

**"SCIENCE" AND SPIRITUAL VIBRATIONS**

**"SCIENCE" AND SPIRITUAL VIBRATIONS:  
CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALISM AND THE DISCOURSE OF SCIENCE**

**By**

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## Abstract

Spiritualism is a religious movement based on communication with the spirits of the dead that originated in New York State in 1848. From its inception, members of the movement claimed that communication with the spirits of the dead was not only a possibility, but was in fact "scientifically" verifiable. Attempts were made throughout the nineteenth century to establish the "truth" of Spiritualist claims to scientific legitimacy. Although there are no longer any overt connections between Spiritualism and the scientific establishment, contemporary Spiritualists continue to insist that their beliefs are in accord with "science." Drawing upon fieldwork with contemporary Spiritualists in Hamilton, Ontario and Lily Dale, New York, this dissertation argues that scientific language and symbols have been incorporated into contemporary Spiritualist discourse to articulate and legitimate the claim that Spiritualist experiences are "true" in a "scientific," empirical sense. An examination of Spiritualist healing, mediumship and narrative practice reveals the extent to which the discourse of "science" has become the means by which the "reality" and "truth" of Spiritualist beliefs are affirmed. In articulating the "truth" of Spiritualist experience and the "reality" of the spirit hypothesis, the language and symbols of science are transformed into a sacred discourse that at once legitimates and affirms Spiritualist beliefs while simultaneously criticizing the "narrow" limits of orthodox science. For many contemporary Spiritualists, "science" has become the language in which religious truth claims are expressed.

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### Introduction: "Science" and Spiritual Vibrations

*We tend to understand things in a "science" kind of way. So Spirit explains things that way, so we'll understand. - Sherry.*

Messerschmidt (1981) has argued that doing anthropology "at home" often challenges a researcher to look at seemingly familiar settings in a new light. Words, actions, and assumptions about the world reveal subtle and often disorienting shifts in meaning within contexts that are *almost*, but not *exactly*, like those to which the researcher is accustomed. In choosing contemporary Spiritualism as the subject of my dissertation research, I was in one respect very much choosing to do anthropology "at home." Raised as a child on a steady diet of stories about my great-grandmother, a Spiritualist medium, I had known all of my life that there were people in the world who talked to the spirits of the dead as a matter of course. As teenagers are sometimes inclined to do, I even dabbled for a few years with ouija boards and tarot cards, tried for a week to learn "automatic" writing, and once saw a "ghost" at the foot of my bed. Despite these perhaps remarkable experiences, my fascination with Spiritualism has always been and remains today an academic one. When my graduate work reached the point at which a dissertation topic had to be selected, a study of contemporary Spiritualism seemed like an ideal choice. In the course of my research I have benefitted tremendously from my early familiarity with Spiritualist beliefs and practices, and yet as Messerschmidt warns, I also found much that was unexpected, surprising, and occasionally disconcerting. The most unexpected, but in retrospect not surprising

element of contemporary Spiritualism, was the strong presence I found of "scientific" language and symbols within Spiritualists' expressions of belief. It is consequently upon this link between contemporary Spiritualism and the discourse of "science" that the present dissertation is based.

### The Spiritualist Religious Movement

Spiritualism is a religious movement based on communication with the spirits of the dead which originated in New York State in 1848. It spread very rapidly throughout the United States, Canada and Europe. For a few short years, its adherents numbered well over one million people in the United States alone. Membership peaked during the eighteen-fifties, and despite periodic revivals has not achieved these levels in North America since that time (Nelson 1969a). Today there are considerably fewer Spiritualists than at the height of the movement, but there are still approximately 180,000 registered members of Spiritualist churches throughout the United States, with an estimated additional fifteen interested individuals for each registered member (Mead 1985:234-235). In Canada the figures are proportionately less, although exact statistics are unavailable. As Mead himself cautions (1985:235), however, these figures can provide only a general indication of the breadth and continuing vitality of the movement, for they are neither "comprehensive [n]or inclusive of all using the services of the church."

It has been suggested by numerous scholars of Spiritualism that the movement was not unique in the American religious experience either in its "supernatural" emphasis or in its emphasis on the compatibility of science with religion (Macklin 1974a, 1977; Moore 1972, 1974, 1977; Ellwood 1973; Melton 1990, 1992; Nelson 1969a, 1969b,



1988). The experiential emphasis of the movement has roots in the Christian reform traditions of Puritanism, Methodism, and Quakerism, and many of its teachings regarding mediumship and spiritual healing can be traced back to the visionary experiences and philosophical contributions of such figures as Ann Lee, Emmanuel Swedenborg, Anton Mesmer, and Andrew Jackson Davis (Moore 1977; Macklin 1974a, 1977; Nelson 1969a; Melton 1992; Ellwood 1973; Brandon 1983; Braude 1989; Barrow 1986). Sociologist Robert Melton (1992:118) observes that when the movement initially emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, the majority of the American public was nominally Christian yet unaffiliated with any denominational Church. The American people of the time showed a fascination for spiritual, metaphysical and supernatural experiences of all kinds, yet did not express this fascination through denominational affiliation (Melton 1992; Macklin 1974a; Moore 1977). As a result, Victorian-era Americans caught up in the burgeoning Spiritualist religious movement adopted much of the ritual and organizational form of mainstream Protestant Christianity, as the tradition with which they were most familiar, yet kept Spiritualist teachings largely independent of specific Christian doctrine. As Spiritualism developed as a religious movement throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Protestant-informed church services have continued as the vehicle for expressing the primarily liberal, inclusive Spiritualist principles of religious faith (Ellwood 1973; Macklin 1977; Zaretsky 1969, 1970, 1977).

The central core of contemporary Spiritualist doctrine can be found within the "Statement of Principles" recited in unison by church attenders at every Spiritualist service. Although several variations of these basic doctrinal principles are in circulation,

each is drawn from an initial description of Spiritualist faith articulated in the nineteenth century by Spiritualist historian and medium Emma Hardinge Britten (Britten 1957). The currently most widely circulated list of "Principles" is that adopted by the National Spiritualist Association of Churches (N.S.A.C), which defines Spiritualism as "the science, philosophy, and religion of continuous life." The "Declaration of Principles" reads:

1. We believe in Infinite Intelligence.
2. We believe that the phenomena of Nature, both physical and spiritual, are the expression of Infinite Intelligence.
3. We affirm that a correct understanding of such expression and living in accordance therewith, constitute true religion.
4. We affirm that the existence and personal identity of the individual continue after the change called death.
5. We affirm that communication with the so-called dead is a fact, scientifically proven by the phenomena of Spiritualism.
6. We believe that the highest morality is contained in the Golden Rule: "Whatsoever ye would that others should do unto you do ye also unto them."
7. We affirm the moral responsibility of the individual, and that he makes his own happiness or unhappiness as he obeys or disobeys Nature's physical and Spiritual laws.
8. We affirm that the doorway to reformation is never closed against any human soul here or hereafter.
9. We affirm that the precepts of Prophecy and Healing contained in the Bible are Divine attributes proven through Mediumship. (N.S.A.C. 1991:36)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Many Spiritualist churches have adopted lists of principles written in more readily accessible language. Hamilton's King Street Church, for example, recites the following

As the above "Statement of Principles" indicates, Spiritualism teaches a doctrine of immanence, optimism, and personal experience that distinguishes it from Christian orthodoxy in both the nineteenth and twentieth century contexts. As sociologist Robert Ellwood notes (1973:130-140), "the language [of the Principles] tends to be abstract, and omits any reference to Christ or the authority of Christian Scriptures [save for the claim] that Spiritualism is taught in the Bible." The concept of a loving personal God is replaced by an impersonal emphasis on "Infinite Intelligence" and "Natural Law"; this emphasis allows for a wide range of personal conceptions of "Godhood" to be expressed by Spiritualists themselves. The doctrine of original sin is rejected in favour of an affirmation of the essential goodness of mankind; and the Christian concepts of Hell and eternal damnation are replaced with a belief in universal opportunities for spiritual progress. Also rejected is the Christian doctrine of salvation: Spiritualism teaches the individual's own responsibility for personal happiness and spiritual progress. The primary point of departure from Christian teachings, however, lies in the emphasis placed within the "Principles of Spiritualism" on mediumship, or the experience of personal communication with the spirits of the dead. According to Spiritualist belief, communication with the dead is a "fact," "scientifically" proved through the phenomena of Spiritualism. It is primarily this strong emphasis on personal communication with the

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list: 1. The fatherhood of God; 2. The brotherhood of man; 3. The immortality of the soul and its personal characteristics; 4. Communion between departed human spirits and mortals; 5. Personal responsibility; 6. Compensation and retribution for all good and evil deeds done on earth; 7. A path of eternal progress, open to every soul. Hamilton's Main Street Church recites a variation of the above list, with the fourth principle revised as follows: "communion with spirits and the ministry of angels". However, the N.S.A.C. list of principles is also available in pamphlet form in the lobby of each church.

spirits of the dead that sets Spiritualism apart from the Christian environment in which it arose.

Spiritual healing is also considered a "fact" of Spiritualism as proven through mediumship. In addition to the stress placed on mediumship itself, therefore, the emphasis placed on spiritual healing by contemporary Spiritualists is also very significant. The ninth Spiritualist principle of the National Spiritualist Association of Churches explicitly mentions spiritual healing as one manifestation of mediumship. In addition to the group recital of the Spiritualist Principles at every church service, therefore, a recital of a "Healing Affirmation" forms an invariable part of Spiritualist worship services. The "Healing Affirmation" reads:

I ask the Great Unseen Healing Force  
 To Remove All Obstructions  
 From My Mind and Body  
 And to Restore Me to Perfect Health.  
 I ask This in All Sincerity and Honesty,  
 And I Will Do My Part.

I ask This Great Unseen Healing Force  
 To Help Both Present and Absent Ones  
 Who are in need of Help  
 And to Restore Them to Perfect Health.  
 I Put My Trust  
 In the Love and Power of God.(N.S.A.C. 1991:29)

Like the "Principles of Spiritualism," the "Healing Affirmation" is written in abstract terms which allows for a broad range of individual interpretation regarding the nature of the "Unseen Healing Force." The "Healing Affirmation" upholds the possibility of spiritual healing through the power of prayer, and implicitly supports the Spiritualist teaching that an individual is responsible for his or her own ultimate state of

well-being. Although the "Unseen Healing Force" is appealed to for help in healing, the individual is also expected and required to 'do his or her part.' The Affirmation also reinforces the assertion of the second Spiritualist principle that the 'physical' and the 'spiritual' are equally expressions of "Infinite Intelligence," or the Divine. By placing one's love and trust in God, the Affirmation asserts, one can affect the physical world. Both the "Principles of Spiritualism" and the "Healing Affirmation" consequently reveal the strong emphasis placed within Spiritualism on an inclusive, optimistic, spiritistic, and individualistic theology. As anthropologist June Macklin concludes (1974a:404), Spiritualist teachings are ultimately intended to reassure members that they "can transcend the here and now, and death, with spirit help."

### Contemporary Spiritualists

According to sociologist Geoffrey Nelson (1969b:152), there are "two criteria by which a group or individual may be classified as Spiritualist. First, a Spiritualist believes in the survival of the human personality after the death of the physical body, and that that survival can be proven. Second, a Spiritualist believes that it is possible, by various means, to communicate with the spirits of the dead, and joins others to effect or participate in such communication." The defining characteristics of Spiritualism, therefore, are a belief in the existence of spirits, and a belief in and willingness to communicate with them. Because of this emphasis on communication with spirits, it has often been assumed that bereavement is a major motivating factor for those who join the Spiritualist movement (Nelson 1969a; Macklin 1977; Skultans 1974; Braude 1989; Richard and Adato 1980). Sociologist Andrew Greeley (1987:258) has found that there

is a statistically higher percentage of "widowed" (53%) as opposed to non-widowed (41%) individuals who have experienced contact with the dead among the general populace. It might therefore be reasonable to assume that bereavement would draw people to the Spiritualist movement as a means for initiating contact with the spirits of their deceased relatives. Contrary to this assumption, however, bereavement does not appear to be a major factor in motivating Spiritualists to join the movement (Richard and Adato 1980). Within the Spiritualist context the importance of such contact experiences cannot be overestimated, and yet recent bereavement does not appear to influence initial interest in Spiritualism.

Similarly, as a religious faith which offers an alternative healing system, it is frequently assumed that people turn to Spiritualism in search of healing when biomedicine fails (Skultans 1974). However, as sociologist Meredith McGuire (1988:5) found in her study of alternative healing systems throughout North America, illness does not appear to be a factor motivating people to join alternative spiritual groups. Spiritualists are encouraged to make use of spiritual healing once they have joined the movement, but physical illness does not appear to be a motivating factor in their initial involvement (McGuire 1988:131-132).

When I asked the Spiritualists with whom I worked why they had become Spiritualists, I received a range of responses. One response overshadowed all others, however. Most respondents answered that they had found in Spiritualism something missing in the religious systems in which they had been raised: in Spiritualism they had found a context within which their own anomalous experiences "made sense". Most

Spiritualists have experienced "strange" or "unusual" events during their lifetimes which are not adequately accounted for within traditional Christian contexts (Gillen 1987; Nelson 1972). These experiences include a full range of "paranormal" events, from contact with the dead, "miraculous" healing, instances of precognition, clairvoyance, or déjà vu, astral travel and near death experiences. As sociologist John Fox (1992:421) has found, over eighty percent of North Americans generally have experienced some form of paranormal event during their lifetime. Spiritualists are not therefore unusual in their experiences. In joining the Spiritualist movement, however, the importance placed on such personal experiences sets Spiritualists apart from others (Gillen 1987). Personal experiences form the basis of the Spiritualist religious movement.

### The Fieldwork Context

Ethnographic research for this dissertation was conducted from September 1990 to February 1992 with Spiritualists in Hamilton, Ontario and Lily Dale, New York. During the fieldwork period, I attended church services at two Hamilton Spiritualist Churches. I also made five visits to Lily Dale, ranging in length from three to six days each. Further research was conducted through periodic attendance at two Toronto Spiritualist churches. Regular attendance at worship services formed the basis of the dissertation research, but this research has been further augmented by participation in development classes, seminars, and social gatherings. Informal in-depth interviews conducted with thirty-three mediums and healers in Hamilton and Lily Dale, ranging in length from one to four hours each, provided additional insight into contemporary Spiritualist concerns.

### The King Street Church

I began my fieldwork early in September of 1990 at Hamilton's King Street Church.<sup>2</sup> The King Street Church has been operating since the early nineteen eighties. It was founded by a first generation immigrant from England, who had died several years prior to my fieldwork period. The church is affiliated with the Association of Christian Spiritualist Churches of Ontario. It is led by a medium-minister who is also a first generation immigrant from England. The church holds services twice weekly, on Sundays and Wednesdays. Church services always offer healing first, followed by prayers and hymns and a "greeting" in which church members can welcome one another. Further hymns and a lecture or inspired sermon follow the healing session, and then the mediumship or "message-work" displays fill the latter half of the service. Services last from one-and-a-half to three hours each, followed by a coffee-hour social gathering which is attended by the core members of the church.

Attendance at Sunday services normally ranges between twenty and thirty individuals. Wednesday services are referred to as "healing" services, but they follow the same format as Sunday "worship" services. Attendance at Wednesday services normally ranges between fifteen and twenty individuals. Two-thirds of the regular attenders at King Street Church services are female. Over half of the regular attenders are over the age of fifty-five. There are rarely any children present, although arrangements are in place to hold "Lyceum" (Sunday School) classes in the church

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<sup>2</sup> The names of the two Spiritualist Churches have not been included, and their street names have been changed. To protect the privacy of informants, all personal names have also been changed in the dissertation.



basement should members bring children or grandchildren with them. Members are from working class or lower-middle class backgrounds, with largely blue collar, clerical or service-oriented jobs. There are several married couples, but most members are single, divorced, or widowed.

There are four healers who work regularly at the King Street Church, one man and three women. Of these four, only the man works consistently at both Wednesday and Sunday services. The number of mediums who give messages during the mediumship portion of services varies considerably depending upon attendance. However, of those mediums who worked most frequently during the fieldwork period, there were four men and two women. Given the proportion of women to men in the congregation, this is a significant over representation of men within the practice of mediumship at the King Street Church.

### The Main Street Church

In January of 1991, I also began to attend services at Hamilton's Main Street Church. The Main Street Church was founded following the Second World War, and is affiliated with the National Spiritualist Association of Churches of America. The church holds services twice weekly, on Sundays and Tuesdays. I attended only Tuesday "healing" services regularly; until late in the fieldwork period, Sunday services conflicted with those of the King Street Church. Sunday and Tuesday services at the Main Street Church follow the same pattern. Two opening hymns and a prayer are offered, followed by the healing session. More hymns and a lecture follow the healing session. Lectures are offered by the president of the church, by church members, or by visiting lecturers.

After the lecture, the mediumship portion of the service begins. A coffee-hour follows the mediumship display, attended by core members of the congregation.

Regular attendance at Sunday services ranges from twenty to thirty individuals. Two-thirds of the regular attenders are women, and over half are over the age of fifty-five. Most are from working class or lower middle-class backgrounds. I never saw any children in attendance at Hamilton's Main Street Church. Members are almost universally single, widowed or divorced. Regular attendance at Tuesday services ranges from ten to fifteen people. At the Main Street Church, there are two men and two women healers who regularly work. As in the King Street Church, more men than women act as mediums, with three males and two females working regularly. While there is some degree of overlap between members of each church, the congregations are largely independent of one another.

### Lily Dale

Lily Dale is a small village in upper New York State that was founded in 1879 as a Spiritualist community. It has a year round population of two hundred people, which swells to several thousand people during the two month "summer season" of July and August. According to official records, Lily Dale sold sixteen thousand day passes during July and August of 1990, which gives some indication of the popularity of the mediumship and healing services offered at the Dale each summer. The community is oriented totally toward the two month summer season. Indicative of this fact is the presence of two hotels in a community of only one hundred and ninety-eight houses. The community of Lily Dale is dedicated to maintaining its Spiritualist identity: in order to

buy property in the Dale, one must first receive permission from the Lily Dale Assembly. Permission is granted only to those who have been members of a Spiritualist church for more than one year. Lily Dale is depressed economically, with perhaps twenty percent of the houses listed for sale. Residents work outside of Lily Dale, in the nearby communities of Cassadaga, Fredonia, Jamestown, and Buffalo, New York.

Lily Dale has two Spiritualist churches, one affiliated with the National Spiritualist Association of Churches, and the other unaffiliated. The community also has a temple dedicated to healing, and a school for the training of Spiritualist healers. It has a Lyceum school, a non-circulating library with a large collection of works on Spiritualism and related topics, a museum dedicated to Spiritualist history, and serves as the headquarters of the National Spiritualist Association of Churches. I first spent a five-day period in Lily Dale in May of 1991, before the summer season began. I returned four times throughout the summer and fall of 1991. In the off-season, there are approximately a dozen mediums and a smaller number of healers in full-time residence. This number increases to thirty or forty mediums and healers during the summer. While at Lily Dale, I attended development classes in mediumship, and took seminars on diverse topics related to Spiritualism. I stayed in boarding houses and in one of the hotels, and met individuals from almost every American state and Canadian province during my stays. The diversity of backgrounds of full time and part time residents and summer session visitors make generalizations about age, sex, and class difficult. More women than men live in the Dale. Most residents are of retirement age or nearly so. Those residents of working age appear to hold blue collar or service oriented jobs.

### Perspective

In interpreting a religious movement such as Spiritualism, where alternative healing practices and regular contact with the spirits of the dead play a major role, it is necessary to move beyond the immediate question of whether spirits *really* exist, or whether spiritual healing *really* "works". Belief in spirits and spiritual healing "works" for contemporary Spiritualists themselves, and any attempt to impose an external standard of "truth" on Spiritualist claims involves using one belief system to evaluate another. This is not academically justified. Questions of whether spirits exist or physiological healing takes place are consequently irrelevant to the present work. More significant are questions regarding how Spiritualists themselves experience and interpret spiritual healing and contact with the dead, and how they articulate these experiences in meaningful ways. This dissertation is therefore concerned to explore what many Spiritualists mean when they claim that their experiences are compatible with "science". Like the existence of spirits or the effectiveness of healing, the truth of this claim concerning scientific compatibility is not a relevant issue. Of relevance to the dissertation are the ways in which Spiritualists legitimate this claim to scientific compatibility through their articulation of beliefs, and the meaning that this claim carries for Spiritualists themselves.

### The Thesis

The Spiritualist movement has a longstanding history of claims to scientific legitimacy (Moore 1972, 1977). Spiritualists have argued since the nineteenth century that their experiences are in accord with empirical science. Attempts to investigate Spiritualist claims by members of the scientific establishment played a major legitimating

role for nineteenth century Spiritualists (Brandon 1983; Moore 1977; Garrouette 1992, 1993). Since the end of the nineteenth century, however, orthodox scientists have not been concerned to investigate Spiritualist claims (Garrouette 1992). Spiritualists themselves today make no attempt to investigate or study their phenomena through "scientific" means. Any overt connection between Spiritualism and orthodox "science" is therefore no longer apparent.

The present dissertation argues, however, that "science" remains of paramount importance to contemporary Spiritualists, and consequently makes three linked claims. First, the dissertation argues that many contemporary Spiritualists conceive of "science" as "the paradigmatic and so sacral form of knowing" (Gilkey 1987:170). This view of science departs from that of most orthodox scientists themselves (Barnes 1985; Casti 1990; McCain and Segal 1982). For many Spiritualists, "science" is the means by which "facts" about the world are discovered and ontological "reality" is described. Within this conception of "science," any "truth" about the nature of reality must be considered "scientific truth." The Spiritualist perception of what constitutes "science" consequently shapes Spiritualist claims to scientific legitimacy.

Second, the dissertation argues that the discourse of science becomes for some Spiritualists a sacred discourse within which to express their beliefs. The language, symbols and theory of "science" are endemic throughout contemporary Spiritualism. When Spiritualist mediums "see" electromagnetic vibrations, for example, or when Spiritualist healers "heal" through the help of deceased biomedical doctors, they are articulating religious experiences in ways which draw upon the authoritative and

legitimizing function which "science" holds for Spiritualists today. "Science" continues to carry immense prestige for Spiritualists, and the incorporation of scientific language, symbols and theory reflects this importance.

Third, the dissertation argues that when Spiritualists use the language and symbols of "science," when they claim that their beliefs are scientifically legitimate, they are making religious "truth" claims. Many of the Spiritualists with whom I worked insist that their experiences are genuine, that the "spirit hypothesis" of mediumistic contact is an accurate reflection of reality, and that their belief in the efficacy of spiritual healing and the possibility of contact with the spirits of the dead is empirically warranted. These Spiritualists wish to assert that such experiences are "true" in an ontological sense. Consequently, the use of "scientific" language, symbols and theory becomes the means by which "truth" is expressed for many contemporary Spiritualists. Because of this perception of "science" as "fact" or "truth," Spiritualists frequently criticize orthodox scientists for being "unscientific" in their failure to accept the "truth" of Spiritualist claims. Although Spiritualist conceptions of "science" are misconceived from a contemporary orthodox scientific perspective, therefore, complaints by orthodox scientists that Spiritualists cannot possibly *really* see electromagnetic vibrations miss the point of such assertions for Spiritualists. Although Spiritualists use the language of "science," the meaning that such claims carry for Spiritualists is purely religious.

### Significance

There is a considerable body of research available on the relationship between "science" and religion in the Western world. In most instances, however, this literature

is written within a Christian context (Barbour 1990; Brooke 1991; Coulson 1968; Cupitt 1976; Graig 1990; Hovenkamp 1978; Leslie 1988; Lindberg and Numbers 1986; Russell 1973) The issues of importance within the framework of Christian theology and the challenge of science (such as the creation/evolution debate, or the question of relativity as opposed to historical revelation) are of only peripheral relevance in the study of Spiritualism. Similarly, there are several thorough histories which trace the links between Spiritualism and science in a historical context (Bednarowski 1973; Brandon 1983; Garrouette 1993; Moore 1977). These texts are useful for understanding the origins of the Spiritualist stress on scientific legitimacy, but they do not illuminate the importance of "science" for contemporary Spiritualists. There is as yet almost no work available on contemporary Spiritualism and the continuing salience of "science". That the connection between Spiritualism and "science" is important within contemporary Spiritualist perceptions is evident in the very few works by scholars that touch upon this issue (Ellwood 1973; Hess 1993; Macklin 1977; Nelson 1988).

This dissertation therefore offers a significant contribution to scholarship for three reasons. First, it contributes to the body of knowledge available on one form of popular religious expression within the contemporary North American setting. While there is a large volume of literature available on Spiritualism as a historical movement, there is surprisingly little written from an academic standpoint on contemporary North American Spiritualist beliefs. As sociologist George Melton has acknowledged (1992:122), "Spiritualism has been somewhat neglected as the field of new religious studies emerged." The present dissertation therefore begins the process of redressing this

neglect.

Second, the dissertation contributes to the body of research on the subject of religion and science in an area as yet poorly explored. As mentioned, much of the literature on contemporary religion and science in the western world is written within a Christian context. The impact of science on non-Christian popular faith has not been adequately investigated. In exploring the relationship between science and religion in the Spiritualist context, the dissertation illuminates the impact of science on issues of faith beyond those of particular Christian concern.

Third, the dissertation analyzes one religiously ambivalent response to "science" in a popular context. Spiritualists both idealize and criticize "science" as the sole legitimate means of knowing "truth". Exploring this ambivalence can help illuminate larger issues in the study of the relationship between science and religion. An examination of Spiritualists' perceptions of "science" can tell us something about the relationship between religion and science in a broader social context.

### The Organization of the Dissertation

One of the most difficult tasks in writing any anthropologically informed text is deciding which material to include, which to exclude, and how to organize the fragments of recorded personal experience to create a coherent story out of the orderless mass of details collected during research. The final document is ultimately a reflection of the author's perspective, and is not always reflective of emic categorizations or concepts, nor representative of the wide diversity of opinion and experience within any given group. As within any movement, Spiritualism contains a wide diversity of opinion, and no



ethnographic text can adequately represent all of this diversity. There are many Spiritualist voices that are not heard in the following pages. Clifford (1986) argues that an ethnographic text can present only "partial truths," for the strong authoritative voice of the ethnographer frequently overpowers the voices of "indigenous collaborators". No matter how "partial" the "truth" presented in the following dissertation, however, I find myself in a position similar to that of the Spiritualists with whom I worked, in wanting to assert that what I have claimed in these pages is "true" beyond my own subjective, idiosyncratic view. To be of genuine value, a document must partake not only of the ethnographer's interpretation, but of the perceptions of informants as well. The following chapters represent an attempt to portray the views of the Spiritualists with whom I worked, in addition to my own interpretive analysis of the meaning of Spiritualist claims to scientific legitimacy.

Chapter One presents an overview of the relevant literature in the field of Spiritualism and "science". An examination of social constructionist literature from the sociology of science serves to contextualize the usage of the term "science" throughout the dissertation. This discussion is followed by an examination of both emic and etic histories of Spiritualism, and a survey of social-scientific literature relevant to the topic. The chapter argues that Spiritualists conceive of science in ways which orthodox scientists consider "misconceived". It is this "misconceived" perception of "science" which underlies Spiritualist claims to scientific legitimacy.

Chapters Two, Three and Four are ordered according to the structure of Spiritualist church services. Spiritualist healing is invariably first within worship

services, followed next by mediumship and finally by the "coffee-hour" in which personal experience narratives are exchanged. Consequently, Chapter Two presents an analysis of Spiritualist healing. The chapter argues that there is a process of medicalization in contemporary Spiritualist healing which is illustrative of the idealization of "science" as authoritative and legitimating within the Spiritualist context. This discussion of the medicalization of Spiritualist healing is contextualized within the model of competing health care systems proposed by anthropologist and physician Arthur Kleinman (1980), and it is suggested that conflicts between differing "clinical realities" for Spiritualists are subsequently minimized through the medicalization process. The chapter subsequently argues that the incorporation of biomedical language, symbols and concepts reflects the importance of scientific legitimacy to contemporary Spiritualists.

Chapter Three presents an analysis of the legitimating function of "science" within Spiritualist mediumship. The language, symbols, concepts and theory of "science" are used by many Spiritualists to express the "truth" of their mediumistic experiences. Drawing upon the anthropological literature of "possession," the chapter explores the ways in which possession experiences are constructed and articulated in meaningful ways within the Spiritualist context, and argues that popular perceptions of "science" shape this process of social construction. The chapter further argues that the Spiritualist perception of "science" as factual and descriptive of reality results in a criticism of orthodox science for ignoring the "truth" of mediumistic visions. Within the context of mediumship, contemporary Spiritualists reveal an ambivalent attitude toward orthodox science.

Chapter Four then presents an analysis of personal experience narratives. Because

Spiritualism is an experiential faith, the role of personal experience narratives in affirming the "truth" of Spiritualist claims should not be underestimated. This chapter argues that personal experience narratives function as "proofs" of the "truth" of Spiritualists claims, and that these "proofs" are intended to establish the "fact" of Spiritualist experiences. Drawing upon the literature of folklore and narrative analysis, the chapter analyzes the structure and content of one set of personal experience stories to illustrate the function of Spiritualist personal narratives as "proofs." It is argued that within contemporary Spiritualism, personal experience narratives become the sole "proof" of Spiritualist claims.

The pervasive presence of scientific language and symbols within contemporary Spiritualist discourse reveals the continuing concern of contemporary Spiritualists to integrate religious faith with popular perceptions of "science." In the Conclusion of the present dissertation, it is suggested that this ongoing concern of contemporary Spiritualists reflects a search for conceptual coherence in which the everyday reality of what Weber (1952) has called the 'rationalized, disenchanted' world can be integrated with the reality of Spiritualist religious experience. The perception held by many contemporary Spiritualists of "science" as the means to "truth" about "reality" reveals contemporary Spiritualists to be inhabitants of Weber's disenchanted world. Following the theoretical insights of Weber (1952), Geertz (1973a, 1973b) and Berger (1969, 1970), however, the Conclusion further argues that in articulating religious experience and faith in the idiom of "science," Spiritualists have reconceptualized that world in religiously meaningful ways. The discourse of science is transformed for Spiritualists into a very

effective *religious* discourse within which *all* of experience may be said to "make sense."

The conclusion then suggests that the underlying search for conceptual coherence which motivates the adoption of scientific language and symbols into the Spiritualist religious system remains of relevance not only within the Spiritualist context, but the broader religious context of contemporary Western society.

Chapter One: Science, Popular Science, and Spiritualism: A  
Literature Review

*Physicist Leo Szilard once announced to his friend Hans Bethe that he was thinking of keeping a diary: "I don't intend to publish it; I am merely going to record the facts for the information of God." "Don't you think God knows the facts?" Bethe asked. "Yes," said Szilard. "He knows the facts, but He does not know this version of the facts." (Dyson 1979)*

The link between Spiritualism and "science" as perceived by Spiritualists themselves has been integral to the Spiritualist movement from the moment of its inception in 1848. Spiritualists have consistently argued that mediumistic phenomena are empirically verifiable, and have attempted to "prove" this claim in a number of ways. Spiritualist mediums have submitted to numerous "scientific" investigations throughout the history of their movement in attempts to claim scientific legitimacy for their beliefs.<sup>1</sup> Spiritualist claims to scientific legitimacy rest upon attempts by Spiritualists to establish that Spiritualist phenomena are "true" or "factual" in an empirical, ontological sense, and on attempts by Spiritualists to argue that the explanatory "spirit hypothesis" represents an accurate description of reality. For Spiritualists, "science" is the means by which "facts" are established and "reality" is described. Throughout the history of their movement, therefore, Spiritualist claims to scientific legitimacy have rested upon the

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the scientific investigations discussed later in this chapter, see Chapter Three for a discussion of early investigations into mediumship.

assumption that "science" is the process by which "truth" about "reality" can be revealed.<sup>2</sup>

Much of the scholarship available on the subject of Spiritualists' claims to scientific legitimacy has focused upon the failure of Spiritualists to establish their phenomena as "factual" in an ontological (read "scientific") sense. This scholarship has also stressed the failure of the spirit hypothesis to adequately describe the reality behind Spiritualist experiences. The underlying question motivating much of the scholarship available on the relationship between Spiritualism and science to date, therefore, has been "... but is it science?" Overwhelmingly, the answer to this question is "no." There are a number of good historical accounts of the relationship between Spiritualism and science available, but they consistently devalue the religious component of Spiritualism because of Spiritualists' insistence that their experiences are scientifically legitimate. The claim to scientific legitimacy is so integral to the Spiritualist movement that rejection of this claim results in an inescapable denigration of Spiritualists' religious faith.

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<sup>2</sup> Sociologist Eva Garroutte (1993:195-198) notes that one of the foundational concepts of scientific positivism in the nineteenth century is the assumption that "science" can accurately describe reality (and the corollary assumption that "religion" cannot). Spiritualists, she suggests, were actually proponents of an older scientific philosophy (which she terms "Baconian") which opposed much of the positivist argument. On the issue of "science" as the path to "truth", however, Garroutte suggests that Spiritualists failed to live up to their potential to challenge positivist assumptions. She writes, (1993:313-314) "Rather than explicitly problematizing positivism, most [Spiritualist] texts attempt a very different function: that of establishing Spiritualist speakers themselves as proper positivist scientists... this sort of discourse only petitions for Spiritualists to be allowed to join the positivist club; it expresses no wish to burn the clubhouse down." Consequently, despite their "Baconian" ideology, Spiritualists accepted the positivist argument that "science" was the best process by which "truths" about "reality" could be revealed.

The following chapter introduces the topic of Spiritualist claims to scientific legitimacy through an examination of relevant scholarship. No such examination is possible without first defining what is meant by the term "science," however. This chapter will therefore explore the literature on the socially constructed nature of orthodox science before presenting an overview of the relevant Spiritualist and non-Spiritualist literature. The Spiritualist perception of "science" differs markedly from orthodox perceptions.<sup>3</sup> The Spiritualist emphasis on "facts" and "truth" reveal what orthodox scientists call popular "misconceptions" of science. In both the emic and etic histories discussed below, these "popular" rather than "orthodox" views of science are readily apparent.<sup>4</sup> As mathematician John L. Casti (1990:12) notes, "science is not in the

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout the body of the present work, the term "orthodox science" is understood in the context of the moderate constructivist school in the sociology of science, as discussed later in the chapter. The term "orthodox science" is therefore used throughout the dissertation to refer both to the view held by many sociologists of science that "science" is a socially constructed system of knowledge intently descriptive of reality, and to the implicitly held view of many practitioners of science (according to Barnes (1982, 1985), Bloor (1971, 1981, 1982), Collins (1985), Knorr-Cetina (1981) and Latour & Woolgar (1979)) that "science" is a system of knowledge intently descriptive of reality that is (unfortunately) shaped by forces of social construction. To some extent, the present work therefore conflates the views of those who practice the natural sciences, and those within the social sciences. Further, the present work does not fully explore the wide diversity of opinion on the nature of "science" within either of these two groups. A more finely grained study on the concept of "science" as held in differing scientific disciplines and how such differing concepts relate to Spiritualist views would therefore be fruitful to pursue at a later date.

<sup>4</sup> Drawn initially from the terms *phonetic* and *phonemic* in the field of linguistics, in contemporary anthropological usage the terms "emic" and "etic" have come to denote two opposing perspectives underpinning cultural analyses. "Emic" in this sense indicates an "insider" perspective, in which the analysis of cultural material reflects the "native" point of view. "Etic," in contrast, indicates an analysis which reflects an "outsider" viewpoint, often through the application of broader theoretical analysis to specific cultural contexts. Contemporary ethnographers utilize participant-observation to combine these

business of providing ultimate explanations... there are no universal, absolute, unchangeable 'truths' in science." It shall be argued throughout the course of the dissertation that for Spiritualists, however, attempts to claim scientific legitimacy for their beliefs are precisely attempts to claim "truth" for their religious convictions. For Spiritualists, "science" is the means for expressing truth. As a result, "science" has become a legitimating discourse within which to express Spiritualist beliefs.

### Popular Misconceptions of Science

According to popular perception, science is the process whereby "facts" about the natural world are discovered and laws regarding the nature of the physical world are articulated. This view of science is widely held by laymen untrained in scientific disciplines, including most contemporary Spiritualists.<sup>5</sup> It is, however, much too limited a view of what science actually entails. As McCain and Segal (1982) note, every human society has accumulated "facts" about its environment and formulated "laws" which explain events. While the accumulation of raw observational data is a vital part of the scientific endeavour, it does not in and of itself constitute science. As mathematician John L Casti (1990:11) writes, "the mere cataloguing of data is not enough; we also require some overall organizing principles and a relationship between these principles and

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two perspectives. The histories analyzed in this chapter, however, are much more exclusive in perspective, and can consequently be clearly distinguished from one another according to the "insider" or "outsider" perspectives of the authors.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of orthodox scientific perceptions of Spiritualist claims, see in particular Bednarowski (1973), Coon (1992); Garrouette (1992, 1993) and Moore (1977).



the data." According to Casti and others, the methods and process whereby such overall organizing principles and relationships are discerned and applied to collected data are what truly constitutes science.<sup>6</sup> This view of science, one held most often by practitioners of science themselves, is again limited in scope, ignoring as it does the socially constructed framework within which such organizing principles and relationships are formulated.<sup>7</sup> Theorists in the area of the sociology of knowledge have challenged the perception that science is somehow asocial and acultural. Barnes (1982, 1985) and Bloor (1971, 1981, 1982) have questioned the entire idea that "facts" can be known outside of the socially constructed worldview within which they are perceived and articulated. Science, then, is much more complex than the popular or even scientifically sophisticated perception of it holds. Science is not the accumulation, organization and theoretical interpretation of "facts" about the natural world, but as Freeman Dyson (1979) might have said, a socially constructed *version* of those facts dependent on cultural context. The popular "misconception" of science as "fact" stems in large part from the ambiguous relationship between scientific knowledge as descriptive of the natural world and, in the words of Barnes and Bloor (1982:33) "unverbalized reality."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See also N. Campbell (1953); McCain & Segal (1982) and Barnes (1982, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> See for example Mulkay (1979); Barnes (1985) and Pickering (1984).

<sup>8</sup> Although contemporary sociologists of science (see for example Barnes 1982, 1985; Bloor 1971, 1981, 1982; Kuhn 1969; Lukes 1982; Hollis 1982; Campbell 1988, 1989; Hacking 1982; Sperber 1982) stress the constructed nature of "science," this recognition of the social constructedness of the discipline is a relatively recent challenge to the positivist assumption of the asocial and impartial nature of "true" science. For an interesting discussion of how nineteenth century establishment scientists "constructed" science as an impartial means to "truth," see Garrouette (1993).

### Science as a Social Construct

The idea that science in some manner directly describes reality independent of individual or societal perceptual influence is no longer seriously held by most philosophers, sociologists, or historians of science, no matter how common such an idea remains in popular perception.<sup>9</sup> The "social constructionist" view of science dominates the literature in the sociology of knowledge (Barnes 1982, 1985; Bloor 1971, 1981, 1982; Kuhn 1969; Lukes 1982; Hollis 1982; Campbell 1988, 1989; Hacking 1982; Sperber 1982). Even Sir Karl Popper (1968:29-30), arch proponent of what has been called "scientific realism" notes "that all knowledge is human; that it is mixed with our errors, our prejudices, our dreams and our hopes; that all we can do is to grope for truth even though it be beyond our reach."<sup>10</sup> What is still under considerable debate is the *degree* to which scientific knowledge is socially constructed. In one often quoted statement of the extreme social constructionist school, sociologist of science H.M. Collins (1982:3) states that "the natural world has a small or non-existent role in the construction of scientific knowledge". Sociologists Barnes (1982, 1985), Bloor (1971,

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<sup>9</sup> Campbell (1989:153) argues that the statement: "the natural world totally determines scientific belief" represents a form of "naive scientism" found in "science education and in popular faith in science [and rarely] among some of the philosophers of science who identify their position as 'scientific realists'".

<sup>10</sup> Despite Popper's willingness to grant that scientific knowledge is human knowledge, and therefore subject to human frailties, he is still, as Bloor (1971:101) notes, "firm in the conviction that scientific theories advance towards a closer correspondence with the world." Within the sociology of science, Popper has therefore become the preeminent representative of the "rationalist" theory of science, often contrasted with Kuhn as the preeminent representative of the "constructionist" theory of science.

1981, 1982) and Collins (1981, 1985) assert that all scientific knowledge is constructed: that science is not a 'mirror to nature,' but in effect a mirror to human society.

Since the publication of Kuhn's seminal work The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, there has been a wealth of literature published supporting the social constructionist view of scientific knowledge. Hacking (1982), for example, has clearly shown that the ontological "truth" of a belief is neither necessary nor sufficient to explain its adoption as "true" in a given cultural context.<sup>11</sup> Many beliefs now considered true were rejected as "false" in the past, and history is filled with examples of ideas now considered "false" which were previously accepted as "true".<sup>12</sup> Collins (1985) and Bloor (1981) have carefully detailed the influence of social, political, and ideological forces on the mechanics of scientific belief adoption.<sup>13</sup> So-called "extra-scientific" (that is, non-experimental or observational) beliefs and prejudices have been shown to influence discretionary judgements about what constitutes both proof or its lack with

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<sup>11</sup> Hacking (1982) provides the example of Sir William Herschel, who originated the theory of radiant heat. Based upon the cultural preconceptions of his day, Herschel entertained and then dismissed the idea that invisible rays of heat existed, reflected better by some colour filters than others. Today, we now accept Herschel's idea as 'true' - but Herschel himself rejected it as 'false'.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Brooke (1991) discusses the famous example of Kepler's theory of elliptical orbits, based on Copernicus' discredited theory of sun-centred astronomy. Both Copernicus and Kepler's ideas were rejected as 'false' at the time, while both are now at least considered 'more true' than the ideas held to be inviolably 'true' during the sixteenth century.

<sup>13</sup> Collins (1985) discusses what he calls 'the scientist in the network,' by which he means both the network of the scientific community and the wider social community. Ambiguous research data is often conceptualized and reported in such a way to either minimize or maximize its impact on the social net - minimize if the scientist has a secure position and ready funding, for example, or maximize if the scientist needs to establish herself as a legitimate contender for the limited funding available.

reference to particular scientific theories, and what distinguishes a "fact" from a theoretical interpretation.<sup>14</sup>

The social constructionist literature on science has also clearly established the fallibility of members of the scientific community with regard to meeting scientific ideals. The scientific standards of neutrality and objectivity are often lacking in individual practitioners of science.<sup>15</sup> Scientific principles regarding standards of scientific evidence and scientific reasoning also often go ignored by practitioners in a variety of scientific disciplines.<sup>16</sup> The scientific standards of replicability and falsifiability also fail in

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<sup>14</sup> Elster (1982:126-127) identifies four types of influences on discretionary judgements: a) adaptive preference, where an individual's 'wants' are subconsciously transmuted to be perceived as theoretical 'possibilities' within a conceptual scheme; b) preference change by framing, where certain theoretical positions are rendered acceptable in one context when judged unacceptable within a different referential framework; c) wishful thinking, where 'wants' shape beliefs so that the individual comes to believe that the desired state of affairs 'obtains or will obtain'; and d) inferential error, where "the 'intuitive scientist' is prone to a depressingly large number of unfounded judgements and inferences stemming from defects in the cognitive apparatus."

