtually no cross-sectional studies that explore the whole range of new and fringe religions as they existed in a particular time and place. The failure to examine alternative religions in their broader social setting inevitably results in a limited and partial account of the phenomenon. Members of fringe religions tend to be active simultaneously in numerous different strands and groups. Martin Marty has written of one very influential religious and political activist of the 1930s, William Dudley Pelley, that he dabbled with "so many movements that [he] seemed a fictional creation: Christian Science, atheism, Rosicrucianism, Theosophy, New Thought, Spiritualism, Darwinism, the occult, the Great Pyramid, telepathy, sexology, metaphysics, Emersonianism, more of conventional Christianity than he or his enemies recognized, and science of the sort later associated with extra-sensory perception." If we were just to study Pelley (for example) in terms of his links with one of these movements, we would fail to see the larger alternative ambience, what social scientists have termed the "cult milieu".

Some of these "cult milieux" are well-known – we think of California in the 1970s, or mid-Victorian Boston. In this study, however, I propose to focus on a different but nevertheless very significant period of religious and cultural history, namely the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Between 1880 and 1940, the United States experienced a "first New Age", an upsurge of fringe religions quite comparable to the better-known boom of the 1970s. The very term "New Age" first gained currency at the end of the nineteenth century, to characterize this burgeoning social reality. This was the era in which Asian religions first made a mass impact on the American consciousness, the first age of

public fascination with gurus, reincarnation and yoga. Some movements applied modern techniques of mass marketing to the dissemination of New Age thought, and entrepreneurs made fortunes from peddling ersatz religions like Psychiana and Mighty I AM.

Several cities or communities would offer valuable case-studies for examining this era, but Philadelphia has major advantages. It was a large urban center, the nation's third city through most of this period, and apart from New York and perhaps Boston, it could claim national pre-eminence in cultural activity and publishing. The city has a lengthy connection with the occult, and is even the setting of two landmark works of early national literature that explore alternative religious ideas, namely Charles Brockden Brown's Wieland (1798), and George Lippard's Quaker City (1844-45). At least from the mid-nineteenth century, Philadelphia had an intensely active spiritualist milieu, from which many of the later groups evolved.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Philadelphia was as critical a center of alternative religious activity as Boston or New York, and remained so until all these Eastern centers were gradually overshadowed by the emergence of Los Angeles from about 1920. Even a cursory examination of the city's newspapers demonstrates the huge popularity of metaphysical churches and temples, as well as of sects like Mighty I AM. During the 1920s and 1930s, occult and astrological groups provided a political foundation on which fascist and anti-Semitic agitators were able to develop political movements like the Silver Shirts. Philadelphia was also central for African-American sects that closely paralleled the mainly white metaphysical groups, including the operations of the legendary Father Divine.

I will use a case-study approach in order to illuminate a crucial and massively understudied era in American religious history. My overall goal is not only to describe the various movements, but to assess the scale and significance of the alternative religious world in one crucial city during a time of intense enthusiasm and activism, and to explore the impact of these ideas on the wider social, cultural and political environment. My working hypothesis, which requires confirmation, is that I will find strong linkages between the esoteric movements and some of the city's key elite groups, and especially its reformist circles. I would expect this because of the powerful evolutionary and feminist themes popularized by esoteric thought, and the central role of those ideas in the Progressivism and liberalism of the period. I will especially be looking for evidence of connections with reform movements like the insurgent Keystone Party that gathered around Theodore Roosevelt's presidential campaign of 1912, and which remained the core of liberal political activism in city and state through the political dominance of Gifford Pinchot during the 1920s and 1930s. I would expect to find strong connections with the related suffrage and temperance movements of these same years.

My argument is that in this area particularly, the "fringe" is anything but marginal, and that these esoteric ideas and networks are an essential aspect of the region's cultural and intellectual life. I will also argue that these ideas were not merely incidental pastimes, but rather motivated and shaped social and political activism. A subsidiary theme would be to study the reasons for the mass popularity of the esoteric groups, and the commercial means by which they were marketed during what was in many fields a revolutionary age for advertising and consumer culture. Studying newspaper and radio advertisements would be particularly useful in this respect.

This would be an authentically pioneering work, and one that I think would have a wide influence on the scholarly literature. I believe my project is feasible given my extensive background in research and publishing on the religious setting (Mystics and Messiahs) but also on the Philadelphia region itself (Hoods and Shirts, and The Cold War At Home.)

Sources and Methods

My first goal would be to identify the major religious and spiritual organizations active in the Philadelphia region in the period in question, and here, I have an excellent resource in the form of the Surveys of Religious Bodies undertaken by the US Census Bureau in 1890, 1906, 1916, 1926 and 1936. These studies are far from complete or comprehensive: they underestimate certain groups, especially African-Americans, and they only count committed members of the various groups, rather than the large penumbra of interested associates. Nevertheless, the Philadelphia census reports of these years provide an excellent starting point. They also include interesting information about “occult occupations” to which people admit, including mediums, spiritual healers and homeopaths. I will then sample local newspaper materials, especially the weekend advertisements for religious services, which (based on my past use of these resources) indicate a bewildering array of small sects, churches, shrines and temples.