<sup>15</sup> See for example Longino (1990)

<sup>16</sup> According to Barnes (1985:38), practitioners of science are "just like the rest of us" in that "they do not perform well in tests requiring abstract, 'logical' reasoning. Consider the following arguments: 1) If the scientific hypothesis is correct then the empirical event, will be observed. 2) The event is observed. 3) Therefore [the] hypothesis is correct. Clearly, this is an invalid form of argument: once cannot move from 1) and 2) to 3). It is for example obviously invalid to reason thus: if the moon is made of cheddar cheese then it will look yellow; the moon does look yellow; therefore the moon is made of cheddar cheese. Yet... one recent study found a quarter of scientists making this mistake, another a third. Again, consider this argument: 1) If the scientific hypothesis is correct then the empirical event will be observed. 2) The event is not observed. 3) Therefore [the] hypothesis is not correct. This is generally accepted to be a valid form of argument. It is actually the whole basis of the... view that science proceeds by the falsification of theories and hypotheses. Yet... almost half the scientists tested denied the reliability of this form of inference, and in another, slightly different, study, the vast majority of scientists denied it." Barnes concludes from these figures that scientific ideals and 'rational arguments' are not necessarily understood or adhered to by

laboratory practice.<sup>17</sup> In each instance, social forces such as peer pressure, politically correct "scientific" hypotheses, the availability of funding, and ideological preconceptions influence belief formation.<sup>18</sup>

This view that science does not in fact act descriptively to reflect the natural world but rather reflects the social, political, and ideological constructs which impact upon its practitioners is accepted only partially by many authors in the sociology of science, however.<sup>19</sup> Hollis (1982) has in fact called this extreme position 'the social destruction of Reality,' and has argued that the natural world must have some impact on scientific knowledge. Campbell (1988a:505) has called it a form of 'hermeneutic nihilism'. According to Hollis (1982), without a "bridgehead" of common ideas based on sense experience of the natural world held by all human cultures, human knowledge

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individual scientists.

<sup>17</sup> Collins (1985) in fact challenges the whole concept of 'replicability' and 'falsifiability' based on the 'fallibility' of those conducting experiments. Social and psychological factors will influence the researchers' perceptions of the effectiveness of their laboratory experiments, and whether these are perceived as true replications of earlier experiments or not will depend on preconceived expectations as to outcome.

<sup>18</sup> See Knorr-Cetina (1981) and Latour & Woolgar (1979). Knorr-Cetina illustrates the production of scientific belief within a laboratory setting as a set of 'quasi-conspiratorial social negotiations,' where inconsistent and inconclusive data are formed into 'proof' of specific scientific assertions when in fact 'ambiguity, equivocality and discretionary judgement' prevail.

<sup>19</sup> Certain social constructionist premises seem almost universally accepted in the literature, including as Campbell (1989) notes, "that [the] belief in scientific facts and theory go beyond what has been empirically and logically proven, [and] that this indeterminacy is practically important as well as logical (in that it allows for social processes of persuasion, group formation, belief traditions, and extra-scientific sources of preferences, all to influence belief choice.)" The main point under contention is the degree to which scientific knowledge is dependent on these social forces, and the degree to which it is independent of them.

would be impossible. He argues (1982:83) that the sociology of knowledge must "restore the independence of facts, to let there be at least an independent and objective natural world" upon which to base human knowledge. He further argues (1982:83) that there are "beliefs which are held for the good reason that they are true and ... beliefs which are held for the fairly good reason that others are true." This 'bridgehead' of common ideas based on sense experience of the natural world forms the basis of scientific knowledge. In this view then, science is indeed based upon the "facts" or "truth" of the natural world, and social construction merely influences the ways in which these facts or truths are conceived and articulated.

One representative of the moderate social constructionist position is Douglas Campbell (1988a, 1988b, 1989). Following Popper, Campbell argues that science functions to articulate not just conceived social "truths," but true "facts" about the natural world.<sup>20</sup> In his attempt to retain at least some fact or truth content for science, Campbell (1988a, 1988b, 1989) has frequently referred to science as a form of "descriptive epistemology". According to Campbell (1988b:447), the fact that science is a socially constructed system of knowledge does not mitigate against the existence of an independent reality of which science acts descriptively. He writes (1988b:447-448):

I am an ontological realist, positing and seeking a reality shareable by all knowers, but which can only be known presumptively and indirectly. [To] move from the epistemological conclusion that the relative truth of different beliefs can only be decided within a framework of shared presumptions to the ontological conclusion that there exists no reality apart

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<sup>20</sup> See for example Popper (1987:115), who writes "Professor Campbell's remarkable contribution [to the sociology of science] shows the greatest agreement with my epistemology."

from such belief systems, no common ontology that independent systems could each be trying to describe [implies] an ontological nihilism which I am explicitly rejecting.... Ontological nihilism eliminates the goal of knowledge, removes any reason for trying to distinguish knowledge from other beliefs, removes the motivation of science.

Within this moderate social constructionist framework, as argued by such authors as Campbell (1988a, 1988b, 1989), Hollis (1982) and Lukes (1982) therefore, science is a socially constructed, culturally relative, imperfect system of knowledge, but one which is intently descriptive of a pre-existent ontological reality. This allows for the relativistic argument that science is a constructed form of knowledge while retaining the assertion that science is descriptive of a reality independent of human social constructs.

### Science as Authoritative

Practitioners of science admit that scientific theory and knowledge are tentative and subject to revision and falsification. Revision and falsification of scientific theory are understood to occur, however, when anomalies are noted between current scientific thinking and the natural world those theories are intended to describe. According to Kuhn (1969), if enough anomalous observations accumulate, a conceptual paradigm shift occurs which overturns the previous scientific worldview and replaces it with one which appears to account more adequately for the anomalous observations. Scientific paradigms or worldviews are remarkably resistant to such shifts, however.<sup>21</sup> As Kuhn (1969:64)

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<sup>21</sup> As will be argued presently, Spiritualist historian J. Arthur Hill (1917:20) somewhat foreshadowed developments in orthodox science, including his recognition of the resistance of orthodox science to admit new conceptual paradigms. He writes, "The task of attaining scientific conviction [for new ideas] is not easy... we run in the old grooves, and a pretty violent jolt is required, or long-continued pressure, to lift us up and

notes, "in science... novelty emerges only with difficulty, manifested by resistance, against a background provided by expectation. Initially, only the anticipated and usual are experienced even under circumstances where anomaly is later to be observed."<sup>22</sup> Scientific theory is therefore officially tentative, open to falsification and revision, but to a large extent in fact is treated as authoritative and final.<sup>23</sup> While many different factors account for this resistance to falsification and change, the fact that science itself is *taught* as authoritative within the educational system can account for much of this resistance.

According to Barnes (1985), there is nothing in the content of scientific theory itself which makes its truth "transparently manifest," and yet scientific knowledge is held to be trustworthy and authoritative by both practitioners of science and the lay public.

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get us free."

<sup>22</sup> Kuhn (1969:62-64) reports the psychological experiment conducted by Bruner and Postman (Journal of Personality 18(1949): 206-223) as support for his assertion that people see only what they expect to see given their socially constructed preconceptions. In this experiment, subjects were exposed to a deck of playing cards in which several cards had been made 'anomalous' - i.e. a red six of spades. Subjects almost invariably failed to identify such a card as anomalous unless repeatedly exposed to it. Some subjects never identified the cards as anomalous, seeing them consistently instead as, for example, a black six of spades, or a red six of hearts.

<sup>23</sup> For example, Barnes (1985:60) cites the experiment known as the 'Mpemba effect,' where hot water can demonstrably be shown to freeze faster than cold water despite the orthodox scientific acceptance of Newton's law of cooling. Despite this anomalous effect, Newton's law is not adjusted or rejected. Barnes lists ten possible explanations for this, the last two being #9) current thermodynamics and physical theories of heat are false; #10) the modern scientific world view is seriously defective. Barnes then writes, "It would be simple enough to adjust to new experience by setting existing knowledge aside [when it contradicts new observations]. I do not imagine for a moment that I, or anyone else, would seriously contemplate taking such a step. I list [options] 9 and 10 in table 2.1 purely as formal possibilities, not as realistic ones."



He argues (1985:70) that the very process of scientific education and training imbues science with an aura of factuality, truthfulness and authority. Science education, he notes (1985:70), "does not even seriously attempt to justify and validate the knowledge it conveys: it very much presumes that the knowledge will simply be absorbed and accepted, as indeed it is." As a result, science is imbued with authority because it is taught with authority, and accepted in large measure unquestioningly by students. Science, Barnes suggests (1985:71), has therefore "a quasi-dogmatic character [that] is not always easily acknowledged by scientists, who would naturally prefer beliefs to be accepted purely on the basis of reason, and not at all on the basis of authority and subtle compulsion."

Regardless of what scientists might 'naturally prefer,' the internal authority and subtle compulsion of scientific education has influenced not only how practitioners of science regard scientific "knowledge" within their own various disciplines, but how they present that "knowledge" for lay consumption. Mulkey (1979:72) has suggested that the norms of scientific discourse represent not so much a value-free system of communication through which scientists communicate impartial "facts," as a "flexible vocabulary" employed by scientific practitioners "in their attempts to negotiate suitable meanings for their own and others' acts in various social contexts." Naturally enough, according to Mulkey (1979:71), "a major influence upon scientists' choice of one verbal formulation rather than another ... is likely to be their [own personal] interests or objectives." Gieryn (1983:781) notes that "alternative sets of characteristics are available for ideological attribution to science [by scientists]... selection of one or another

description depends on which characteristics best achieve... scientists' claims to authority or resources."

One personal interest or objective pursued in the name of "science" is that of personal credibility. Anthropologist Gary Downey (1989:32) has shown that the discourse of members of the scientific community when speaking to the lay public is often structured deliberately so as to establish the authoritative nature of scientific knowledge. This authority is then drawn upon to emphasize the credibility of the individual's own specific theoretical position owing to its "scientific" (as opposed to political, ideological, or religious) nature. The rhetorical devices by which members of the scientific community establish their own credibility therefore require them to invoke the authoritative, rather than the tentative and constructed, view of science.<sup>24</sup>

The result of this presentation of science as authoritative has been the popular "misconception" of science as both "factual" and "authoritative," despite official scientific recognition that it is neither.<sup>25</sup> As McCain and Segal (1982) argue, this perception of science as authoritative and factual is reinforced repeatedly in the popular

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<sup>24</sup> Downey (1989:30-31) argues that science for North Americans holds an authoritative status comparable to religious authority for members of other societies. He writes, "The one definitive way to resolve this conflict [between competing political positions] was through pronouncements from a supreme cultural authority, a term that in American culture refers not to the ancestors nor to priests but to the activity of science.... This pre-structured cultural authority of science as the source of knowledge about nature made scientific discourse the focus of concern in the ...dispute, even for groups of nonscientists... Every group involved in the ... dispute invoked the authority of science."

<sup>25</sup> Actually, many practitioners of orthodox science refuse or fail to recognize this. For example, well-respected popular astronomer Carl Sagan (1985:1) has announced that "the cosmos - as known by science - is all there is, all there was, and all there will be."

media. "For example," they note (1977:10), "we are all aware of the attempts to link science with such fascinating subjects as deodorants, gasoline additives, and false teeth. Whether or not these links are legitimate, they exemplify the advertisers' confidence that "science" has sufficient glamour and acceptance to be worth a few dollars' extra profit. Implied is the further assumption that the viewing, reading, or listening public does not understand science, so that an oblique reference to "science" will reduce them to helpless acquiescence. Whatever the effectiveness of this approach, it does reflect an assessment of popular views."<sup>26</sup>

According to Barnes (1985), it is the very inability of most of the lay public to comprehend contemporary science that allows such advertising ploys to be effective. He argues (1982, 1985) that contemporary science has passed beyond the bounds of 'common sense' and that it is largely incomprehensible to the lay public today. He writes (1985:20), "a good proportion of what today is common sense knowledge is the scientific knowledge of yesterday in another guise... but for all that the perceived gap between science and everyday life has never been wider. Most people see science, quite rightly, as an activity beyond their understanding." As a result, scientific knowledge is accepted on faith: certain theories or concepts possess authority simply because they

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<sup>26</sup> Although McCain and Segal's (1982) book is intended as a text-book style overview of what "science" is from an orthodox scientific perspective, it is also widely cited in the field of the sociology of science for its discussion of the social construction of "popular" science. Casti (1990:501) for example calls it "an informative, educational, and easily readable discussion of [the] profound misunderstanding" of science held by many that "science" is only "a collection of facts leading to practical ends." Despite its text-book style format, therefore, as an informative source on the differences between orthodox scientific perceptions of what constitutes "science" and those of the popular audience, the book is both useful and scholarly.

are (or are claimed to be) scientific. Similarly, the pronouncements of scientists possess authority simply because they are made by scientists.<sup>27</sup> When practitioners of science represent science as authoritative, therefore, the lay public accepts this representation, based upon the prestige and authority which science already carries.

### Popular Perceptions of Science

According to theologian and science writer Langdon Gilkey (1987:167), "we live in an advanced scientific culture. The first implication of this is that science is now thoroughly established... By established I mean, first, that science is now utterly necessary for almost every aspect of our life - for the production of goods, agriculture, medicine, communication, travel, self-defense, and so on - and thus does the society unquestionably support it, pay its bills, and revere it." One result of this incursion of

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<sup>27</sup> Barnes (1985:72-89) presents the research results of psychologist Stanley Milgard in support of his claim that science carries immense prestige and authority for North Americans. Milgard's experiment directed randomly selected individuals to administer incrementally more powerful electric shocks to a second individual each time that second individual failed to answer a question correctly (the second person did not really receive the shocks, but the first person believed that the shocks were received). The test was presented as an examination of the effect of punishment on learning, but was actually designed to test obedience. The only thing inducing the first individual to obey was the authority of the scientist and the belief that the scientist knew what he was doing in constructing the test. Despite visual labels on the shock buttons warning of severe shock levels, and despite pleas, moans, shrieks of pain and, at 330 volts and above, constant screaming from the second person, more than 80% of individuals reached the half-way point (225 volts administered), and more than 60% reached the final button (450 volts). Barnes (1985:80) notes, "It seems reasonable to accept that in his [Milgard's] experiments subjects were extraordinarily obedient to persons they believed to be scientists, and that they were obedient largely because those persons were believed to be scientists. And this must surely be taken as a token of the potency of the trust and authority which may be invested in scientists...today."

science into everyday living has been the acceptance of scientific knowledge as authoritative by individuals themselves untrained in the scientific disciplines. Often, however, the perception of what constitutes 'scientific knowledge' undergoes a transformation in the eyes of the lay public. As Barnes (1985), Casti (1990) and McCain and Segal (1982) have noted, much of scientific theory, knowledge and practice is no longer comprehensible to those outside of specific scientific disciplines. "Science" in popular perception therefore frequently differs from the "emic" view of members of the scientific community.<sup>28</sup> Handlin (1972) has called this transmuted concept of science "popular science". According to Gilkey (1987), the concept of "popular" science has been borrowed from the study of religion. In the terms of religious studies, he notes (1987:168), "popular religion" develops when "an established religion then takes on, as a part of itself, local, age-old, often deviant or bizarre... syncretistic forms".<sup>29</sup> Within

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<sup>28</sup> It is important to note that "orthodox science" is not a monolithic entity with no internal boundary distinctions. As Hess (1993) and Gieryn (1983) have argued, there is a complex negotiation of identity within the confines of "orthodox science" that is often worked out in negotiation with other representatives of "orthodox science" rather than with representatives of "popular science" or "pseudo science". As Hess (1993:145-146) notes, "analysis shows not only how scientists engage in boundary-work to distinguish science from non-science, but also how a variety of other groups construct boundaries (and consequently themselves as groups) not only with respect to more orthodox scientists and sceptics but with respect to each other. In short, scientific boundaries are recursive, nested, and multiple". Much of this negotiation, however, is designed to establish the "orthodox" status of the individual or discipline in question. "Orthodoxy" in science is therefore fluid and negotiable, but conceptually distinct from "popular science".

<sup>29</sup> As anthropologists Badone (1990:3-5) and Christian (1981:178) note, the term "popular" religion is problematic in that it implies a two-tiered model of religion in which the "popular" is seen as a misconception or corruption of "true" religion (or what Redfield (1956) has called "the Great Tradition"). The term remains useful, however, when precautions are taken against using the term in a condescending or disparaging fashion. Badone (1990:4-5) suggests that the term can apply "to those informal,

the realm of science, "popular science" builds upon the basis of orthodox science, but is not confined to orthodox interpretations or understandings.<sup>30</sup> As Handlin (1972:266) argues,

since the explanation of the scientists was remote and incomprehensible, a large part of the population satisfied its need for knowing in its own way. Side by side with the formally defined science there appeared a popular science, vague, undisciplined, unordered and yet extremely influential. It touched upon the science of the scientists, but did not accept its limits. And it more adequately met the requirements of the people because it could more easily accommodate the traditional knowledge [excluded or ignored in orthodox science].

Popular science and the popular perceptions of orthodox science are called "misconceptions" by members of the scientific community. According to McCain and Segal (1982:12), two of the most common misconceptions of science are that science is

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unofficial practices, beliefs, and styles of religious expression that lack the formal sanction of established church structures." In this sense, therefore, "popular science" is understood in this dissertation not as a derogatory label intended to imply "deviance" from orthodoxy, but rather to refer to a perception of science within popular circles which departs from the formal views of establishment scientists, without passing judgement on the legitimacy of such views.

<sup>30</sup> Sociologist and historian of science R.G.A. Dolby (1982) suggests that the main distinction between "orthodox" science and "popular" science is one of specialization and claims to consensus among "scientific experts." He writes (1982:272), "Orthodox science typically strives for consensus through rigorous argument from agreed observational data with modest theoretical postulates. It is specialized, and each region of inquiry is deliberately limited to that which is recognized as achievable by the accepted methods used. In contrast, popular science aspires only to plausibility, for there is insufficient expertise for consensual judgements to rigorous standards to be made. Rather than limit itself to what can be achieved by established methods, popular science seeks systematic generality and maximum significance on questions that trouble its supporters, and it flourishes by maintaining popular interest... It is wide ranging in coverage, offering insight into explanations of many popular issues. It is visionary and programmatic rather than rigorous and testable. It gains its support without the mediation of the scientific expert."

primarily aimed at accumulating facts and that science is exact (that it accurately describes reality and can therefore prove without question its own presuppositions).<sup>31</sup> Both of these "misconceptions" are linked to the perception of orthodox science as "authoritative". Gilkey (1987:170) calls science the "paradigmatic and so sacral form of knowing" for North Americans. Barnes and Edge (1982:2) call science "near to being *the* source of cognitive authority: anyone who would be widely believed and trusted as an interpreter of nature needs a license from the scientific community." Science, therefore, carries immense weight and prestige in popular perceptions as a preeminent means of knowing. As Gilkey (1987:171) then notes, "in a scientific culture the step ... from regarding science as the most immediately useful and so the paradigmatic form of knowing (which it is) to regarding it as the *only* form of knowing is... short". With the perception of science as the sole authoritative means of knowing, any body of knowledge accepted as legitimate must, *ipso facto*, be scientific within the conceptions of popular science. Within popular perceptions, therefore, science represents that means to knowledge which is ultimately authoritative, factual, and effective. As a result, "truth" and "science" are often equated, if not confused. If an observation or perception is "true," it must also be scientific. This blurring of the boundaries between "science" and "faith" results, as Handlin (1972:267) notes, in the acceptance of "no test of validity save experience... One took the little pills; the pain went away. One heard the knocking; the

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<sup>31</sup> Conversely, McCain and Segal (1982:12) also note that some people reject science because it fails to provide ultimate explanations of things, and because it distorts reality by failing to appreciate the fullness of experience. Spiritualists would agree with this perception or misconception of science also, in that orthodox science persistently refuses to acknowledge the reality of Spiritualist claims.

spirits were there. The observable connections between cause and result were explanation enough" to make them "scientific" within popular views. If this equation between observation, "fact" and "science" is yet another "misconception" of science by the lay public, however, it is one which is, as Handlin (1972:267) notes, "not always less correct than the official [orthodox view]." Both orthodox and popular science are negotiated within a social context and constructed according to cultural preconceptions. While the "science" of lay perception differs from the science of members of the scientific community, both are social constructs intently descriptive of "reality". As such, they are "on a par with one another with respect to the causes of their credibility (Barnes and Bloor 1982:23)." While popular perceptions of science might well be "misconceived" according to orthodox scientific views, both draw upon the same epistemological concern to understand and describe reality "as it truly is" (Barnes 1985).

### Spiritualist Literature and Popular Science

Spiritualist literature is concerned to establish the "scientific" character of Spiritualist belief in order to assert the "reality" of Spiritualist experience. It does so, however, through a utilization of many popular as opposed to orthodox scientific concepts. Many nineteenth and early twentieth century Spiritualist histories reveal the perception common to popular science that "science" represents the sole legitimate and hence "sacral" form of knowing and expressing empirical "truth." In order to affirm the truth of Spiritualist belief, therefore, "science" is explicitly drawn upon within this literature to provide a legitimating discourse within which the ontological reality of



Spiritualist claims can be affirmed. Such claims are legitimated in ways which reflect what McCain and Segal (1982) have identified as two of the common popular perceptions, or misconceptions, of science: namely, that science is primarily aimed at accumulating facts, and that science is exact (that it accurately describes reality.) As sociologist Eva Garrouette (1993:235-250) notes, however, such attempts to assert the factual nature of scientific knowledge in the nineteenth century were hardly confined to Spiritualists. Both establishment science and Spiritualist sources stressed the factuality of the knowledge gained through "scientific" means.<sup>32</sup> For Spiritualists, however, what constituted legitimate scientific "evidence" and legitimate scientific "knowledge" often differed sharply from the "truths" of establishment science.

For nineteenth and twentieth century Spiritualists, the "fact" of communication with the spirits of the dead constituted clear scientific truth, and Spiritualist authors attempted to establish that truth in a number of ways. All Spiritualist histories assert the factuality, and hence the scientific legitimacy, of the Spiritualist experience of communication with the dead.<sup>33</sup> While both "cumulative evidence" and "negative

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<sup>32</sup> Following Dolby (1982) and Garrouette (1993), the term "establishment science" rather than "orthodox science" is used to refer to the "science" of the nineteenth century. This term recognizes the lack of a fully developed professionalised discipline of science during the nineteenth century, while still indicating the existence of boundaries between "mainstream" science and "fraudulent" science as defined by the contemporary positivist majority of practitioners.

<sup>33</sup> "Spiritualist phenomena" consist of a variety of anomalous experiences, ranging from the sound of voices or other noises to the appearance of strange objects or people. In establishing the factuality of Spiritualist phenomena, Spiritualist historians work to establish that a) an event took place; and b) that it was 'anomalous'. The 'spirit hypothesis' of causation is then put forward as the 'true' explanation of events.

evidence" are tools of argument used by Spiritualist historians to support the Spiritualist presentation of "facts," the testimony of witnesses is the most important "proof" of Spiritualist claims within this literature. Testimonials affirm the "factuality" or empirical reality of Spiritualist experience, and the experiences then in turn provide "proof" of the scientific legitimacy of the spirit hypothesis.<sup>34</sup> "Fact" and "reality" are therefore interrelated within Spiritualist histories, and this link allows Spiritualist histories to distinguish between "true," "scientific" Spiritualist phenomena and the "deceit, imbecility and fraud" of "fake" mediumship (Britten 1884:2). The accumulation and defense of Spiritualist "facts," the assertion of the empirical reality of Spiritualist interpretations and belief, and the exclusion of fraudulent mediumship as "non-Spiritualist" owing to its "scientific" illegitimacy are patterns clearly apparent throughout much of Spiritualist literature (Britten 1870, 1884, 1957; Doyle, 1921, 1926; Hill 1917, 1918). A few clear examples of this process will be sufficient to establish the importance of "science" within Spiritualist histories, and to reveal the influence of popular science on Spiritualists' claims to scientific legitimacy.

### Evidential Testimony

The establishment of Spiritualist experiences as "fact" begins within the Spiritualist histories relevant here with some account of the Hydesville origins of the

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<sup>34</sup> Testimonials, or personal experience narratives, continue to play an important role in contemporary Spiritualism. See Chapter Four for a discussion of the use of personal experience narratives as "proofs" of contemporary Spiritualist belief.

Spiritualist movement (Britten 1870, 1884, 1957; Doyle 1921, 1926; Hill 1917, 1918).<sup>35</sup>

While opinions regarding the importance of those beginnings differ from author to author, the recitation of the Hydesville Rappings narrative allows the "facts" of Spiritualist phenomena to be established early in the work, and to locate those "facts" at the earliest possible point in Spiritualism's beginnings. In order to establish Spiritualist experiences as factual, Spiritualist histories itemize instances of Spiritualist experience, and the earliest set of widely recognized Spiritualist experiences to be drawn upon are those at Hydesville.<sup>36</sup> The key to the presentation of the Hydesville events as "fact" is

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<sup>35</sup> According to the Spiritualist histories of Britten (1870, 1884), Cadwallader (1917), Doyle (1921, 1926) and Hill (1918), the events at Hydesville began with a series of loud, unexplained knocking noises in the cottage of the Fox family, a poor working class family which had moved into the home only weeks before the noises appeared. The sound of ghostly raps and footsteps convinced the family that the cottage was haunted. The 'facts' of the events which the Fox family witnessed are attested to through the depositions of the family members and their neighbours, and facsimile copies of these depositions are included within Cadwallader (1917) and Doyle (1926). According to these depositions, on the evening of March 31, 1848, the youngest Fox daughter (Kate, age 12) challenged whatever force was making the unexplained knocking noises by shouting out, "Mr Splitfoot, do as I do!" and clapping her hands. The mysterious rapper duplicated the number of claps. Through experiment, the family then discovered that the rapper would answer questions put to it by varying the number of knocks it produced. Through this means, the Fox family was informed that the rapper was the spirit of a murdered peddler, slain by the previous occupant of the house and buried in the basement. Attempts by the Fox family and their contemporaries to verify this claim failed when the excavators reached water before finding a body, but Cadwallader (1917) and Doyle (1926) report that a body was recovered from the site in 1904. The Spiritualists of the early twentieth century considered this discovery to be the "missing link," in a concept borrowed by Leah Underhill (1885) from evolutionary theory, in the chain of evidence in support of Spiritualist claims.

<sup>36</sup> Spiritualism traces its modern origins to the "Hydesville Rappings" of 1848, but as with any other religious movement, antecedents can be found much farther back in history. Perhaps the most eminent of emic historians of Spiritualism, Mrs. Emma Hardinge Britten (1884:4-5), identified the problem of tracing the origins of the Spiritualist movement when she wrote that "one great difficulty in attempting to chronicle

the existence of evidential testimony from the Fox family themselves.<sup>37</sup> Within the framework of Spiritualist histories, this testimony establishes the "facts" of the events in question, and the facts themselves then establish the reality of the Spiritualist "spirit hypothesis" interpretation. According to Spiritualist historian Emma Hardinge Britten (1884), for example, the events at Hydesville, as "proved" through the reputable testimony of the Fox family and their neighbours, removed all doubt as to the "fact" of the spirit-hypothesis.<sup>38</sup> Because of this testimony, she writes,

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the details of this movement, is the very fact that it did not originate in any special locality, or at any given time, inasmuch as it manifested its influence in a spontaneous and universal outpouring all over the world, coming and going like the wind - few, if any, could say whence, or witherward." Given this difficulty, most emic historians choose to acknowledge that Spiritualist phenomena existed prior to the "Hydesville Rappings," often specifically mentioning the mediumship and visions of Emmanuel Swedenborg and Andrew Jackson Davis. They begin their actual histories, however, with the discovery and mediumship of the Fox sisters at Hydesville.

<sup>37</sup> Leah Fox Underhill (1885:2) provides written testimonials from her sisters and parents as well as neighbours in support of her own testimony with regard to the Hydesville Rappings. She believes that testimony has so clearly established the 'truth' of Spiritualism that to doubt the 'facts' is 'simple ignorance'. She writes, "It is but a few years since it was a favourite topic for scoff or sneer by the press, while now it is but rarely that here and there is to be found some writer so far lagging behind the march of the age as still to yield, in that way, to the force of former foolish habit. How far and how deeply it has modified the old teaching of the pulpit is patent to all observant eyes; while among the priesthood in the divine temple of Science, the number and unsurpassed rank of those who, under its influence, have abandoned the materialism of their old philosophies, after exhaustive investigation of the facts and truths of Spiritualism, is such as to stamp with the disgrace of simple ignorance those who may still dare to deny and deride; - even as history has fixed the fate of those professors and priests who refused to take a look through Galileo's telescope; or of those doctors who, being past the age of forty, could never, to their dying day, accept Harvey's demonstrations of the circulation of the blood."

<sup>38</sup> Emma Hardinge Britten (1823-1899), was a "trance" medium with a background in music who was born in the east end of London, England. Her father was a sailor, and she herself began work at the age of eleven. She moved to the United States as a young woman as part of her employment. She was converted to Spiritualism in 1856, and

we found beyond a shadow of doubt or peradventure, that death had no power over the Spirit, could never touch the soul, or destroy one attribute or property of soul life.... On the 31 of March 1848, we discovered that we had never lost a friend... On that momentous night, all our vague dreams of "Super-naturalism" were swept away like cobwebs, and in their place came the realities of a rational living human Spirit naturalism. All our doubts and denials concerning "miracles" were blown to the winds, and a new and wonderful array of powers for the soul, possibilities for the man of the future, and germs of new sciences, took their place.<sup>39</sup>

The use of reputable testimony and supportive empirical evidence to affirm the "scientific" nature of hypotheses is a long-standing tradition within the history of science, and Britten is clearly attempting to align herself with this tradition in the passage above. Campbell (1988:514) notes that the use of testimony as evidential "proof" is found not just in "questionable" sources, but in respected and influential sources as far back as the writings of Euclid. Sociologist Eva Garrouette (1993:291) argues that the Spiritualist assumption that "testimony" of reputable witnesses can constitute valid

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enthusiastically joined the lecture circuit to speak throughout the United States, Canada, England, and Australia. She founded a Spiritualist magazine, of which she acted as editor for five years, and wrote numerous books in support of Spiritualism. For a discussion of the life of Emma Britten, see Dingwall (1970).

<sup>39</sup> Not every Spiritualist historian places such extreme emphasis on the Hydesville rappings, but even those historians who question the spiritual value of the events at Hydesville, such as Doyle or Hill, emphasize their value in establishing the 'fact' of spirit contact. Doyle (1926) recognizes the complaint of many non-Spiritualist critics when he acknowledges the essential pettiness of the Hydesville occurrences, but argues that even pettiness can 'prove' a scientific premise. According to Doyle (1926(1):56), "It is true that the circumstances were lowly, the actors humble, the place remote, and the communication sordid, being based on no higher motive than revenge. When, however, in the every day affairs of this world one wishes to test whether a telegraphic wire is in operation, one notices whether the message comes through, and the high or low nature of that message is quite a secondary consideration.... So it is that the humble spirit of a murdered peddler of Hydesville may have opened a gap into which the angels have thronged."

scientific evidence is part of a well-established Baconian view of science widespread throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She further adds (1993:291-292), however, that such a view of testimony as "evidential" was being increasingly challenged in the nineteenth century by proponents of scientific positivism.<sup>40</sup> In the face of such a challenge, those holding Baconian views of scientific "evidence" would have had to fight to maintain scientific credibility.<sup>41</sup> According to Barnes (1985), resort to the use of testimony as a form of scientific "proof" is most pronounced in those times and places where individuals must fight to establish their credibility as practitioners of science. In such instances, Barnes notes (1985:51), "the testimony of [reputable] witnesses [would be] recorded [and] agreement amongst many witnesses was taken as a sign that what was

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<sup>40</sup> Garrouette (1993:251-252) writes, "Spiritualists, for example, spoke with heartiness of "modern inductive research." This they construed as entailing nothing more than the careful observation and typological arrangement of phenomena... One time AAAS member Joseph Rhodes Buchanan, for example, insists that "in a question of the existence of certain facts," it is not the man who pursues scientific research as his livelihood who is the best guide. Rather, it is "the honest witness who, without prepossession, investigates and follows up the facts wherever they are visible, [who] is competent to instruct us..." This man, although by his own (earlier) admission not a scientist by occupation, nevertheless clearly expects that his observations should count for something in scientific discussions."

<sup>41</sup> According to Garrouette (1993:9), Baconian science differed from positivist science on a number of levels. The primary distinction between them, she notes, however, was "one between "religious science" and "irreligious science": between "individuals... who defended to one degree or another the prevailing harmony of method, fact, and scripture versus individuals who lacked such a prepossession". Baconian science defended the right of both religion and science to make truth claims about the world, and consequently the right of both religious and scientific specialists to make truth claims. Positivist science, by contrast, restricted the right to make truth claims about the natural world to scientific professionals, and marginalized the right of religion generally to speak about empirical truth. The testimony of anyone but establishment scientists was consequently excluded from the realm of scientific consideration within positivist circles.

agreed to was indeed a genuine fact... that every man in a group of witnesses would testify to having observed a phenomenon was taken to show that... the phenomenon was really there, a fact of nature."

In the Spiritualist context, the signed affidavits of the Fox family and their neighbours established a paradigmatic pattern within Spiritualist literature which Britten (1870, 1884) uses to good effect. "Events" are itemized, and the testimony of witnesses provided to affirm that the events truly happened: that they were "facts," and "true" in an empirical, verifiable sense. In many instances, the higher the social status of the witness, the more reputable the testimony is considered.<sup>42</sup> Britten (1870, 1884) considers non-Spiritualists to be the most reputable witnesses to Spiritualist phenomena, and she consequently puts much stress on the testimony of such witnesses. According to Britten, in such instances where Spiritualist phenomena are experienced by non-believers, the evidential detail carries a much clearer burden of proof.<sup>43</sup> These instances, she writes (1884:4),

are quite sufficient to demonstrate the facts of spiritual agency, and place the cause [the spirit hypothesis] on a basis of proof, that rises triumphantly over the most injudicious partisanship, or the most bigoted antagonism.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> According to Barnes (1984:49-58), such differential credibility based on social status remains the case today. In a contemporary orthodox scientific framework, in order to be a credible witness, the witness must be an orthodox scientist.

<sup>43</sup> Significantly, this emphasis on the evidential value of non-Spiritualist testimonials can still be found among contemporary Spiritualists in their personal experience narratives. See Chapter Four.

<sup>44</sup> For Britten, the weight of testimony and the status of the witness attests to the "scientific" nature of Spiritualism. The "facts" of Spiritualist phenomena are "proved" by the nature of the witness, and his or her testimony affirms the scientific legitimacy of the spirit hypothesis. Britten's support for the scientific status of Spiritualism is based

In other instances, sheer numbers of witnesses supported the evidential value of testimony. Doyle (1926:21-22) provides an excellent illustration of this kind of reasoning when he writes,

Speaking of our own experiences, I mentioned that my wife and I had actually spoken face to face beyond all question or doubt with eleven friends or relatives who had passed over.... Then with a sudden impulse I called upon those in the audience who were prepared to swear that they had had a similar experience to stand up and testify. It seemed for a moment as if the whole audience were on their feet. *The Times* next day said 250 out of 290 and I am prepared to accept that estimate. Men and women, of all professions and social ranks - I do not think that I exaggerated when I said that it was the most remarkable demonstration that I had ever seen.... If such a public agreement of evidence does not establish a fact then it is indeed impossible, as Professor Challis remarked long ago, to prove a thing by any human testimony whatever.<sup>45</sup>

Within the confines of orthodox science, it is indeed impossible to 'prove a thing by any human testimony'. The testimony of witnesses cannot establish facts nor "prove" the validity of scientific hypotheses within the official understanding of orthodox science. "Anecdotal evidence," in this respect, is very much a contradiction in terms. Experience

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precisely, therefore, in the accumulation of "facts" as attested by witnesses, and in the perception that such facts "prove" certain scientific hypotheses to describe reality accurately. Both are factors which orthodox scientists perceive as the most common misconceptions of what constitutes science.

<sup>45</sup> Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930), best known for his Sherlock Holmes mysteries, was born in Scotland, and received his M.D. degree in 1881, and his Knighthood in 1902. He became interested in Spiritualism between the years 1885-1888, and joined the Society for Psychical Research. It was not until 1902, however, that Doyle became a "convert" to Spiritualism, and not until 1916 that he began to lecture and write in support of the movement. Doyle was a lifelong friend of Harry Houdini, but was never as sceptical as Houdini regarding mediumistic phenomena. Within the field of psychical research, Doyle is sadly best known for being duped by fraudulent photographs of "fairies" which he accepted as genuine. For a discussion of Doyle's life and connection to Spiritualism, see Doyle (1946).



and testimony constitute not "proof" but "data," and "facts" are established only through more formal forms of scientific investigation.<sup>46</sup> On an unofficial level, however, anecdotal or testimonial evidence is often accepted as "proof" of scientific claims, provided the witnesses are scientists themselves (Barnes 1985; McCain & Segal 1982).<sup>47</sup> According to Barnes (1985:49), "for something to count as a scientific fact it must [simply] be observed by a qualified scientist...". Garrouette (1993:238) suggests that establishment scientists in the nineteenth century worked very hard to legitimize scientists as the sole source of authoritative testimony.<sup>48</sup> The value of testimony as evidence,

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<sup>46</sup> Subjective experience can never be considered a "scientific fact," owing to the principle of "intersubjective testability" enshrined within orthodox science. According to McCain and Segal (1982:55-56), intersubjective testability requires that a "scientifically observable event" must in principle be observable by more than one person. Any subjective experience - pain, hunger, religious visions - must be excluded under this requirement.

<sup>47</sup> Dolby (1982:267) in fact suggests that the "knowledge construction industry" (namely "science") has become so bureaucratized and segmented that "expertise" has become the guiding factor shaping "acceptable" and "unacceptable" contributions to scientific debate. He writes (1982:267), "In pure science, the more expert an individual is on a topic, the more he can be trusted as an authority... The institutionalization of knowledge advancement particularly involves organizing the activity of individuals high in hierarchies of expertise... contributions from those who are the most expert are the most readily appreciated [while] any individual who fails to reach the minimum standards set by some scientific organization finds considerable barriers obstructing his participation in the activities of science." Only those granted the stature of "scientific expert" are granted the right to speak authoritatively on science.

<sup>48</sup> According to Garrouette (1993:238), establishment scientists challenged the Baconian assumption that any learned individual could speak with authority on matters relating to science by attempting to locate the right to speak authoritatively on such matters firmly within the professional body of scientists. In attempting to do so, Garrouette suggests that Spiritualists were attacked by positivist scientists as 'illegitimate speakers.' Establishment scientists who 'converted' to Spiritualist viewpoints were likewise attacked, and their right to speak authoritatively about science challenged. Garrouette provides the illustration (1993:242-243) of a Popular Science Monthly attack on William Crookes, a well-known British chemist and later proponent of Spiritualism.

therefore, lies in the status of the witness, and this holds true within both orthodox and popular scientific contexts. For Spiritualist historians, testimony provides "proof" of the "fact" of Spiritualist phenomena, and this "proof" is understood to establish the "scientific fact" of Spiritualist claims.<sup>49</sup>

### Cumulative Evidence

The evidential value of testimony as scientific proof is not, as previously mentioned, recognized officially within the confines of orthodox science, although within popular science the value of such testimony is frequently assumed. In recognition of the potentially questionable value of testimony as scientific proof, not all Spiritualist historians rely so exclusively on the presentation of "facts" and the evidential value of testimony as Britten is inclined to do. The early twentieth century Spiritualist historian J. Arthur Hill (1917, 1918) holds both the first witnesses to Spiritualist phenomena and the initial scientific investigators into Spiritualist claims in low esteem. As a result, he

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According to Garrouette (1993:243), "the article concludes with this challenge: '*our charge ...affects directly... [Crookes'] conception of truthfulness and honor, his claims to belief as a witness and to respect as a man. According to our notions of the brotherhood of science, its members always confide in one another's sincerity and good faith. A person who cannot be trusted so far is, ipso facto, not a member.*' Here is a strong implication that Crookes deserves banishment from the community of science - and perhaps from the society of decent human beings, as well."

<sup>49</sup> Garrouette (1993:291) further supports this point when she writes, "Spiritualists typically construe the claims of intelligent, rational persons to have witnessed spirit activity as evidence for the reality of the same... For the Spiritualists, eye-witness evidence confirms their claims; for establishment scientists [however], the identical evidence is used as an argument for the exclusion of all similar [testimony] from further consideration" within the confines of establishment science.

is much less certain than Britten or Doyle of the evidential value of personal testimony for "proving" Spiritualist beliefs. Correspondingly, he is much less interested in the Hydesville occurrences, for example, than in those events which are attested to not only through the testimony of witnesses, but through the measurements of rigorous scientific investigation. According to Hill (1918:41-42), the scientific criteria applied to the initial investigations into Spiritualist phenomena were inadequate. As a result, he rejects the testimony of both Spiritualist witnesses and the first scientific investigators into Spiritualist phenomena. Hill writes (1918:42),

It may be that the American epidemic of the eighteen-forties and fifties was entirely genuine, at least as to the supernormal causation of the sounds. We cannot accept anything as decided either way; certainly the investigation was not conducted with the rigour which later standards demand; but, on the other hand, it would be risky to dismiss the whole thing as hocus-pocus. Unsatisfactory as this may be, suspense of judgment seems to be the only possible course.<sup>50</sup>

The investigations which Hill dismisses as conducted 'without scientific rigour' proved very unfavourable to the Spiritualist claim to scientific legitimacy. Hill argues, in effect, that the claim of these investigations to "scientific" status rested solely on the fact that the men involved in the investigation were understood to be scientists.<sup>51</sup> As

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<sup>50</sup> John Arthur Hill (1872-1951) was born of working class parents and lived in England his entire life. His training was in business management, but due to ill health caused by a heart attack suffered in 1898, he lived the rest of his life as an invalid. Hill devoted himself to psychical research after this point, joining the society for psychical research, and serving on its board of directors for eight years. He wrote numerous books and articles on Spiritualism throughout the course of his lengthy life (Shepard 1991).

<sup>51</sup> Garrouette (1993:261-306) suggests that it was in such challenges to the authority of scientists to make pronouncements about the "truth" of various claims that Spiritualism represented a serious challenge to the emerging discipline of positivist science in the

Garrouette (1993) and Barnes (1985) have noted, often such status is all that is required to lend scientific legitimacy to an endeavour. Barnes for example writes (1985:49), "scientific knowledge, we are now obliged to say, is based not on experience as such, but upon the experience of the scientific profession." Similarly, scientific evidence is based not necessarily on empirical observations, but on "what[ever] qualified scientists have reported one way or the other." Within the official confines of orthodox science, however, the scientific status of the investigators is no guarantee of the scientific legitimacy of their conclusions, and Hill draws upon this reasoning to reject the conclusions of the early investigations into Spiritualist phenomena. As these investigations amounted to little more than casual dismissal of Spiritualist claims in favour of more "rational" explanations, Hill (1918:41-42) considers them to represent the airing of scientific prejudice.<sup>52</sup> For Hill, neither the "expert" testimony of Spiritualists

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nineteenth century. Indeed, in challenging the right of scientists to make judgements of this kind, Garrouette suggests that nineteenth century Spiritualists foreshadowed contemporary "constructionist" theorists. She writes (1993:304), "Spiritualists had set out to raise spectres, and in fact they did. But the most significant of these for professionalising positivism were not the departed loved ones... The dangerous shades they invoked turned out to be none other than the familiar shades of twentieth-century discourse analysts."

<sup>52</sup> The first scientific investigation into the mediumship of the Fox sisters took place in 1849. Later dubbed the "Rochester Rappings Investigation," this investigation concluded that the "raps" were really the result of the ability of the Fox daughters to voluntarily dislocate and snap back into place the joints of their toes. This alternative "scientific" explanation of the Hydesville occurrences did not convince many, but the pattern had been set for scientific investigations to discount and discredit most Spiritualist phenomena as fraud or trickery. In 1850, the University of Buffalo sponsored an investigation into the mediumship of the Fox sisters. This investigation proposed "knee snapping" as the likely logical alternative explanation to spiritual influence. The Buffalo investigations were followed by a long series of scientific inquiries, as Spiritualists continued to insist that Spiritualist phenomena were empirically verifiable, and scientists

nor that of the investigating scientists could either "prove" or "disprove" Spiritualist claims.<sup>53</sup>

Significantly, despite his doubts about the value of evidential testimony, Hill (1917:20-22) continues to insist that "proof" of Spiritualist belief is possible to attain.

"The task of attaining scientific conviction is not easy," he writes,

[for] our generation has grown up in a materialistic atmosphere, and we do not easily get out of it.... We were sceptical when we began the investigation, ten years ago; we are now fully convinced, all of us, that the explanation [of Spiritualist phenomena] must be supernormal, and, further, that the telepathic hypothesis seems on the whole much less rational than the spiritistic. In fact, we do not stop at the 'hypothesis' stage; we think the case is proved, so far as proof is possible.

For Hill, the "proof" of the "spirit hypothesis" is found not so much in the evidential testimony favoured by Britten and to a lesser extent, Doyle, but in the "cumulative evidence" of Spiritualist "facts" (although he does proceed to present two volumes of personal "scientific" testimony of his own). Hill (1917:vi) does maintain the Spiritualist emphasis on the "factuality" of Spiritualist phenomena found in the works of Britten and Doyle as "proof" for the spirit hypothesis. He writes,

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continued to oblige the Spiritualist impulse towards establishing scientific evidence. See Chapter Three for a discussion of early investigations into mediumship.

<sup>53</sup> Not all of these early investigations dismissed Spiritualist claims as 'fraud'. In subsequent investigations there were occasionally instances in which investigating scientists were unable to offer any 'rational' explanations for the perceived phenomena. Spiritualists gained several converts from the ranks of science, including Edward Carrington, Sir Oliver Lodge, and Sir William Crookes in these cases (Brandon 1983; Moore 1977). Despite these successes, however, later investigators would dismiss the 'science' of such converts as 'naive' and 'biased'.

At the beginning of my investigations, my prejudices and wishes were opposed to the conclusions which the facts gradually forced upon me. If I am now biased in favour of the belief in personal life after death, it is objective fact, not subjective preference, that has brought it about.

Hill (1917, 1918) advocates that very strenuous testing criteria be applied to all Spiritualist phenomena in order to establish such "facts" and obtain the necessary "proof" of the spirit hypothesis. It is not enough to claim "proof" of spiritual agency simply because no other explanation is readily apparent, nor to reject such claims because they do not accord with previous conjecture. Hill argues that genuine Spiritualist phenomena can withstand the 'bright light of scientific investigation,' and suggests that in fact Spiritualists have higher verification standards than most scientific investigators.<sup>54</sup> Hill himself foreshadows current orthodox science in rejecting the possibility of definitive proof for scientific hypotheses. With reference to Spiritualist phenomena, Hill (1918:132-133) argues that absolute "proof" can never be obtained, but "cumulative proof" is both possible and established. He writes (1918:133-34),

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<sup>54</sup> Hill suggests that most scientific investigators would be content with a single "sealed note" test provided the note had been read by none beforehand. He himself, on the other hand, required repeated confirmation of the spirit hypothesis before he would grant its credibility. In his own estimation, this distinguished him from both Spiritualists and other scientists. Hill preferred to regard himself as "an impartial witness" rather than a Spiritualist; however, he does confess to a belief in spirit communication and spiritual existence after death. He writes (1918:vii) of himself, "But personal experience is necessary before real conviction of new truth can be attained, when one has remained in ignorance until over thirty; so I set myself to investigation. I sat with many mediums, professional and private, and the result was that I was gradually driven to admit that phenomena certainly happen which orthodox science does not explain or even recognise, that some of them may be due to not understood subliminal activities of living people [e.g. telepathy] or to still more unknown causes, but that some others point to the agency of discarnate human beings.... In short, then, I believe that the survival of human beings past death, and the possibility of occasional communication, is a legitimate inference from the facts."

The "proof" of survival must always be cumulative. It cannot be of the knock-down kind, for it is never possible to exclude all other hypothesis. The survival hypothesis may seem the most reasonable, but no psychical researcher will say it is the only possible one. It is a question of heaping up data until the tendency of the whole is seen, as in all other inductive sciences. It cannot be proved by a crucial test that the earth is spheroid or that it goes round the sun; indeed there are flat-earth and fixed-earth cranks still in existence, who cannot be called insane. Our beliefs in these matters - where they are not the result of mere acceptance of authority, as they really are in most cases - are based not on a crucial test, but on a large mass of accumulated observations. So with psychical science. To say that absolute proof can be supplied by one incident is to show complete failure to understand not only the canons of evidence in psychical research, but the canons of evidence in inductive science generally.<sup>55</sup>

According to scientific "realist" Karl Popper (1965:vii), "The way in which knowledge progresses, and especially our scientific knowledge, is by unjustified (and unjustifiable) anticipations, by guesses, by tentative solutions to our problems, by conjectures. These conjectures... can never be positively justified: they can neither be established as certainly true nor even as 'probable'" This assertion led Popper to formulate the "falsifiability criterion" of scientific theories, a criterion now considered orthodox within scientific circles. The falsifiability criterion requires, as science writers McCain and Segal (1982:62) note, that any scientific theory must, in principle, be open

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<sup>55</sup> In discussing the search for legitimate scientific support for parapsychological claims, William James (1897:180) suggests that the story of parapsychology is the story of the search for one white crow: "if you wish to upset the law that all crows are black," he wrote, " you must not seek to show that no crows are [black]; it is enough if you prove one single crow to be white." Hill suggests, on the contrary, that psychical research must be based on the cumulative evidence of many anomalous instances, on many "white crows". That this assertion challenged much of normative scientific thinking at the time is supported by Popper (1965:46), who writes, "my denial [of the claim that definitive proof for any hypothesis can be found] is often met with incredulity. I have even been suspected of being insincere - of denying what nobody in his senses can doubt."

to challenge and change. They write (1982:62): "If it reaches the point at which one cannot imagine any event or set of events that would imply that the theory is false, the story automatically becomes scientifically useless. This doctrine, called *the principle of falsifiability*, is extremely important." Popper first formulated this criterion, according to his own testimony (1965:34), in 1919 - the year following the publication of Hill's work. In this instance, therefore, the Spiritualist historian Arthur Hill clearly foreshadows developments in the orthodox science of his day.<sup>56</sup>

### Negative Evidence

Whereas Hill's work may well have foreshadowed developments within orthodox science, the scientific claims of Doyle (1921, 1926) are representative of the "negative evidence" argument found largely in branches of what orthodox scientists label "pseudoscience" or, more politely, popular science. As quoted earlier, Handlin (1972:266) suggests that a "vague, undisciplined, unordered and yet extremely influential" form of popular science developed along side the orthodox science of scientists. This popular science, he adds (1972:266) "touched upon the science of the scientists, but did not accept its limits." And, we might add, this popular science did not

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<sup>56</sup> According to sociologist Eva Garroutte (1992, 1993), the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the gradual divergence of "establishment" and "heterodox" scientific disciplines, or what she calls "positivist" and "Baconian" ideologies. Garroutte argues (1993:8-9) that it was during this period that "Spiritualist" science was excluded from the bounds of scientific orthodoxy. Although Garroutte (1993:264) herself suggests that the exclusion of Spiritualist "science" was complete by the end of the 1870's, the convergence of Hill's and Popper's views in the early twentieth century may indicate that the exclusion of Spiritualist scientists from the realms of "legitimate" scientific theory and research remained as-yet incomplete.



restrict itself to the orthodox methods of scientific reasoning. In his use of a "negative evidence" argument, Doyle clearly reveals the authoritative function of "science" within Spiritualist belief. Even in rejecting scientific conclusions, Doyle argues for the legitimacy of the scientific pursuit. According to Doyle (1926), "scientific" proof of Spiritualist claims is frequently found in the very absence of Spiritualist phenomena in "unharmonious" circumstances. He suggests that Spiritualist mediumship is based on the workings of human and spirit magnetism, and this magnetism requires a "condition of harmony" to work properly. "The primary law of harmony," he writes (1926(1):76), "is invariably broken at the so-called test seances, the members of which imagine that they have disproved the philosophy when they obtain negative or disordered results, whereas they have actually confirmed it." Through the use of this negative evidence argument, Doyle affirms the scientific legitimacy of Spiritualist phenomena while simultaneously rejecting scientific conclusions which challenge his belief.

According to philosophers of science Radner and Radner (1982:41-42), claims to negative evidence are frequently made in current paranormal research. Within parapsychology, they suggest, "if the results of [an] experiment are significantly above the level expected by chance [or are] significantly below chance expectation... if the subject either always gets precisely the score expected by chance or gets very high scores on some runs and very low scores on others - then that shows the operation of psi." This amounts to an irrefutable hypothesis, for no amount of negative evidence will disconfirm it. It consequently lies outside the confines of orthodox science. However, in the case of Doyle (1926), the use of negative evidence also reveals the immense prestige that

science can hold. Doyle argues for the scientific legitimacy of Spiritualism from the "proof" of negative evidence. He asserts that the very procedures instituted for gathering scientific proof often mitigate against its achievement. Despite this, the argument that the truth of Spiritualism might lie outside the confines of legitimate scientific inquiry is never presented by Doyle or any other Spiritualist historian.

### Demarcating Boundaries: Self Identification as "Scientific"

Spiritualist historians consider it vital to establish the scientific legitimacy of Spiritualist claims. While the status of Spiritualist belief claims as "scientific" is certainly open to question, the perception by Spiritualist authors of the scientific nature of Spiritualist belief is not open to debate. Nineteenth and early twentieth century Spiritualist historians are deeply concerned to link Spiritualist belief with the establishment science of their day. As a result, they devote considerable energy not only to affirming the scientific validity of Spiritualist claims, but to demarcating the boundaries of "legitimate" Spiritualist phenomena from those of illegitimacy and fraud. This process is common to both orthodox and popular science. According to Gieryn (1983:781), the public discourse of scientists is designed to demarcate identity boundaries which distinguish legitimate science from pseudoscience. "Construction of a boundary between science and varieties of non-science is useful for scientists' pursuit of professional goals: [primarily the] acquisition of intellectual authority and career opportunities". While most orthodox scientists would promptly designate Spiritualism as "pseudo-science," Spiritualists themselves follow the same rhetorical technique of

boundary demarcation.<sup>57</sup> Within the context of Spiritualist literature, such demarcating of boundaries allows Spiritualists to disassociate themselves from "fraudulent" mediums and maintain their insistence that "true" Spiritualist phenomena are both "factual" and empirically verifiable.<sup>58</sup> This demarcation has been necessary because Spiritualist mediums were continually being exposed as charlatans during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. When this exposure came through the offices of orthodox scientific investigations, the claim by Spiritualists to scientific legitimacy suffered.

Spiritualists responded to the challenge of establishment science by drawing identity boundaries which included the Spiritualist movement within their definition of scientific legitimacy.<sup>59</sup> Nineteenth century Spiritualism needed scientific validation because Spiritualists had based their entire belief structure on the compatibility of science and religion. Repeated exposure of fraudulent mediumship by scientific boards of inquiry threatened the very foundation of Spiritualist claims. As a result, fraudulent

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<sup>57</sup> For a discussion of Spiritualism as 'pseudo-science' see Hines (1988)

<sup>58</sup> It is the epitome of embarrassment for Spiritualists to have lauded the mediumistic abilities of an individual only to have that individual exposed or confess to fraud. Often in such instances, individual Spiritualists simply discount the discrepancy and continue to affirm the legitimacy of the phenomenon which *they themselves* witnessed, distinguishing it from the fraudulent display later witnessed by others. An examination of Spiritualism and the role played by what Festinger et al. (1967) have called cognitive dissonance would be valuable. Brandon (1983) and Moore (1977) touch on this subject, but only indirectly. Among Spiritualists, the assertion is often made that because mediumship is not an exact science, in order to meet the constant demand for performance, mediums often engage in fraud when their true mediumship gifts leave them temporarily bereft.

<sup>59</sup> Orthodox science at this period in history was simultaneously drawing identity boundaries much more tightly to exclude such 'marginal' groups and practices such as Spiritualism and psychical research. For a discussion of the boundary-work of nineteenth and early twentieth century scientists Coon (1992) and Garroutte (1992).

mediumship had to be rejected while the legitimacy of "true" mediumship was simultaneously affirmed. As Gieryn (1983:791-792) notes, within the confines of orthodox science such boundary-work is useful "when the goal is expansion of authority or expertise into domains claimed by other professions or occupations, [for it] heightens the contrast between rivals in ways flattering to the ideologists side [and] excludes rivals from within by defining them as outsiders with labels such as 'pseudo,' 'deviant' or 'amateur.'"

Like many Spiritualist writers, Emma Hardinge Britten was highly concerned to establish that Spiritualism was based on "true" instances of mediumship rather than on the fraudulent mediumship frequently exposed by establishment scientists. Suspect mediums are often omitted from discussion within Spiritualist histories so that the "evidence" is not clouded by fakery and fraud. However, it is equally important to Spiritualist historians to acknowledge the existence of fraud to avoid accusations of naivety or deliberate omission. Britten (1884) meets this requirement by accusing exposed "fraudulent" mediums of being 'opportunists,' an exoteric label designed to demarcate "true" mediums from false ones. She refuses to discuss such 'parasites' beyond an initial acknowledgement. She writes (1884:2),

In carrying out this plan of the work, the author has been strongly counselled...to omit, as far as possible, all notice of those excrescences which invariably fasten on the armies of reform, in the shape of fraud, imbecility, or such evidences of human selfishness as represent what Spiritualism *is not* - not what it really is. Whilst then, we would "nothing extenuate, or set down aught in malice," we shall unhesitatingly point to any breaches made in the spiritual garrison by human intervention, but carefully avoid giving to the worthless interloper, that notoriety which so many seek to obtain, even at the price of tampering with "the life lightnings," through which the angels telegraph to man; in a word, the

cheat, swindler, and parasite, whose genius it is to prey upon any cause strong enough to bear them along on the broad current of progress.

Doyle (1921, 1926) is also reluctant to discuss fraudulent mediumship directly, beyond admitting to its existence. He writes (1926(1):183), "in the light of our later, fuller knowledge we know that much that bears the appearance of fraud is not necessarily fraud at all. At the same time, the unbounded credulity of a section of Spiritualists undoubtedly provided an easy field for charlatans."

The fact that Spiritualists find it necessary at all to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate mediumship illustrates the importance of empirical verifiability within Spiritualism. Spiritualists understand themselves to be making empirical claims when they affirm the existence of Spiritualist phenomena. They also understand themselves to be making religious claims, but religious claims that are open to contradiction by empirical science.<sup>60</sup> As a result, Spiritualist historians themselves are forced to distinguish between legitimate and fraudulent mediumship, to avoid invalidating their claims to scientific legitimacy.

#### Non-Spiritualist Literature, Spiritualism and Popular Science

Sociologist Irving Zaretsky (1970, 1977) once noted that there had been more works written on and about Spiritualism than any one researcher could read in a lifetime, and the volumes discussed in the preceding section represent only a tiny fragment of this

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<sup>60</sup> Although, as previously mentioned, Doyle (1921, 1926) himself seems to hold an unfalsifiable version of the spirit hypothesis.

vast literature.<sup>61</sup> The number of academic works devoted to the subject of Spiritualism is surprisingly few, however, and the number which are dedicated to the topic of Spiritualism and science even fewer.<sup>62</sup> The key to understanding this surprising lack of research can be found, perhaps, in the perception of "science" revealed in many of those studies on the topic that have been published. Beginning with Podmore's (1902) detailed history of the Spiritualist movement, etic histories have often attempted to evaluate Spiritualism's claims to scientific legitimacy by adopting the Spiritualist perception of science and then challenging Spiritualism's ability to fulfil that perception. As discussed above, Spiritualist historians work to establish the "fact" of Spiritualist phenomena, as "proved" through testimony and both cumulative and negative evidence. They then argue that the spirit hypothesis represents an accurate description of reality, given the proof provided, and make boundary demarcating value judgements which inclusively define Spiritualism as "scientific" because facts have been "established" and reality "described". Etic historians have tended to accept this Spiritualist definition of science. When they find Spiritualist "facts" questionable, the spirit hypothesis improbable, and scientific boundaries exclusive of Spiritualist claims, the importance of

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<sup>61</sup> Zaretsky (1970:iii) primarily refers to the thousands of volumes written by Spiritualists themselves attesting to their own private quests for the truth of Spiritualism. Given the importance of testimony as 'proof' for Spiritualists, such a wealth of written material is not surprising. The quality of much of this material, as Zaretsky notes, is often questionable, however.

<sup>62</sup> In addition to the earlier works of Nelson (1969a), Moore (1972, 1977) and Brandon (1983), several excellent histories of Spiritualism appeared in the late 1980's and early 1990's, including the works of Barrow (1989), Braude (1990) Garrouette (1993) and Owen (1990). Of these works, only Garrouette's unpublished Ph.D. dissertation deals directly with the issue of Spiritualism and science, however.

the Spiritualist claim to scientific legitimacy is subsequently devalued, and this fruitful area for research largely ignored. Etic histories of Spiritualism *reject* Spiritualist claims to scientific legitimacy on precisely the same "misconceived" understanding of science that Spiritualists use to support those claims. This observation in no way implies that the criticism of Spiritualism as "unscientific" is unwarranted. It is simply ironic that both Spiritualist and non-Spiritualist histories draw on similar popular views of the nature of science to justify their conclusions.

The primary point of argument for both Spiritualist and non-Spiritualist authors is the factuality of Spiritualist phenomena. Spiritualist historians argue that Spiritualist phenomena are empirically verifiable. The testimony of witnesses, coupled with cumulative and negative evidence, establish for Spiritualists the existence of Spiritualist phenomena as "fact," and therefore as "scientific". Etic historians stress the failure of Spiritualists to establish the factuality of Spiritualist phenomena, and consequently the failure of Spiritualism as a "scientific" religion. However, as noted earlier in this chapter, among contemporary sociologists of science there is considerable debate about the mechanism whereby "facts" can be established within scientific discourse. As Barnes (1972, 1982, 1985), Bloor (1971) and Collins (1981, 1982, 1985) have argued, scientific "facts" are actually the constructed result of social consensus. Orthodox science is based, as Hacking (1982:57) notes, on inductive reasoning, but neither deductive nor inductive reasoning will provide new "facts" for scientific consumption: both "are devices for jumping from truth to truth... they give us no original truth from which to jump." The willingness to interpret one phenomenon as "fact" and another as "conjecture" is

therefore largely the result of common consensus.

The rejection of the factuality of Spiritualist phenomena among non-Spiritualists stems largely from preconceived cultural ideas of what is "possible" and what is not. According to the historian of psychical research Roy DeCarvalho (1988, 1989), nineteenth century Spiritualists themselves railed against the unwillingness of scientific investigators to recognize the limits to their own inductive method for admitting new "facts". According to DeCarvalho (1988:187), Spiritualists insisted that their "science" was based on a "descriptive" scientific method which "presented facts the way they appeared in the world without pre-possessed ideas. In the inductive methods, however, [facts] were treated with such rigor that the investigator could exclude what he did not wish to receive." This point has also been noted by sociologist Eva Garrouette (1993) in reference to the nineteenth century debate between Spiritualists and positivist scientists over the "factuality" of Spiritualist claims. She writes (1993:291-292) "The problem [of] choosing between hypotheses... included as well the question of what should count as proof, and how much proof was required... Whether or not they could detect some "trick" behind them, establishment scientists flatly refused to attribute [Spiritualist] phenomena in any way to the operation of unknown forces... [whereas Spiritualists demanded to know] what further evidences could possibly be required, in how many repetitions [before establishment scientists would accept Spiritualist claims?]" At the root of this dispute, therefore, lay clearly differing views on what might constitute "enough" proof to establish the "fact" of Spiritualist phenomena. As Garrouette notes, since the spiritistic hypothesis was clearly untenable from an establishment scientific perspective,



attempts to assert the "factuality" of Spiritualist phenomena were frequently met with rejection and disbelief.

Frank Podmore (1876, 1902a, 1902b, 1910) provides one of the earliest exhaustive surveys of Spiritualist physical phenomena in search of Spiritualist "facts".

He writes (1902b:358-359):

It is important to note that [the spirit hypothesis] is not a mere philosophical speculation founded on assumptions which are incapable of verification, but a scientific hypothesis, based on the interpretation of certain alleged facts... In fine, the first question is not what new agencies may be inferred from the facts, but whether the facts justify the inference of any new agency at all.

In his attempt to determine whether Spiritualist phenomena are "factual" or fraudulent, Podmore concentrates on such phenomena as table rapping, trumpet mediumship, materializations, and apports.<sup>63</sup> Initially, Podmore was very sympathetic to Spiritualist claims, once writing that "if these things are true - and they are true - it is of transcendent importance to humanity."<sup>64</sup> Over the course of years of investigation into

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<sup>63</sup> These four physical phenomena were the mainstay of nineteenth and early twentieth century Spiritualism. Table rapping is a simple oracle, where participants lightly rest their hands on a table, and the table bounces off the floor in numeric sequence in response to questions; trumpet mediumship is another form of oracle, where a trumpet blows itself [under 'spirit influence'] in response to questions; materializations of 'spirit matter,' or 'ectoplasm' provided physical evidence of spiritualist claims; and apports were physical objects, such as jewellery or dew-soaked flowers dropped into seance rooms as proof of spirit presence.

<sup>64</sup> Podmore (1876) wrote a series of articles in 1876 for a journal titled Human Nature discussing and defending Spiritualism's claims to scientific legitimacy in the face of orthodox scientific condemnation. "A Modern Miracle," describes his witnessing of a Henry Slade seance. Another article, titled "The Darker Side of Science," firmly criticized the reactions of scientific men to Spiritualist phenomena, writing: "science shows herself [in this regard] to be but a blind teacher of the blind."

Spiritualist phenomena and their historical antecedents, however, Podmore came to dismiss the entire range of physical phenomena as fraud. He became so critical of physical mediumship, in fact, that he has been called "the most formidable critic that Spiritualism has ever encountered" (Dingwall 1963:xxii).<sup>65</sup> His primary criticism of physical phenomena was that it was supported by no evidence beyond the testimony of witnesses, and was subsequently subject to suspicion of fraud. "[Spiritualist medium] Mrs. Piper would be a much more convincing apparition," he wrote (1902b:361), "if she could have come to us out of the blue, instead of trailing behind her a nebulous ancestry of magnetic somnambules, witchridden children, and ecstatic nuns."

The history of fraud and the feasibility of more "likely" scientific rationales for anomalous phenomena led Podmore to demand rigorous scientific research in support of even the most reputable testimony before the credibility of Spiritualist claims could be granted. For Podmore, Spiritualist testimony was neither reputable or reliable, and certainly could not be considered "evidential". The witness accounts provided to attest to Spiritualist "facts," he concluded, were uncritical and therefore inadequate. He writes (1902a(1):228),

Very few critical accounts of the earlier seances have been preserved; but they are not needed. The accounts given by Spiritualists themselves, when they condescend upon detail, are sufficient to show that we need look for no other cause for the results described than trickery of the most trivial and vulgar kind - trickery for the most part too obvious to need a commentary.

Not only are these witness accounts uncritical and therefore questionable in Podmore's

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<sup>65</sup> E.J. Dingwall is one of the foremost psychical researchers of the nineteen sixties and seventies.

view, the character of the witnesses themselves makes the testimony questionable.

According to Podmore (1902a(2):182),

These physical manifestations are open to suspicion by reason of their pedigree and historical relationships; that they bear a strong resemblance to conjuring tricks; that similar phenomena have constantly been produced fraudulently; that in the few instances where the results recorded have so far resisted analysis, they are yet legitimately suspect as having been produced under conditions favourable to fraud, and in the presence of persons again and again convicted of fraud; that the precautions taken have been inadequate, and the qualifications of the witnesses in most cases are not such as to inspire confidence in their ability to detect trickery of the kind probably practised.

The lack of more rigorous "scientific" evidence in support of testimony leads Podmore sarcastically to note (1902a(2):184):

Eminent persons have vouched for movements and alterations in the weight of heavy bodies, but the balance in its locked glass case has remained unaffected. Flowers and fruit and parian statuettes have continued to make their appearance in closed rooms, but the least particle of arsenic has not yet found its way through the walls of the hermetically sealed tube. Intense cold has been felt at the seance, but has never been recorded by a self-registering thermometer.... Strange draperies, delicious scents, solid luminous bodies, even articulate human forms, have been produced out of the viewless air, and into the viewless air have returned unweighed, unanalysed, unrecorded on phonograph or sensitive plate, on balance or thermometer or resisting circuit.<sup>66</sup>

The result of this rejection of Spiritualist testimony as evidential and the lack of any kind of "legitimate" scientific evidence is Podmore's concomitant rejection of Spiritualism's "scientific" status. As Barnes (1985) has noted, the scientific status of

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<sup>66</sup> Garrouette (1993:241-243) makes the interesting observation that when nineteenth century establishment scientists rejected Spiritualist claims to scientific legitimacy on the basis of "lack of evidence," they were very careful to construct what constituted "legitimate" evidence and who constituted "legitimate" investigators in ways which would automatically exclude Spiritualist claims.

various hypotheses has often been dependant on the status of witnesses who attest to phenomena. "Science," he writes (1985:52), "has always had to place people upon a hierarchy of credibility in order to filter knowledge-claims and ignore the less plausible ones... 'the general public' as we might say now, were not to be trusted."<sup>67</sup> Podmore's filtering system places Spiritualist witnesses at the bottom of the 'hierarchy of credibility,' and as a result excludes Spiritualist hypotheses from consideration. In his later writings, Podmore (1902b, 1910) only acknowledges the possibility of legitimate Spiritualist interpretations when previous scholarly work has established the possibility of the phenomenon.<sup>68</sup> Spiritualist claims are rejected as "unscientific" by Podmore because Spiritualist testimonials are rejected as invalid. In the words of Barnes (1985:49), "in science today insiders count and outsiders do not": clearly, for Podmore,

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<sup>67</sup> Barnes discusses the meteorite controversy in the late eighteenth century in support of this point. When the 'common people' attested to the fact that meteorites fell from the sky, the scientific community was incredulous and scornful. When one professor received a signed, witnessed legal statement to that effect from a township in France, it prompted the following response in an academic journal: "If the readers have already had occasion to deplore the error of some individuals, how much more will they be appalled today seeing a whole municipality attest to, consecrate, by legal protocol in good form, these same popular sensations, which can only excite the pity, not only of physicists, but of all reasonable people" (Barnes 1985:54). Ultimately, it was only after scientists themselves investigated a meteor fall in 1803 that their extra-terrestrial origin was accepted.

<sup>68</sup> For example, Podmore accepts the possibility of trance mediumship, for such trance states are found in other ecstatic religions, and do not require the spirit hypothesis to explain the physiological effect. He is still somewhat dubious about the "physical" manifestations that accompany trance states, and writes (1902(1):110) "on the one hand we find... examples of apparent thought-transference and clairvoyance; on the other, we find... indications of systematic trickery... conjoined with trances and ecstasies apparently genuine, and outpourings, also probably not less genuine, of religious feeling."

Spiritualists are excluded from the ranks of scientific 'insiders'.

Podmore (1876, 1902a, 1902b, 1910) is not the only etic historian to label Spiritualism "unscientific" on the grounds that Spiritualist testimonials fail to convince. Pearsall (1972) provides a descriptive account of nineteenth century primarily British Spiritualists and the motivations behind their seance attendance. He rejects the "reality" of Spiritualist phenomena largely because evidential testimony is provided solely by those who shared a belief in the underlying spirit hypothesis. The alternative explanations of trickery and fraud, he suggests, are more "scientific" than the conclusions of those investigations which supported the spirit hypothesis. He writes (1972:238-239):

What was true and what was false in Victorian spiritualism?... Spirit painting and drawing is explained by the emergence of a secondary personality under trance. This is true also of phenomena produced by the planchette, and this was recognised by objective men and women who used the planchette. If Victorian spiritualism rests or falls on the evidence of spirit photography, it must fall. No Victorian spirit photograph convinces.... The scientific investigations by Crooks and Varley were unsatisfactory and inconclusive.

Pearsall (1972), like Podmore before him, applies standards of scientific verifiability to Spiritualist phenomena which exclude Spiritualist testimony and Spiritualist interpretations of the "facts" in favour of alternative explanations more acceptable to orthodox science.<sup>69</sup> The subsequent necessary failure of Spiritualists to provide "facts" to "prove" the spirit hypothesis results in the dismissal of Spiritualism as "unscientific," and a consequent devaluation of Spiritualism as a religious movement. Like Podmore,

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<sup>69</sup> Pearsall is following in the long-standing tradition of investigation into Spiritualist claims when he searches for more 'likely' explanations for Spiritualist phenomena. Among his alternative explanations are "mass hysteria" (1972:148); psychosis and neurosis (1972:182); and of course deception.

Pearsall is not willing to discount all Spiritualist phenomena, but those aspects which are saved from condemnation are those which withstand "true" scientific inquiry.<sup>70</sup>

Etic historians such as Podmore or Pearsall, like Spiritualist historians themselves, persist with the argument that to be scientific one must accumulate "facts" and provide theories which accurately describe reality. The apparent conclusion reached by most etic historians is that if Spiritualism is not "factual" (and by the standards of orthodox science it clearly is not), it must in turn be fraudulent. This claim necessarily leads to a denigration of Spiritualist religious claims. As DeCarvalho (1988:183-84) notes, "the tendency among historians has been to disregard what Spiritualists themselves said about their science, focusing instead upon the broader social, intellectual and emotional issues." There is a strong theme of rationalization in academic etic histories. In effect, if Spiritualist claims are not "factual," and hence not scientific, other emotional, psychological or social reasons must be found to "explain" why so many people believed in them. Many non-Spiritualist historians have identified the central importance of science to Spiritualists, but most of those who pursue the observation follow the pattern set by Podmore in rejecting the scientific validity of Spiritualist claims.<sup>71</sup> The rejection of Spiritualism's claim to scientific legitimacy is concomitantly followed in much of the

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<sup>70</sup> Pearsall accepts the possibility of telepathy, empathy, and other concepts linked to psychical science. Such concepts, he argues, have been rigorously investigated and have withstood scientific investigation to the point that they can be seen as 'plausible' while the spirit hypothesis seems implausible.

<sup>71</sup> Frequently, they go further than Podmore (1902:361) who at least insisted that orthodox science must continue to investigate anomalous phenomena so as "not [to] throw away the baby with the water from the bath."

literature by a devaluation of Spiritualism as a religious system. As Swatos (1990:476) concluded in his analysis of Icelandic Spiritualism, "By attempting to create itself as a religion of science, Anglo-American Spiritualism voided its potential for significant impact upon either religion or science."

The historical works of Moore (1972, 1977) and Brandon (1983) explore the impact of nineteenth century Spiritualism on both religion and science through an examination of Spiritualism's links to psychical science. Both Brandon (1983) and Moore, (1972, 1977) have written thorough histories of nineteenth century Spiritualism, each focusing on this relationship between Spiritualism and psychical research in recognition of the very real Spiritualist perception that Spiritualist beliefs were "provable" through scientific means. Moore's (1972, 1977) works are the more professional of the two. He details both the many empirical investigations into psychical manifestations which took place in the nineteenth century, and the claims of Spiritualists that these manifestations were scientifically verifiable. According to Moore, Spiritualism was very much a product of the nineteenth century, and the Spiritualist attempt to claim scientific legitimacy for Spiritualist phenomena reflected the very real concern of Victorian Americans to come to terms with a changing world view. As a result, Moore finds a study of Spiritualism's links to psychical science a worthy endeavour. He writes (1977:38),

Spiritualism was at once a reaction to what it conceived of as materialistic science and the most absurd product of a set of assumptions we call positivism... [it] successfully framed a theory that brought forth a very positive response from a population who liked its marvels packaged in machines or put into one of P.T. Barnum's cages. Its claims gained acceptance in the same way that electrical phenomena did. While never

quite achieving respectability, the Spiritualists clearly attracted everyone's attention... Virtually everyone conceded that spirit communication was at least a possibility. And because that possibility was associated in the popular mind with other questions concerning science... even the opponents of Spiritualism found it too central an issue to be ignored.

Moore, too, finds the links between Spiritualism and science too central an issue to be ignored. What fascinates Moore is that most nineteenth and early twentieth century mediums and psychics were exposed as frauds at least once during their careers, and yet the claims of Spiritualists and psychical researchers to scientific legitimacy never faltered. According to Moore, the claims to scientific legitimacy made by Spiritualists and psychical researchers were very much a double-edged sword: in claiming scientific legitimacy for their beliefs, both Spiritualists and psychical researchers were attempting to "borrow" the prestige and authority of scientific orthodoxy; by making such claims, however, they also opened themselves to accusations of heterodoxy by the established scientific community. In attempting to define the parameters of science to include Spiritualist belief, Spiritualists and psychical researchers opened themselves to scientific rejection when they failed to meet the standards of orthodox science. If they had chosen other standards, Moore suggests, Spiritualism and psychical science might not have been pushed beyond the margins of respectability, a respectability that claims to scientific legitimacy were intended to convey. He writes (1977:xv),

I would even push my point to an ironic conclusion. Spiritualists and psychical researchers were so totally absorbed by the forms of their culture [and its stress on science] that the potentially most innovative aspects of their point of view were bound to fall short of general acceptance. Their attempts to convince the scientific community to acknowledge the occurrence of events were doomed to fail [precisely] because spirit communication and ESP could not be proved with the means of scientific verification Spiritualists... had at their disposal.



For Moore, the failure of Spiritualists and psychical researchers to "prove" the reality of spiritual experience excludes them from the realm of scientific legitimacy. Such a failure was inevitable, he argues (1977:1-7), for spirituality is not reducible to empirical science. Implicit in Moore's conclusion is the belief that science and spirituality are incommensurate. For Moore, the very attempt by Spiritualist mediums (and parapsychologists) to empirically verify through scientific means the existence of spiritual phenomena detracted rather than added to the religious value of Spiritualism. He argues (1977:37) that Spiritualist attempts to make spirituality scientific were "embarrassingly antiseptic" and that such an attempt to link spirituality and science "reduced spirituality to man's most trivial activities. No amount of moralizing about the courage to confront truth could repair that kind of damage to human imagination."

Moore is primarily concerned to trace the development of parapsychology from its inception in the mid nineteenth century through to the present. His discussion of Spiritualism in particular ends when Spiritualists began to disassociate themselves from parapsychological research.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, Moore manages to question not only the "scientific" status of Spiritualist "facts" but the spiritual value of the religious movement during the course of his analysis. According to Moore, Spiritualism fails as science

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<sup>72</sup> According to Moore, Spiritualism began to decline in significance within American religious thought after 1870. He suggests that the failure of Spiritualism to gain scientific recognition, the liberalization of Protestant churches, the popularity of the occult Theosophical society as an alternative to Spiritualism for the more occult minded, the founding of the American Society for Psychical Research as an alternative to Spiritualism for the more scientifically inclined, lack of financial support for Spiritualist organizations, and the strong stress on individualism within the movement led to the general collapse of Spiritualism as a viable religious movement.

because Spiritualist belief claims have not been factually established. Spiritualism fails as a belief system because of the insistence by Spiritualists that spirituality is scientifically verifiable. In quoting the nineteenth century novel The Undiscovered Country he cautions (1977:39), "They are not miracles if you follow them up to see them a second time. We must beware how we make the supernatural a commonplace." For Moore, the very attempt to claim scientific legitimacy for religious faith excludes Spiritualism and psychical science from the realm of orthodox science while simultaneously devaluing the religious component of the movement.

Ruth Brandon's (1983) historical account of nineteenth century Spiritualism is more anecdotal than Moore's. Brandon provides a well written and interesting account of the Hydesville occurrences, and traces the development of Spiritualism through the years from 1844 to 1888, with a brief additional discussion of twentieth century Spiritualism.<sup>73</sup> Like Moore, Brandon is fascinated by the links between Spiritualism and science, and she devotes much of her narrative history to the early investigations of Spiritualist phenomena. Like Moore (1972, 1977), Pearsall (1972) and Podmore (1876, 1902a, 1902b, 1910), she concludes that the Spiritualist attempts to claim scientific legitimacy for their beliefs were in error, and therefore suggests that the whole religious movement was based on foolishness. Brandon explores in detail what she considers to be the 'credulity' of those who actually believed Spiritualist phenomena were verifiable

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<sup>73</sup> 1888 is the date at which Brandon ends, for it was in this year that Margaret and Kate Fox confessed to having made up the whole Hydesville rapping occurrence. This is a significant ending point for Brandon, who stresses the chicanery and duplicity within the Spiritualist movement throughout her book.

through science. She writes (1983:250), "two little girls play a game [and] in less than five years, millions of people are caught up in quasi-religious enthusiasm... Some of the best intellects of the day apply themselves in the most strenuous manner to testing the veracity of con-men and conjurers....the passions aroused, on both sides, seem much too large for the phenomena under investigation. How can such dreadful trivia arouse such deep emotions?"

In response to her own semi-rhetorical question, Brandon proposes the useful concept of "the rejection of disbelief". According to Brandon (1983:252-254), the scientific revolution has gradually been eroding the boundaries between the natural and supernatural worlds, as the supernatural world becomes smaller and the realm of science all-encompassing. Religion, she argues, responded to the challenge of science by abandoning the mystery and poetry of the supernatural realms in favour of the 'clarity and demystification' of rationalism. Poetry, mystery, and supernaturalism are still nostalgically longed for, however, and if people can no longer find them in religion, they will voluntarily reject disbelief in such things, and find them in science itself. Brandon writes (1983:253):

The notion [of psi phenomena] is absurd. And therein, maybe, lies its attraction... especially for those many scientists... whose beliefs remain unshaken despite repeated explanations and disproofs. If science, in its various aspects, has now usurped the position and authority once held by religion and magic, and if religion itself, in response, is assuming an increasingly prosaic and quasi-scientific posture, what room is left for the act of faith, for Camus's 'leap into the absurd'? Seemingly very little; and yet there is no reason to suppose that this is not as attractive, even essential, to a great many people as it ever was. In this situation, psi... psychical research [and Spiritualism] present a way out of the dilemma. The act of faith is transferred to the realm of science itself. And how much more emotionally satisfying it is than the arid wastes of rationalism!

Such a rejection of disbelief might be understandable for Brandon, but it is not "science". Like Podmore, Pearsall and Moore, Brandon bases her critical evaluation of Spiritualism on the explicit Spiritualist claim that Spiritualist phenomena are "factual" and that the spirit hypothesis explanation of those "facts" accurately describes reality. Since Brandon cannot acknowledge the legitimacy of Spiritualist "facts" nor the legitimacy of the spirit hypothesis as descriptive of reality, she cannot acknowledge the legitimacy of Spiritualist's religious claims. She writes (1983:251),

Anyone who reads widely in this field [parapsychology] must be shocked when he arrives at some of the weightiest tomes by some of the most highly respected of the researchers. Quite simply, all the facts are never mentioned - or, if they are, only in the most slanted way, so that those undermining the desired evidence will be dismissed. This may be excellent propaganda, but it is not science.

Brandon clearly concludes that Spiritualism and parapsychology are not scientific. The claim to being scientific, she proposes, is an attempt to clothe the desire to hold onto irrational beliefs in the idiom of rationalistic science. Such a claim to scientific legitimacy does not make Spiritualism scientific, however, it simply reveals the credulousness of nineteenth and early twentieth century Spiritualists. It is ultimately on this point which Brandon concludes. Podmore (1876, 1902, 1910), Pearsall (1972), Moore (1972, 1977) and Brandon (1983) are all inclined to see Spiritualism as a reduction of spirituality to the level of materialism and fraud because of the Spiritualist failure to establish their claims as "scientific fact". Both the Spiritualist insistence that Spiritualist beliefs are "scientific" and the rejection of this claim by etic historians reflects, therefore, the same popular perception of science as "factual" and "descriptive of reality" that is explicitly rejected by those within the confines of orthodox science

itself. Failure to meet these standards of popular "science" results in a dismissal of Spiritualism as a legitimate religious system.

### Social Scientific Literature, Spiritualism and Science

Sociological and anthropological interest in the link between Spiritualism and science lies less with the question of whether Spiritualist belief is factual and descriptive of reality than with the question of why such a claim was important to Spiritualists. In her doctoral dissertation, sociologist Eva Garroutte (1993) explores the process whereby establishment scientists in the nineteenth century "colonized" religious discourse and thereby co-opted the right to make "truth" claims about reality while simultaneously denying that right to religious speakers. Garroutte uses Spiritualism as an example of a nineteenth century positivist heresy to illustrate this argument. In doing so, Garroutte indirectly addresses the issue of why Spiritualists themselves in the nineteenth century felt the need to claim scientific status for Spiritualist belief.

According to Garroutte, the decade of the 1870's was a period in which scientists were shifting from what she terms a "Baconian" view to a "positivist" view of science. The Baconian view held that the core of science consisted of the direct observation and accumulation of facts by reputable investigators. According to Garroutte, Baconians accepted two kinds of facts: natural, and revealed. All such facts must be in accord with one another, and consequently Baconians accepted the co-equal status of empirical and Scriptural "truths" and the right of both scientists and Christians to speak with authority on the nature of "truth" and "reality". By contrast, she suggests, nineteenth century

scientific positivists restricted the right to speak with authority about the natural world and to make truth claims about "reality" to scientific specialists. Garrouette then suggests that in their adherence to the older Baconian view of science, Spiritualists constituted a threat to the emerging discipline of scientific positivism and the professionalization of science. Like other Baconians, Garrouette argues, Spiritualists wished to affirm the co-equal status of religion and science as means to knowledge. Unlike other Baconian ideologists, however, Garrouette notes (1993:254) that "it was not the Biblical revelation for which they typically wished to leave room in their list of facts... they defended another type of revelation as scientifically-relevant, empirical evidence - namely, direct, individual communications vouchsafed by the spirit world."