Once I have sketched the various groups and organizations, I will then be able to explore their history through their own records, and from accounts of them by contemporary observers, whether journalists or sociologists. Since Philadelphia is the center for so many academic institutions, such accounts abound, and the University of Pennsylvania alone produced a number of important contemporary doctorates surveying the area’s alternative religious scene. One of the best books ever written on fringe African-American religions, Black Gods of the Metropolis (1944) evolved from a doctoral thesis at Penn.

My earlier work in Pennsylvania history has given me an excellent acquaintance with local archival resources. By far the most significant is the Urban Archives at Temple, which inter alia includes the “morgues” (catalogued clippings files) of several now defunct local newspapers. Investigations of local “cults” were especially intensive during eras of scandal, which proliferated during the 1930s. In Philadelphia, this was the era of exposés of the Mighty I AM movement, and of the plebeian underworlds of Jewish and Italian sorcerers and folk-magicians. In terms of examining the records of individual movements, I would have access to national archives like National Center of the American Theosophical Society, in Wheaton, IL. I would find local Philadelphia records at Temple University, the Balch Library for Ethnic Studies, the Free Library, the Pennsylvania Historical Society, or any one of a number of different repositories where I have worked extensively in the past.

The second stage of my work would be prosopographical – and again, this would be an innovative approach to the study of America’s new and fringe religions. By examining the leading figures in the various movements under discussion, I would study their social and educational backgrounds and career structures, wealth and social status, political and cultural affiliations, their social and political networks. My initial hypothesis – based on my earlier work - is that I will find massive overlap in the leadership and grassroots membership of the various movements, that individual X was quite as prolific in his or her affiliations as William Dudley Pelley, cited earlier. Through such a network analysis, I would hope to identify the major figures in the city’s alternative religious culture. Themes I would hope to address include their participation in political parties, pressure groups and other social movements (especially women’s movements), and their adherence to mainstream churches and religious organizations.

I would very much like to relate changes in the esoteric movements to overall patterns of religious involvement and participation, but at this stage, I honestly do not know how successful I would be in assessing the numerical impact of the alternative religious world. One key problem is the promiscuous joining of organizations and causes, which

raises many problems for studying the membership rolls of particular groups, and consequently their social impact. If one sect claims five thousand members, while another group claims ten thousand, we cannot simply argue from addition that occult ideas are reaching fifteen thousand Philadelphians, since the two movements may well have a substantial overlap of members. Many fascinated by the alternative religions world never have actually joined groups, and instead grazed the materials of mail-order movements like Psychiana. I would however hope to find reliable figures for the core memberships of lasting and stable alternative movements like Theosophy and the New Thought sects, and would also note attendance for “spectacular” public events like those presented by Mighty I AM. This would give an upper figure for the degree of public interest. But while I will use what quantitative evidence is available, I have a healthy skepticism about the precise limits of what the data can show.

As noted above, the great majority of the sources needed to undertake this project are located within the state of Pennsylvania, though some national archives are to be found in Washington, New York, or Chicago.

The proposed research fits very well into current areas of historical interest in its stress on the significance of America’s alternative religions, and the need to situate them in a social and cultural context. It especially meets the call by scholars like Thomas Tweed and R. Laurence Moore to retell America’s religious history from the point of view of the minorities, the outsiders. The immense range of works touching on these areas may be glimpsed from the extensive bibliography of my Mystics and Messiahs. The sheer volume of contemporary publication is daunting. Having said this, nothing really parallels my proposed study. Some books on alternative religions focus on a key individual: see Gillian Gill’s Mary Baker Eddy (Reading, Mass: Perseus Books, 1998) or John P. Deveney’s Paschal Beverly Randolph (State University of New York Press, 1997). Other books study movements or trends. Major examples of this genre include James Harvey Young, The Medical Messiahs (Princeton University Press, 1992); Thomas A. Tweed and Stephen Prothero, ed., Asian Religions in America (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999); Beryl Satter, Each Mind a Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement, 1875-1920 (University of California Press, 1999), or Catherine Tumber’s American Feminism and the Birth of New Age Spirituality : Searching for the Higher Self, 1875-1915 (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002). But to reiterate, no case-study presently exists of alternative religions in a particular region, state or city. There is presently no cross-sectional approach of the whole range of such movements in a particular era. The closest would be Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz, The Kingdom of Matthias (Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), which explores the esoteric underworlds of antebellum New York City.

Reviewers praised my Mystics and Messiahs as an innovative and influential reformulation of the study of new religions. I believe that the proposed book, Occult City, would in a somewhat different way be just as important.