In making the attempt to defend the "truth" of spirit messages and the "fact" of continued life after bodily death, Garrouette suggests that Spiritualists challenged scientific positivism on three fronts. First, they directly questioned the right of positivist scientists to restrict the authority to make truth claims to the scientific sphere. Spiritualists argued that other reputable investigators, including spiritual investigators, should also have the right to speak with authority on matters of "fact" and "truth" (and hence "science"). Second, they threatened to spread this Baconian democratic view of science to a wide popular audience. In the 1870's, only the highly educated public were aware of the Baconian scientific ideology, and consequently the Baconian threat to scientific positivism was slight. Spiritualism, however, had immense appeal to people across a wide spectrum of differing social and educational backgrounds, and consequently the threat to the emerging elitist positivist view of science became much greater. Third, Spiritualism

indirectly challenged the positivist assumption that "truth" could be known with surety at all through scientific means. Spiritualists questioned the right of establishment scientists to make truth claims while denying others that right. While Garrouette notes that Spiritualists themselves never fulfilled their potential for challenging the right of scientists to speak with authority on "truth," (for Spiritualists wished to retain the right to speak about "truth" themselves) they provided the concepts and categories by which others might do so. According to Garrouette (1993:315), Spiritualists made "a genuinely radical critique of positivism available to other speakers, and in this way threatened the professionalization of positivist science severely."

Garrouette's work is a valuable scholarly contribution to the study of Spiritualism and science from a social-scientific perspective. It provides a wealth of historical detail, and contextualizes the nineteenth century Spiritualist insistence on the scientific compatibility of Spiritualist and scientific knowledge within the broader debate between competing Baconian and positivist ideologies. While Garrouette's primary interest is in the discourse of establishment scientists and how they excluded religious speakers, including Spiritualists, from the realm of scientific authority, she also provides insight into the nineteenth century Spiritualist conception of what constituted "science," "facts," and "truth". The parallels between nineteenth century Spiritualists and contemporary Spiritualists in this regard are striking. For Garrouette, the insistence of Spiritualists in the nineteenth century that their religious experiences were "facts" and hence scientifically legitimate in no way implies a devaluing of spirituality to the level of material concerns. Rather, such claims simply represent one example of competing

ideological paradigms in which the "victor" succeeded in labelling Spiritualist claims "heretical" and thereby illegitimate. As Garrouette notes (1993:320), there are no grounds to assume the innate superiority of the positivist over the Baconian view of science. Had the outcome of the "battle" between these competing systems been different, the scientific legitimacy of Spiritualist claims might not have been rejected.

While Garrouette's sociological analysis of Spiritualism is the work which addresses the issue of Spiritualist claims to scientific legitimacy most directly, other sociologists have also studied the connection between Spiritualism and science. Sociologist Mary Farrell Bednarowski (1973), for example, examined the Spiritualist claim to scientific legitimacy from the perspective of social upheaval in her unpublished doctoral dissertation. According to Bednarowski (1973:18-20), Americans in the nineteenth century were confronted with the challenge of holding traditional religious faith in the face of an increasing scientific naturalism. Positivist science was increasingly marginalizing Scriptural faith. Within this context, Bednarowski suggests, Spiritualism allowed for the affirmation of developing scientific views while simultaneously affirming religious doctrine. Bednarowski further adds, however, that this logical procedure opened religion to the dictates of scientific reasoning. The linkage of science and religion within Spiritualism represents, for Bednarowski (1973:20) "a concerned, even a desperate, effort to reconcile science with religion" in face of the fear that the two were truly incompatible.<sup>74</sup> Consequently, the link between religion and science in

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<sup>74</sup> Moore (1972:488) has also argued this point, stating that "Anything, [nineteenth century] Spiritualists feared, which science would not investigate would, in the modern world become a matter of indifference... and [they] could not therefore remain satisfied



Spiritualism had very little to do with science itself, she suggests, and much more to do with the attempt to mediate the perceived conflict between competing conceptual paradigms. According to Bednarowski, if "religion" and "science" were seen to be in conflict in the nineteenth century, Spiritualism was an attempt to mediate this dispute.<sup>75</sup>

According to anthropologist June Macklin (1977), contemporary Spiritualists continue to mediate between these competing conceptual paradigms through a technique she calls 'boundary-hopping'. Like Garrouette and Bednarowski, Macklin avoids the tendency to devalue the religious component of Spiritualism simply as a result of its claims to scientific legitimacy. Nineteenth century Spiritualists were very much a product of their times in their 'boundary hopping,' she notes, and in many ways were highly representative of mainstream American values. Contemporary Spiritualists are similarly representative of the American cultural milieu. She writes (1977:70):

the hard-working mediums, for whom no task should be impossible, did not and do not challenge the existing power structures of American society.... it seems clear that Mrs. M. and her spirits share with the rest of us the view that we occupy a universe that can be understood and that life is a problem to be solved: With the help of knowledgeable experts - talented, trained scientists, mediums, and progressed spirits - we too can understand and cope.

"Coping," Macklin suggests, is a primary function of Spiritualist belief.

Contemporary Spiritualists resolve the tension between spirituality and science which

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with an understanding between science and theology whereby science, without denying God and the soul, merely ignored them."

<sup>75</sup> As Hovenkamp (1978); Brooke (1991); Sharlin (1966); and Barbour (1990) have pointed out, religion and science were seen by most North Americans to be increasingly in conflict throughout the nineteenth century.

makes coping difficult in the modern world by living 'conceptually' in two different worlds at once. According to Macklin (1988), while Spiritualists perceive their belief system to be compatible with science, they do not in fact conceptualize the world in scientific terms at all times. Instead, Spiritualists engage in perceptual boundary hopping, whereby they shift back and forth between a scientific, empirical worldview and a worldview of religious perception.<sup>76</sup> As a result, she suggests, they are in fact able to mediate between religion and science by simultaneously holding both conceptual paradigms. While this may make Spiritualist beliefs inconsistent, she suggests, it also ensures their effectiveness in fostering conceptual stability where both orthodox science and orthodox religion exclude Spiritualist beliefs.<sup>77</sup>

Garrouette (1993), Bednarowski (1973) and Macklin (1977) all cite the work of Geoffrey Nelson (1969a, 1969b, 1972), the pioneering sociologist in the study of

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<sup>76</sup> Macklin borrows the term "boundary hopping" from Ernest Gellner (1973:162-181), but it is also a concept explored by anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his seminal essay "Religion as a Cultural System". As Geertz notes (1973b:110-119), "to speak of 'the religious perspective' is, by implication, to speak of one perspective among others. A perspective is a mode of seeing, in that extended sense of 'see' in which it means 'discern,' 'apprehend,' 'understand,' or 'grasp.' It is a particular way of looking at life, a particular manner of construing the world, as when we speak of an historical perspective, a scientific perspective, an aesthetic perspective... But no one, not even a saint, lives in the world religious symbols formulate all of the time, and the majority of men live in it only at moments... The movement back and forth between the religious perspective and the common-sense perspective is actually one of the more obvious empirical occurrences on the social scene".

<sup>77</sup> Macklin also points out that such conceptual boundary hopping contributes to the marginalization of Spiritualism from orthodox science. "By refusing to recognize the scientifically determined boundary between the empirical and the transcendent," she writes (1977:74), "Spiritualism and its mediums have become anomalies: they are not crazy, but are also not quite mainstream."

Spiritualism. Like the three authors discussed above, Nelson also sees Spiritualist claims to scientific legitimacy as an attempt to bridge the conceptual dichotomy between religious and scientific worldviews. Unlike Garrouette, Bednarowski and Macklin, however, he does not necessarily find such an attempt either meaningful or necessary. According to Nelson (1969a), the conflict between these two spheres stems from religion's inability to confine itself to a non-empirical domain, and from the inability of science to be confined to strictly empirical methodology and goals. Spiritualist attempts to link Spirituality with science simply aggravated the perceived conflict between these two systems.<sup>78</sup> For Nelson (1969a:139-140), both religion and science are social systems, and as such come into conflict when their means and ends contrast. Spiritualists, in attempting to use scientific assertions to achieve their religious goals, seek to mediate this conflict. In doing so, however, Spiritualists confuse the boundaries between the empirical and non-empirical worlds. Like Moore (1972, 1977), Nelson (1969a:139-140) believes that these two worlds are essentially and integrally separate, and writes:

Science is not able to investigate certain areas of human experience. By this we mean that the scientific method cannot be applied profitably to those areas of human experience which may be classified as moral

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<sup>78</sup> Theologian and science writer Ian Barbour (1990:3-30) suggests that there are four main "ways of relating" science and religion to one another. These are a) conflict; b) independence; c) dialogue; and d) integration. Nelson is clearly a representative of the "independence" school of thought. Barbour (1990:10) defines this stance as viewing "the two enterprises as totally independent and autonomous. Each has its own distinctive domain and its characteristic methods that can be justified on its own terms... each party must keep off the other's turf." The weakness of this viewpoint, according to Barbour, is that neither science nor religion can benefit from the insights of the other if they are compartmentalized to such a degree.

experience, aesthetic experience, supernatural experience and the experience of ultimate reality. The non-material is not amenable to scientific methods of investigation. The claims of science can only be seen as an attack on religion if one accepts that reality is entirely material, that mental and spiritual phenomena are epiphenomenal, that they are merely projections of the material world.

According to Nelson (1969a), the nineteenth century Spiritualist attempt to mediate the conflict between science and religion stemmed from a misperception by Spiritualists of the threat posed by scientific naturalism. In addition, their attempts at scientific investigation of Spiritualist phenomena were doomed to failure. If Spiritualist phenomena were truly "spiritual," scientists would not have been able to verify them. If they were not, then Spiritualism as a religion was based on a faulty premise. Either way, the entire Spiritualist stress on the compatibility of religion with science and the attempts of nineteenth century Spiritualists to demonstrate this claim empirically is rejected by Nelson as misguided and unnecessary, as well as impossible. No matter how misguided or impossible the Spiritualist goal of linking religion and science might be, however, Nelson (1988) recognizes in his later work that it is an integral part of the Spiritualist religious system. Unlike the historical analyses of Podmore (1876, 1902, 1910), Pearsall (1972), Brandon (1983) and Moore (1972, 1977), Nelson is unwilling to devalue the religious component of Spiritualism because of its attempts to establish a link to empirical science.

Throughout the body of his work, Nelson (1969a, 1969b, 1972, 1988) has stressed the marginality of the Spiritualist belief system with reference to both orthodox science and mainstream religion. He has suggested (1988), however, that the contemporary Spiritualist system of belief might in fact be closer to contemporary

orthodox science in worldview than it was to either the establishment science of the nineteenth century or to the more mainstream religious systems of that era. He writes (1988:112),

Spiritualists [today] recognise that while it is possible to prove, or test the evidence for human survival, it is not possible to prove the existence of God or establish the nature of Ultimate Reality through similar evidence or by using empirical methods. They therefore attempt to legitimate and validate their conceptions of Ultimate Reality in two ways, first by an appeal to Authority [if messages from spirit are proven true, the opinions of spirit about God and ultimate reality can be accepted as true.] Second they claim that the information received through mediums can be legitimated by subjecting it to rational examination. Does it agree with what we know about the nature of the universe through scientific study, is it consistent with our experience of human life and is it logically consistent internally as a theory? On all these grounds it is possible to defend the proposition that Spiritualism constitutes a valid system of thought, though there is need for updating, particularly in respect to the relationship between Spiritualist conceptions and the developing theories and methods of the natural sciences.

Nelson, then, is not concerned to "label" Spiritualism as either "scientific" or "pseudoscientific," but simply to recognize Spiritualism as a legitimate and consistent if somewhat outdated intellectual and religious system. As such, he suggests that developments in modern science can only support the Spiritualist claim that religion and science are compatible. Quantum and Field theories, he insists, are more consistent with Spiritualist conceptions of human nature and the nature of the cosmos than those of earlier scientific paradigms. He concludes (1988:113) that "recent developments in physics and cosmology can only strengthen the argument of Spiritualists regarding the nature of meaning of human life within the universe". In this sense, the value of

contemporary Spiritualism's link between religion and science is affirmed.<sup>79</sup>

### Conclusion

According to Moore (1972:36) "the war between science and religion had not yet been declared in America in the 1850's. Most scientists did not even dream of one. But had a declaration been made, Spiritualists would have declared themselves in intent and method on the side of science." Certainly the Spiritualist histories discussed here attempted to establish Spiritualism's links to scientific legitimacy. As Gieryn (1983:781) notes with respect to orthodox scientists, an appeal to the authoritative image of science can serve to reinforce personal credibility in the competition for respect or resources. By making claims to scientific legitimacy, Spiritualist historians attempted to bolster the credibility of Spiritualist belief in what Jansen (1969) might have called both an esoteric and an exoteric fashion. Of course, Spiritualist claims to such scientific legitimacy do not necessarily mean that recognition is granted outside of the Spiritualist movement.

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<sup>79</sup> Although Nelson makes the claim that recent developments in physics and cosmology can only strengthen Spiritualist claims, he does not mean to imply that contemporary science can "prove" Spiritualist belief. The cosmological anthropic principle (which holds that the universe seems tailored or designed to fit human life), and the rather "spooky" characteristics of quantum physics (such as the ability of one electron to seemingly "know" what scientific measurements were being taken on another), do seem to lend themselves to spiritualistic interpretations on the surface. Orthodox scientists, however, including Einstein and contemporary physicists, insist that the "spookiness" of quantum physics is not a result of psychic phenomena, nor the anthropic principle a result of the divine creation of the universe. At first glance, however, twentieth century science seems better capable of supporting Spiritualist claims than nineteenth century science. For a discussion of the anthropic principle and the "spookiness" of quantum physics from an orthodox (sceptical) scientific perspective, see Stenger (1988, 1990).

As Podmore (1902b(2):360) wisely notes with respect to Spiritualist belief, "The mere existence, however, of a belief... supported by an ever-increasing volume of testimony, raises but a faint presumption that the belief is well-founded." With regard to the Spiritualist claim to scientific legitimacy, even the faint presumption that such claims are well founded has often been lacking. Garrouette (1993:264) notes that Spiritualist claims were taken seriously by establishment science only during the limited period of the 1870's.<sup>80</sup> After this point, as Moore (1977:xv) points out, the very attempt to claim scientific legitimacy frequently undermines rather than bolsters the credibility of the Spiritualist movement. Spiritualists did indeed firmly consider themselves on the side of science, but recognition of such affiliation has never been granted by etic sources.

Until the ground-breaking work of sociologist Eva Garrouette (1992, 1993), academic historical analyses of Spiritualism had never apparently analyzed the concept of "science" as distinct from the "popular science" view held by Spiritualists themselves that science is "factual," authoritative and descriptive of reality. Taking Spiritualist claims to scientific legitimacy at face value, the academic historians discussed above analyze Spiritualist belief according to how well the movement fits such a "popular" definition of science. When Spiritualist claims in this regard are found wanting, this scholarship has tended to be dismissive not only of Spiritualist claims to scientific

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<sup>80</sup> Garrouette writes, "Spiritualism, if not exemplifying Kurtz's claim that "one generation's heresy is frequently the next generation's orthodoxy," at least illustrates that today's heresy may be tomorrow's triviality. It was [only] constructed as an expressly scientific heresy by positivist speakers for a limited period near the seventh decade of the nineteenth century."

legitimacy but of Spiritualism as a viable religious movement.<sup>81</sup> Despite the useful conceptual contributions of Moore, Brandon, and Macklin, the majority of literature on Spiritualism and science reveals no apparent recognition that orthodox science represents not a factual representation of reality (as Spiritualists presume, and from which Spiritualist claims consequently fall short), but rather a socially constructed *version* of reality dependent in large part on the cultural preconceptions of orthodox scientists. In correcting this deficit in the academic literature on Spiritualism, Garrouette's (1993) dissertation fills a vital role in illuminating the link between Spiritualism and science.

The question of whether Spiritualism can be contained within the boundaries of orthodox science is not open to debate. Spiritualists are unquestionably 'outsiders' to orthodox science, and as Gieryn (1983), Coon (1992), Garrouette (1992, 1993) and Hess (1993) have shown, orthodox scientists spend considerable energy making such insider/outsider distinctions clear. What is ironic in the literature on Spiritualism and science is that the dismissal of Spiritualism as a legitimate scientific and religious system has been based solely on its failure to live up to the popular "misconceptions" of science as factual, authoritative and descriptive of reality, rather than on more orthodox scientific grounds. Spiritualism is clearly *not* "scientific" within the confines of orthodox science. This argument could be made with reference to much more legitimately "orthodox" grounds. Even a short list of orthodox scientific characteristics, such as the intersubjective testability principle for any scientifically observable event; the requirement

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<sup>81</sup> For example, Moore (1972) calls Spiritualist beliefs 'pedestrian,' Brandon (1983) calls them 'aberrant' and even Nelson (1969a) considers them 'cultish'.



that any scientifically observable event must in principle be replicable; the falsifiability criterion necessary for any scientific theory; the requirement that theories agree with empirical observation; that theories be fruitful (lead to new areas of research); that they have coherence (be compatible with other accepted scientific theories) and that they have broad scope (to integrate a broad range of phenomena across scientific disciplines) excludes Spiritualism from consideration as "scientific." <sup>82</sup> The important issue in the study of Spiritualist claims to scientific legitimacy, therefore, is *not* whether or not Spiritualism is *really* scientific. From the standards of orthodox science, it very clearly is *not*. More important to ask are the questions of *why* Spiritualists make this claim, and *what* they are claiming when they use the legitimating discourse of science to express their beliefs.

Spiritualists are well aware of the "failure" of orthodox science to confirm their claims. They are also aware of their marginal status with respect to orthodox science. Analyses of Spiritualism which concentrate solely on such questions as 'are these claims of contact with the spirit world verifiable scientifically?' or 'have the facts of Spiritualist phenomena been established?' therefore, miss the significance of these assertions for

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<sup>82</sup> As Gieryn (1983:781) argues, "lists" of orthodox scientific characteristics are often a "poor heuristic" for distinguishing "science" from "non-science," for "characteristics once proposed as capable of distinguishing science from non-science are found to be common among intellectual activities not ordinarily labelled scientific, or they are found not to be typical features of science-in-practice." Nevertheless, as Gieryn further points out, "demarcation is routinely accomplished in practical everyday settings" and this demarcation is often based on lists of such characteristics as mentioned here. For discussions of what orthodox scientists see as constitutive of "genuine" science, see Barbour (1990); Barnes (1985); Barnes and Edge (1982); Brooke (1991); Casti (1990); McCain and Segal (1982); Rothman (1988); Stenger (1988, 1990).

Spiritualists. The answer to such questions to date must be no, and most Spiritualists would accept this response. However, since Spiritualists are well aware of the lack of orthodox scientific support for their assertions, and are equally aware of the existence of fraud in psychic phenomena, the significance of claims to scientific legitimacy for Spiritualists must lie elsewhere.

It is my contention that contemporary Spiritualists have shifted their emphasis from the nineteenth century attempts to verify their experiences scientifically, to the use of scientific language and concepts as a legitimating discourse to validate those experiences. Spiritualists utilize "science" as a source of authority to lend credence to their claims. Within contemporary Spiritualism, mediumistic phenomena are legitimated by incorporating orthodox scientific sources of authority into the spirit possession idiom to "explain" how such phenomena "work". Spiritualist healing is legitimated by incorporating orthodox biomedical symbols as sources of authority into the non-biomedical system of Spiritualist healing. Sociologist Eileen Barker (1980) suggests that in a religiously pluralistic society, sources of authoritative legitimation are frequently sought by those who hold marginal religious beliefs. According to Barker (1980:79), "the need is felt for an independent yet commonly acknowledged criterion of epistemological authority. In modern, rationalised society the only such available source is science." She then notes (1980:81):

Those of us who have been brought up in an age of science, however disillusioned we may be with its uses and limitations, will be unlikely to admit publicly or privately that what we believe will go against its findings. Minimally, if we are to transcend the limits of rationality to enter the realm of the non-rational, we must not be seen by ourselves, or others, to be irrational (paradox is paradoxically allowed and even

welcomed); minimally if we go beyond the limits of science and empiricism we must not be seen to be unscientific. Science and logic must at least *allow* the truth that transcends their boundaries.

Based on my own contemporary field work, it is possible to argue that Spiritualists have transformed the discourse of science into a set of sacred symbols within which their experiences can at once be expressed and legitimated. Science becomes for Spiritualists not so much a method of verification but a means of expression for their spiritual experiences. Spiritualists continue to insist that their beliefs are compatible with science, but acknowledge that their beliefs transcend the boundaries of current scientific knowledge. The Spiritualists with whom I worked are both critical of official science and ultimately reliant upon the legitimating power that such "science" can convey. While the criticism of official science is largely confined to the Spiritualist mediumship context, the authoritative, legitimating function of "science" can be seen throughout Spiritualist belief and practice, and is especially apparent in the medicalization of Spiritualist healing, as discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter Two: The Medicalization of Spiritualist Healing

*I'm a first class healer. Had the gift for about ten years now... the doctors in the spirit world use me as a medium to pass their knowledge through me to the afflicted. Like they all get together for a consultation and they say, 'Well, let's try such-and-such,' and they try it through my hands. That's a lot of expensive talent, you know! Dr. Banting, Louis Pasteur, Hippocrates. They are all way ahead of us in research. -Rev. Baines.*

Healing is one of the most important elements in contemporary North American Spiritualism. Spiritual healing is offered by every Spiritualist Church, either integrated into regular worship services or offered separately at healing services and private sessions (Macklin 1974a, 1977; Nelson 1969; Skultans 1974; Zaretsky 1970, 1977).<sup>1</sup> The healing offered at these services is primarily "laying on of hands," a non-physical, non biomedical system of healing understood to convey healing energy through the power of prayer, the channelled energies of spirits, and the loving power of God. This system of religious healing is free from any biomedical elements, (even such semi-medicalized elements as herbalist or homeopathic remedies, accupressure or massage).<sup>2</sup> Despite this

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<sup>1</sup> One Spiritualist healer informed me that 'Spiritualist services can't go on unless there is a healing [session].' Another Spiritualist healer and minister (Kim) disputed this statement, but during my 19 months field observation I never attended any worship service which did not also include a Spiritualist healing component.

<sup>2</sup> This is in distinction to Mexican, Brazilian and Puerto Rican Spiritism, which does include such semi-medical elements (see Finkler 1980, 1981a, 1981b, 1984, 1985, 1987; Macklin 1974a, 1974b; Bonilla 1969; Garrison 1977; Harwood 1977; Koss 1977; Singer & Borrero 1984; Greenfield 1987, 1992 for discussion of Spiritist therapies which use herbalist remedies in addition to "spiritual" healing).

purely spiritual emphasis, Spiritualists draw upon the authority of allopathic biomedicine to legitimate the efficacy of their healing techniques. As sociologist Meredith McGuire (1988:7) notes, the allopathic biomedical system has been so successful in subordinating or suppressing alternative therapies that "health care" has become synonymous with "medical care" in modern western societies. Spiritualists reflect this acceptance of biomedicine as the dominant system of health care. One implication of this dominance, however, is the frequent "labelling" of those who use alternative therapies as "marginal" or "deviant" by practitioners of orthodox biomedicine.<sup>3</sup> Any use of alternative therapies consequently represents an implicit critique of contemporary biomedicine, for such utilization is rarely accepted by those within the dominant biomedical system.<sup>4</sup>

Within the Spiritualist healing context, biomedicine is implicitly criticized for its

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<sup>3</sup> There is considerable debate in the field of medical anthropology regarding the use of appropriate terminology to describe different health care systems. Frequently used labels for the dominant medical system in North America are "Allopathic Medicine" (Frankenberg, 1981); "Western Medicine" (Welsch, 1991; Unschuld, 1980); "Cosmopolitan Medicine" (Leslie, 1980; Heggenhougen, 1980; Cosminsky & Scrimshaw, 1980), and "Biomedicine" (Kleinman 1988, 1980, 1978; Press, 1980). I have chosen to use "biomedicine" consistently throughout this chapter.

<sup>4</sup> Although the critique of orthodoxy implicit in alternative health care and religious systems is widely recognized (McGuire 1988; Comaroff 1982; Crandon 1989, 1983; Crandon-Malamud 1991; Finkler 1987, 1981a; Hess 1993; and others), it has also been suggested that alternative systems of healing frequently support rather than undermine orthodoxy. For example, Finkler (1987) suggests that the ties of individuals to Mexican Spiritualist temples maintain a separation between Spiritualist members and the wider cultural milieu that ultimately reinforces the sense of marginalization they originally joined the movement to alleviate. Finkler asserts, therefore, that far from offering a challenge to the status quo, Mexican Spiritualist healing temples serve to maintain it. Discussion of alternative systems of healing as providing implicit critiques does not necessarily entail, therefore, a perception of alternative systems of healing as fundamentally incompatible with or threatening to orthodoxy.

failure to treat the "spiritual" as well as the physical person. Although this criticism is an important factor in the Spiritualist utilization of alternative healing, it does not represent the major emphasis in contemporary healing practices among Spiritualists. Beneath criticism of the limits of biomedicine lies a pattern of medicalization within the Spiritualist healing system in which the influence of biomedicine is readily apparent. Spiritualists themselves insist that Spiritualist healing is not intended as an alternative to Western biomedicine, but as a complement to it.<sup>5</sup> The Spiritualist healers quoted in the following pages downplay any implied critique of biomedicine that their alternative healing system represents. Instead, they stress the complementarity of their healing system with biomedicine. The Spiritualist utilization of biomedical language and symbols, their patterns of health care resort, and their acceptance of individualized aetiologies of illness reveal the important impact of biomedicine on Spiritualist conceptions of healing and illness. Within Spiritualist healing one can see therefore both a criticism of orthodoxy, implicit in any alternative religious or healing system, and the deliberate Spiritualist attempt to minimize boundary distinctions between Spiritualist healing and biomedicine. Spiritualists draw upon biomedical language and symbols to legitimate their non-biomedical healing practices and beliefs. Biomedicine becomes a source of legitimation for the efficacy of Spiritualist healing. The adoption of biomedical

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<sup>5</sup> This conclusion is supported by Skultans' (1974:30) observation that "Spiritualism does not attempt to assert its supremacy over orthodox medicine. Spiritualists are seldom discouraged from seeing their doctor and they are rarely given advice which contradicts that of the doctor. Spiritualism does not see itself as an alternative to orthodox medicine but rather as its complement. It fills in the gaps and smooths over the inadequacies of more orthodox treatment methods."

symbols into Spiritualist healing creates a sacred discourse that ultimately affirms the legitimacy of both systems of healing.<sup>6</sup>

The adoption and incorporation of biomedical language, symbols and concepts into Spiritualist healing is part of the wider Spiritualist utilization of "scientific" symbols as sources of legitimation. The link between biomedicine and "science" is often assumed in the literature on the medicalization of alternative healing, but is rarely made explicit.<sup>7</sup> For example, anthropologist Loring Danforth (1989) casually links the New Age incorporation of "recent scientific developments" to his discussion of New Age healing without ever explicitly linking his discussion of 'science' to allopathic biomedicine. He writes (1989:254) "although much New Age thinking is characterized by a lack of faith in science, it would not be an exaggeration to say that in the New Age science has become a sacred symbol, psychology a religion. Much New Age healing... is brought

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<sup>6</sup> The term "medical system" is also the subject of debate in the field of medical anthropology (see for example Landy 1977; Leslie 1980; Press 1980). Consensus suggests that "medical system" refers to the complex interrelationship of cultural practices, methods, techniques, beliefs and values relating to health coupled with social structures, technologies, and personnel which represent them. Consequently, "system" refers to 'institutionalized belief and practice,' and can refer to both the 'biomedical system' and the Spiritualist 'healing system'.

<sup>7</sup> As Romanucci-Ross and Moerman (1991) have argued, biomedicine is very much a product of the history of science, and that perhaps more so than in other scientific disciplines, the socially constructed nature of "science" goes unrecognized. They write (1991:390, 402), "We began with mention of Descartes and it is appropriate to refer again to the man and his period, the 17th century, since in the times and in the man we recognize the foundations of modern scientific thought... in some cases, men and women in medicine have achieved a Kuhnian view of their profession, but most share a greater affinity with Descartes... research paradigms in Western allopathic medicine rest on the ideology that the structure of science is unassailable as the researcher moves through better and better paradigms to 'complete description' of 'how things really work.'"

about by a variety of psychospiritual techniques that involve 'balancing polarities,' manipulating energy...". Left unspoken in Danforth's study is any overt connection between "science" and biomedical assumptions and practices. Anthropologist David J. Hess (1993) also discusses New Age healing briefly in the context of his discussion of 'science in the New Age' without making explicit the assumed connection between "science" and allopathic biomedicine. He simply notes (1993:171) that "sceptics criticize holistic medicine for not being scientific enough..." without exploring what "scientific" means in this context. It is clear, however, that within the context of alternative systems of healing, attempts to integrate "scientific" elements take the form of attempts to integrate "biomedical" elements. That "science" can be equated with Western biomedicine in the context of spiritual systems of healing is made explicit by anthropologist Lola Romanucci-Ross (1986) in her analysis of Italian systems of alternative healing. She writes (1986:4): "Both in verbal communication and journalistic writings, individuals and groups adopt the language of science to describe healing techniques ... folk healers, then, have been affected by the media and have joined a syncretic movement to link 'proofs' of treatment efficacy from religion, medicine, and technology." For the Spiritualists with whom I worked, "science" and "biomedicine" are clearly equated when healing is at issue. The medicalization of Spiritualist language, symbols and concepts of healing is therefore indicative of the wider incorporation of scientific symbols as a legitimating discourse within this alternative religious system.



### Historical Background

Healing has been an integral part of Spiritualism since its very inception (Bednarowski 1973; Isaacs 1983; Macklin 1974a; Moore 1975; Nelson 1969a, 1988), and the attempt to bridge religion and biomedicine through Spiritualist healing has an equally longstanding history. One of the most influential thinkers of the early Spiritualist movement, Andrew Jackson Davis, became known as a "medical medium" as early as 1845, three years prior to the Fox sisters' demonstrations of mediumship in upstate New York (Davis 1861).<sup>8</sup> Under the influence of mesmerism, Andrew Jackson Davis began to diagnose the illnesses of individuals through what he interpreted as divine revelation. During the 1850's, Davis's philosophical writings and the content of his mesmeric revelations became strongly influential in the growing Spiritualist movement.<sup>9</sup> Medical diagnoses and prescriptions became foremost among the "proofs" of spirit communication offered by Spiritualist mediums, for recipients could attest to the accuracy and effectiveness of the spirit-inspired medicine. Davis himself suggested that such

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<sup>8</sup> Anthropologist Felicitas Goodman (1988b:30-37) argues that Andrew Jackson Davis's 'medical mediumship' was different than that of normative Spiritualist healers, for "Davis's religious trance experiences concentrated on visions and spirit journeys. He was not geared to possession. And so he considered it unnecessary to keep contacting the dead on a regular basis. However, it was this experience [possession] that in the development of Spiritualism until the present remained central for the movement, and so Andrew Jackson Davis faded into the background." While it is true that the philosophy of Davis is less influential today than in the nineteenth century, Davis considered himself a Spiritualist until the mediumship exposés of the 1880's forced him to distance himself from the movement. Consequently, one cannot force a distinction between Davis and other nineteenth century healers when Davis himself did not make such a distinction.

<sup>9</sup> Although Davis was critical of certain aspects of Spiritualism and in later years would divorce himself from the movement completely, most modern day non-Christian Spiritualist groups can trace their philosophical origins to him.

mediumistic diagnoses and prescriptions could benefit establishment biomedical science, for under the influence of spirits the medical medium could see things which earth-bound doctors could not.<sup>10</sup> He writes (1861:21):

The best natural judgment, though crowned with the diplomatic glory of a scientific education, is often incapable of reaching with certainty below physical disturbances to their primal causes. In the detection of the hidden sources of human misery, and of the conditions that generate corporeal discords, no sight less penetrative than that of the genuine clairvoyant can ever avail much....

Under the influence of A.J. Davis, spiritual healing became an integral and universally accepted element of Spiritualism.<sup>11</sup> Davis never intended clairvoyant diagnosis to replace medical analysis, however. "The careful instructions of the scientifically-trained judgment are to be preferred as superior, and as being more in harmony with rational sense," he writes (1861:25), "than the blunderings of undeveloped or non-medical clairvoyants."<sup>12</sup> Davis believed that the diagnoses and prescriptions of

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<sup>10</sup> Contemporary North American Spiritualists argue essentially the same thing today. According to Greenfield (1992:36), Brazilian Spiritists also make this argument: "Dr. Lacerda turned to the visitors to inform them that perhaps 75 to 80 percent of all illnesses begin on the astral body. Medicine... cannot treat them until they appear on the somatic body... with apometry, however, the illnesses of the astral body can be treated quickly and easily by spirit doctors long before they ever appear on the flesh."

<sup>11</sup> Nineteenth century Spiritualist willingness to accept and utilize orthodox biomedicine revolved around the question of whether orthodox biomedicine was in fact "scientific". Davis clearly perceived biomedicine as "science". Other Spiritualists, however, disagreed. As Barrow (1986:169) notes, for example, one British Spiritualist magazine argued the position that "the so-called science of medicine... [was] one huge deception... injurious to all." For a discussion of nineteenth century Spiritualist attitudes towards biomedicine, see Barrow (1982).

<sup>12</sup> The distinction that Davis draws here between medical clairvoyants and non-medical clairvoyants may be indicative of the 'professionalization' of medicine taking place in nineteenth century America. Davis appears to have accepted the need for a professionalised class of health care specialists. Davis would have considered himself,

medical clairvoyants were fully compatible with medical science. For Davis, clairvoyant medicine upheld and complemented biomedicine, rather than challenging it. He considered his own trance-inspired diagnoses and prescriptions to be in full accord with the best (if not the mainstream) medical knowledge of his day.<sup>13</sup> For Davis, spiritual healing meant acting on knowledge of both the biological and spiritual nature of humanity, knowledge gained during mesmeric trance and communication with the spirit world. Davis perceived an essential unity between the physiological and spiritual aspects of humanity, and as a result his pharmacological prescriptions were often applicable to spiritual malaise.<sup>14</sup> Davis did recognize that practitioners of establishment biomedicine were often unconvinced by his claim to medical and scientific legitimacy, but where medical doctors and scientists disagreed with his perceptions, Davis attempted to enlighten them with what he regarded as scientific truth. He writes (1861:65):

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as a trained medical medium (but not a biomedical doctor), a valuable member of such a professionalised class of professionals. Other Spiritualists rejected this drive towards professionalization. For example, Barrow (1986:169) quotes a nineteenth century Spiritualist handbook as follows: "To mystify, shut up in the schools, and make private property of that knowledge, which of all others ought to be universally taught, is a wrong the deepest and most injurious to society."

<sup>13</sup> Davis did depart from the medical wisdom of the time in favour of what he called the "harmonial philosophy". In his harmonial philosophy, Davis advocated the treatment of the physical, mental, and spiritual natures of man simultaneously through diet, exercise, magnetism, and rational learning.

<sup>14</sup> For example, to treat "A Multitude of Sins," Davis (1861:281-282) insists that all voluntary sinning be stopped immediately, and prescribes "As a medicine, eat nothing between breakfast and supper; never eat any bread fresh baked; no pancakes or salted food...[take] the following Chylifier: Cinnamon bark and nutmegs, bruised, of each one table-spoonful; cardamon seeds, horse-radish, ginger-root, mandrakes, and Turkey rhubarb, powdered, of each two table-spoonfuls; let all these macerate, that is, soften and dissolve in water sufficient to cover them and more - for twelve days...then strain and add two quarts of cider brandy or half a pint of alcohol."

Even the most unlearned... can discern, at a glance, the unreliableness of much of the so termed medical science of the day....We trace the secret of this impotency, among medical men of learning and research, to one cause, namely: the Professors of our colleges of medicine - with few, but glorious exceptions - take the student out of himself, as though he were a spectator, a foreigner, a secondary and subordinate fact, to the science of health and the uses of medicine.... The true physician, the unritual, but spiritual, teacher in the departments of physiology and health, is certain to reach the unseen springs of life, and he invariably depends upon the immutable flowings of vital energy for the success of his prescriptions.

Davis wanted to educate physicians so as to improve scientific health care from its state of perceived precariousness to one of more holistic success. He was apparently unwilling to accept the body/mind dichotomy prevalent in orthodox biomedical science, but believed that "true" medical science transcended such a false dichotomy. He encouraged open-minded physicians to verify his prescriptions and diagnoses, and proudly published instances of such verification.<sup>15</sup> The goal for Davis was the evolution of health care to the point where there would be no distinction between the practice of medicine by physicians and that practised by Spiritual healers. Each discipline could contribute to the success of the other, and there would be considerable overlap between the two systems. Both systems of healing, he hoped, would one day be in perfect accord.

### Contemporary Spiritualist Healing

A.J. Davis' dream of a future unity between biomedical and spiritual healing has yet to be realized, although many contemporary North American Spiritualists still argue

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<sup>15</sup> See for example "Confessions of a Cancer Doctor" (Davis 1861:359-360), which supports Davis's prescription of mineral tinctures for cancer treatment.

for the necessity of such a holistic approach to medicine. The gap between Spiritualist and biomedical healing has apparently grown wider since the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> Davis understood the value of Spiritualist healing to lie primarily in the diagnosis of hidden illness and the prescription of appropriate treatment. For Davis, spiritual healing was an indirect process of observing hidden disease aetiologies and prescribing behavioral, homeopathic or allopathic cures. Contemporary North American Spiritualist healing has departed considerably from the model of Spiritual healing proposed by Davis. In contemporary North American Spiritualism, spiritual healing consists of direct spiritual preventative and curative intervention with no biomedical component, and avoids both diagnosis and prescription.<sup>17</sup> There are four healing modalities prevalent within North American Spiritualism, none of which contain any biomedical components. The language and symbols of biomedicine, however, are endemic in Spiritualist healing.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For example, attempts to "explain" religious experiences in biomedical terms indicate the wide gulf between religious and biomedical systems of thought. By implication, religion itself becomes medicalized as pathology (see for example Lavallée & Persinger 1992).

<sup>17</sup> Spiritualists avoid any kind of explicit, verbalized diagnosis of illness or disease. However, un verbalized implicit diagnoses take place as evidenced by the appropriate healing technique selected by the healer for each "patient". Witnesses to the healing can read the implicit diagnosis by recognizing the healer's pattern of motion.

<sup>18</sup> In addition to the four modalities of Spiritualist healing practice within official Spiritualist healing, individual Spiritualist healers also practice idiosyncratic forms of healing which unite 'laying on of hands' with other alternative healing practices. These individualistic forms of healing frequently incorporate legitimating biomedical and "scientific" language and symbols. For example, Lily Dale healer Beth gave me a pamphlet describing "RO-HUN" therapy, of which she was a "certified therapist." According to the pamphlet, "RO-HUN is a systematic and rapid acting psychotherapy for growth and change... based on the psychodynamic inter-relationship between the individual and his or her energy field. It draws its theoretical base from quantum physics and the recent discoveries of the electromagnetic energy fields surrounding the physical,

### Spiritualist Healing

The first type of Spiritualist healing is laying on of hands, the most widespread and standard form of healing for Spiritualists today, and the mainstay of Spiritualist healing services. Although some details may vary from group to group, Spiritualist laying on of hands is fairly uniform in practice among all the Spiritualist communities studied during the fieldwork period.<sup>19</sup> In laying on of hands, healers who have prepared themselves by praying and by making contact with their spirit guides ritually wash their hands in water blessed for that purpose and then take up positions behind small stools that have been placed at the front of the church. I have seen as many as twelve healers work at one time, or as few as one, depending upon demand. Members of the congregation who wish healing seat themselves on one of the stools with feet placed flat on the floor and with hands resting on knees in an 'open' posture that will not "block the vibrations." The healer, who may be male or female, works with eyes open or closed, in silence or in conversation with the sitter or other healers, according to his or her own preference.<sup>20</sup> S/he takes the sitter's hands or shoulders and quietly holds them for several minutes. During this period, according to informants, the guiding

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emotional and spiritual bodies of each person."

<sup>19</sup> Macklin (1974a), Zaretsky (1977, 1970), Fishman (1980) and Haywood (1983) describe similar healing sessions in their fieldwork accounts of Spiritualist communities throughout the United States. "Laying on of hands" is clearly the dominant healing practice throughout conventional North American Spiritualism.

<sup>20</sup> There was usually an equal distribution of male to female healers working in each of the Spiritualist groups studied. This is the case despite the fact that females outnumbered males by almost two to one within the general congregational membership. Males were over represented in mediumship roles as well. Further research on gender roles within a Spiritualist context would be fruitful.

spirits are silently diagnosing the sitter's ailment. Based upon this diagnosis, which is never verbalized, the healer proceeds to channel healing energy into the sitter. If the spirits have diagnosed a physical ailment, the healer will be drawn to move slowly around the sitter with hands held two to three inches away from the body, with occasional touches at head, shoulders, back, hands, feet or other areas that need healing. If the diagnosis is of a spiritual or emotional nature, the healer will make sweeping gestures around the sitter, starting at the head and working down, with occasional touches on the floor to "ground" the sitter's "vibration."<sup>21</sup> Healers prefer to rely on their own psychic or spirit-inspired awareness of which problem to address, rather than ask the sitter directly. When the healer senses that s/he has sent enough energy, s/he again takes the sitter's hands or shoulders and ends the healing with a ritual phrase, often "God bless you," or the injunction to "carry this healing with you throughout the week."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The most dramatic instance that I witnessed of this type of healing took place in Hamilton in the winter of 1991, when a man who announced that he had just tried to commit suicide wandered into the church during services. He was exceedingly distraught, and the healer who was acknowledged by members as "the best" worked with him for close to half an hour, using dramatic sweeping hand motions and vigorous shaking motions to smooth the man's vibrations and re-balance his emotional energy. The man was not a member of the church and had apparently entered without knowing its denominational affiliation. He stayed for approximately forty minutes following the healing, seemingly much calmer than when he entered, and then left. He never returned. Many Spiritualists are quite critical of suicide, since it is believed to impede the spiritual progress of the soul (Lester, 1981). The healer in this case clearly treated the man's emotional turmoil as an illness in need of treatment.

<sup>22</sup> There are strong parallels between the 'laying on of hands' practised by Spiritualists as described above, and the practice of "therapeutic touch" which has gained marginal respectability within the medical establishment. The difference lies in the refusal of therapeutic touch practitioners to attribute the efficacy of the method to

In addition to the laying on of hands as described above, other forms of Spiritualist Healing are the Healing of Colours, Absent Healing, and Trance Healing. In Absent Healing, energy is transferred to someone not present at the time.<sup>23</sup> As I was assured repeatedly "Absent Healing works!" It is essentially an assertion of the healing power of prayer.<sup>24</sup> In Trance Healing, the healer allows a spirit to possess his/her body. In this case, the form the healing takes differs depending upon the preference of the possessing spirit. Trance Healing is not often practised, owing to an on-going re-evaluation by modern Spiritualists of the advisability of surrendering control of the self to foreign spiritual elements.<sup>25</sup>

Healing of Colours most often occurs in the clairvoyant portion of the service. During this time, which is usually the last part of the service, members of the congregation who have psychic or mediumistic abilities will be asked by the chairperson

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spiritual sources.

<sup>23</sup> Greenfield (1992, 1987) also notes the emphasis on absent healing in Brazilian Spiritism, which he calls "fluidic healing at a distance". The Brazilian rationale for the physical presence of the sick person in attendance with the healer is similar to that of North American Spiritualists. Greenfield (1987:1102) writes, "The only reason he sees patients in person Edson (or Fritz) says, is that Brazilians, like all people, are overly materialistic. They need to physically see the healing performed by the spirits or else they will not have the faith to believe."

<sup>24</sup> Spiritualists strongly believe in the healing power of prayer. At the beginning of any healing service, the Spiritualists of both Hamilton Churches and the Healing Temple in Lily Dale recite the "Healing Affirmation" as discussed briefly in the Introduction. It serves as a genuine request for spiritual healing, and as an affirmation of Spiritualist belief in both the existence of and the efficacy of Spiritual healing.

<sup>25</sup> For a journalistic "emic" account of the dangers of possession trance, see Fisher (1990). Trance healing may be undergoing a renewal, however, with reference to the growing prestige of psychic surgery, as will be discussed later in this chapter.



or minister if they have any messages from "Spirit" to impart. If a medium answers yes, s/he will stand and face the congregation, seeking the person or persons for whom the messages are meant.<sup>26</sup> In *Healing of Colours*, the medium usually identifies the source of the message as a loved one or family member, or occasionally as a spirit guide. This spirit tells the medium that someone in the congregation is suffering from a particular problem, which the spirit wishes to help alleviate. In my own case, a "spirit vibration on my mother's links" informed the medium that I had been expending too much energy on my studies and that this had weakened me physically, leaving me tired. I agreed that I had been very busy and was feeling tired lately, at which point the medium told me that this spirit was sending me the colour red, to replenish my energy.<sup>27</sup> This exchange is fairly typical of healing of colours, with the medium identifying both the problem and the specific colour solution: yellow is sent for courage, white for protection, blue or green for healing, red for strength, pink for love or emotional support, gold for spiritual development. This type of healing does not require any physical contact between the

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<sup>26</sup> For a description of the message-work portion of the Spiritualist church service, see Chapter Three.

<sup>27</sup> Most of the Spiritualists I worked with were sympathetic to my academic agenda, but had little real knowledge of the scope of my research. Many frequently displayed considerable curiosity regarding the progress with my research, and occasionally seemed impatient that I hadn't 'finished yet'. The medium who sent healing of colours in this message was a woman with whom I never explicitly discussed my research. She passed messages to me regarding my studies on several occasions, however. At another service several weeks after the one mentioned above, she asked if I had ever tried "automatic writing". When I answered yes, she suggested 'when you sit down to write, if you just blank your mind, Spirit will give you the right things to say. Spirit will help you write what you need to know.' Apparently, she concluded that I needed more than a bit of red added to my vibration, if I was ever to get this dissertation finished!

medium and the person who receives it.

### Legal Implications

As the above descriptions indicate, there are no biomedical components to Spiritualist healing. The shift in Spiritualist healing practices from the biomedical diagnoses and prescriptions of Davis to the purely spiritual intervention of contemporary North American Spiritualists is a result, at least in part, of the imposition of legal restrictions on the practice of medicine that took place as part of the professionalization of medicine throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in North America (McGuire 1988; Richardson and Dewitt 1991; Rothstein 1972; Rushing 1993; Sharpe 1987; Sheppard 1977; Starr 1982).<sup>28</sup> This concern by the orthodox medical establishment to maintain control over the practice of medicine is on-going, and alternative therapies continue to be looked upon with critical scepticism by defenders of orthodox medicine.<sup>29</sup> Both Canada and the United States restrict the practice of

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<sup>28</sup> Biomedicine, like "science," is a socially constructed system of knowledge. The construction of orthodox medicine, like the construction of orthodox science, has taken place through what Gieryn (1983:781) calls "boundary work". Orthodox medical practitioners have constructed the boundaries of biomedicine through the labelling of certain healing practices as marginal, deviant, or heterodox. For an discussion of the social construction of orthodox biomedicine, see Foucault (1973); Nelkin & Tancredi (1989); Romanucci-Ross & Moerman (1991) and Romanucci-Ross, Moerman & Tancredi (1991).

<sup>29</sup> For example, science writer Martin Gardner (1957:186) writes, "In no other field have pseudo-scientists flourished as prominently as in the field of medicine. It is not hard to understand why. In the first place, a medical quack - if he presents an impressive façade - can usually make a great deal of money. In the second place, if he is sincere, or partly sincere, the healing successes he is almost sure to achieve will greatly bolster his delusions. In some cases, of course, the doctor is an out-and-out

medicine to those with a medical degree from a licensed institution.<sup>30</sup> The Ontario

Health Disciplines Act, for example, restricts the practice of medicine as follows:

All licensed physicians are members of the College of Physicians and Surgeons... Everyone is prohibited from engaging in or holding himself out as engaging in the practice of medicine unless he is licensed under this Part... proof of the performance of one act in practice on one occasion is sufficient to establish engaging in the practice of medicine... the practice of medicine includes the practice of surgery and obstetrics [and] diagnosis... [and] prescribing treatment... not included in the prohibition against holding oneself out or engaging in the practice of medicine by a non-licensed person are the rendering of first aid or temporary assistance in an emergency without fee; or the administration of household remedies by members of the patient's household... [In addition] nothing in this part shall be construed to affect the treatment of human ailments by the use of prayer or spiritual means in the exercise of a religion in accordance with the tenets of an established church by the members thereof. A fine of not more than \$2000 is the penalty for a first offence of unauthorized practice.<sup>31</sup>

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charlatan. In other cases he is as sincere as was Piazzi Smyth about the Great Pyramid. In still other cases, there is that baffling mixture of sincerity and skulduggery which so often is found within a crackpot's brain."

<sup>30</sup> In Canada, the legislation which restricts the practice of medicine without a license is both federal and provincial. The federal statute is referred to as "The Canada Medical Act," and is responsible for regulating professional colleges for the licensing of physicians. The provincial legislation varies from province to province. In Ontario the relevant legislation is referred to as the "The Health Disciplines Act, 1974," and regulates the licensing, expected standards of care, education, and conduct of physicians. Certain provisions of the federal Criminal Code also apply to the practice of medicine, particularly Section C-34:197-229. For a discussion of Canadian law as it applies to the practice of medicine, see Sharpe (1987) and Krever (1977).

<sup>31</sup> This passage is excerpted from the Health Disciplines Act, Statutes of Ontario Volume 23-24, 1974, Chapter 47, Section 52, Parts 1-7. Excerpts from this act can be found in Krever (1977) and Sharpe (1987). An illustration of American legislation, from the State of Michigan, is found in Sheppard (1977) as follows: "Any person who shall practice medicine or surgery in this state or who shall advertise in any form or hold himself or herself out to the public as being able to treat, cure or alleviate human ailments or diseases and who is not the lawful possessor of a certificate or registration license...shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanour... In this act...the term 'practice of medicine' shall mean the actual diagnosing, curing or relieving in any degree, or

As a result of such legislation, interventionist techniques including diagnosis and prescription were forcibly excluded from the repertoire of Spiritualist healing. Only purely non-biomedical healing is allowable under such legal restrictions on the practice of medicine. Within contemporary Spiritualist healing, therefore, the inclusion of any kind of biomedical content is forbidden by law. The adoption of biomedical language and symbols, on the other hand, remains a legitimate means by which Spiritualists can insist on the compatibility of their spiritual system of healing with that of orthodox scientific biomedicine.

One example of this attempt to link "science" to Spiritualist healing took place in Lily Dale in August of 1991. Although modern Spiritualist healers are fully aware of the restrictions placed upon their practice of healing by government legislation, they are not always willing to abide by them. According to Spiritualist informants, legal restrictions in the State of New York include the limiting of religious healing to those buildings designated as "religious." In the Spiritualist community of Lily Dale, the Lily Dale Assembly holds the responsibility for ensuring compliance with this restriction. Lily Dale has a Healing Temple dedicated solely to Spiritual healing, and anyone wishing to practice Spiritual healing on the grounds of Lily Dale must request licensing by the Lily Dale Assembly to do so. Not all healers in Lily Dale are happy with this restriction. One healer's response to this restriction was the self-conscious adoption of

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professing or attempting to diagnose, treat, cure or relieve any human disease, ailment, defect or complaint, whether of physical or mental origin, by attendance or by advice, or by prescribing or furnishing any drug, medicine, appliance, manipulation or method, or any therapeutic agent whatsoever."

"scientific" terminology to legitimize her illegal practice of healing in her home. The following was recorded during an impromptu dinner party at the Lily Dale summer home of Toronto Spiritualist Pam:

Pam: Have you heard the latest? I'm not to give Spiritual healings in the house. It's just come to their attention that I've been giving Spiritual healings in the house, and if I want to give healings I've got to go up to the Healing Temple, in the proper place.

Cheryl: How many houses in Lily Dale have never done a healing, have never had a healing done in them? I doubt there's a house in Lily Dale... I'd like to know how they're going to keep her from doing it, because if she's not advertising...

Pam: You can read it [the letter from the Lily Dale Assembly] if you like...

Cheryl: [Quoting from the letter] *"It has been brought to the attention of the board of directors that you are doing healings in your residence at Lily Dale"* ... Right, so are practically everyone else on the grounds! ... *"The board feels it is necessary to remind you of the fact that the Healing Temple is open during the season"* ... Oh, I guess this means you can do them in the off season... [interjected: when no one is here!] *"as well as one night a week in the off season"* ... [laughter] ... *"Spiritual healings are authorized only in the Healing Temple... the board has found itself in the legal position of having to prohibit private healings by individuals in the home"* ... There's no way they can prohibit private healings in your home! ... [Interjected: how could they!] ... [quoting] *"Although the practice has undoubtedly been going on for some time, there are legal ramifications which cannot be ignored by the board. We are certain that your talents will be welcome at the Temple, and urge you to practice your healing art there, under the legally accepted offices of an approved facility. This will protect both you and Lily Dale. Thank you for your co-operation"* ... Well look, yeah, if you were soliciting, if you hung out a sign that said healer, and then you charged money, that would be one thing, but...

Pam: Last year... last year they wrote and told me I had to take the healer sign down [from the front yard] so, I thought, well I'm not making a new sign, so over the top of healer, I put 'psychic artist,' you see. But 'psychic artist' has a lot more letters than 'healer,' so I had to, [laughter] scrunch the letters up, you know, so [laughter] one day this woman walks into my reading room and she says, 'Oh I'm so thrilled that you're a

psychiatrist!' [Uproarious laughter] Well, so I'm not going to do spiritual healing anymore, I'm going to do energy balancing...

Linda: So now it's energy balancing.

Pam: Yeah, and I'll use my pendulum too [Laughter].<sup>32</sup>

As the above passage shows, Spiritualists are well aware of the legitimating power scientific or medical language can convey on healing practices. The entire group at Pam's dinner party recognized the ludicrous hilarity of mistaking the words "psychic artist" for the term "psychiatrist," but part of the humour of the situation that Pam recounts is the prestige that the term "psychiatrist" mistakenly lent her in the perceptions of the woman off the street. Pam deliberately juxtaposes this narrative with her sarcastic announcement that she plans to stop practising "healing" and start practising "energy balancing" as a way to avoid Lily Dale Assembly and New York State government restrictions. Angry at being restricted in her practice of healing (for which she "never took a penny"), Pam half humorously transformed her "spiritual healing" into an innocuously scientific sounding term designed to legitimate her practice and lend the prestige of "science" to her non-biomedical healing practice. This self-conscious adoption of semi-scientific terminology is part of the wider incorporation of scientific language and symbols into the Spiritualist healing system.

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<sup>32</sup> Throughout the course of the dissertation, all quoted passages enclosed by quotation marks ("...") are directly transcribed from tapes which are in the sole possession of the author. Passages enclosed in apostrophes ('...') are taken from fieldnotes and must be considered paraphrases of Spiritualist statements. All passages such as the one above, with multiple speakers, are transcribed directly from tapes.

### The Medicalization of Language and Symbols

The lack of overt biomedical elements within the Spiritualist system of healing creates an initial impression of paradox when the observer is confronted with the semi-medicalized language that Spiritualists use to explain and describe their healing techniques. Terms such as Pam's "energy balancing" abound in Spiritualist discourse. It is through the Spiritualist incorporation of such semi-scientific language that the medicalization of Spiritualist healing is most readily apparent. The utilization of semi-medicalized language is particularly evident when Spiritualists explain the reasoning behind their healing techniques. This medicalization can be seen most clearly in the physiological rationale provided for laying on of hands and in the semi-medicalized language and concepts contained within spirit messages.

As evidenced by the Spiritualist belief in Absent Healing and Healing of Colours, physical contact is not deemed necessary for spiritual healing to take place. Nevertheless, the healer's handbook used in development classes at Hamilton's King Street Church argues that there are very real physiological reasons for the patterns of physical contact in laying on of hands (Roberts 1949). According to this book, the healer holds the sitter's hands "because the whole nervous system has an ending in the thumb and fingers. By contact with these nerves a link can be established to any part of the body." The reasons a healer touches shoulders or neck, it is explained, is "because the glandular chain runs through the body and at the base of the neck, as your hands are on the shoulders, you are at the centre of an important group of the glands through contact with which the guides can judge the disease of the whole body." Similarly, the book

states that a healer touches a sitter's head "because the brain is the centre from which is [sic.] sent the impulses which govern the movement of the whole body.... by contact with the brain, the guides can establish a link through which they can examine every organ." There is an apparent contradiction between the Spiritualist claim that "absent healing works" and this suggestion that bodily contact is necessary for spiritual diagnosis and cure to take place, but the Spiritualists at the King Street Church themselves saw no contradiction. "It's just that we need the physical contact, you see, the spirits don't, but we do, so we know the healing is happening," the leader of the King Street Church's healing development class told me.<sup>33</sup> A Spiritualist healer, medium, and minister named Kim, she added that touching helps her as a healer to visualize where she needs to send healing energy.<sup>34</sup> For Kim, laying on of hands is effective because it allows her to visualize the body's "chakras" and direct energy to them. Chakras, she explained, "are your endocrine system. Each chakra represents a part of your endocrine system

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<sup>33</sup> Not all Spiritualists try to work out the apparent contradiction. Toronto Spiritualist Pam, for example, said "Each spiritual healer uses a different method of healing. They use a procedure according to the way they are impressed by their principle doctor in spirit... at one time, I was sitting with Dan, one of our church healers, and the spirit in control told him to never touch a person when healing them... that touch wasn't needed [but] my guide told me to carry on with my same method which was to work principally on the nervous system [where] I always stood behind the patient and with my hand directly on the crown of the head." Pam gives responsibility to the different modes of healing, therefore, to the different spirits who work through the healers.

<sup>34</sup> Visualization is a key element in Spiritualist healing. As in mediumship development classes, healing development classes teach healers to visualize the "healing energy" that is being "sent" to the sitter, and to visualize the sitter in full health. 'Even doctors tell you to picture yourself as well and happy if you want to get better,' one healer at Hamilton's Main Street Church told the congregation.



[and] if part of that endocrine system goes wrong, then of course it kind of goes through the body. So you have to send energy through that chakra. As you are doing that, of course that gives the build up [of energy] back to that particular area of the body."<sup>35</sup>

It is not just within the context of healing development classes that semi-medicalized terminology is used. In the clairvoyant section of the Spiritualist service, messages "from Spirit" are often couched in semi-medicalized terms. One medium, while passing along Healing of Colours to a member of the congregation, announced that Spirit was 'sending colours to your chakras to boost your immune system.' Another medium, in passing along a message from Spirit to an elderly woman, said 'You have an imbalance in your body, you are all out of balance. When you go to bed tonight, place a glass of water by the bedside. When you get up in the morning, drink it. Spirit will chemicalize the water. It may taste funny, different every night, but keep doing it. Spirit will add the right chemicals to re-balance your system.'<sup>36</sup> In Lily Dale, a Spiritualist healer named Vera described my own state of health in terms of magnetic

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<sup>35</sup> In adopting the term "chakras," Kim appears to also be drawing on the legitimating power of established Ayurvedic medicine. This willingness to blend the spiritual contributions of both east and west is found frequently within the Spiritualist context.

<sup>36</sup> This is in fact a prescription of sorts. Contrary to my generalized claim that contemporary North American Spiritualist healers neither diagnose nor prescribed treatment, this type of "inert" prescription is fairly common during mediumship services. "Spirit" often recommends non-active or marginally active ingredients as "medicines". Other such "prescriptions" include recommendations to wear warm scarves, soak feet in warm water, etc. Such recommendations are almost always preceded by the phrase "We're not supposed to prescribe things, but..." Clearly, however, this kind of prescription differs from the nineteenth century pharmacological prescriptions given by Davis.

fields. She said, "You have an electronic... electronic, No! An electric-magnetic field around you. Sometimes you can be so healthy that, you just have so much you don't need, some of it, so it's just... thrown off into the ethers, ready to be used by someone else who may be slightly depleted."

The initially surprising use by Spiritualists of semi-medicalized terminology to describe their system of healing is actually part of a coherent and logical pattern of integration which links orthodox biomedicine to Spiritualist practice. According to physician and medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman (1988, 1980, 1978), every society contains differing and competing models of sickness and healing, models which Kleinman calls "clinical realities." Kleinman (1978) identifies three subsystems within a wider societal health care system, each containing differing clinical realities. According to Kleinman (1978:86), the "popular" arena "comprises principally the family context of sickness and care [and] somewhere between 70 and 90% of sickness is managed solely within this domain." The folk arena "consists of non-professional healing specialists, sometimes classified by ethnographers into sacred and secular groups." The professional or medical arena "consists of professional scientific ("Western" or "cosmopolitan") medicine and professionalised indigenous healing traditions". Kleinman suggests that lack of complementarity between these three subsystems of health care often leads to conflicting explanatory models of sickness and healing. Such cultural iatrogenesis, he argues (1978:87), can "systematically produce problems for clinical care." As a result, any effective system of healing must negotiate a meaningful or adaptive response to illness that minimizes or negates conflict between sectors of the wider health care system.

It is within the context of Kleinman's model of health care systems that the Spiritualist integration of biomedical terminology into their "folk" system of healing can be understood. According to Kleinman (1978:89), it is "the process of interaction [between subsystems of health care] which discloses the real structures of knowledge, logic, and relevance that operate in different health care sectors and systems, and which reveals how they are used in the healing process." For Spiritualists, the utilization of biomedical and semi-medicalized terms can serve to mediate the conflict between the explanatory model of healing provided by society's dominant medical clinical reality and that of their spiritual or folk clinical reality. Such a mediation allows Spiritualists to integrate their spiritual system of healing with the dominant biomedical model.

#### Spirit Doctors/Spirit Guides

The adoption of biomedical language serves not only to mediate conflict between two clinical health care realities, it also serves to legitimate one clinical reality through adoption of elements particular to the other. This adoption actually goes well beyond the integration of quasi-biomedical terminology into the Spiritualist system of healing. One of the most significant indicators of the importance of Spiritualist attempts to integrate biomedical science into their alternative healing system can be found in the integration of biomedical specialists as sources of spiritual prestige and power. It is with the adoption of biomedical doctors as spirit guides that we truly see the importance of biomedicine, and by extension "science," for Spiritualists, since deceased biomedical doctors become the main source of healing efficacy within the non-biomedical Spiritualist

system of healing. The adoption of doctors as spirit guides or as potent symbols of healing power results in both the sacralization of biomedicine and in the "scientific" legitimation of spiritual healing, for the efficacy of spiritual healing is credited to experts in biomedical science. "Spirit doctors" are a primary example of the Spiritualist attempt to minimize the boundary distinctions between the spiritual system of healing (the folk clinical reality) and that of orthodox biomedicine.

The connection between the sacralizing of biomedical specialists and the medicalization of religious systems of healing is not solely confined to a Spiritualist context. Anthropologist Seta Low (1987:136) has argued that the medicalization of healing cults in Latin America is explicitly representative of the increasing power and status of the biomedical sector. As the status of biomedicine increases, religious systems of healing respond by incorporating biomedical elements in response to this prestige. Low suggests that as medical science challenges religious healing systems' claim to miraculous cures, these systems respond by sacralizing medical symbols by placing them within a religious context. Part of this process of medicalization, Low suggests, is the transformation of biomedical specialists into spiritual figures worthy of reverence. "Doctors" can apparently fulfil the role of medical symbol. Low writes (1987:137), "The symbol of a medical doctor endowed with supernatural healing powers is only one of many examples of the overlapping spheres of medicine and religion... doctors and healers are identified as highly developed spirits and appropriate intermediaries to the spirit world."

The figures of deceased medical doctors are foremost among the biomedical

symbols incorporated by Spiritualists into their system of religious healing. Healers and mediums all work with a number of different guides, but in healing these guides are almost invariably medical doctors.<sup>37</sup> According to Kim, "The patient you first get will determine which guides will work with you. If I start off with a chest complaint, that's what I get all night. People are drawn to me who all have the same complaint, because that is the kind of doctor I have working with me that night." An elderly American healer named Stan, who works while in a semi-trance state, insists that Spiritual healing can heal any complaint, but that the type of healing offered depends on the type of medical specialist who came through from the spirit world. Each healer has many spirit doctors to draw on. Stan told me:

"I and a few friends were doing the table one time and we didn't have a question to ask, so I asked 'How many doctors do I have working with me?' Well, it went knock knock, knock knock a number of times and then stopped. So I asked, 'Is that it?' And it said no, so I asked 'How many more?' and it said thirty-five hundred. I got thirty-five hundred doctors working with me. I got father and son heart doctors. I got an osteopath who comes through lots of the time. An osteopath is just like a chiropractor, only they can do surgery."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Exceptions are the figures of non-western healing specialists, such as native Indian shamans or Chinese herbalists, and "truly advanced spirits" such as old Atlanteans or extra-terrestrials. Drawing on emic classifications of spirit guides, Zaretsky (1977:208) ranks them as follows: Rank One: Band (consisting of unnamed guardian spirits); Rank Two: Control (directs psychic experiences); Guardian (protector); Mentor (teaches metaphysical laws); and Doctor (guides development as healer). Zaretsky places American Indians and Chinese healers below this level, at Rank Three. He does not mention Atlanteans or extraterrestrials at all.

<sup>38</sup> When Stan says he was 'doing the table,' he is referring to the practice of table-rapping. Like other forms of physical mediumship, table-tapping is rarely practised in contemporary Spiritualism, except in small, private circles. Table tapping, like ouija boards, assumes the power of spiritual beings to move physical objects in response to

This utilization of deceased medical doctors as effective spirit guides reveals the legitimating function of biomedical symbols within the Spiritualist system of healing. To some extent it also represents a critique of orthodox biomedicine, however, for it allows Spiritualists to externalize the sources of healing competency outside of the human realm. According to medical sociologist Renée Fox (1988), there is a progressive societal disenchantment with the power and authority held by physicians within Western society. Spiritualists are neither unaware nor unaffected by this disenchantment. The adoption of deceased medical doctors as sources of spiritual healing allows for the affirmation of the authority and knowledge of biomedical specialists while simultaneously removing those sources from the human realm. Spirit doctors are consequently not prone to the fallibility of their living counterparts. For example, spirit doctors will admit to lack of knowledge and seek "second opinions." As Lily Dale resident and healer Vera explained, "There is all kinds of spirits, doctors that have passed on, in spirit, and every one of them has a specialty, or is best at something.... one says 'I just can't come up with the right cure, I didn't work enough with rheumatism,' there's going to be another one who says 'Ah, but I did and I have found this to be very effective let ME work through Vera for a while.'"

In addition to the implied critique of biomedical specialists suggested by the spiritualization of doctors, many Spiritualist healers also present a critique of biomedical technology. Spirit doctors do not have to rely on technology to diagnose and treat

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questions. For a discussion of the shift away from physical mediumship towards purely mental mediumship, see Chapter Three.

illness. Sociologist Oscar Handlin (1972) and anthropologist Jean Comaroff (1982) have argued that popular responses to science are largely ambivalent, and responses to technology more so. Handlin argues that the lay public holds a deep distrust of the scientific specialists who hold control over the technology that is taken for granted in contemporary society.<sup>39</sup> Most Spiritualists appear to respect biomedical science, but biomedical technology is held in less regard.<sup>40</sup> As Ann, a visiting healer to Lily Dale, expressed it:

"When I heal, the doctors who work through me can SEE what's wrong with a person. They don't need x-rays or cat scans to see what's wrong....

For me, that's hard, because of being clairvoyant, 'cause I would see body parts, and I thought, what's THIS, it's like, yech! So afterward I would get medical books, and figure it out, cause they would give me big words, I'd hear these great big words about diseases and how you're supposed to do this or that and it will get better, or see this doctor or that,

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<sup>39</sup> Handlin writes (1972:253), "Indeed, a deep underlying distrust of science runs through the accepted attitudes of people in the most advanced nations. Paradoxically, the bubbling retorts, the sparkling wires and the mysterious dials are often regarded as the source of grave threat. Their white-coated manipulators, in the popular image, have ominously seized a power which they may use to injure mankind... those who blankly and passively depend upon modern technology frequently feel themselves mastered by science without knowing why."

<sup>40</sup> In contrast to this claim, Skultans (1974:13-14) suggests that among the Welsh Spiritualists with whom she conducted fieldwork, "spirit technology" is held in high regard. She writes, "Mrs Trigg also described various complicated instruments used in healing [by spirit doctors]. One such instrument resembled a barometer and it measured vulnerability and, hence, the correct combination of rays of different colours needed to produce a beneficial effect... Dr Oscar was, in fact, a medical electrician rather than a doctor, being particularly concerned with rays." I did meet one Spiritualist with considerable faith in technology as well as "science". He told me "I believe that someday AT&T will build a device that we can use to talk to the spirit world...". Most of the Spiritualists I met, however, sharply distinguished between "spiritual" and "technological," whereas they did not distinguish between "spiritual" and "scientific".

and I thought, this is nuts! So I had to get MEDICAL books with PICTURES, because it drove me so crazy, 'cause I couldn't believe what parts I was seeing until after I'd seen them in print!"

Spirit doctors are therefore of tremendous importance for Spiritualist healers. While there are some healers who believe their healing energies to come directly from God, most understand these energies to be channelled through spirit doctors to the healer and hence into the person in need of healing. Spirit doctors become sacred figures, as possessors of scientific medical knowledge and spiritual healing power. Through the symbol of deceased medical doctors, biomedical science is sacralized. It is their training in biomedicine on the earth plane that makes these figures worthy of reverence and the status of spirit guide, but this training is 'purified' in the context of the spirit realm. This sacralization of biomedicine consequently legitimates Spiritualist healing in turn, by giving credit for its efficacy to "spiritualized" biomedical specialists.

### Psychic Surgeons

In "orthodox" Spiritualist healing, deceased biomedical specialists or spirit doctors use their knowledge and abilities to heal, but they do so in a spiritual, non interventionist manner.<sup>41</sup> Psychic surgery, in contrast, is the practice whereby deceased biomedical doctors heal by "possessing" a spiritual healer, and carrying out real, biomedical

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<sup>41</sup> Occasionally trance healing is still practised in the context of spiritualist healing services. When this occurs, there may be some direct interventionist healing practised. I met only one healer, Stan, who still regularly worked under trance while healing, although many other older Spiritualists told me that they used to work under trance but do so no longer. When Stan heals, he practices a form of accupressure/chiropractic under the control of his osteopath spirit guide. This healing is clearly interventionist in a biomedical sense, and is, I suspect, technically illegal as a result.



interventionist treatments on patients.<sup>42</sup> In psychic surgery, the trance medium actually physically cuts (or is claimed to cut) patients, and heals through surgical means. Psychic surgery is a healing practice largely confined to the Philippines and South America (Dein 1992; Azuma and Stevenson 1988, 1987; Greenfield 1987, 1992; Hess 1991; Cosminsky & Scrimshaw 1980). Recently, however, a minority of North American Spiritualists have become fascinated with psychic or mediumistic surgery. While not all Spiritualists are in favour of this form of spiritual healing, it represents a variation on "orthodox" Spiritualist healing in which the adoption of biomedical specialists as sacred symbols of healing power is carried to its ultimate extreme.

The practice of "psychic surgery" is an ancient shamanic practice (Eliade 1964; Kiev 1974; Lewis 1971). It has taken on new forms within industrialized contemporary contexts, however. The primary innovation in "modern" psychic surgery is the adoption of biomedical doctors as sources of healing power by spiritual healers. In South America, the modern introduction of psychic surgery can be traced to José Arigo, the Brazilian trance medium and healer who became somewhat famous in the 1960's as the "surgeon of the rusty knife" (Fuller 1974). José Arigo became a healing medium under

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<sup>42</sup> There is some discrepancy in the academic literature on psychic surgery regarding the "source" of the apparent medical knowledge psychic surgeons display. For example, Dein (1992:461) writes that one Filipino psychic surgeon insisted that "learning to become a psychic healer was not like becoming a doctor. He claimed that he was only the vessel of the Holy Spirit and that while in a trance, it was God who told him what to do and moved his hands." Hess (1991), Cosminsky & Scrimshaw (1980) and Greenfield (1987), however, clearly argue that Latin American psychic surgeons credit deceased biomedical specialists for their surgical gifts. This may indicate a cultural difference between the Philippines and Brazil, or it may be an indication of the sparsity of academic research on psychic surgery. The North American Spiritualists who display a fascination with psychic surgery all refer specifically to the Brazilian practice.

the influence of his spirit doctor guide in the early nineteen fifties (Fuller 1974; Greenfield 1987, 1992; Hess 1991). Arigo claimed that his spirit guide was a deceased German physician named Dr. Fritz.<sup>43</sup> Arigo himself had no medical training, but under the influence of Dr. Fritz became famous for his medical cures. There are several extant accounts that include discussions of the reputed healing abilities of José Arigo, all of which stress the surgical interventionist nature of his healing technique (Fuller 1974; Greenfield 1987, 1992; Hess 1991, 1994).<sup>44</sup> According to Hess (1991:126), the intellectual elite of Brazil's Spiritist community condemns psychic surgery as "unscientific," but as Greenfield (1987, 1992) and Hess (1991) have shown, the majority of Brazilian Spiritists do not agree. Within the Brazilian Spiritist context, psychic

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<sup>43</sup> "Dr. Fritz" apparently died in an automobile accident during the First World War. José Arigo died in an automobile accident in 1971 (Fuller 1974; Greenfield 1987; Hess 1991). Since Arigo's death, other Brazilian psychic surgeons have claimed to work under the guidance of Dr. Fritz. For example, Hess (1994:81-89) and Greenfield (1987:1101) discuss the figure of Edson Queiroz, a contemporary Brazilian healer who also works under the guidance of Dr. Fritz. According to Hess (1991:135), many Brazilian Spiritists believe that all healers subsequently "possessed" by Dr. Fritz are also fated to die in this manner. Interestingly, Hess further reports (1994:83) that Edson Queiroz himself met with a "violent and untimely death" in 1991.

<sup>44</sup> Much of the literature on psychic surgery focuses on the question of whether such surgery is "true" or "fraudulent" in nature (Dein 1992; Azuma & Stevenson 1988, 1987). According to anthropologist David J. Hess (1991:129-134) the operations conducted by José Arigo have been variously studied by both sympathetic and hostile investigators. Brazilian Spiritist and biomedical surgeon Ary Lex represents a compromise between these extremes. Hess (1991:127-128) notes that Lex studied Arigo and found that some of the claims made in his name were in fact true, such as his ability to extract tumours and stop bleeding. Other claims made in his name were patently false, however, and according to Hess (1991:128) Dr Lex is apparently particularly scornful of Arigo emulators, calling them "ambitious charlatans". Interestingly, Hess himself reports (1994:84-85) witnessing the psychic surgeon Edson Queiroz, while "possessed" by Dr. Fritz (the same spirit doctor that José Arigo claimed worked through him) remove three cysts from various patients.

surgeons are resorted to increasingly to treat physiological complaints, and they do so through "real" physiological interventionist techniques.<sup>45</sup>

Among the North America Spiritualists with whom I worked, several healers had recently attempted to incorporate elements of psychic surgery into their own healing practices. North American Spiritualists are hampered in the potential incorporation of psychic surgery into their system of belief and practice, however, by legal restrictions placed on the practice of medicine without a licence. Those Spiritualists who have "discovered" psychic surgery must, as a result, make a pilgrimage to Brazil in order to witness it. This is, in fact, what many Spiritualists have done.<sup>46</sup> Despite the criticism of psychic surgery as "unscientific" by the Brazilian Spiritist elite (Hess 1991:126), the budding fascination on the part of some North American Spiritualist healers with psychic surgery can be seen as an extension of their incorporation of biomedical or "scientific"

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<sup>45</sup> For example, Greenfield (1987:1098) provides a graphic example of surgery on "an infected, festering growth about an inch and one half in diameter" on the neck of a Brazilian biomedical doctor. Greenfield himself witnessed this procedure, complete with blood and excised tissue. Greenfield writes, "I asked him why he, a doctor, had come to Edson and not gone to a conventional physician when the growth first developed. With his head erect and a straight look he responded that it was because he wanted to get at the source of the problem. Conventional doctors we know, he said with conviction, only treat symptoms and work at the surface. If you want to get at the cause, you go to a spiritist healer; and since Edson is the best, he had waited until he was able to see him in Recife."

<sup>46</sup> One "New Age" faction in Lily Dale is lobbying to bring a Brazilian psychic surgeon to the United States as key guest speaker at a future Lily Dale Summer Session. This same group is attempting to establish a yearly pilgrimage from Lily Dale to Brazil for interested Spiritualists to witness psychic surgery first hand. At the end of the fieldwork period, neither proposal had yet been instituted.

symbols into their system of religious belief.<sup>47</sup> In the prestige and respect granted psychic surgeons by many North American Spiritualist healers, the sacralization of biomedicine and biomedical specialists within the Spiritualist context is revealed.

Within the North American Spiritualist context, the same two Brazilian psychic surgeons are repeatedly mentioned, "Dr. Geddes" and "John Abagione."<sup>48</sup> During a birthday party in Lily Dale, Spiritualist medium and healer Max enthralled his listeners with the following account of the healing of Dr. Geddes:

"The guy with the needles [Dr. Geddes], that I was talking about before, [pointed to] this poor girl that was with us. She's the first one, she's one of those kind of people that steps forward, and this guy goes into trance, and he says "Okay, let's go," and he puts her on the table, and he does an entire operation on the small of her back. I mean, he CUT her open, using all kinds of instruments, yeah, he'd clip them on and then he goes for another one, did the whole number on her, with the clamps and everything. She says to Marco [the Spiritualist coordinator of the pilgrimage to Brazil], she says "Hold my hand, Marco." This guy

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<sup>47</sup> It may be significant that North American Spiritualists have become fascinated primarily by Brazilian as opposed to Filipino psychic surgery. While there are many factors which could account for this, included geographic and economic factors, if the limited academic literature available in English is correct in noting that Brazilian psychic surgeons operate under the control of discarnate biomedical doctors (Greenfield 1987; Hess 1991) while Filipino surgeons claim to receive their surgical powers directly from God (Dein 1992; Azuma & Stevenson 1988, 1987), the North American fascination for the Brazilian version can be explained with reference to the legitimating power that biomedicine holds for North American Spiritualists. Further research would be necessary in order to expand on this point fully, however.

<sup>48</sup> In the course of fieldwork, I interviewed five Spiritualist healers who accepted and admired the practice of psychic surgery within a Spiritist context. Three of them had been to Brazil and one to the Philippines to witness psychic surgery in practice. All five psychic surgery "proponents" referred to one or both of the psychic surgeons discussed here. Neither surgeon is featured in the limited academic literature available on Brazilian psychic surgery (Greenfield, 1987; Hess, 1991, 1994). There is a body of literature on psychic surgery written in Portuguese and Spanish which is not surveyed for the dissertation, however, in which these two figures may be mentioned.

hasn't got any training, he's in trance. He's a beer salesman!...

And this is the guy in the book, you know, the surgeon with the rusty knife.<sup>49</sup> And no anaesthesia, you know, and no, no anaesthesia and no, ah, what do you call it? Antiseptic. No antiseptic...

And you know what else? All the time he's cutting, his eyes are closed. I'm serious! He's in trance, he's in trance..."

Max had seen Dr. Geddes heal many times, and did not doubt the reality of the surgeries he had witnessed. Max, however, is something of a showman, and was not above playing to the boisterous mood of the birthday party crowd. When one guest at the party called out "How was she afterwards?" Max jokingly yelled back, "She could no longer walk!" which elicited great laughter from everyone present. Joking aside, however, Max has visited Brazil and Dr. Geddes repeatedly, and takes psychic surgery very seriously indeed. The entire humour of his joke was based on the firm belief of everyone at the party that the woman was perfectly healthy after her surgical ordeal. Although some Spiritualists remain sceptical of the advisability of psychic surgery, and others warn of the potential for fraud, there was no real question among Max's listeners that the events which Max had witnessed and narrated had happened exactly as he recounted them.

Another Spiritualist who has witnessed Dr. Geddes' psychic surgery is a woman named Elizabeth, who takes a somewhat more reverential attitude toward the healer than

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<sup>49</sup> Actually, Max is incorrect in this assertion, for Max witnessed this scene in Brazil in the summer of 1991 - twenty years after the death of José Arigo. It is possible, however, that Max meant to imply that Dr. Geddes works under the influence of Dr. Fritz, the spirit surgeon who also worked with Arigo.

does Max.<sup>50</sup> She told me that Dr. Geddes "is a beautiful healer who allows his body to be used by a doctor from the other side...". Elizabeth is a summer resident at Lily Dale who described her second visit to Mr. Geddes as follows:

"When we got to this Mr. Geddes, he said, "You're supposed to come tomorrow," but we said "No, we're here now." We were leaving [Brazil] the next day, so it was either see him that night or not at all. And he, the last time when we were there, last year, he had twelve mediums sit in meditation for half an hour before he went into trance, and then he had all kinds of helpers around him, nurses and people calling people up, and I mean, a full house so to speak, and [this time] it's just us and he's saying he's not going to do it. And we all held hands and did a little circle and prayed, you know..."

And ALL of a sudden out of NOWHERE he just went into trance, and he banged the table and said, "Let's go." And his WIFE said "NO, NO, you can't!" She was afraid, 'cause all the mediums weren't there, you know, for the energy...<sup>51</sup>

But we were all healers, too, you know, maybe not to the extent that he is, but we knew, you know, to keep sending love and support. So he worked on all the people who were there. And the first one that he

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<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth referred to Dr. Geddes as "Mister" rather than "Doctor" in her narratives.

<sup>51</sup> The narrative reveals here Elizabeth's perception that Dr. Geddes apparently has no control over his possession trances. As she reports, Geddes did not desire to do any healing, but lapsed into trance anyway, and began to operate. This inability to control his trance state is part of the reason why many Spiritualists remain suspicious of this kind of healing. 'Only a low spirit would barge in and take over control of another person's body,' one mediumship development class leader announced. 'We have personal responsibility, and that means responsibility for our bodies. To give up control of your body to another person is morally wrong. What kind of spirit would take that kind of control from you?' Another Spiritualist medium argued that "too many people are allowing any old thing to take control of them... You wouldn't lend your car to just anyone so why do that with your body? A wise being will not ask you to surrender complete control.... Only an evil or under-developed entity will ask or demand that we surrender completely to their will, letting them assume complete control." It is owing to reservations such as these that the future incorporation of psychic surgery into conventional Spiritualism remains open to question.

worked on was someone who was having a lot of trouble with the small of her back, and he just took a knife and opened her back up and took little chips of bone out of her spine, there must have been something wrong, I don't know quite what it was, and then he just closed his hand over her and it looked like, the holes that you would see from sewing, but there was no stitches, but it looked like stitches, and I watched that girl throughout the week and by the end of the week there was nothing but a thin red line. And little pin holes... it just healed, so quickly."<sup>52</sup>

Elizabeth is clearly impressed with Mr. Geddes' abilities as a trance or psychic surgeon. She says explicitly that she and the other Spiritualist healers in her tour group were not "healers to the extent that he is," showing a clear perception of "surgery" as superior to "spiritual healing" of the sort practised in North America. It is also interesting to note that Elizabeth makes a specific reference to the fact that the wound was closed as if with stitches. The spirit doctor did not, apparently, simply close the wound magically, he closed it with the astral plane equivalent of sutures! According to Spiritualist teachings, spirit guides and spirit doctors retain the patterns of thought and practice they learned while incarnate on the earth plane (Macklin 1974a, 1974b; Zaretsky 1977, 1970). The healing of Dr. Geddes and his spirit doctor guide is therefore clearly modelled on the allopathic medicine of biomedical surgeons.

The other psychic surgeon well known in Spiritualist circles is John Abagione. "Abagione" is not apparently the healer's real name, but is the name of the town outside Brasilia in which he lives. The town of Abagione has become a minor pilgrimage site

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<sup>52</sup> According to the narratives collected during fieldwork, back surgery and eye surgery are the most common types of surgery practised by Dr. Geddes. I have recorded several narratives dealing with each type of surgery. Similar narratives are recounted in Fuller (1974); Greenfield (1987); Dein (1992); Cosminsky & Scrimshaw (1980); and Hess (1991, 1994).

for those seeking healing. Elizabeth recounts a truly revealing narrative about her trip to visit Mr. Abagione:

"John Abagione sees maybe three to four hundred people a day, and of those three or four hundred people he maybe does thirty or forty surgeries. As the people pass before him, he, it's an entity who incorporates through him, sees that that person needs surgery. John just stops them right there, and even as they are standing he'll pull up their shirt or whatever and, and take a knife from the table there, and operate on them right in front of you. And there's very, very little blood. Now, with Mr. Geddes there's no blood at all. With John Abagione there was some blood, but nothing like what you would expect. And those too, those also, because I saw people, within hours of the surgery, it would heal so quickly, that even by the end of day, the scar was just a thin red line. His surgeries healed even much quicker than Mr. Geddes' did.

And John Abagione, as I passed through the line, told me that I was getting surgery the next day at eight o'clock. And I was all prepared for it, I was ready to let him cut me, but when I went back the next day, I was taken into a room where I was told to meditate, and a nurse came in who spoke English, and Portuguese, at least I assume she was a nurse, she was dressed in white, and there were other people in the room with me who were also going to have surgery, and she said that we did not have to be cut. If we chose just to have John Abagione pray over us, the surgery part would not be necessary. It was just as a sign of faith, because there was so many people there who needed to see physical evidence that surgery was taking place.

So what happened then was, I got, ah, I guess I, chickened out. Because I thought, "Oh, if I don't have to be cut then I won't do it, I'll let him pray over me." And I feel then my intent was all messed up, and I really regret that I didn't let him cut me, because he cut many, many people that day and they were all healed and they all had beautiful experiences from it."

In this narrative, Elizabeth stresses the "nurse's" comment that the actual surgical procedure, the cutting, was not necessary, but served as "proof" of the effectiveness of the healing to those who needed external evidence. The search for "proof" is integral to Spiritualism, and it is not surprising that Elizabeth regretted her decision to be prayed



over rather than "cut."<sup>53</sup> While Elizabeth considers herself beyond the need for physical "proof," she still regrets her decision to forgo the psychic surgery. Despite the fact that Elizabeth herself was unaware of any medical problem she might have had that required surgery, she felt that her "intent" had been "all messed up," and that she should have gone through with the surgery. The requirement for "proof" is firmly embedded within Spiritualism. Elizabeth herself agreed that the need for physical proof in some manner revealed a lack of faith, and yet she still believed that "surgery" would have been preferable to purely non-interventionist healing by prayer. It is possible therefore to see here the prestige in which biomedical interventionist medicine is held within Spiritualist circles.<sup>54</sup>

This narrative also reveals clear evidence that the "form" of biomedicine had been adopted by John Abagione and used to great effect. Anthropologist Daniel Moerman

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<sup>53</sup> The central importance of "proof" within Spiritualism historically has been discussed in Chapter One. The continuing importance of "proof" for contemporary Spiritualists is discussed in Chapter Four.

<sup>54</sup> The prestige of biomedical interventionist medicine is even more apparent among those who do not see the need for physical intervention in a Spiritualist context as a sign of lack of faith. For example, medium and healer John argues that physical cutting must simply be done because a different vibration of healing energy is sometimes required than purely spiritual healing can provide. He said, "Some people do not respond to spiritual healing, because the physical [illness] requires [psychic] intensity. When you are working to really heal the body, you need the intensity of the gravity of the astral plane. Now the astral plane is made up of astral matter. And, when a spirit doctor comes in to work, he has come in on a spirit vibration that is still alike physical vibration, therefore he is actually still working with the intensity of physical force. As you will see, if you ever undergo this type of healing." For John, therefore, the healing of physical bodies requires the manipulation of energies "with the intensity of physical force" - physiological intervention is the only answer for some kinds of illness, and "prayer" is simply not enough at times.

(1991:130) has argued that both the form and the content of medical systems contribute to the effectiveness of any system of healing. In this instance, John Abagione has clearly adopted the "form" of biomedicine to emphasize the effectiveness and legitimacy of his practice of surgery. The presence of the "nurse" dressed in white, the waiting room, and the need for a special appointment to see the doctor all contribute a sense of legitimacy to the setting.<sup>55</sup> Anthropologists Cosminsky and Scrimshaw (1980) have noted the legitimating function of such external biomedical forms within the context of psychic surgery in Latin America. As they note (1980:270):

"Spiritists have incorporated aspects of cosmopolitan medicine into their practice and expanded their repertoire with pharmaceutical remedies, techniques and symbols, such as written prescriptions, operations and X-rays, and spirits of dead doctors. In certain respects, they are using the doctor as a role model, but projecting these aspects into the spiritual realm. Their use of the spirits of dead doctors and modern medicines are also a way of validating their own status as healers."

The adoption of this kind of biomedical symbolic form as a means of legitimating Spiritualist healing can be found among North American Spiritualists despite legal restrictions that severely limit any interventionist style of medical treatments. Upon

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<sup>55</sup> Hess (1994) provides an excellent corroborative account of this kind of adoption of biomedical symbolic form in his description of a "less controversial" kind of spiritist mediumistic surgery, which he calls "spiritual injections". Hess writes (1994:88-89), "The mediums, wearing green surgical gowns, motioned to me to take off my shirt and belt and to unsnap my pants. A nurse medium (a woman) then took two cotton swabs and rubbed my temples, and following this the "doctor" medium (a man) gave me a spiritual injection. The syringe was invisible, but he dug his fingernail into my arm until I could feel the pain. When he withdrew the invisible syringe (and his fingernail), there was a red mark on my skin but it was not quite bleeding. The doctor medium put a cotton swab in my hand - the same arm that had received the injection - and then placed my hand to my nose, where I held the cotton in place. I thought for the moment that the cotton might have ether in it, but it had no smell: ethereal ether." The symbolic form of biomedicine is clearly evident in this account.

returning from a visit to the psychic surgeons of Brazil, healer and medium John decided to set up a psychic-surgery clinic modelled on that of Dr. Geddes in his hometown in the mid-western United States. The symbolic form of biomedicine is readily apparent in the following description:

"[At home] we have a healing sanctuary. It's a room that's kinda the third story on a house. And its all white, except for some separator things, between the tables. And we have tables, just like operating tables, and we invite people from all the community and all around, they come from three and four hours around, to take part in that service, and we bring them up, and we have healers that operate on the tables, and people come up and lay on the tables, the healers actually use their hands, [guided] by spirit doctors, and we have done this now since we have come from Brazil, we've learned about this, and as soon as we got here we incorporated some of that way.

And some of the same doctors began coming through. There's Dr. Mendez who comes through very often, it's the same one that we met in Brazil. And one doctor, Dr. Frederick, comes through. We don't tell people this one, we wait for people to tell us, they say 'We saw someone,' and we say 'What did he look like?' and five people have described him, very detailed. And this is the same doctor, Dr. Frederick, [that we experienced in Brazil].

So... when you walk up there [to the healing sanctuary], they [the spirit surgeons] have really charged things with spiritual energy, to the point where, when you walk up there, you can actually feel things going over your skin and over your body, as if they just have taken up residence there. And they [doctors Mendez and Frederick] actually live there, as best I can tell."

For a Spiritualist healer, the most effective and most prestigious spiritual helper and guide is a biomedical doctor. These spirit doctors use their medical knowledge to diagnose illness, and by working through the healer channel healing energy into the patient. Until the advent of psychic surgery, however, this healing was purely non-physical and non-interventionist in nature. With the growing prestige of psychic surgery

for many Spiritualists, the last clear distinguishing feature between living biomedical doctors and spirit doctors has disappeared. Spirit doctors now use invisible stitches and real scissors, needles or knives to operate on their patients. Spiritualist healers now use operating tables to heal people on. And spirit doctors have taken up residence in spiritualist medical clinics, an apparent sign of true dedication on the part of the spirit doctor. Elizabeth suggested to me that the spirit doctors working through the psychic surgeons in Brazil were medical doctors who still wanted to fulfil their calling on the earth plane. She hypothesized that "the spirit of a doctor who perhaps wants to continue working in medicine, even though he's now in the spirit world, incorporates into them [the healers Geddes and Abagione], or perhaps a doctor who didn't, was not so ethical I sometimes think, on earth, comes back to work through one of them to sort of, you know, pay off a karmic debt." Whatever the motivation of these spirit doctors, the increasing Spiritualist acceptance of psychic surgery reveals more clearly than anything else the immense prestige that the symbolic form of biomedicine can hold for North American Spiritualists. The acceptance of psychic surgery complete with scalpels, sutures, operating tables, "nurses" and spirit doctors reveals the extent to which the powerful symbols of biomedicine can be incorporated into Spiritualist healing.

### Hierarchies of Health Care Resort

The incorporation of "scientific" language and the adoption of biomedical doctors as sacred symbols by many Spiritualists are readily apparent indicators of the medicalization of Spiritualist healing. However, the medicalization of Spiritualist healing

transcends this adoption of biomedical symbolic form. The prestige in which biomedical science is held by Spiritualists and the impact of biomedicine on Spiritualist healing can also be seen in Spiritualist patterns of health care resort, and in a fundamental acceptance of biomedical understandings of disease aetiology and cure. Like the medicalized terminology with which many Spiritualists describe their system of spiritual healing, Spiritualist patterns of health care resort are initially surprising. Anthropologists Peter Morley and Roy Wallis (1978) have suggested that in non-Western contexts, medical pluralism and patterns of resort behaviour are frequently indicative of conflict between underlying concepts of illness and health in competing systems of health care.<sup>56</sup> For the Spiritualists with whom I worked, there was no apparent conflict between biomedical and Spiritualist perceptions of illness and disease.<sup>57</sup> Spiritualists practice a form of

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<sup>56</sup> In the context of North America this also holds true. For example, Richardson & Dewitt (1991) survey the sources of conceptual conflict between the orthodox biomedical system of health care and the alternative health care system of Christian Scientists. According to Richardson & Dewitt (1991:557) a recent Christian Science Church statement to the effect that the use of biomedical treatments in addition to spiritual healing was acceptable behaviour by Church members was viewed as a fundamental reversal of policy on behalf of both members and non-members of the Christian Science Church. Prior to this statement by Church officials, Christian Science healing and biomedical healing were perceived as competing systems of health care, rather than compatible or complementary ones, by many Christian Science members. This perception is probably an on-going one for many Christian Scientists, despite "revised" official Church policy.

<sup>57</sup> The literature of medical anthropology (see for example Csordas 1987; Comaroff 1980; Kleinman 1988, 1980, 1978; Landy 1977a, 1977b; Press 1988, 1971, 1969) has adopted a distinction between the concepts "disease" and "illness" and a corollary distinction between "curing" and "healing". According to Kleinman (1978:88), "disease denotes a malfunctioning in or maladaptation of biological and/or psychological processes. Illness, on the other hand, signifies the *experience* of disease and the societal reaction to disease." Curing is consequently the alleviation of disease, while healing is the alleviation of the *experience* of illness. Spiritualists do not distinguish between 'curing'

medical pluralism that allows them resort to both Spiritualist and biomedical systems of healing. Furthermore, it became apparent during the course of fieldwork that most Spiritualists utilize biomedicine as their system of first resort. These patterns of Spiritualist health care resort reveal the underlying acceptance of and prestige of biomedicine for Spiritualists, and are further indications of the medicalization of the Spiritualist healing system.

Almost all Spiritualists practice a form of medical pluralism, as is evident in the following exchange:

Q: But everybody here goes to medical doctors as well?

Kim: Oh, we would never say don't go to a medical doctor!

Carol: We don't advocate that you just work straight on our healing. Our basic position is if it works, we're happy. Right now, I'm trying to deal with my problem in a way that doesn't compromise any of my beliefs. I've talked with my doctor and he understands me, my position. That's why we worked out the combination we did, with some homeopathic treatments as well as the medication. And of course, I take healing here [at church] as well.

Q: So you told your doctor that you were a Spiritualist healer? What did he think?

Carol: Well, he's a doctor, you know. But he listens to me, my ideas. He's very open minded. That's why I go to him.

As members of a contemporary western society that takes modern medical science and practice for granted, Spiritualists accept the biomedical health care system with no

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and 'healing'; they distinguish between 'disease' and 'illness' only in their treatment of emotional and spiritual traumas which would not be considered 'disease' by the standards of biomedicine.

more difficulty than other members of society.<sup>58</sup> Spiritualists utilize both the biomedical and their own spiritual systems of healing, engaging in a pattern of medical pluralism that is becoming increasingly prevalent in a North American context. McGuire (1988) has suggested that medical pluralism is much more common in North America than has generally been recognized. According to McGuire (1988:13), there is an "apparently widespread use of such alternative medical systems by middle-class persons" and as a result medical pluralism is becoming increasingly normative in middle class America. Arthur Kleinman (1988, 1980, 1977) has argued that all health care systems are intrinsically pluralistic. Family, folk and professional health care systems coexist within most societal and cultural contexts. Spiritualist patterns of medical pluralism are by no means unique as a result, but within the Spiritualist context, patterns of health care resort reveal the degree to which biomedical science is held in high regard.

The pattern of pluralistic health care resort can be seen in the following narrative excerpted from Toronto Spiritualist healer Pam's unpublished autobiography. She writes,

I was awakened by a very deep gasp... and as I fumbled for the light switch, I said, "what's wrong Bill?" There was no reply... I put two nitroglycerin tablets under his tongue, I stroked his face and patted his cheek, but I could get no response... I remembered then that [spirit doctor] Lee had said that if I ever needed help to call upon him, and I did that. I called out to Lee to help me but I thought that if Bill was already

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<sup>58</sup> Biomedical practitioners do not reciprocate this acceptance and tolerance of spiritual healing. For example, a 1992 survey of physicians' attitudes towards spiritual healing revealed that 95% of physicians believe that biomedicine can heal where faith healing cannot, and 55% believed that faith healing was actively harmful for patients (see King et al. 1992). Spiritualists generally recognize this lack of reciprocal tolerance. As one Spiritualist responded when asked if his doctor knew he utilized Spiritualist healing, "He'd think I was crazy!" The statistical findings of King et al. (1992) seem to support this assertion.

dead that there was nothing Lee could do, but if Bill was just in a coma I was wasting time, and I should be getting him... an ambulance...

Pam is narrating the traumatic event of her husband's death. Both Pam and her husband had been Spiritualist healers for many years at this point. Pam's spirit guide, Dr. Lee, had "worked" through her successfully for many years. At the moment of crisis, Pam called out to her guide for help to heal her husband. However, as she says, she felt that she was 'wasting time' by waiting for Dr. Lee to do something, when she herself could be calling for biomedical aid. Pam does not doubt the healing abilities of her guide, but she very clearly reveals that in times of crisis, biomedicine is to be preferred as the system of first resort. Pam did call on her guide before calling for an ambulance, but she did not wait to see what effects her plea for spiritual help would have before turning to biomedicine for aid. Pam's experience is more traumatic than the health-care choices most Spiritualists are asked to make, and yet the pattern of resort revealed in her choice parallels that of Spiritualists in less dramatic contexts.

Most of the theoretical literature on patterns of medical pluralism is taken from non-Western contexts.<sup>59</sup> As McGuire (1988) indicates, however, this literature can be equally applicable to Western patterns of health care resort.<sup>60</sup> The pattern of medical pluralism for Spiritualists is similar to that evidenced by individuals in non-Western

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<sup>59</sup> See for example Banerji (1981); Bhardwaj (1980); Chen (1981); Cosminsky and Scrimshaw (1980); Kunstadter (1980) and Lasker (1982).

<sup>60</sup> McGuire (1988) does not discuss the contributions of specific authors, theoretical perspectives, or ethnographic sources within the body of her book. All such references are contained within end notes. The sources cited in her notes are drawn from a wide cross-cultural sampling of ethnographic and theoretical sources, however, including many of the sources referenced elsewhere in this chapter.



cultures after Western biomedicine has been introduced, with one significant difference.<sup>61</sup> Any discussion of Spiritualist patterns of health care resort must differ from those in the anthropological literature on non-Western contexts in that the Spiritualist religious system of healing must be seen as the "new" health care system competing with the already established biomedical system of healing "indigenous" for Spiritualists. Anthropologist Irwin Press's (1969, 1971, 1980) widely cited model of medical pluralism provides a useful framework within which to examine Spiritualist healing, therefore, but in a generalized context that stresses the established preeminence of biomedicine for contemporary Spiritualists.

Press (1969:216) identifies three patterns of pluralistic or "dual use" behaviour, which he called competition, compartmentalization, and exploitation. Contemporary North American Spiritualism can be seen to display elements of each of these patterns, particularly those of competition and compartmentalization. According to Press, when medical systems are in competition, the patient consults both medical doctors and indigenous healers for the same ailments, but the hierarchy of resort and the accrediting of healing success differ according to the degree of Western acculturation involved.<sup>62</sup> As Press illustrates, hierarchies of resort are a useful gauge of an individual or a

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<sup>61</sup> See for example Crandon (1983); Press (1969); Romanucci-Ross (1977, 1986); Furnham & Smith (1988); Landy (1977) and Williams (1977).

<sup>62</sup> Press (1969:216) argues that in 'compartmentalized' resort practices, patients resort to different health care systems to treat different types of illnesses. In 'exploitative' resort practices, he suggests, patients resort to one or another system of health care for non-medical purposes: for example, to make statements about their economic, political, or social status in the community.

culture's degree of Westernization, where Westernization is understood in this context to be the successful adoption of biomedicine into non-Western indigenous patterns of health care resort. This theoretical approach is also apparent in Romanucci-Ross's (1977:482) characterization of first use of Western biomedicine in non-Western contexts as an acculturative sequence, and first use of traditional or non-biomedical healing as a counter-acculturative sequence of resort behaviour. According to both Press (1969) and Romanucci-Ross (1977), first resort can be taken as an index to the degree of acculturation of the group or individual involved. An examination of Spiritualist patterns of resort, therefore, is useful for establishing the degree of Spiritualist acceptance of the dominant biomedical model of health care in North America.

As mentioned above, for the majority if not all of contemporary North American Spiritualists, biomedicine must be considered their "indigenous" system of health care.<sup>63</sup> Implicit biomedical conceptions of individual nature, illness, and health have consequently shaped the Spiritualist formulation and perception of Spiritual healing. Anthropologist Jean Comaroff (1980, 1982) has argued that the adoption and internalization of new medical systems are invariably shaped by the logic of the "indigenous" system. Spiritualists themselves consistently minimize boundary distinctions between Spiritualist belief and practice, and the belief and practice of

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<sup>63</sup> Attempts to discuss North American Christian-informed religious healing systems as "indigenous" systems in contrast to "cosmopolitan" biomedicine are unconvincing (see for example Ness 1980). Within the context of Southern Ontario/New York area Spiritualism, most members are first generation adult converts to the religious movement. As a result, the majority adopt Spiritualist healing as a secondary system of healing after patterns of health care resort are already established.

orthodox biomedicine. As a result, Spiritualist patterns of health care resort are coherent and consistent within a belief system that stresses the compatibility of Spiritualist belief with orthodox biomedicine and "science." Spiritualists can affirm their patterns of resort behaviour because the Spiritualist belief system fails to challenge to the legitimacy or efficacy of biomedical healing.

Macklin (1977) has suggested that in order to avoid challenge or conflict between scientific and spiritual worldviews, Spiritualists engage in conceptual 'boundary hopping'. In this context, however, it would be more accurate to argue that Spiritualists construct their conceptual boundaries to prevent any perceptual gap between Spiritualist healing and biomedicine from developing. For many Spiritualists, biomedicine constitutes the health care system of first resort because their religious beliefs make this pattern of resort religiously justifiable. The following discussion with Lily Dale healer Vera illustrates the logic behind Spiritualist patterns of first resort.

Q: Do you think that there is anything that Spiritual healing is best or most effective on, or do you think it's effective for any problem?

Vera: I think it's effective for any problem, emotional, physical, spiritual, just for general well being, preventative medicine. I think sitting for healing a lot of the time is done [by most people] as a preventative medicine treatment to keep themselves aligned well and happy.

Q: I don't understand, then, why Spiritualists don't dispense with going to medical doctors completely, if Spiritual healing is so effective?

Vera: Oh, possibly, I believe... I KNOW that spirit life is pretty close to the way we are... I might say 'Ah, gee I just can't DO this, Jennifer,' and you'll say 'Well yeah, I know how to do it,' and I think the same thing might be going on in the spirit world. Where one says 'I just can't come up with the right cure, I didn't work enough with rheumatism,' there's going to be another one who says 'Ah, but I did and I have found this to be very effective. Let ME work through Vera for a while.' So you see,

it's the same on the earth plane, here, with doctors. You just go to them to see if they have the knowledge you need, then if they don't, or if you, maybe if you feel you need other healing besides your body, then you go to spirit.

Q: And you believe that it is mostly medical doctors who work in Spiritual healing?

Vera: I believe it to be mostly medical doctors that have passed on and still pursue their special talent of being able to channel medical science into effective healing. Earth plane doctors are the same, only they don't have as much time for study and learning.

Spiritualists consider themselves to be students and seekers of knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is always to be sought, and respected where it is found (Barrow 1986; Nelson 1969, 1988; Richard & Adato 1980). Consequently, the Spiritualist respect for medical science and medical practitioners, as evidenced in their patterns of resort, is a recognition of the valuable knowledge held by physicians. Spiritualist patterns of health care resort lend legitimacy to biomedicine within Spiritualist perceptions by giving such patterns of resort a spiritual justification. While "earth-plane doctors" cannot be considered as learned as their astral-plane counterparts, they are 'the same as' spirit doctors save for the fact that they have not yet died. Spiritualists consequently recognize the link between biomedical doctors and the source of Spiritualist healing. To reject the knowledge and services of biomedical specialists on the "earth plane" would therefore undermine faith in Spiritual healing, for Spiritualist healing is dependent on the knowledge and services of (deceased) biomedical doctors. Consequently, a rejection of biomedicine on the "earth plane" would be inconsistent with Spiritualist belief. Support of biomedicine and biomedical doctors, on the other hand, simultaneously reinforces Spiritualist faith in both the system of Spiritual healing and that of biomedicine.

### Hierarchies of Resort and "Ethico-moral" Illness

The use of medical diagnoses and prescriptions as signs of illness status is one way in which contemporary Spiritualists reveal their recognition and support of biomedical specialists and biomedical science. As one young man told me after a healing service, "I needed a lot of healing tonight, the sweat was pouring off me. The doctor says it's not just a cold, it's a virus. I have to take antibiotics for it." According to sociologists Joel Telles and Mark Pollack (1981), such claims to biomedical legitimation of illness are common. They argue (1981:243) that "claims to being sick typically require legitimation," and that people seek sources of legitimation which accord with their preconceived ideas about the nature of illness and the possibility of treatment.<sup>64</sup> Typically, North Americans turn to biomedicine to legitimate feelings of illness because biomedicine is considered authoritative in matters of illness and health. Spiritualist utilization of biomedical prescriptions and diagnoses as signs of illness status is therefore indicative of the Spiritualist acceptance of biomedicine as authoritative in matters of health care. It is only when "illness" is understood in non-physiological, ethico-moral terms that Spiritualists turn to Spiritual healing as the health care system of sole resort.

According to Romanucci-Ross (1977), socio-moral components of illness are one of the most important factors in determining patterns of health care resort. Illnesses

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<sup>64</sup> Press (1969) also discusses patterns of resort as indicative of status-seeking behaviour. He suggests that exploitative patterns of medical pluralism are often expressed by recourse to biomedical doctors or native healers not primarily to obtain a cure, but to gain status or make a statement about degrees of modernity or traditionality. Spiritualists make statements of both "modernity" and "spirituality" in their utilization of both systems of healing.

understood by individuals or cultures as being primarily socially or morally derived are reserved for indigenous practitioners, while illnesses devoid of moral content (broken bones, for example) are referred to biomedical health care practitioners. Press (1969) calls this pattern of health care resort "compartmentalization," in which patients make health care choices based on perceived differences in illness characteristics. Such compartmentalization is not confined to non-Western contexts. Public health researcher Marsha Balshem (1991) provides an example of this distinction as made by urban Philadelphians in her analysis of lay conceptions of heart disease as opposed to cancer. In her study, patients' optimism and acceptance of what was perceived as the standard scientific biomedical view of heart disease as a physical dysfunction treatable by modern medicine contrasted sharply with a fatalistic moral view of cancer as capricious and not subject to control by medical science.<sup>65</sup> Unlike the individuals in Balshem's study, however, who had no alternative health care system of resort, Spiritualists have access to non-biomedical healing for illnesses with perceived ethical or moral content.

Spiritualists themselves almost invariably claim to practice no compartmentalization in patterns of resort behaviour, but it is possible to identify clear differences in response to ethico-moral illnesses from illnesses with no ethico-moral

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<sup>65</sup> Balshem writes (1991:158-162), "Respondents expressed an easy acceptance of what they perceived as standard scientific knowledge about heart disease. The use of a mechanical model reflected their faith in the ability of modern medical science to understand heart disease fully... [In contrast], many community residents... spoke of cancer as a purposeful entity that is capricious, cruel, and evil. The workings of cancer are workings of fate, and fate explains why one person rather than another falls ill...".

component.<sup>66</sup> Drawing distinctions between physiological and ethico-moral based illnesses and supporting a division of labour between biomedical and indigenous healers is characteristic of what anthropologist David Landy (1977) has called 'adaptive' indigenous healers.<sup>67</sup> According to Landy, a successfully adaptive indigenous healer is one who fits his/her curing role into a complementary relationship with Western biomedical practice, confining treatment and diagnoses to those areas that do not compete with Western medicine. This compartmentalization or 'division of labour' is further fostered by the Western academic and biomedical willingness to grant legitimacy to indigenous healing systems as effective psychological rather than biological healing tools.<sup>68</sup> Landy (1977a:478) suggests that a successfully adaptive indigenous healer has a high tolerance of cognitive dissonance coupled with a capacity to compartmentalize dissonant values and role requirements. He further argues (1977a:477) that an adaptive healer "not only incorporates, but elaborates, Western elements." As a result, an adaptive healer in Landy's system is one who integrates his/her non-biomedical system of healing thoroughly with Western biomedicine while simultaneously remaining completely physiologically non-interventionist in nature.

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<sup>66</sup> This difference is apparent to worshippers every time a healer practices laying on of hands, for as discussed earlier, a healer's hand motions differ depending on whether "Spirit" reaches a physiological or ethico-moral diagnosis of illness.

<sup>67</sup> Landy (1977a) identifies three roles for indigenous healers: adaptive, attenuated, and emergent. An attenuated role is one in which the indigenous healer fails to adapt to western medicine and slowly becomes alienated from other members of the culture. An emergent role is one in which the indigenous healer takes on new functions and methods not associated with either traditional or bio-medical system.

<sup>68</sup> See for example Lauer (1974); Macklin (1977); Richard & Adato (1980) and Torrey (1974).

Spiritualist healers and wider Spiritualist health care resort practices are adaptive in Landy's terms. The incorporation by Spiritualist healers of biomedical terminology and symbols and the willingness of Spiritualists to utilize biomedicine serve to legitimate Spiritualist healing as commensurate with and supplemental to biomedicine (Skultans 1974). The presence of any degree of compartmentalization within Spiritualist healing arises out of a pattern of ethico-moral distinction made by Spiritualists with regards to certain chronic illnesses. It has been suggested by Landy (1977a:471) that biomedicine deals with critical incapacitating dysfunctions while indigenous non-Western adaptive healing systems deal with chronic non-incapacitating dysfunctions. As mentioned, Spiritualists reject the idea that Spiritual healing is more efficacious on some types of illness than others, but there is a strong tendency to locate chronic illness within an ethico-moral framework, and this can lead to a compartmentalization of resort practices. The link between ethico-moral judgements and compartmentalized resort practices arises from an attempt to locate biomedically 'non-curable' illness within a religiously meaningful context. As anthropologist Thomas Csordas (1987) has suggested, one of the functions of a religious healing system is to bring about a transformation of the phenomenological conditions under which a person experiences illness. Within the Spiritualist context, chronic or incurable illness is reinterpreted within an ethico-moral context of self-blame. Spiritual healing becomes a form of palliative care for any chronic or terminal illnesses for which the patient is understood to bear sole responsibility. Such a reinterpretation of illness reveals a deep acceptance of biomedical categorizations of illness, as will become evident in the following discussion.



### "Ethico-moral" Illness

Spiritualists believe, as tenets of faith, in personal responsibility and in compensation and retribution for good and evil deeds.<sup>69</sup> Given this belief structure, perception of an illness incurable by medical science is easily transformed into a perception of personal moral responsibility for the illness experience. For Spiritualists, biomedical treatments are devoid of ethico-moral content. Illnesses that are treatable by biomedicine are therefore also devoid of such content. When biomedicine fails, a reevaluation of the illness often takes place. This reevaluation involves the continued belief in the efficacy of spiritual healing coupled with acceptance of the illness as a learning experience or as retribution for wrongs committed in this life time or another.<sup>70</sup> Illnesses that are incurable through biomedical science therefore undergo a reevaluation in Spiritualist perceptions whereby the spiritual rather than physiological aetiology of the disease is stressed. For Spiritualists who successfully find physiological healing through

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<sup>69</sup> As discussed in the Introduction, the "Principles of Spiritualism" as recited in Lily Dale and at Hamilton's King Street Church are as follows: "The Fatherhood of God; the Brotherhood of Man; the Immortality of the Soul and its Personal Characteristics; Communion between departed human Spirits and Mortals; Personal Responsibility; Compensation and Retribution for all Good and Evil Deeds done on Earth; a Path of Eternal Progress, open to every Soul." Hamilton's Main Street Church recites a variation on the above. Personal responsibility and retribution for evil deeds are therefore part of the core of Spiritualist beliefs.

<sup>70</sup> Not all Spiritualists believe in reincarnation, but "karma" has become a concept widely accepted by Spiritualists. One Spiritualist woman spoke to me of "instant karma," by which she meant that she 'paid' for bad deeds almost instantly with physical symptoms. She said, 'I get them [headaches] all the time, migraines, the minute I get angry or jealous or whatever, I get a headache that tells me to watch it, watch what I'm thinking. It's instant karma... the doctor can't do anything, it's my own fault, and anyway they go away again pretty quickly.'

Spiritualist healing practices, this reevaluation of illness as spiritually based and the stress on personal responsibility for both good and evil deeds lends a sense of personal validation and spiritual well-being.<sup>71</sup> For those who fail to find physiological healing, the reevaluation of illness carries a strong burden of self-blame. In these cases, a spiritual reevaluation of illness in an ethico-moral context is often only reluctantly adopted by Spiritualists. Some Spiritualists in fact persistently resort to biomedical treatments for chronic illness as a way to avoid a reevaluation of illness in a context of personal responsibility and self-blame. Consequently, while Spiritualist healing can provide a sense of personal validation for illnesses healed outside the biomedical context, it can also provide a sense of personal self-blame for those illnesses which biomedicine and spiritual healing fail to alleviate.

An example of the reluctance of some Spiritualists to reevaluate illness in an ethico-moral context can be seen in two related incidents that took place in the fall of 1991 at Hamilton's King Street Church. Two very committed, elderly and long-standing

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<sup>71</sup> During the fieldwork period I spoke to numerous Spiritualists who reported being "healed" through Spiritualist healing after having been given a biomedical diagnosis of "incurable". Both Ann and Lynn, who had overcome repeated Multiple Sclerosis exacerbations, proudly announced that it was their own faith and their own determination to help others which had let them be healed. Through becoming healers to help others, they themselves were healed. In another instance, a woman with an immune deficiency disease ("it's not AIDS, but like that") named Paula assured me that it was her own determination to be well, coupled with her willingness to devote herself to healing others, which let her resist the deterioration of her immune system. In each of these cases, the women felt that their personal strength, faith, and will had been vindicated through the success of Spiritual healing. Having been successfully healed, self-blame was avoided, while the efficacy of spiritual healing was reinforced. Interestingly, none of these women blamed biomedical doctors for failure to cure them. As Paula told me, "There are some things that God can heal that medicine can't."

Spiritualist church members named Mark and Paul revealed patterns of resort behaviour that carried implications for the ethico-moral context of their chronic illnesses. Paul, the elder, was suffering from severe physical impairment to his legs and eyes. Paul himself told me he had received the physical damage in the nineteen sixties while serving in the British Army, and that his symptoms had been chronic since that time.<sup>72</sup> Mark also suffered from circulatory problems in his legs and had difficulty walking. The two men were close friends, living in the same apartment complex, sharing chores that required travelling, and attending Spiritualist services together twice weekly. Both men regularly took Spiritual healing in the Church. Both men also regularly consulted biomedical physicians. In the fall of 1991, the hierarchy of resort practices for both men became clear, and carried clear implications for the ethico-moral reevaluations of illness within the Spiritualist context.

In September 1991, Mark stopped attending church services. Until this time, Mark had faithfully attended Spiritualist services at the King Street Church for years. Mark was in fact an ordained Spiritualist minister (although not the minister of the King Street Church) and was committed to the well-being and continuation of the Church. Mark sent a message to the Spiritualist community through Kim, the minister, apologizing for his absence. She announced that 'Mark won't be joining us [any more],

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<sup>72</sup> Interestingly, Paul became a Spiritualist while in the hospital following the initial accident which led to his impairment. The physiotherapist in the British hospital where he was sent to recuperate was a Spiritualist who spoke to her patients about the possibility of spiritual healing. Paul initially joined the Spiritualist movement out of desire for healing when it became clear that biomedicine would not restore full movement and eyesight. He ultimately died seeking healing from biomedicine once again.

his doctor told him that he won't get better if he doesn't stay off his feet. He's got to stop climbing stairs. Climbing stairs is too hard, he's not allowed to do it."<sup>73</sup> To enter the King Street Church, it is necessary to climb a flight of twelve steps. Although there may be other factors involved in Mark's decision, of which I and the Church members were not aware, it appears that Mark made a clear choice to accept biomedical advice over his religious affiliation in his decision to stop attending church services. Since Mark's religious beliefs include acceptance of the possibility and efficacy of spiritual healing, choosing to stop attending church for medical reasons appears initially surprising. However, this decision can be illuminated by reference to the Spiritualist reevaluation of incurable ailments in an ethico-moral context of self blame. Mark's choice of biomedical advice over church attendance indicated his refusal to consider his condition as chronic or incurable, and thereby his refusal to reinterpret it in an ethico-moral context.<sup>74</sup> As long as medical science could offer concrete suggestions for improvement, he would consider his condition as a curable physical ailment and nothing more. As long as he considered his illness in this light, biomedical advice superseded

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<sup>73</sup> I never got the opportunity to interview Mark regarding his decision to stop attending Spiritualist services, for Mark returned to the Church only once during the remainder of the field work period, to attend Paul's funeral. It is therefore possible that his decision depended on other factors than the medical diagnosis, but this is the reason Kim stressed when passing on Mark's apologies to the congregation.

<sup>74</sup> As McGuire notes (1988:246), "the dominant medical system in this society is highly rationalized, and questions of moral evaluation are neutralized (or hidden or denied) in most discussions of health and illness. For example, physicians generally would not address patients questions about the meaning or ultimate causes of a serious illness. Biomedicine represents that diseases are morally neutral categories to be rationally diagnosed and treated in a value-free professional context."

any other possible course of behaviour.

During the remainder of the fieldwork term, Mark returned to the King Street Church only once, to attend the memorial service for Paul, who died in November of 1991. The reluctance of Mark to accept an ethico-moral interpretation of illness apparently extended from his own illness to that of Paul as well. During the memorial service, Mark recounted an atypical deathbed visitation narrative that reveals his reluctance to interpret Paul's illness in ethico-moral or spiritual terms. This reluctance becomes apparent when it is stressed that Spiritualists are not supposed to fear death. If it is time for a person's soul to pass to the Spirit World, the soul of a Spiritualist should make the transition easily.<sup>75</sup> As one Spiritualist visitor to Lily Dale explained it to me, "making the transition [to the spirit world at death] is like going from sleeping to waking. As easy as that." According to Mark's deathbed visitation narrative, however, Paul did not make the transition easily. Mark said,

'It was three twenty in the morning. I woke up and looked at the clock, and then I saw him, sitting on the window bench, looking at me. He said, "Mark, I'm not ready to go, I don't want to go. I don't want to go." We talked for a long time. He wasn't ready to move on, he wanted to stay. I phoned the hospital in the morning and they told me he had died, but I already knew.'

Paul in fact died as a result of complications arising from biomedical surgery in

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<sup>75</sup> Spiritualists argue that the Spirit World is interactively shaped by the expectations of the deceased. If you expect to find Heaven, you will. If you expect to find Hell, you will. If you expect to find nothing, you will spend a very long time lost in nothingness, until your soul finally opens itself to the truth of continued existence after bodily death. Spiritualists are therefore taught that mental attitude and expectations upon death are of extreme importance. People in despair often become ghosts, or spirits of 'low vibrations'. The best way to succeed in the Spirit world is to enter it with clear ideas of what to expect, and an optimistic outlook for one's future.

an attempt to alleviate the ongoing physical deterioration of his legs. Three days after his surgery, he suffered a stroke, and died in his sleep. It is significant that Paul chose to undergo this surgery, because he himself had told me less than a month before his surgery that his symptoms were the result of karmic debt, and therefore incurable. His willingness to accept personal moral responsibility for his illness was well known in the community. He continued to take Spiritualist healing to ease the swelling and pain in his legs, but had long since ceased to look to Spiritualist healing for a cure. Another member of the Spiritualist community also recalled Paul's acceptance of the karmic nature of his illness:

"[Paul] was a powerful magnetic healer, an adept guide and a conscientious fellow traveller. He was also becoming terribly crippled; he was losing the use of both legs.... He told me that his disability was his own way of paying off some past life debts; karma. He said that he knew that I could heal him but asked me not to. He was becoming old and tired and believed that he was doing the proper thing."

Less than a month after assuring me that he himself carried the karmic burden of responsibility for his deteriorating physical condition, Paul opted for biomedical surgery in an attempt to counteract the damage to his legs. His choice to accept such surgery despite the risks it entailed may support Mark's assertion that his friend was not "ready to go." Certainly Paul's friends at the memorial service accepted Mark's atypical deathbed visitation narrative as a genuine instance of contact with the soul of his departed friend. Paul's willingness to undergo risky surgery to overcome what he himself confessed to be karmic illness may reveal, therefore, his ultimate desire to avoid the ethico-moral context of self-blame attached to any illness which biomedical science fails to alleviate. Paul made one last attempt to place his illness within a biomedical rather

than ethico-moral context, and failed. His friends subsequently reintegrated Paul into the Spiritualist community when Kim announced at the memorial service that Paul himself was in attendance, and that he wanted to assure everyone that he had 'made a good transition to the other side.'

### Biomedicine and Personal Responsibility

Spiritualists believe as tenets of faith that humans have free will, and are personally responsible for their own actions. Consequently, people are ultimately responsible for their own illnesses, especially for chronic illnesses that do not respond to treatment. According to Foucault (1973), the development of the "clinical gaze" which isolated human bodies as subjects of study and divorced them from their socio-ethical context was the beginning of modern allopathic medicine. Comaroff (1982) argues that this separation of individual from social context, and the separation of body from mind or spirit, is communicated implicitly by biomedicine. According to Telles and Pollack (1981:243), the legitimating function of biomedicine reinforces biomedical perceptions of the nature of illness, health, and the individual, and these perceptions include the understanding that illness is individualistic and physiologically based. As these researchers note (1981:249),

Whatever accident, infection, psychological or spiritual state which we might believe to be the source of the problem, in modern western societies, unlike some others, we locate the illness inside of our bodies. It is that internal matter which we try to identify in diagnosing illness and it is that internal matter which we usually treat to cure illness. We might think that we have the flu because we were out in the rain without a raincoat, but to cure our flu, we aim at what is occurring within our body... Because of these socially sanctioned beliefs, illness can be

legitimated only by a medical perspective which indicates that disease, malfunction or injury exists within the body, and which can account for the feelings by which we perceived it. [Bio]medicine has attempted ever more precisely to provide that account.

In their use of biomedicine as a source of legitimation for Spiritualist healing, therefore, Spiritualists implicitly adopt much more than the external symbolic forms of biomedicine and biomedical specialists as spirit guides. They have accepted what Comaroff (1982:61) calls the contemporary biomedical shift of blame for illness from external (social, divine) forces on which it historically was placed, to internal psychological ones. As Comaroff observes (1982:62), "the overt emphasis in our mainstream culture upon an ideology of rational self-determination predisposes us to hold individuals responsible (if often indirectly) for their own afflictions, despite the apparent neutrality of the bio-medical model of disease. In fact, as our popular usage suggests, the term 'sick' has itself become a powerful metaphor of moral condemnation." The implications of Spiritualist ethico-moral responses to illness are indicative of this biomedical impetus to blame the victim for illnesses which biomedicine fails to cure.

For many Spiritualists, chronic or terminal illness can clearly be seen as a metaphor for "moral condemnation." Spiritualist attitudes toward chronic illness reveal an implicit acceptance of the pattern of "blaming the victim" identified by Comaroff. This emphasis is logically consistent with the strong Spiritualist emphasis on personal responsibility. Responsibility for illnesses that do not respond to treatment, either biomedical or spiritual, is placed firmly with the sufferer, and this attribution of blame is consistent with both biomedical and Spiritualist assumptions. According to Vera, the Lily Dale healer, "if we expect to be well, therefore we do become well... you are about



as healthy as you believe you are...". The logical corollary of her belief is that if you do not expect to get well, you will not improve. Also implied is the conclusion that if you fail to get well, you must not have really wanted to get well at all. Lily Dale visiting healer Ann support this conclusion when she explained that "There's a lot of things involved in it [healing] besides the fact that you direct the energy. A lot depends on the ailment, a lot depends on a person's mental attitude, whether they're ready to accept it. A lot of times people don't WANT to be healed. They may THINK they want to be healed, but there's something in the illness that gives them more benefit than the healing would... I'm not quite sure how that works, but it's EXACTLY how it works."

This stress on personal responsibility for the failure of healing is more clearly expressed by Ann in the following passage, recorded at Lily Dale in November 1991:

Ann: I have a client who has MS, that's very ill. She had to be carried in and out of my house, she's been in a walker, she hasn't walked unassisted in years, five years. Right before she came down with the MS, her husband died.... and immediately she got sick, she couldn't walk right off the bat, so there's trauma there, that brings on an illness that's already probably in the body to begin with... So when I went to do the healing we talked a lot about that first... well, the woman could walk steps, this was just from August, with just her boyfriend holding her hand, she could walk down a flight of steps.... This was someone who should never have walked again, according to all things... But then, her mother decided to take care of her "invalid" daughter, which was doing very good on her own... I just got a call this week and I'm going on Monday 'cause the woman can no longer walk...

Q: So you think the mother's attitude affected the daughter...?

Ann: She gave up control of her own life to someone else. So the way I feel about healing is if you have a DESIRE, then... there's a lot of people that don't have the desire... If you have the desire, then the path's more open, I think, especially with chronic illness.

The import of Ann's statements above lies not in her assumptions about the nature

of illness (which was "already probably in the body to begin with,") but in her assumptions about why healing succeeds or fails. She suggests that her client improved while desiring to do so, but sickened again when she "gave up control of her own life" and accepted an invalid role. Responsibility for the continued illness is placed not on the social context of family tension, but on the individual's voluntary abrogation of personal control. Comaroff (1982:62) suggests that biomedicine reduces environmental and social variables in such a way as to "shift the culpability of illness more securely upon the victim." If this supposition is correct, the Spiritualist perception of individuals as morally culpable for chronic illness reveals a compatibility with biomedicine that goes beyond the adoption of language or symbols to the incorporation of underlying biomedical ideology. The Spiritualist non-biomedical healing system draws legitimation from orthodox biomedicine, and as Telles and Pollack (1981) suggest, such legitimation in turn reinforces the biomedical assumptions about the individualized context of illness. The medicalization of the Spiritualist healing system is therefore apparent at a number of levels, from the adoption of biomedical language and symbols through to the acceptance of implicit biomedical assumptions about the moral culpability of individuals for illnesses not susceptible to biomedical cure.

### Conclusion

Medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman (1978, 1980, 1988) has argued that within any given health care system there exist conflicting clinical realities, according to which assumptions about disease aetiology and treatment differ. Conflicting views of

disease and treatment within these systems can result in poor clinical health care. Proper care, according to Kleinman (1978:89), comes through establishing communication between differing subsystems of health care and minimizing differences between various explanatory models of illness and health. According to David Landy (1977a:477), an adaptive healer is one who minimizes differences between his or her own system of healing and that of biomedicine by "making accommodations to as many Western medical elements as he feels he must." The contemporary Spiritualist incorporation of biomedical symbols and concepts minimizes differences between explanatory models of illness and treatment, and fosters common ground for communication between differing clinical realities. Spiritualist healers are clearly distinct from practitioners of biomedicine, and yet they successfully integrate, from a Spiritualist perspective, their alternative system of healing with the dominant biomedical model. The entire alternative healing system of Spiritualism is structured to minimize boundary distinctions between orthodox biomedicine and Spiritualist belief and practice.

Medical sociologist Renée Fox (1988:480) has argued that the American public is becoming increasingly disillusioned with orthodox biomedicine. Likewise, sociologist Meredith McGuire (1988:251) suggests that many of the alternative systems of healing popular throughout the United States are attempts to challenge the rationalized assumptions about illness, health, the body and individual identity held within orthodox biomedicine. By providing a completely non-biomedical system of spiritual healing, Spiritualists in one sense contribute to this implicit challenge to the dominant biomedical model. However, the alternative system of healing which Spiritualism represents grew

out of the nineteenth century attempt to link religion and science, including biomedicine, together in a world that found religion increasingly marginalized (Moore 1977; Nelson 1969; Brandon 1983). Both religion *and* science are therefore central to the Spiritualist message. This remains true today within the Spiritualist healing context.

Landy (1977a:477) has suggested that a successfully adaptive healer is one who combines Western medical elements with conservative traditional beliefs. The adoption by Spiritualists of symbolic and conceptual elements of orthodox biomedicine reveals the adaptive nature of Spiritualist healing. Through the medicalization of Spiritualist healing, the historic Spiritualist insistence on the compatibility of religion and science is maintained. The Spiritualist system of healing is simultaneously a spiritual critique of orthodox biomedicine and an affirmation that religion and science can coexist in the modern world. Within the context of Spiritualist healing, however, the criticism of biomedical science is not the dominant factor. The dominant element in the medicalization of Spiritualist healing is the acceptance of biomedicine as authoritative and therefore as a powerful source of potential legitimation for Spiritualist belief.

Spiritualist healing clearly is non-biomedical in nature. This fact is proudly attested to by Spiritualist healers. "Healing," Vera told me, "that is, what some people call miraculous healing, doesn't need anything to make it work except God's healing love." Such a strong religious emphasis excludes Spiritualist healing from the bounds of orthodox science and medicine. However, for Spiritualists, the biomedical and semi-medicalized language of Spiritualist healing, the incorporation of medical doctors as figures of sacred power, the implicit acceptance of biomedical dichotomies of body and

mind, and of the biomedical perception of individual culpability for illness, all implicitly affirm the fundamental compatibility of Spiritualist belief with orthodox "scientific" medicine.

Fox (1988:483) suggests that wherever medicalization is prevalent, "health, illness and medicine are central preoccupations... that have diffuse symbolic as well as practical meaning." It is here that we see the central importance of medicalization within the Spiritualist context. The medicalization of Spiritualist healing is part of the wider Spiritualist incorporation of scientific symbols into their system of religious belief. Biomedical science is clearly perceived by Spiritualists as the dominant, authoritative source of health care. Sociologist Eileen Barker suggests (1985:198) that in our society, "science" is accepted as authoritative because "science works [and] science knows." For Spiritualists, biomedicine "works" and "knows," and consequently becomes a source of legitimation for Spiritualist healing. Through the incorporation of biomedical language, symbols, and concepts, therefore, the legitimacy of both Spiritualist healing and biomedicine are affirmed. The medicalization of Spiritualist healing consequently serves as one illustration of the wider legitimating function of the sacralization of science within the contemporary Spiritualist context. This legitimating role that "science" plays for contemporary Spiritualists is clearly evident in Spiritualist healing practice. It becomes even more evident in their practice of mediumship, as the next chapter will show.

### Chapter Three: Mediums, Message-work, and "Science"

*The first thing my guides were telling me was, be done with riddles, its time for science to prove God. "Mathematics is the perfect lauding of the gods," those were their exact words. Which is pretty incredible, but true. It's really true. - Richard.*

The most central and defining characteristic of Spiritualism is the practice of communication with the spirits of the dead. The stress placed on such communication is so prominent that historically, critics of the movement claimed that it should be called "spirit-ism" rather than "spiritual-ism," in recognition of this overwhelming emphasis (Moore 1972).<sup>1</sup> Spiritualists themselves trace the origins of their movement to the "Hydesville Rappings," understood by Spiritualists to be the first "modern" instance of communication with the spirit of a deceased human being (Brandon 1983; Isaacs 1983; Moore 1972, 1977).<sup>2</sup> With few but significant exceptions, Spiritualist communication with the supernatural or spiritual realm is confined to communication with human spirit

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<sup>1</sup> Moore (1977:19) himself suggests that this overwhelming emphasis on communication with spirits overshadowed the potential spiritual emphasis of the nineteenth century movement. He writes, "Transforming a concern for man's inward spiritual nature into an empirical inquiry into the nature of spirits, they built a belief in an afterlife upon such physical signs as spirits from another realm could muster. What, after all, as one spiritualist inquired with a characteristic lack of any sense of the sublime, was the difference between the 'spiritual world' and the 'world of spirits?'"

<sup>2</sup> For a brief discussion of the "Hydesville Rappings," see Chapter One, footnote 27. See also the Spiritualist histories of Britten (1970, 1884); Cadwallader (1917); Doyle (1921, 1926); Hill (1918) and Underhill (1885). Scholarly accounts of the origins of the movement can be found in Brandon (1983); Isaacs (1983); Moore (1972, 1977); Nelson (1969a) and Skultans (1974).

entities.<sup>3</sup> Spiritualists cite many reasons for such communication with the spirits of the dead, but the most frequently cited reason is to bring "proof" of continued existence after bodily death.<sup>4</sup> Historically, many Spiritualist mediums cooperated with attempts to prove "scientifically" that human spirits continued to exist after bodily death and were capable of communicating with the living (Brandon 1983; Britten 1870, 1884; Cadwallader 1917; Doyle 1921, 1926; Hill 1918; Moore 1972, 1977; Nelson 1969a). Within contemporary Spiritualism, such "scientific" investigations into Spiritualist claims no longer play a role.<sup>5</sup> Most contemporary Spiritualists recognize that orthodox science

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<sup>3</sup> Exceptions to this general statement can be found in the communication by some Spiritualists with "guardian angels" (although several of the Spiritualists with whom I worked were themselves unclear whether guardian angels are non-human spiritual entities, or simply very highly evolved human spiritual entities). Macklin (1974a) suggests that Catholic-informed groups are more open to non-human spiritual contacts than Protestant-informed groups, and this may be one factor influencing experience and interpretation. Another exception to this general statement can be found in the recent adoption of extra-terrestrial entities as spirit guides by some Spiritualists. This exception will be discussed later in the chapter.

<sup>4</sup> Other less "empirical" reasons for spirit communication are given as well. According to a brief article by Toronto minister Reverend Ruth Dyke (1991:7), the primary reason for communication with the spirit world is "to bring proof of the continuation of life," but she adds that "Spirit communicators prepare people to meet their new situation after their transition from the earthly experience of life; teach the importance of giving caring thoughts and love toward all Creation... teach the importance of searching for knowledge about life... teach people to look at obvious facts in life when forming conclusions; urge people to retain open minds... [and] inform human beings that Life's opportunities for spiritual and mental growth are endless...".

<sup>5</sup> According to Moore (1977:143;187), scientific investigations of spiritualist claims became less frequent as "psychical science" began its search for scientific legitimacy. Shepard (1991), McClenon (1984) and Moore (1977) suggest that while J.B. and Louisa Rhine, the founders of the parapsychology department at Duke University, believed in the spirit hypothesis of Spiritualist phenomena, they moved the investigations of parapsychology toward phenomena which could more adequately be scientifically studied. As a result, few "scientific" investigations into spirit communication have been conducted since the 1930's.

has failed to "prove" Spiritualist claims, and argue that orthodox science is too "narrow" in scope.<sup>6</sup> Criticism of the narrowness of orthodox science has not prevented contemporary Spiritualists from continuing to place importance on claims to scientific legitimacy for Spiritualist belief, however. As a result, contemporary Spiritualists have adopted the use of "scientific" language, symbols, and theory as a means to assert the scientific legitimacy of their experiences of contact with the spirits of the dead, despite their recognition that orthodox scientists invariably reject the legitimacy of such claims.<sup>7</sup>

Within the Spiritualist movement, communication with the spirits of the dead is conducted through the practice of "mediumship." A medium is one who, either as a result of innate ability or Spiritualist training, is able to sense the presence and thought of spirit entities. Contemporary Spiritualists make no attempt to establish the existence of spirits nor the possibility of spirit communication through scientific investigation. There are no overt "scientific" elements to spiritualist mediumship practice.<sup>8</sup> Despite

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Spiritualist minister Reverend Bernard F. Baker (1991:11) writes, "Whatever view may be taken of scientific investigation, of the whole subject [of Spiritualism] or of its physical phenomena only, it is the proper place here to state that all scientific minds who have investigated the phenomenal phases of this movement readily admit, and many of them openly declare, that Spiritualism will compel a restatement of science, either by the readjustment or the re-creation of scientific bases and terms".

<sup>7</sup> "Orthodoxy," as Barnes (1985) points out, is consensually defined by the community. Scientists who accept Spiritualist claims have historically been redefined as heterodox from the perspective of "mainstream" scientists. For a discussion of orthodox scientific exclusion of scientists "sympathetic" to "pseudoscientific" claims, see Brandon (1983); Gardner (1988); Garrouette (1992, 1993); McClenon (1984); Rothman (1988); Stenger (1990).

<sup>8</sup> Contemporary Spiritualists use "science" descriptively to legitimate their beliefs, rather than empirically to establish them. Moore (1977:235) has suggested that the Spiritualist emphasis on scientific verifiability is not unique, writing "Virtually every new



this, the Spiritualists with whom I worked drew heavily upon popular perceptions of science to legitimate their beliefs. Spiritualists insist on standards of verifiability for mediumship experiences, for example, which allow them to distinguish the "fact" of genuine spirit contact from "false" mediumship claims.<sup>9</sup> Such standards allow Spiritualists to maintain their assertion that "real" mediumship experiences are empirically (and hence scientifically) "true." In addition to the importance of establishing the "fact" of Spiritualist phenomena as "scientifically true," the attempt to claim scientific legitimation for Spiritualist mediumship experiences can also be seen elsewhere. The popular perceptions of science as "authoritative" and "descriptive of reality" form the basis of a legitimating discourse for mediumship that reveals the continuing significance of "science" for contemporary Spiritualists.

For many contemporary Spiritualists, scientific language, symbols and theory have become the idiom within which to express the experience of contact with the dead. The utilization of scientific language and concepts in contemporary Spiritualist mediumship can be perceived in at least three areas. Within the idiom or argot of Spiritualist

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American religion of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has offered to prove itself by empirical and objective standards," but Spiritualism has not gone quite so far in this direction as some other religious movements. For example, the Scientology of L. Ron Hubbard has incorporated elements of technology in a clear attempt to bolster its image of a "scientific" religion.

<sup>9</sup> The "fact" or "proof" content of Spiritualist experience is more fully expressed within the use of personal experience narratives as "proofs". For a discussion of the nineteenth and early twentieth century Spiritualist perception of science as "fact" and the role of personal experience narratives for establishing the "scientific fact" of Spiritualism, see Chapter One. For a discussion of contemporary Spiritualist emphasis on "facts" and "proofs" in personal narratives, see Chapter Four.

mediumship, empirically descriptive terminology is employed to communicate Spiritualist experience. Terms such as "vibration" are employed to communicate the empirical reality of Spiritualist perceptions, and hence the scientific legitimacy of Spiritualist experiences. Second, Spiritualists explain how Spiritualist phenomena "work" by explicitly drawing upon "scientific" theory. Popular perceptions of orthodox scientific theory are drawn upon to "explain" Spiritualist belief. Finally, Spiritualists appeal to the authoritative function of science by adopting figures of scientific superiority into their system of belief. Albert Einstein, for example, becomes a powerful symbol of scientific legitimation to many Spiritualists. As will be argued, for some contemporary Spiritualists the figures of extraterrestrials also assume the role of scientific symbols of authority, symbols that ultimately uphold the high status of science within Spiritualism while simultaneously criticizing the "narrow" limits of orthodox science.

#### Historical Context: "Testing" the Mediums

It has been suggested by proponents and critics of Spiritualism alike that the Spiritualist stress on communication with the spirits of the dead was not "new" in the context of American religious experience (Brandon 1983; Britten 1870, 1884; Hill 1918; Moore 1972, 1977; Nelson 1969a, 1988; Podmore 1902). What was new within Spiritualism was the insistence that such communication was empirically verifiable and explainable with reference to science and "natural law" (Moore 1972:482). From the very inception of the Spiritualist movement, attempts were made to "test" the validity of Spiritualist phenomenon and "prove" the correctness of the explanatory "spirit

hypothesis" suggested by Kate and Margaret Fox. The Fox sisters set the paradigmatic standard by which mediumship abilities would be interpreted and judged throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> After being joined in their practice of mediumship by their elder sister Leah within months of the "rappings" in March 1848, the Fox sisters began to hold numerous "demonstration" seances in which sceptical audiences could "test" the validity of spirit communication.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps because of this willingness of the Fox sisters to put themselves on public display, from the very beginning of the Spiritualist movement demonstrations of mediumship ability were accompanied by attempts to empirically prove (or more frequently disprove) the legitimacy of mediumistic phenomena.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Kate and Margaret Fox were young girls in 1848, aged twelve and fifteen. Their temperaments, youth, even their physical appearance, all became part of a paradigmatic standard of the "ideal" qualities which contributed to mediumistic ability. For example, Isaacs (1983:90) notes, "All three of them [Kate, Margaret and older sister Leah] had long, dark hair, dark eyes, and extremely pale skin - 'complexions of a transparent paleness, such as we have observed in persons highly susceptible to mesmeric influence,' as one of their admirers put it." For a discussion of the ideal qualities of mediumship, see also Braude (1989); Moore (1975); Owen (1987, 1990) and Skultans (1983).

<sup>11</sup> Demonstration seances were held throughout the spring and summer of 1848 in their home in Hydesville, N.Y., and within a year the Fox sisters were giving demonstration seances in a rented hall in Rochester for the admission price of 25 cents. Sceptics and believers turned out in equal numbers, leading on several occasions to riots in the hall (Brandon 1983; Isaacs, 1983). It was the notoriety of these demonstration seances which led to the "Buffalo Investigation," the first of many "scientific" investigations into Spiritualist phenomena.

<sup>12</sup> It has been suggested by Isaacs (1983) that the younger Fox sisters did not choose to put themselves on display. Rather, it was Leah Fox Fish and a newspaper editor named Eliab Wilkinson Capron who made the decision to "go public" with the mediumship abilities of the younger girls. Leah and Capron were apparently abetted by the spirits themselves. Isaacs (1983:84) writes, "According to Capron, the spirits urged the Fox sisters to submit to a public investigation of their spiritual powers. Early in November 1849... the spirits became so insistent on the point that they threatened to leave if the investigation was not held." See also Capron (1855:88-98).

For those interested in "testing" the validity of spirit communication, a wide pool of mediumship candidates quickly evolved. Beginning with the development of mediumship ability in Leah Fox Fish shortly after her return to Hydesville, "rappings" phenomena and belief in spirit communication spread rapidly.<sup>13</sup> By 1850, there were a reported one hundred practising mediums in New York, fifty to sixty "private circles" for the development of mediumistic ability, and an additional fifty practising mediums in Philadelphia (Braude 1989; Isaacs 1983; Moore 1977; Nelson 1969a; Shepard 1991; Skultans 1983).<sup>14</sup> In addition to these newly developed mediums, thousands of others became ardent believers in the possibility of spirit communication.<sup>15</sup> Within two years of the Hydesville Rappings, a tide of spirit communication was sweeping throughout the United States, and with it spread attempts to study mediumistic abilities using "scientific" means.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> "Rappings" reportedly broke out in the homes of two aunts of the Fox sisters in the fall of 1848, when the daughters came to visit them to escape their growing notoriety in Hydesville. Similar phenomena were then reported all over the eastern seaboard of the United States, and from there into Canada and later Great Britain. For detailed discussions of the early developmental progress of Spiritualism see Nelson (1969a), Isaacs (1983), Brandon (1983); see also Spiritualist histories Britten (1870); Doyle (1926) and Underhill (1885).

<sup>14</sup> These estimates are taken from the short lived Spiritualist periodical Spirit World in 1849.

<sup>15</sup> The rapid growth of Spiritualist non-mediums can be seen in the statistics provided by Nelson (1969a:5-6), who suggests that within five years of the Hydesville Rappings, there were a conservatively estimated one million Spiritualists in the United States alone. One frightened Christian minister apparently estimated their numbers at eleven million people, out of a total population of twenty-five million.

<sup>16</sup> Mediumship abilities and belief in the possibility of communicating with spirits spread rapidly outside of the United States as well. Nelson (1969a) reports that Spiritualism was introduced into Canada as early as 1849, and into Britain by 1852.

The mediumistic phenomena available for scientific study remained largely confined to the original "rapping" phenomena discovered (or developed) by the Fox sisters during the first two years of Spiritualism's development. "Tests" of this phenomena consisted of attempts to elicit "facts" from the spirit sources that the mediums themselves could not have independently known.<sup>17</sup> By 1850, however, new phenomena started appearing and new techniques for communicating with spirits arose. According to historian R. Laurence Moore (1977:15), in 1850 New York "most of the spirits were rappers, but already some had learned to do other things. Aside from making rapped replies to questions, spirits could rely on automatic writing, slate writing, and control of the medium's voice to get their message through". As mediumistic phenomena became more elaborate, full possession trance became the norm for Spiritualist mediums.<sup>18</sup> The testing of Spiritualist mediumship also became more elaborate. Within ten years of the movement's origins, mediums were producing "materializations" of spirit matter from

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<sup>17</sup> According to Isaacs (1983:90) there were a range of standard test questions which developed at these early test seances, including asking for the names and ages of relatives both living and dead, the occupations of those present, and details about personal lives that presumably only the spirits would know.

<sup>18</sup> According to Bourguignon (1973, 1974, 1976, 1977), possession and possession trance are cultural concepts used to explain physiological and psychological changes within individuals by crediting such changes to spirit influence. She writes (1976:7-8): "a belief in possession exists, when the people in question hold that a given person is changed in some way through the presence in or on him of a spirit entity or power, other than his own personality, soul, self, or the like. We shall say that possession trance exists in a given society when we find that there is such belief in possession and that it is used to account for alterations or discontinuity in consciousness, awareness, personality, or other aspects of psychological functioning." The experiences of many nineteenth century Spiritualist mediums, particularly female ones, reflect this definition of trance in their experiences. See Braude (1985, 1989); Owen (1987, 1990); Moore (1975) and Skultans (1983)

their own bodies, while sceptical audiences demanded stricter and stricter controls to limit the possibility of fraud.<sup>19</sup> By the 1870's, mediums had become completely passive instruments of the spirit world, unaware of their own words or actions while under trance, and required in the "spirit of scientific inquiry" to be locked into cabinets, tied to chairs, stripped naked (in the case of same-sex audiences), gagged, blindfolded, and in at least one instance tied into a sack and nailed to the floor (Braude 1985:177). Nineteenth century audiences wanted to believe in the possibility of communication with the spirit world, but they also wanted such communication to be empirically verified, and were by no means ignorant of opportunities for fraud (Braude 1985, 1989; Brandon 1983; Isaacs 1983; Moore 1972, 1973, 1977; Nelson 1969a).

Concern over the possibility of fraud was largely centred on those mediums who produced "physical" mediumistic phenomena. The nineteenth century saw the development of two categories of mediumistic phenomena, the "physical" and the "mental" (Braude 1989; Britten 1884; Hill 1918; Isaacs 1983; Moore 1972, 1975, 1977).<sup>20</sup> At the same time, Spiritualist contemporaries began to distinguish between

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<sup>19</sup> The production of "spirit matter" was one of the most elaborately tested of Spiritualist phenomena. The Nobel prize-winning French physiologist Charles Richet coined the term 'ectoplasm' to refer to spirit matter as produced by Spiritualist medium Eusapia Palladino in 1894. At the conclusion of his study of Palladino's mediumistic phenomenon, he is quoted by his contemporary scientist and colleague Sir Oliver Lodge as repeatedly saying, "C'est absolument absurde, mais c'est vrai" (Brandon, 1983:134).

<sup>20</sup> The distinction between mental and physical mediumship was never clear cut, for mental mediumship was recognized to have a physical basis, while physical mediumship still depended on the "sensitivity" of the medium's mental faculties (Moore 1972, 1977). Nineteenth century examples of physical mediumship included apports, automatic writing, drawing, etc., chemical phenomena (luminous lights; spirit photography); electrical phenomena; fire immunity; levitation; magnetic phenomena; materialization; psycho-

what they called "test" mediums and "trance" mediums (Braude 1989; Isaacs 1983; Moore 1977). Trance mediums were those who spoke "inspired sermons" on topics chosen by the audiences while under the influence of a controlling spirit.<sup>21</sup> Trance mediums largely avoided physical materializations and the more blatant displays of mediumship favoured by test mediums. Test mediums, in contrast, built reputations on their ability to produce the most elaborate physical manifestations while under "rigid" test conditions.<sup>22</sup> The demand of nineteenth century audiences for test mediums to provide concrete physical manifestations may have stemmed in part from desire to link spirituality

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physiological phenomena (shrinking or elongation of the body; stigmata, trance; ectoplasm production); and telekinesis. Mental phenomena included clairvoyance, clairaudience, healing, possession, premonition, psychometry, telepathy, and glossolalia (Brandon 1983; Braude 1989; Isaacs 1983; Moore 1977; Shepard 1991). One contemporary Spiritualist (Pitman 1991) also reflects this tendency to categorize mediumship phenomena. She writes (1991:26), "mental mediumship stems from the base of the brain which is the centre of the cerebrospinal nervous system... physical mediumship centres in the solar plexus which controls the sympathetic nervous system and regulates all unconscious functions of the body...". She adds "clairsentience," "improvising poetry," and "inspirational speaking" to the list of mental mediumship phenomena. She also includes "independent typewriting," and "independent telegraphy," "passing matter through matter," "spirit etherealization," and "writing in blood letters on skin," within the phenomenon of physical mediumship.

<sup>21</sup> Barrow (1986) and Braude (1989) have explored the role of mediumship-inspired trance lectures in fostering the cause of social reform in the nineteenth century. Topics such as abolition of slavery, female emancipation, and labour reform were given the legitimization of spiritual support through the lectures of trance mediums.

<sup>22</sup> As Braude (1989:181) notes, "once mediums began to traffic in materialization, fraud was much easier to prove." According to Brandon (1983:231), only D.D. Home of all the famous nineteenth and early twentieth century test mediums never confessed to nor was exposed for fraud. Despite such sometimes rampant fraud among test mediums, however, both scientists and non-scientist investigators were often satisfied that strict "scientific" controls were in place at many "test seances" which categorically excluded "fraud" from possible explanations of mediumistic phenomenon (Bednarowski 1973; Brandon 1983; Isaacs 1983; Moore 1972, 1977).

to empirical science.<sup>23</sup> As Moore (1972:486) points out, Spiritualism's war against the secularizing trend of nineteenth century science "consisted totally in getting science to recognize the existence of a matter 'too refined, subtil, and sublimated for our vision.' [As a result], spirit matter... somehow had to prove itself to the senses or go begging." Test mediums fulfilled this need for phenomena that was open to empirical study, and as a consequence gradually overshadowed the importance of the purely mental mediumship of trance mediums.<sup>24</sup>

The testing of Spiritualist mediums began very early in the movement's development. There were dozens if not hundreds of "test" mediums in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, beginning with the mediumship of the Fox sisters.<sup>25</sup> In

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<sup>23</sup> It also stemmed, according to Moore, from the Victorian love of spectacle. Nineteenth century America, he writes (1972:499) "liked its marvels packaged in machines or put into one of P.T. Barnum's cages," and Spiritualism catered to this demand for entertainment as much as it catered to the attempt to unite religion and science.

<sup>24</sup> According to Moore (1972, 1977), test seances provided Spiritualists with "evidence" to prove the compatibility of Spiritualist belief with the standards of empirical science. He writes (1972:486), "Seances carried out under proper test conditions were merely public disclosures of fact [in Spiritualist perceptions]. Claiming their adherence to Baconian procedures which had guided American science in the first half of the 19th century, they professed to let their conclusions emerge naturally from the observed data. To them it appeared that scientists who scoffed at their labours violated empirical principles... Bacon in the 1850's sent many messages of consolation to spiritualist circles because of the hostility they encountered".

<sup>25</sup> The three best known and most thoroughly investigated test mediums were D.D. Home (1833-1886), Eusapia Palladino (1854-1918), and Mrs. Leonora Piper (1859-1950). D.D. Home was known for physical mediumship, primarily levitation, but it was his ability to depress a spring-weighted balance through 'psychic force' which convinced many that his mediumistic abilities were genuine. Home was largely responsible for converting award-winning chemist Sir William Crookes to Spiritualist belief (Crookes 1874; Home 1972). Eusapia Palladino, who was exposed repeatedly for fraud, nevertheless convinced many psychic investigators of the genuineness of "ectoplasmic"



February of 1851, the first official "scientific" investigation into the mediumship of the Fox sisters took place. The "Buffalo Investigation" was conducted by three University of Buffalo School of Medicine faculty members who concluded, after watching a display of mediumship in a public forum, that "joint-snapping" was the answer to the question of the source of the mysterious "rappings."<sup>26</sup> Other investigations followed regularly. In 1857, the "Cambridge Investigation" took place in response to a newspaper challenge offering a \$500 reward for the production of "genuine" mediumistic phenomena. A committee of Harvard scientists agreed to act as judges. They, too, returned a negative report.<sup>27</sup> In 1887, the "Seybert Commission" was established as a result of a \$60,000

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matter, most notably Charles Richet, the Nobel Prize winning physiologist (Carrington 1954; Podmore 1910). Mrs. Piper is the trance medium responsible for converting the hostile "debunker" Dr. Richard Hodgson to a belief in Spiritualist mediumistic abilities. She is also the medium who convinced William James that the phenomena of mediumship were legitimate, even if the "spirit hypothesis" was still open to question (Piper 1929). See also Bednarowski (1973); Brandon (1983); Moore (1977) and Pearsall (1972).

<sup>26</sup> Doctors Austin Flint, Charles Dee, and C.B. Coventry (1851) wrote, "It is sufficient to state that the muscles inserted into the upper and inner side of the large bone of the leg near the knee joint, are brought into action so as to move the upper surface of the bone just named, laterally upon the lower surface of the thigh bone, giving rise, in fact, to a partial lateral dislocation. This is effected by an act of the will, without any obvious movements of the limb, occasioning a loud noise and a return of the bone to its place is attended by a second sound" (Shepard 1991:1590; Isaacs 1983:108, n. 22). Kate, Margaret and Leah responded by suggesting that their knee joints should be examined by the doctors before they became too certain of this explanation (Isaacs 1983:94).

<sup>27</sup> The Harvard Committee was made up of noted mathematician Benjamin Peirce, naturalist Louis Agassiz, and astronomer N.B. Gould. Kate, Margaret, and Leah Fox were among the mediums tested. According to Isaacs (1983:96), Leah Fox later reported that "our rappings came, if not as profuse as usual, yet abundantly, both low and loud." This was, however, insufficient "proof" for the Harvard committee members. Surprisingly, the report of the Harvard Committee condemned Spiritualist phenomena not so much on "scientific" grounds, as moral ones. They wrote, "It is the opinion of the Committee, derived from observation, that any connection with Spiritualistic Circles, so

bequest to the University of Pennsylvania from deceased Spiritualist Henry Seybert, made on the condition that a scientific inquiry into the possibility of life after death be conducted. Like the other committees before it, the Seybert Commission rejected the spirit hypothesis in favour of "the theory of the purely physiological origin of the [mediumistic rapping] sounds" (Isaacs 1983:99).<sup>28</sup> There were many other less prestigious investigations into mediumistic phenomena, but every reputable investigation returned a verdict of "natural" as opposed to "spiritualistic" causation of sounds.<sup>29</sup>

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called, corrupts the morals and degrades the intellect. They therefore deem it their solemn duty to warn the community against this contaminating influence, which surely tends to lessen the truth of man and the purity of woman." (Peirce, Agassiz & Gould 1857; Britten 1870:173-181; Isaacs 1983:96). Garrouette (1993:261-262) suggests that in their attempts to "colonize" religious discourse, positivist scientists in the nineteenth century often went beyond "scientific" criticisms and into the realm of "moral" ones. The Harvard Committee report reveals one instance in which the prestige of science is used to legitimate such "moral" pronouncements.

<sup>28</sup> The Seybert Commission report of 1887 was greeted with great resentment by Spiritualists and its research questioned by scientists as a result of experiments conducted under less than ideal conditions. Its preliminary report, based in part on the Commission's study of Margaret Fox, was an exposé of fraudulent mediumship (Seybert Commission 1887; Podmore 1902:193-196). It was only one year later that Margaret and Kate Fox confessed publicly to fraud. (Isaacs 1983; Moore 1977; Nelson 1969a; Shepard 1991).

<sup>29</sup> It is on this point that Spiritualists and nineteenth century scientists differed. Spiritualists considered the spiritualistic causation of the frequently heard mediumistic 'rapping' sounds to be "natural". "Reputable" scientists did not. The very act of returning a spiritualistic verdict on mediumistic phenomena would exclude an investigation from being considered "reputable," and scientists who returned such verdicts were often ostracized thereafter. For example, Robert Hare, professor of chemistry and inventor of the oxy-hydrogen blowpipe, converted to Spiritualism after his attempts to prove "electricity" as the cause of mediumistic phenomena failed. Afterwards, his respected friend and scientific colleague Benjamin Silliman wrote to him to "dissuade him of his folly" (Moore 1977:31). Hare was unrepentant. In 1855, he submitted a preliminary report to the American Association for the Advancement of Science on "an experiment made with the greatest care and precision, which proved the existence of a power independent of any possible or conceivable mortal agency" (Hare

Despite this scientific rejection of Spiritualist claims, however, Spiritualists continued to insist that mediumistic phenomena were both compatible with and explainable through scientific means.

### Historical Context: The Language and Symbols of Science

The primary "scientific" explanation of mediumistic phenomena offered by Spiritualists and sceptics alike throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was that of electricity. As Moore (1977:29) notes, "during the mid-nineteenth century no force in nature was more intriguing to the popular mind than electricity... and scientists and occultists alike invoked its name to explain otherwise mysterious occurrences. When confronted with reports of lifted tables [and] mysteriously rung bells... the American public of this period listened sympathetically to theories attributing all these strange happenings to electrical currents." Very few people in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries actually understood how electricity "worked."<sup>30</sup> As a mysterious, invisible, "imponderable" yet natural force, electricity seemed like an excellent candidate to explain

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1856:431). The peer review committee refused to accept the paper for publication (McClenon 1984:5; Moore 1977:31-33). Instances such as this one lead sociologist Eva Garroutte (1993:303) to conclude that "the treatment which high-profile, Spiritualist scientists such as Crookes and Hare received from their colleagues [bore] a remarkable resemblance to that of heretics at the hands of church authorities."

<sup>30</sup> Braude (1989:4-5) for example notes, "When Samuel F.B. Morse went to Congress to request \$30,000 to construct an experimental telegraph line linking Washington and Baltimore in 1842, he found little understanding of the principles of electricity in the nation's governing body... If the U.S. Congress found the use of electricity in the telegraph incomprehensible in 1842, the general public can hardly have had a firm grasp of the principles of telegraphy six years later".

mediumistic phenomena in naturalistic terms (Barrow 1986; Brandon 1983; Braude 1989; Isaacs 1983; Moore 1972, 1977).<sup>31</sup> While critics of Spiritualism used the theory of electricity to "prove" that mediumistic phenomena were not the result of spirit influence, Spiritualists themselves eagerly adopted the language, symbols and theory of electrical force to legitimate their claims that Spiritualism and science were in perfect accord.<sup>32</sup>

The language of electricity, according to historian Ann Braude (1989), was used by nineteenth century Spiritualists to describe the most effective means for establishing spirit communication. Electricity, it was understood, was made up of the tension between positive and negative polarities, and Spiritualists came to view women as "negative" and men as "positive" poles around which spirit energy formed. She writes (1989:23-24), "experts agreed that... in order to facilitate the transmission of electrical currents that spirits used to manifest their presence, [seance] circles should seat men and women, 'or positives and negatives,' alternately in a circle, 'the most positive and most

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<sup>31</sup> Other natural "imponderable" forces were used to explain mediumistic phenomena as well. For example, Baron Karl von Reichenbach (1850) suggested that a new imponderable force should be added to those already known - electricity, heat, magnetism, and light - to explain the mechanism of mediumistic phenomena. He called this new force the "Odyle" or "Od" force. According to Moore (1977:30), von Reichenbach believed "this force behaved similarly to electricity and magnetism in some ways and before this point had been confused with them... it explained all the perplexing problems" of Spiritualistic phenomena. This tendency to explain the seemingly miraculous in naturalistic terms can be seen in part as what sociologist Max Weber (1952) has called the "rationalization" of religion and the "disenchantment" of the world.

<sup>32</sup> Sceptics determined to "prove" that electricity rather than spirits was responsible for mediumistic phenomena conducted tests in which mediums were required to stand on non-conducting materials - failure to produce results indicated the "truth" of the electricity hypothesis. See Hare (1856); Hill (1918); Carrington (1931). See also Brandon (1983); Braude (1989:23-24); Moore (1977:29-32).

negative persons occupying opposite positions'.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, the language of the 'electrical telegraph' was used by Spiritualists as a metaphor for the mechanism behind spirit communication. Historian Ernest Isaacs (1983:101) suggests that nineteenth century Spiritualists compared their phenomena to the mysteries of electricity and called their method of communication the 'spiritual telegraph' because they wished to insist that theirs was a new "scientific" religion. The "spiritual telegraph," according to Moore (1972:486), "proved a favourite illustration of [Spiritualist] contentions because, Spiritualists thought, it illustrated the reduction of something once considered marvellous to a completely understandable occurrence".<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Contemporary Spiritualists still stress the need for "positive" and "negative" polarities in mediumship and healing, and it is still preferable to alternate male and female sitters in seances, development classes, and healing circles. It is not necessary to do so, however, for the "positive" and "negative" energies can be provided by either sex. The following exchange took place in a healing development circle I attended at Hamilton's King Street Church: *Fay*: "If you work in pairs, like Kim and I have worked in pairs together, Kim will be the negative, the cold part, she'll get very cold and I will be the positive, and...oh, after working on Erica I was radiating so much heat,... generally, when you're working you will start to sweat, if you're being positive. But if you work in a pair, somebody will be a positive and somebody will be the negative, balanced out." *Paul*: "I find that one hand is positive, and the other negative." *Fay*: "That's when you're working alone, but when you're in a pair, you work as a unit... the energy comes from outside and goes through you, and you balance it."

<sup>34</sup> Moore (1972, 1977) adds that the content of spirit messages frequently reflected the Spiritualist tendency to use nineteenth century technology to illustrate the "mechanism" of spirit communication. The spirits also, according to Moore (1972:486), "demonstrated a mechanical aptitude by handing down inventions for riving shingles, milling and net weaving" to their eager listeners. Contemporary Spiritualists continue to receive such messages today. Spiritualist author C. Coulson Pounder (1971:88-95), for example, writes: "Sir Charles Parsons... one of the greatest and most notable engineers that Britain has ever known.... inventor of the steam turbine... sought me out through this medium... to talk to me about the turbine troubles of *Queen Elizabeth II*... he said that, in the two high-pressure turbines, the rotor blades had failed at row 9 and adjacent rows, due to vibrations set up by the steam nozzles... the significance of all this

The language of electricity and the telegraph allowed nineteenth century Spiritualists to present mediumistic phenomena as understandable and "natural," and consequently in accord with recent advances in science.<sup>35</sup> Belief in spirit communication, they felt, should not therefore be considered superstitious or "occult," but rather "factual" and explainable by scientific means.

Spirit communication *was* explainable by scientific means, according to nineteenth century Spiritualists. There was a perfectly rational, "scientific" explanation for why spirit communication had become possible on such a dramatic scope in the modern world, and this explanation depended upon the discovery of electricity by Benjamin Franklin. According to many nineteenth century Spiritualists, the modern "breakthrough" of spirit communication was the direct result of Franklin's scientific discovery. Since electricity had become the primary "scientific" explanation for mediumistic phenomenon, Benjamin Franklin, as the "discoverer" of the theory of electrical action, became the primary "explanation" for why spirit communication was possible at all. According to historian and scientist Bernard Cohen (1990:4), Franklin was popularly credited by his contemporaries for making a "science" of the phenomenon

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is that Parsons pin-pointed the defects some weeks before the government appointed committee of experts..."

<sup>35</sup> As Braude (1989:5) notes, "Science captivated the public by revealing to them that they were surrounded by wonderful invisible forces. Gravity and electricity could be proved to exist but remained miraculous and inexplicable to most people." These forces were "equally plausible" as spiritistic explanations for mediumistic phenomena, therefore.

of electricity.<sup>36</sup> Spiritualists therefore insisted that it was Franklin who had worked out the scientific principles that allowed spirits to communicate with their loved ones still on earth through the utilization of electrical force. In 1853, the Spiritualist publication Shekinah (1853:49-66) named Franklin a "spiritual seer." The editor wrote, "We are assured that *he* first worked out the problem by which beings in heaven can communicate with beings on earth through the potential agency of magnetic forces. What spirit gone heavenward would be more likely to have accomplished it?"<sup>37</sup>

The adoption of Benjamin Franklin as a spirit guide in the nineteenth century is a clear indication of the importance of "science" for nineteenth century Spiritualists.

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<sup>36</sup> Franklin published a summary of his theory of electrical action in 1749; his famous "kite" experiment took place in 1752. His contributions to the theory of electricity had therefore been used by orthodox science for one hundred years by the time of Spiritualism's development. Over the course of this one hundred years, Franklin's status as scientist, inventor and statesman within popular perceptions had grown to epic proportions. Cohen writes (1990:4), Franklin "was the first scientist to win an international reputation in the new branch of science: electricity. His major contribution was the elaboration of a workable theory of electrical "action," one that was remarkably successful in predicting the outcome of experiments of many different sorts. In the opinion of some of his contemporaries, it was this theory that made a "science" of electricity, a subject that had been a congeries of so many 'bizareries, or unaccountable phaenomena...that a man can scarce assert any thing in consequence of an experiment which is not contradicted by some unexpected occurrence in another.'" Cohen later goes on to argue that it was Franklin's status as a scientist which made him so successful in his political and ambassadorial career, and which resulted in his lasting fame in American history.

<sup>37</sup> Moore traces the origin of this claim to an earlier letter to Shekinah from Supreme Court Justice John C. Edmonds in 1852. Moore writes (1972:486), "In one of his visions Benjamin Franklin revealed, before a host of applauding spirits, how his discoveries in electricity had made possible the communication they now had with their still living relatives." Franklin is not the only scientist who served as spirit guide to Edmonds. According to Moore, in the same letter, Edmonds revealed that "Newton confessed to Edmonds an error in his work on gravity which Edmonds had suspected for some time."

Within five years of Spiritualism's origins, Benjamin Franklin had become one of the most sought after and most frequently quoted spirit guides of the nineteenth century (Britten 1870; Braude 1989; Isaacs 1983; Moore 1972).<sup>38</sup> Franklin became a powerful symbol of scientific legitimation for Spiritualists, but he also became a symbol that challenged the "materialism" of orthodox science.<sup>39</sup> Spiritualists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries used Franklin to stress what they saw as the need for orthodox science to recognize the spiritual as well as the material realm. If not for the influence of spirits like Franklin, Spiritualists argued, orthodox science itself would not have developed. According to Braude (1989:5), one early message attributed to Benjamin Franklin "asserted that scientific advancement on earth depended on the interest and cooperation of scientifically inclined spirits like himself." Spiritualist historian Emma Hardinge Britten (1870:45) argued that the spirit of Benjamin Franklin was personally responsible for ensuring the success of the telegraph, and that all scientific progress on earth depended upon him and "the intelligence of disembodied spirits" like him.<sup>40</sup> As

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<sup>38</sup> Benjamin Franklin is mentioned as one of the spirit guides of Kate Fox (Isaacs 1983:101); British reformer and "father" of British Spiritualism Robert Owen (Barrow 1986:22); and American Supreme Court Judge John C. Edmonds (Moore 1972:485-486), among others.

<sup>39</sup> Moore (1977:26) points out that if nineteenth century Spiritualists meant by the term "materialism" the doctrine that nothing exists except matter, "they would have been hard pressed to find many materialists during the first half of the nineteenth century, especially among American scientists." The scientific materialism against which Spiritualists fought was the doctrine that "spirit" and spiritual concerns were scientifically irrelevant because they lay outside the realm of what science could explore.

<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, Hamilton Spiritualist medium Richard once told me that Albert Einstein had received his knowledge of the General Theory of Relativity from "spiritual forces" while meditating.



a symbol, therefore, Franklin represented both the idealization of science and the criticism of science prevalent among Spiritualists in the nineteenth century.

As has been noted, the importance of science for Spiritualists historically has been well documented (Bednarowski 1973; Brandon 1983; Braude 1989; Garroutte 1992, 1993; Moore 1972, 1977; Nelson 1969a, 1988; Swatos 1990). Through their insistence that Spiritualism constituted a "spiritual science," Spiritualists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries attempted to argue simultaneously that spirit communication was empirically observable and explainable through naturalistic "scientific" means, but also that spirit communication constituted "proof" that scientific materialism was inadequate to account for spiritual reality. Nineteenth century Spiritualists did not want to abandon faith in a spiritual realm, they simply wanted to make that spiritual realm open to scientific investigation and acceptance. Spiritualists feared that anything, as Moore notes (1972:488), "which science would not investigate, would in the modern world become a matter of indifference." To rescue spirituality from indifference, they defined Spiritualism as a "scientific religion," and set out to "prove" it through "scientific" means. The willingness of Spiritualist mediums to be "tested," the utilization of electrical theory to "explain" spirit contact, and the adoption of Benjamin Franklin as an ideal spirit guide are all indications of the importance that science held for Spiritualists. By crediting the possibility of spirit communication to Benjamin Franklin and electricity and by exposing themselves repeatedly to scientific boards of inquiry, nineteenth century Spiritualists assured themselves that their religious beliefs and experiences were, in Moore's (1977:36) words, "on the side of science."

### Contemporary Spiritualist Mediumship

Contemporary Spiritualists still insist that their beliefs and experiences are 'on the side of science,' but they recognize that few orthodox scientists would accept this claim.<sup>41</sup> In the contemporary context, scientific "tests" of mediumistic phenomena are no longer an integral part of the Spiritualist movement.<sup>42</sup> Mediumship has changed from that practised in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>43</sup> The physical

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<sup>41</sup> One Lily Dale resident, speaking to a mixed group of residents and non residents in the lobby of the Maplewood Hotel in Lily Dale in the summer of 1991, told the group, "Scientists refuse to believe it [the empirical "truth" of mediumistic phenomena] because it doesn't fit with how they see the world. Even when its there, they don't see it. It's like when [D.D] Home was giving a seance, and he floated right out the window, and just hung there, and then back in the other one, and they still didn't believe it... it happened! Right in front of them, and they wouldn't believe it."

<sup>42</sup> Parapsychologists do occasionally still study the question of continued existence after bodily death, but such attempts are only loosely connected to Spiritualism. In the search for scientific legitimacy, parapsychologists frequently avoid the subjective aspects of mediumship in favour of a more "objective" emphasis. For example, parapsychologist Julius Weinberger (1977:465-466) writes, "After more than twenty-five years of investigation into the question of post-mortem survival of human personality by conventional means (i.e. sittings with mediums), I began a new line of research. This involves apparatus for direct communication with discarnate persons... without the need for a "sensitive" intermediary... the apparatus was devised because all methods of mediumistic communication suffer from certain disadvantages. In some cases it is difficult to tell how much of the information came from or was influenced by the medium's own mind. Other cases - those where a dark or dimly lit room is used for the seance - lend themselves to fraud. Thus, I felt that further progress in this area depended upon the development of a system of communication with discarnate persons... in which apparatus would be provided that could be influenced by some form of energy available to such persons. If such a system could be developed, then messages could be transmitted, using Morse telegraph code."

<sup>43</sup> When I asked elderly Lily Dale resident Edith why changes in mediumship had occurred, she said: "Spiritualism has been going in different stages. And I feel, having been here so long, that I was able to see some of the early physical phenomena that brought people here that wouldn't have come otherwise except it was so extraordinary. It made them interested in the religion, and now, there doesn't seem to be that need for that kind of phenomena. Today people are more interested in the religion as such..."

mediumship of nineteenth century test mediums is a thing of the past.<sup>44</sup> So, too, is the full trance mediumship of inspired trance speakers.<sup>45</sup> In the contemporary context, mediumship has shifted away from possession trance and physical phenomena toward a purely "mental" form of non-trance spirit possession.<sup>46</sup> "Message work," as the

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There are still materializations and things like that, but they are much rarer. Maybe, people just, time being what it is, are not spending the time developing any kind of special abilities they might have, had they given the time to it. And maybe, some of those other materializations weren't real after all. [Q: You mean fraud?] Yes, there was such a demand, you know, but now, with the readings, it's much harder [to fake]."

<sup>44</sup> Contemporary Spiritualists do not reject the possibility of physical mediumship, but neither do they place much emphasis on it. While spontaneous physical manifestations such as ghostly materializations are welcomed, attempts to elicit such manifestations are rare and considered questionable. I was invited independently by Joel and Pam, two Lily Dale healers, to attend an illicit "fake" materialization seance in Lily Dale in 1991, but the medium refused to allow me to attend. Joel assured me, 'It's all fake, of course. They aren't even allowed to do it, but sometimes, once or twice a season, he'll hold one. You know, for tourists and like that. They charge for it, a hundred dollars I heard, but not for residents.'" Neither Joel nor Pam even considered that the materializations and trumpet mediumship which took place at the seance might be "real" spiritual manifestations.

<sup>45</sup> Some spiritualists still work in a semi-trance state while giving lectures, claiming that their topic is 'inspired by spirit.' Full possession trance is rare, however. I witnessed only one full possession trance during the course of the study. During this episode, the medium lost all conscious awareness and was 'taken over' by a possessing spirit. Spiritualists stress both the moral danger of full trance, and the physical danger (in addition to the likelihood of fraud). For example, one Hamilton Spiritualist told me, 'I used to work in trance, but it's dangerous! I got caught in it twice, and I don't do it no more. When you're in trance and there is a loud noise, or a bright light, or you are startled, and you can't get out. It hurts! [Q: What does it mean, to 'get caught?'] When you are in trance you don't have control of yourself, so if you get startled out you can't move, your eyes won't focus, your head feels like its THIS big [about five times normal], and you can't scratch it either! I got caught twice, and there isn't going to be a third time.' Braude (1989:88) suggests that similar doubts about trance states occurred to some nineteenth century Spiritualists.

<sup>46</sup> Brandon (1983) reveals one possible reason for the changes in Spiritualist mediumship when she details the repeated exposure of fraud in mediumship practice. As sociologists Michel Richard and Albert Adato (1980:190) note, contemporary Spiritualists

demonstration of mediumship is called, is practised at all Spiritualist services, but full possession trance and physical mediumistic phenomena no longer play a role.<sup>47</sup> The nineteenth century Spiritualist utilization of "scientific" language and symbols to "explain" Spiritualist beliefs, however, continues. The Spiritualists with whom I worked still perceived mediumistic phenomena as compatible with science, and draw upon popular perceptions of science to provide the legitimating discourse within which to express their beliefs. For contemporary Spiritualists, the language, symbols, and concepts of "science" continue to "explain" and legitimate their communication with the spirits of the dead.

#### Spiritualist Mediumship: Message-Work

Communication with the spirits of the dead is the central and defining characteristic of spiritualism. Spiritualists claim that it is through mediumship or "message work" that "proof" of the continuation of existence after bodily death is

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are careful to avoid any appearance of fraud in their mediumship practice. Moore (1977:65-69) suggests six reasons for the decline of Spiritualist membership and respectability and the subsequent shifts in emphasis and practice: loss of membership owing to the liberalization of Protestant Christian churches; loss of membership to Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society; the founding of the American Society for Psychical Research; the scandals prompted by mediumistic exposés, as well as the lack of institutionalization, lack of financial support, and the strong stress on individualism within Spiritualism.

<sup>47</sup> Both Hamilton Churches held "worship" services and "healing" services, but "message work" was part of both services. In Lily Dale during the summer season, "message work" is practised in the auditorium once a day; at the "Forest Temple" once a day; at "Inspiration Stump" twice a day; and at the "Medium's League" once a week. It is therefore possible to attend 29 mediumship sessions in Lily Dale per week during the summer season.

provided. It is in the mediumship portion of the service that the "fact" of Spiritualist belief is established, and hence the "scientific" nature of Spiritualism affirmed.<sup>48</sup> Historian Logie Barrow (1986:143) argues that in the perceptions of nineteenth century Spiritualists, "their phenomena were tested and attested facts, science was based on facts, [and] therefore Spiritualism was scientific." This perception is still held today. In the Spiritualist churches with which I worked, the mediumship display was the *raison d'être* of the religious service, and was frequently referred to as the "proofs" portion of the service.<sup>49</sup> It invariably came last on the worship schedule, and was consistently the best attended portion of the Spiritualist service.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> The fifth Spiritualist Principle as adopted by the National Spiritualist Association of Churches reads, "We affirm that communication with the so-called dead is a fact, scientifically proven by the phenomena of Spiritualism." "Science," in this context, means a simple statement of fact. As one Spiritualist writer (Baker 1991:10-11) explained it, "mediums are chosen by the spirit intelligences desiring to manifest... the phenomena of Spiritualism. The cause or source of the phenomena has been recognized... to be individual spirits who once lived in earth forms... Science has nothing to do but make a statement... to make a scientific investigation on the basis of discovering a new cause [is] entirely impertinent... totally unscientific, as well as illogical."

<sup>49</sup> Spiritualist services frequently last 2-3 hours. Healing usually takes up less than forty minutes, followed by a lecture, hymns, announcements, and then finally "message-work." The length of time spent on message work varies depending on the number of working mediums, but usually consumes half of the total time spent at the service. While people frequently arrive at the service late to miss the healing portion, I never observed congregation members to leave before message work began, and people almost never leave before it is over.

<sup>50</sup> Since message work is unpredictable in terms of time requirements, this scheduling removes any time constraints on the working mediums. Some churches devote whole services solely to message work. In Lily Dale, for example, in addition to worship services which integrate a message work component with worship and healing, "message services" are held which are completely devoted to mediumship demonstrations. Several Toronto Spiritualist churches also devote certain church services solely to message work. In Hamilton, however, both the King Street Church and the

Mediumship or "message work" begins once healing, lectures, and worship have been offered. To begin the "message work" session, the minister or chair of the service calls upon specific members of the congregation who have recognized mediumistic skills, to deliver any messages "from Spirit" they feel they have to impart.<sup>51</sup> If there are numerous mediums present, the minister or chair may restrict the number of messages each may give so that all mediums who desire to work may do so. Mediums in the congregation are then called upon by name, and may agree or decline to give messages.<sup>52</sup> If they decline, they simply announce they have "no messages from Spirit tonight." In any given service, one or more mediums will decline to work.<sup>53</sup> If they

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Main Street Church integrate message work consistently into their regular worship services. Message work is followed by a closing hymn and a "coffee hour" in both churches.

<sup>51</sup> Guest lecturers are also called upon to give messages. Most guest lecturers are mediums, and are often given first opportunity to do message work. The "lecture" and the "lecture circuit" are important parts of Spiritualist practice. Often, lecture topics are "inspired by Spirit". This recalls the trance mediumship of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but the medium retains full conscious awareness of her surroundings at all times. Many mediums suggest, however, that they cannot recall their own words only minutes after concluding the sermon.

<sup>52</sup> By calling upon mediums by name, the minister or chair exercises considerable control over mediumship in the church. Zaretsky (1977:176-178) argues that Spiritualist churches in "Bay City" are quite dependent on the personality and preferences of the medium-minister, and that s/he exercises quite strict control over message work and use of Spiritualist "argot". In my own fieldwork experience, the "chair" of the services rotated regularly, and no single person controlled who would speak and who would not.

<sup>53</sup> At one service at Hamilton's King Street Church, all four mediums in the congregation that night declined to work. As the minister was absent that night and the service being chaired by woman who had been attending development classes for only three months (and consequently did not feel confident of her ability to give messages), there was no mediumship portion of the service that night. This was the only instance in the fieldwork period in which mediumship was omitted from a worship service.

agree to work, they stand and face the congregation. At this point, the medium often reveals a personal "style" of message work. Some mediums work with eyes closed, for example, while others do not. Some mediums take on the posture, voice intonation, or other characteristics of their spirit source, while others never do.<sup>54</sup> All mediums retain conscious awareness during message work, however, and there is an overall consistency in language, behaviour, and "doctrine" among all practising mediums within each church.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> One of the more popular mediums in Hamilton was a regular member of both Spiritualist churches named Kevin. Kevin worked with eyes closed and often took on characteristics of the spirits he was speaking for. He also invariably turned in a slow circle while speaking, so that he frequently found himself facing away from the recipient. Kevin told the congregation of the Main Street Church that when he worked, he sensed Spirit behind his shoulder and was drawn to turn towards the sensed presence. This resulted in turning him in a complete circle, if the message lasted long enough. One irritated member of the church who did not appreciate having the medium face away from her while he was speaking responded, 'Well, tell Spirit not to do it then.' Unfortunately, Kevin himself declined to speak with me 'on the record'.

<sup>55</sup> Although some degree of difference in belief and practice exists from congregation to congregation in Spiritualism, there is also a remarkable level of consistency between churches when it comes to mediumship among Spiritualists. Mediumship practices in Hamilton, Toronto, and Lily Dale did not differ significantly from one another. Other social scientific studies of North American Spiritualism (Macklin 1977; Zaretsky 1970, 1977; Fishman 1980; Haywood 1983; Richard & Adato 1980) also reveal an overall consistency in belief and practice. For example, Zaretsky's (1977) experience with mediumship development classes in California did not differ significantly from my own, although the churches in his fieldwork study (1977:199) used "billets" to prompt message work. Where differences existed between churches in my own fieldwork, they were more often differences in "content" than "style." The acceptability of Christian or New Age teachings, for example, was sometimes controversial. Differences in terminology also occurred, usually centred around the issue of inclusive language: "Father-Mother God" often replaced "Father" in the Lord's Prayer, for example. It has been suggested by Barrow (1986), Braude (1989), and Owen (1990) that the "lecture circuit," "camp meetings," and periodicals that form an integral part of Spiritualism serve to maintain consistency of belief. Luhrmann's (1989) study of neo-pagans reveals similar patterns of consistency and marginal differentiation.

When a medium gives a message to a member of the congregation, it is either a "directed" message, or a "general" one. Directed messages are intended for a specific recipient, and the medium knows whom the message is intended for. This type of message is the most common, particularly in congregations with regular members and few newcomers.<sup>56</sup> The medium points to the individual in question, and ritually asks, 'May I speak to you?' or 'May I come into your vibration?' The person indicated will then respond either with a yes or a no.<sup>57</sup> If the recipient accepts the message, the medium will identify the spirit source, sometimes by name, but more often by relationship: for example, 'I have with me a motherly or grandmotherly vibration, who is sending you love and support from the other side. Do you accept her?' Mediums usually ask for confirmation of the spirit identity from the message recipient. Failure of the recipient to recognize the spirit entity will lead to a re-identification ('She is someone who was like a mother to you,' for example), or occasionally to a reselection of message recipient ('I'm being told that it's not you, it's the woman behind you, that Spirit wants to talk to').<sup>58</sup> In most cases, the message recipient recognizes the spirit source, accepts

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<sup>56</sup> In the Lily Dale auditorium sessions, by contrast, fewer messages are "directed," and more are "general" messages which must be claimed by a member of the audience.

<sup>57</sup> During the course of fieldwork, I do not recall any person ever rejecting a message from Spirit. I was told, however, that the question must always be asked because for a medium to "read" a message accurately, he or she needs "feedback" from the "vibration" of the person for whom the message is intended. Therefore, transmission of the message would constitute an invasion of privacy, should permission not be sought and given.

<sup>58</sup> In one rare case, the refusal of a medium to reevaluate a message that was rejected by the recipient led to an argument that ended only when the minister intervened. The incident took place in Hamilton's King Street Church, and the recipient was the ex-president of Hamilton's Main Street Church, an older woman named Ruth.



the message, and thanks the medium, who closes the message with the phrase, 'God bless,' and then moves on to the next member of the congregation.

General messages are messages received by the medium without a specific recipient being indicated or sensed.<sup>59</sup> Usually, a general message is much more specific in identifying material (for example: 'I have with me a man who passed due to a heart condition, and I'm getting the name "Gene" or "John"') so that a member of the congregation will be able to claim it. General messages are less detailed when it comes to identifying the recipient, however.<sup>60</sup> Despite this lack of information, there is

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She was apparently unknown to the members of the King Street Church, not having lived in Hamilton for several years. I suspect I was the only person present who could identify her. The message dealt with her need to devote less time to worldly concerns and more time to spiritual concerns. She insisted that she set aside time each day to meditate on spiritual concerns, and that the message did not therefore apply to her. The medium responded that she was clearly not meditating properly, at which point Ruth accused the medium of 'Speaking for himself and not for Spirit'. At a later date, Ruth told me "They don't know what they are doing over there [at the King Street Church] anyway," perhaps in response to this incident.

<sup>59</sup> According to Spiritualist medium and healer Ruth of Hamilton's Main Street Church, most messages are brought by a medium's spirit guide, who acts as an intermediary between the medium and the spirits of other people's deceased loved ones. At times, however, a spirit will want to communicate with loved ones still on the earth plane so badly that this spirit will supplant the spirit guide temporarily and insert their message directly into the medium's mind. When this happens, the sense of the "identity" of the spirit is very strong, but because the spirit is unskilled, not all necessary information is communicated. For this reason, a general message frequently lacks a clear sense of who it is intended for, and consequently is not directed toward a specific recipient.

<sup>60</sup> Occasionally, a general message will take the reverse form: for example, in the Lily Dale auditorium sessions messages are frequently directed at a specific individual who is unknown to the medium: "I have a motherly vibration who is sending Mary, or Marie, healing for a back injury. Is there a Mary here?"

usually no difficulty in getting a general message claimed.<sup>61</sup> When it is not claimed, the medium will either suggest that the spirit simply wanted to bring "proof" of existence after bodily death, or will suggest that the message was meant for an absent member of the congregation, or for the friend or loved one of someone in the audience. The congregation is encouraged to keep the message in mind ('It'll come to you in a few hours, and you'll think, 'Oh yeah, I know who it was'), and then the medium moves on to deliver the next spirit message.

The content of mediumistic messages is usually very commonplace.<sup>62</sup> Messages deal with health ('Spirit wants you to wear a scarf when you go out, you are very open to colds right now, your energy is low,' came one message early in the fieldwork

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<sup>61</sup> At one point during the fieldwork period, I claimed a general message after waiting long enough to know that no others would claim it. The message was brought by Kim, who identified the spirit as "Jackie, a boy who drowned while still very young." I claimed the message because my mother-in-law's brother Jackie drowned as a child. "Jackie" assured me that he was happy in the spirit world, and still remembered his loved ones here on earth. This kind of message is considered by Spiritualists to be a "proof" of spiritual existence: it has no purpose aside from reassuring loved ones that life continues beyond bodily death. Taking the chance that my mother-in-law would might appreciate the message, I phoned and told her of it later that night.

<sup>62</sup> The commonplace content of spirit messages was one of the largest complaints of sceptics in the nineteenth century. In defense, Spiritualists argued that superficial messages were necessary to "prove" that the spirits of deceased human beings were genuinely responsible for the phenomena. As Moore (1977:253) notes, Spiritualists felt that "To be convincing... the spirits had to cite small details relating to the lives of the people they visited. To the community at large these were bound to seem banal, but spirits had to worry about proving their identity. Discussions of moral philosophy, which were beyond the talents of most spirits anyway, would not have done the job." This argument is still made by many contemporary Spiritualists. Toronto healer Pam told me, "This may seem such a small, almost mundane message for a spirit to mention but think carefully. If you had to convince a member of your family that you were really you, wouldn't it be by mentioning some family happening or a possession of quite ordinary value, special only to you?"

period); finances ('Spirit is telling me that you worried about money, but they are telling me that things will start to turn around in another three weeks'); work ('Are you having trouble with a co-worker right now? I'm getting the message that you should try a different tack'); spiritual development ('When you meditate, Spirit wants you to concentrate on the colour gold, it will lift your vibrations and help you in your path'); and personal relationships ('Is there someone in your family, who you sometimes just want to give a "swift kick" to? I'm being told that this person needs your love and support right now, they are going through a difficult time'.) According to Spiritualist teachings, it is not so much the content of spirit messages, but the "fact" of spirit messages that is significant. The very "fact" that messages are given is "proof" that mediumship phenomena are "true." As will become evident, the "fact" or "proof" value of mediumistic phenomena plays a major part in contemporary Spiritualist perceptions of Spiritualism as "scientific."

### Spirit Possession and Spiritualist Mediumship

The experience and practice of mediumship entails a shift in everyday consciousness whereby the medium perceives reality from an "alternate" perspective.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Following psychiatrist Norman Zinberg (1977:1), the present dissertation uses the term "alternate state of consciousness" as apposed to the frequently used terms "altered state" and "alternative state" because the words "altered" and "alternative" imply a deviation from a "normative" state, whereas the word "alternate" allows each state of consciousness equal standing. Zinberg (1977) has discussed the difficulties in distinguishing an "alternate" state of consciousness from "the usual" state of consciousness. He asks (1977:8) whether consciousness is really a set of discrete and separate states that can be identified, or rather a continuum that cannot be arbitrarily categorized? There appears to be no consensus on this issue (Bourguignon 1973; Marsh

Alternate states of consciousness within ritual or religious contexts are a global human phenomenon (Bourguignon 1973, 1974, 1976, 1977; Crapanzano 1977; Goodman 1988a, 1988b; Lewis 1971; Marsh 1977; Tart 1977; Zinberg 1977).<sup>64</sup> According to anthropologist Erika Bourguignon (1977:236), spirit possession is one of a limited number of ways in which religiously meaningful alternate states of consciousness are interpreted.<sup>65</sup> The "psychobiological" state of an altered state of consciousness is distinct from the cultural interpretation imposed upon it (Bourguignon 1973, 1977; Crapanzano 1977; Goodman 1988a, 1988b). According to both anthropologists and

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1977; Noll 1985; Zinberg 1977) Zinberg (1977:9) also points out, however, that "certain changed states are so marked and so easily observable or are so much a part of everyone's experience that, even if their essence cannot be effectively articulated, they can easily be accepted as alternate states. Sleep and dream states or intense intoxication are clear-cut cases." Because there is no consensually accepted definition of "states of consciousness," I shall accept psychologist Charles Tart's (1977:158) suggestion that, in terms of our own interpreted experience, discrete states of consciousness do exist. Tart (1977:192-194) suggests that changes or alterations in consciousness occur when the "stability" of the present state of consciousness is "disrupted," and "patterning forces" shape a new state of consciousness. He adds, (177:193) "the same stimuli may serve as both disruptive and patterning stimuli." According to Bourguignon (1973, 1974, 1976, 1977), Crapanzano (1977), and Goodman (1988a, 1988b), identification of the 'stimuli' causing changes in consciousness is subject to cultural interpretation.

<sup>64</sup> Bourguignon (1973:10-11), for example, has found that "of a sample of 488 societies, in all parts of the world, for which we have analyzed the relevant ethnographic literature 437, or 90% are reported to have one or more institutionalized, culturally patterned forms of altered states of consciousness."

<sup>65</sup> For example, Bourguignon (1977:236) notes, "possession, it seems to me, is one of a limited number of possible solutions to the problem of communication between humans and spirits. An abstract concept of "spirit" satisfied, I suggest, none of the needs postulated to account for the development of the concept in the first place, whether intellectual, sociological, or affective. If belief in spirits is to be of dynamic value, if it is to have, in other words, survival value, two way communication with spirits must be established." Bourguignon suggests that "possession" is one way in which "communication" between humans and "supernatural beings" is established, and one way in which alternate psychobiological states can be explained.

psychologists, (Bourguignon 1973, 1977; Crapanzano 1977; Garrett 1987; Goodman 1988a, 1988b; Lewis 1971; Marsh 1977; Tart 1977; Tippett 1976; Zinberg 1977) alternate states of consciousness are experienced in all cultures.<sup>66</sup> "Spirit possession," however, is only found where the religious context permits such an interpretation.<sup>67</sup> According to anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano (1977:7), spirit possession may therefore be defined as "*any altered state of consciousness indigenously interpreted in terms of the influence of an alien spirit.*"<sup>68</sup> Spiritualist mediumship is a form of spirit possession in which mediums experience alternate states of consciousness which they interpret as instances of communication with the spirits of the dead.

Current anthropological interpretations (Bourguignon 1973, 1974, 1976, 1977; Crapanzano 1977; Garrison 1977; Goodman 1988a, 1988b; Macklin 1974a, 1974b, 1977) of spirit possession include "mediumship" as one of its expressions. A distinction is frequently made, however, between the issue of mediumistic "communication" and the

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<sup>66</sup> Social psychologist Caryl Marsh (1977) lists daydreaming, meditation, hypnosis, sleep dreaming, chemically induced states, trance, ecstasy, and psychotic states as some of the most "frequently experienced" alternate states of consciousness. Anthropologist Felicitas Goodman (1988b:8) suggests that "each one of these altered states of consciousness... has at one time or another been a candidate for explaining religious experience." Goodman goes on to suggest that "ecstasy" is the psychobiological state underlying religious alternate states of consciousness cross-culturally. In the case of Spiritualist mediumship, this is not necessarily the case, however.

<sup>67</sup> Garrett (1987:5-6) writes, "For spirit possession to take root in a culture, there are three preconditions. The culture must believe, first, that there are higher spirits who want to communicate with humans; second, that spirits can bridge the chasm between the finite world and the infinite by means of taking control of the senses, speech, and actions of individuals; and, finally, that a person possessed by a spirit would behave as the people who claim to be possessed behave."

<sup>68</sup> Original italics.

issue of "control" in other possession contexts. Anthropologist Raymond Firth (1967:296), for example, has argued that "spirit possession," "spirit mediumship," and "shamanism" are related but separate interpretations of religious experience.<sup>69</sup> This debate has prompted Bourguignon (1974:42) to adopt the term "non-inspired" spirit possession to refer to altered states of consciousness that "involve communication with spirits rather than possession by them."<sup>70</sup> Spiritualist mediumship does therefore differ from other potential types of spirit possession, for "communication" rather than control is clearly the focus of Spiritualist practice. Spiritualist mediumship remains, however, within the definition of spirit possession as proposed by Crapanzano (1977:7-8) above.<sup>71</sup>

According to Crapanzano (1977:7-8) and Bourguignon (1973:13) among others (Garrett 1987; Garrison 1977; Goodman 1988a, 1988b; Lewis 1971; Tippett 1976), spirit

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<sup>69</sup> Firth suggests (1967:296-297) that in 'spirit possession' an individual is 'controlled by' spirit entities, in mediumship an individual 'communicates with' spirit entities, and in shamanism an individual 'controls' spirit entities. Crapanzano (1977:9-10) argues that this kind of classification system "distorts the essential fluidity of interpretation and consequent articulation of the phenomena." He further (1977:10) suggests that this emphasis on control is a Western preoccupation with often little relevance to indigenous contexts. In the Spiritualist context, control is an issue, for in the on-going reevaluation of the advisability of possession trance, the idea of "giving up control" of one's body is negatively valued. Spiritualists would also never attempt control over spirit entities - Spiritualist mediumship practices are non-coercive.

<sup>70</sup> Bourguignon (1974) borrows this term from Loeb's (1929:60-84) analysis of California shamanism.

<sup>71</sup> Goodman (1988b:26-31) suggests that there are similarities between the mediumship practice of nineteenth century Spiritualist A.J. Davis and the practice of shamanism, particularly in the pattern of visions experienced by Davis. Visionary experiences are sought and welcomed by many contemporary Spiritualists. If visionary experiences of "death/rebirth" and "soul flight" are indicative of shamanism, contemporary Spiritualism may have elements of "inspired" forms of possession as well as "non-inspired" forms. The visionary experience of "Richard," discussed later in the chapter, has similarities to 'shamanic' visions.

possession is a cultural construct independent of the psychobiological state underlying the experience. The experience of spirit possession depends upon a prior belief in the existence of spirits and the possibility of spirit possession: similar psychobiological states have multiple possible interpretations. As Bourguignon (1976:5-6) notes, "Where no belief exists in such spirit entities or in the ability of such entities to behave in such a way, "possession" as a concept will, of course, not exist either." Both the belief in and the experience of spirit possession are therefore culturally patterned. The ways in which alternate states of consciousness are experienced, interpreted, and expressed are consensually determined.<sup>72</sup> An individual is only "possessed" when s/he experiences alternate states of consciousness in culturally appropriate ways and articulates that experience within the local "idiom" of spirit possession.<sup>73</sup> Consequently as Bourguignon (1973:14) notes, "possession trance is not a simple biological or biochemical "given," but is subject to a greater or lesser, but always significant, amount

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<sup>72</sup> Crapanzano (1977:16) points out that any consensually validated set of spirit possession beliefs must be flexible enough to allow for individual variation. Thus, individual experience and social norms result in "a complex negotiation of reality between the possessed and those about him".

<sup>73</sup> Other cultural interpretations are available for experiences that deviate from accepted norms. As Garrett (1987:45) notes, if the "'spirit possessed' ...did not conduct themselves in culturally expected ways, their claims to have been visited by alien or supernatural beings would not be believed." Anthropologists (including Goodman 1988b; Bourguignon 1973, 1976; Crapanzano 1977; and Macklin 1977), suggest that psychological explanations are "easy" alternate interpretations of possession behaviour in a Western context, and are frequently adopted by scholars when studying possession experience and belief. As Crapanzano (1977:11) notes, the "psychological idiom [is one with] which we in the modern Western world feel more comfortable." In a Western context, therefore, the spirit-possessed must carefully construct their experience and its expression to avoid this "alternate" interpretation by their peers.

of learning." To be possessed, one must therefore "learn" to be possessed.

### Learning to be Possessed: The Mediumship Development Class

Spiritualist mediums "learn" to be possessed by watching other mediums "work" during message services, and by attending what are variously called "development" classes or "unfoldment" classes.<sup>74</sup> Development classes are lead by an experienced medium, often the minister of the church, or a long-standing member of the church with an excellent reputation for mediumship ability.<sup>75</sup> Members of the class are those who

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<sup>74</sup> In his ethno-semantic study of Spiritualist Churches in California, Zaretsky (1977, 1970) identified slight differences in meaning between these two terms, which in my own experience are used synonymously. Zaretsky notes (1977:201-202): "Mediumship classes are known in the argot by several other terms, such as *development* classes and *unfoldment* classes... unfoldment implies that each person contains within himself the abilities of mediumship and sensitivity to spirit influences while the term development emphasizes the role of the trainer over that of the trainee. Unfoldment implies the spiritual nature of man, while development connotes to the Spiritualist a certain artifice and artistry bordering on theatrics." Zaretsky consistently emphasizes the "control" of the mediums within his study over church members. This emphasis perhaps shapes his analysis of the above terms, particularly that of "development" classes. In my own study, neither Hamilton church was led by a "dominant" medium (owing to personal circumstances, the minister of one church and the president of the other were frequently absent for extended periods of time), and in Lily Dale the context is such that no single medium dominates the rest. Consequently, in these contexts the term "development" class, used most frequently, is synonymous with "unfoldment" class, and does not connote "artifice" or the dominance of a trainer over the trainees.

<sup>75</sup> The influence of the mediumship development class leader in shaping his or her congregation has been noted by a number of scholars of modern Spiritualism (Macklin 1977; Skultans 1974; Zaretsky 1970, 1977). In my own research, mediumship development classes at Hamilton's King Street Church were led by three different mediums over the nineteen month fieldwork period. These included Kim, the minister; John, her husband; and Richard, who had just taken over the development class as the fieldwork period ended. Hamilton's Main Street church did not hold development classes until the last two months of the fieldwork period owing to lack of sufficient students and to the illness of the church president. The classes organized in the last two months were



either ask to join or are invited to join by the leader of the class.<sup>76</sup> They must be regular members of the church, and be considered "serious" students of Spiritualism.<sup>77</sup> Because students must be regular members of the church before being admitted into "development," they already have some experience with the necessary behavioral, linguistic and conceptual framework for mediumship. Within the development class, they learn to experience alternate states of consciousness, and to interpret and express these experiences within the appropriate Spiritualist framework. It has been suggested by Crapanzano (1977) that learning to be possessed involves both technical and symbolic aspects. As he argues (1977:15), "Technically the spirit possessed must learn to... enter trance, to carry out expected behaviour gracefully, and to meet the demands of his spirit... Symbolically, the spirit possessed must learn to situate himself within the idiom; that is, to structure and evaluate his experience in terms of the idiom at his disposal." The Spiritualist development class teaches students both the technical aspect of how to communicate with the spirits of the dead, and the symbolic aspect of expressing and

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cooperative peer-development classes with no single leader. In Lily Dale, classes were lead by mediums licensed by the Lily Dale Assembly.

<sup>76</sup> The exception to this generalization are the development classes held in Lily Dale, for which students register and pay a fee. However, they too must be "serious" students of Spiritualism, for the Lily Dale classes require a considerable commitment of time, energy, and money.

<sup>77</sup> Zaretsky (1977:202) stresses the control wielded by the medium in selecting candidates for development classes. As he notes, "The people that attend class are not the anonymous public... the medium in all cases chooses her students from among the inquiring clients." In my own fieldwork experience, the medium does select who s/he accepts into her class, but the pool of candidates was smaller than that implied by Zaretsky in descriptions of his own fieldwork experience. Consequently I am aware of only one interested candidate who was actually rejected (owing to disruptive behaviour, rather than the desire of the medium to exert "control").

"explaining" mediumship experiences within the appropriate "idiom." Much of this idiom is drawn from popular conceptions of "science."

### The Development Class

When a development class begins, it usually has less than a dozen students.<sup>78</sup> It meets once a week, in the home of one of the members, and regular attendance is strongly encouraged.<sup>79</sup> The opening of the class is very informal: students catch up with events in each others' lives, and any "unusual" experiences are exchanged and compared. Students then contextualize these experiences within the framework of Spiritualist belief.<sup>80</sup> Often, the leader of the class will choose the topic for the lesson

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<sup>78</sup> Zaretsky (1977:202) suggests a number between eight and twelve. Skultans (1974:3) suggests a number of twelve. The development class at Hamilton's King Street Church, based on the "Course in Miracles" program, initially had eight members when I first began attending the church. During the final year of my fieldwork study, the leader of the class changed three times, and the student body fluctuated from a low of six students, to a high of nine students. The peer-development class which formed at the end of the fieldwork period at Hamilton's Main Street Church had six regular attenders, and three periodic "drop-ins." In the development class I attended in Lily Dale, there were 22 students. The Lily Dale context is distinct from the church development classes, however, as it is a "paid" development class, and can be considered an "intensive" course for interested Spiritualists who are not regular members of any Spiritualist church. Many Spiritualists live in communities where there is no established Spiritualist church. The classes offered at Lily Dale provide the opportunity for interested individuals to develop mediumistic and healing skills in a group, guided context.

<sup>79</sup> The Lily Dale mediumship development class is an exception to this rule. Because of its "intensive" nature, the Lily Dale class met five hours daily for the duration of the course.

<sup>80</sup> The main topic of discussion prior to one evening's development class was the loss of a student's keys several days previously. After explaining her regular habit of leaving the keys on a table by the front door, Carol said: 'And do you know, they just weren't there, when I went to leave. And I was already late, and I searched and searched, but they somehow weren't there.' John: 'Spirit must have taken them, there

and the meditation exercise from something discussed in these first minutes of class. Once the students have all arrived, one student will be asked to lead an opening prayer.<sup>81</sup> The leader of the class will then announce the topic for the night's lesson.<sup>82</sup> Lesson topics are a vehicle for teaching Spiritualist doctrine, and are frequently the avenue for "explaining" how mediumship "works." The lesson lasts anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour, and is followed by the "practical" portion of the class: the meditation exercise. Once the meditation and the discussion that follows it are over, a final closing prayer is offered, and the class dismissed.

In each of the development classes in which I participated during the fieldwork

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was a reason you shouldn't drive...' Carol [interrupting]: 'That's right, because it made me late, and do you know, I found them. Right on the floor, by the door.' Mark: 'And what happened?' 'Well, I think what happened is, that my guides were saying 'Carol, if you go you're going to be in trouble,' so they took the keys. Something bad would have happened otherwise, I'm sure of it.' Stories like this one, in which a strange or coincidental event is interpreted as "proof" of spirit contact, were frequently told at the beginning of the development class (and at after-service coffee hours).

<sup>81</sup> There is no set format for the opening prayer, and these prayers often reflect the idiosyncratic preferences of the students in style and content. Almost invariably, however, prayers seek both "guidance" and "protection". One example, offered by Heather, went as follows: 'We ask tonight, Father, for your love and understanding to be granted us here tonight, and to those who could not be here. We ask that your healing light and healing love surround us, and that your messengers, our guides, be with us, to show us your wisdom, to guide us on the path to spiritual progress. We ask that only spirits of the highest love and truth work through us, and that your white light of protection surrounds us. We ask this in all love and gratitude, Amen.'

<sup>82</sup> Topics can cover a vast range of Spiritualist belief. During the fieldwork period, topics at the King Street Church's class included "Spirit Guides," "The Spirit World," "Proofs," "The Healing Power of Love," "Interpreting Colours," "Soul Mates," "Physical Phenomena," "Spirit Children," "Precognition," "Soul Flight," "Reincarnation," "The Golden Rule," "Indian Guides," "Spiritual Readings," "The Power of Prayer," and "Christianity and Spiritualism".

period, the method of contacting the spirits of the dead was referred to as "meditation."<sup>83</sup> Learning how to meditate involved three things: physical exercises in breathing and posture; mental exercises in visualization and concentration; and verbal exercises in articulation. Exercises in breathing and posture act as induction strategies for achieving alternate states of consciousness. As anthropologist Felicitas Goodman notes (1988b:11), "In order for the switch from the ordinary perceptual state to the ecstatic one to take place, people first of all have to prepare physically." The members of the development class move their chairs into a rough circle, and sit with feet firmly placed on the floor and hands resting palm up on their thighs ('You have to have an open posture, so you don't block the vibrations,' it was explained to the members of the King Street Church class).<sup>84</sup> The students also begin regulated breathing - inhaling in for a count of four, and out for a count of four (because 'Regular breathing helps balance the

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<sup>83</sup> According to Goodman (1988b:31), altered states of consciousness such as the meditative state and the hypnotic state are unusual states from which to enter "ecstasy" - the psycho-biological state she suggests underlies all possession experiences. However, she notes that experienced mediums can slip from one altered state of consciousness to another easily, so that the initial altered state is more of a "trigger" for the possession state, than the possession state itself.

<sup>84</sup> Students are taught to maintain a sense of awareness of their bodies while in meditation, because their bodies frequently experience somatic symptoms which Spiritualists interpret as caused by "impinging vibrations" of spirit entities. Such symptoms are neither sought nor prized, however. 'You may feel things in your body sometimes, that Spirit brings to you,' John told his development class. 'Spirit brings it to you for recognition, and because often, some spirits are still attached to the earth plane, and it's through the body that they still identify themselves. Say 'thank you' and ask them to take it away.' Another Spiritualist medium told me, "Sometimes spirit comes in on a vibration that you can feel, in your body. Like, chest pains, or like that, if they died of a heart condition. You have to tell them to stop, 'cause its your body, not theirs."

chakras, and makes you more in tune to spirit energy'). The breathing and posture exercises of Spiritualists provide a "trigger" for inducing the alternate state of consciousness necessary for communication with the spirits of the dead to take place. Church members who have taken development classes are easily identified during message services by their regulated breathing and "open" postures.<sup>85</sup>

Simultaneous with the physical exercises, students in the development class are told to practice concentration and visualization. As psychologist Richard Noll (1985) notes, exercises in concentration and visualization are generally considered a key part of learning to communicate with "extramundane agencies." According to Noll (1985:445), "The cultivation of mental imagery may be considered the experiential core of the indigenous magico-religious tradition" wherever visionary experiences and ability to communicate with spiritual entities is prized. Goodman (1988b:11) suggests that experienced mediums come to focus their concentration "as a matter of course," but considerable practice is required before students learn to focus their attention in the manner required.<sup>86</sup> Students in the meditation class are taught first to "concentrate" on

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<sup>85</sup> Such postures and breathing are only used as induction strategies. Once the message service has begun, working mediums stand and others relax both breathing and posture. During the period of meditation in the development class, however, students maintain both rhythmic breathing and 'open' postures.

<sup>86</sup> After one particular development class, another student and I left together and I asked him what he had thought of the class. 'I couldn't concentrate at all tonight,' Dave told me, 'My thoughts were all over the place. I don't know why. I didn't see anything.' In my own experience of learning to meditate, this lack of concentration was a frequent problem. Students are told to 'take each stray thought that crosses your mind, and set it aside, and keep doing that until only the key remains.' The "key" is whatever image or concept or sound was serving as the meditation focus for the night.

"sensing the vibrations," and then to "visualize" their spirit guides.<sup>87</sup> At the beginning of the class, students often have no personal knowledge of their own spirit guides.<sup>88</sup> Through visualization, however, they soon learn to recognize and identify them.<sup>89</sup> The mental image or "vibration" of these guides becomes a recognizable mental key, which developing mediums then use to initiate and guide their contact with the spirits of the

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<sup>87</sup> Guided meditation is meditation upon a particular image, concept, or emotion. Unguided meditation is "open," meaning the leader of the class provides no particular image or theme for the students to concentrate on. Spiritualists frequently practice unguided meditation in private, but within the context of the development class, a "key" is almost always provided: usually, the "key" is students' own spirit guides.

<sup>88</sup> When Tom, the leader of Lily Dale's mediumship development class, asked the class on the first night how many of us "knew" who our spirit guides were, only six (out of twenty-two) put up their hands. Of these, four had been "told" about their guides by other mediums. Only two regularly communicated with their guides personally. Students in the King Street Development class could all visualize at least one of his or her spirit guides within a period of several months of attending the class.

<sup>89</sup> Spirit guides within Spiritualism fall into identifiable groups, such as Native Americans, Doctors, Asian and Oriental spiritual 'masters,' and others. Further research would be valuable in pinpointing the implications of the Spiritualist preference for certain "types" of guides. Many Spiritualists themselves are aware of this tendency to "stereotype" guides. One development class leader used this pattern to make a point about what was and was not important when it came to identifying the student's own spirit guides. Because "Native" spirit guides are so common within Spiritualism, Tom used his "native" guide as the basis for the following "lesson": "I want to tell you something very, very, very funny, about spirit guides. I was aware that I had a North American like most mediums [laughter]... So I wanted to know something of his background, who he was, what he was, give me some information like that. And he refused. And all he kept saying was, I want to be known by what I do, not who I am or what I am. But I insisted upon it. Somehow I felt that, that if you are going to be doing things for me, I certainly want to know as to whether you're a big honcho, or a little honcho, or a so-so, or what you were. And one day I got my satisfaction. One day, he showed himself to me. It was INCREDIBLE. Absolutely incredible. There he was, in a perfect three-piece business suit! [laughter] And he said, 'Are you satisfied?!' I never asked again... so I can't tell you who my guides are. I can tell you what they are, but not who they are." One can tell "what" they are by the sensed "vibrations" of the spirit, without needing a name or national identity by which to recognize them.

dead.<sup>90</sup>

Learning to "see" one's spirit guides is an exercise in visualization that teaches students to "focus" their "third eye." Students are taught to visualize images in increasing detail throughout the duration of the development class.<sup>91</sup> Noll (1985:445) suggests that such exercises are part of a global pattern in mental imagery cultivation, where "the neophyte... is trained to increase the *vividness* of his visual mental imagery through various psychological and physiological techniques." Students in Spiritualist development classes are taught to "imagine" their spirit guides, and to "see" and "hear" them in such a way that these sensations become more "real" during meditation than the physical surroundings. This, too, is part of what Noll (1985:443) calls the "ubiquitous" pattern in mental imagery cultivation. Lily Dale mediumship development class leader Tom told the students, "Just pretend you are imagining your spirit guide. Just pretend you are imagining, and look with your third eye. What do you see? Do you see a man?"

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<sup>90</sup> Spiritualists believe that their spirit guides act as "mediums" in their own right, filtering messages from Spirit and allowing only "appropriate" spirits to communicate with the Spiritualist medium. Many Spiritualists have one main guide, referred to variously as a "spirit guardian" or "spirit control," who mediates between the medium and all other spirit entities. Consequently, it is vital for a medium who wishes to do message work to establish a clear connection to his or her spirit guides before any other spirit communication is attempted.

<sup>91</sup> Some students excel at detailed visualization. Others are less detailed in their reported visions. In one visualization exercise in the development class at Lily Dale, one woman was so detailed in her visions that she prompted each student who followed her recital into beginning theirs with an apology for the 'poor' quality of their visions (myself included!) Through comparisons of this sort, Spiritualists learn to seek increasingly detailed mental imagery.

A woman? What does he look like? What do you see?"<sup>92</sup> The development class leader then begins to ask increasingly specific questions: 'What does he look like?'; 'What is she wearing?'; 'What is she thinking?'; 'When did he pass [die]?'; 'What colours do you see?'; 'What emotions do you sense?'; 'Do you see anything around him?'; 'Do you hear a name?' These questions are all asked of the students while they are visualizing their spirit guides. Over time, students come to have clear mental images of their spirit guides.<sup>93</sup> This "image" is more than a mental picture: Spiritualists claim it is a "sensation" akin to sight, hearing, smell, and touch, and that it is quite unmistakable and undeniably "real." Over time, Spiritualists can contact their spirit guides with little effort, slipping in and out of alternate states of consciousness without lengthy preparation time and few physical 'triggers'. Mental images become much clearer and more detailed as the development class progresses.

When students have learned to contact their spirit guides, the development class then proceeds to explore the full range of Spiritualist mediumistic abilities. Students learn how to communicate with other spirits in the spirit realm, and how to "hear" messages from spirits wishing to communicate with loved ones still on earth. Students

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<sup>92</sup> The phrase, "Pretend you are imagining," was used in each of the development classes I attended, as well as frequently by students who had taken development classes with other leaders and in other locales. Although unmentioned by Zaretsky (1970, 1977) or Skultans (1974) in their discussion of development classes, it appeared a common and widespread development technique among those Spiritualists with whom I worked.

<sup>93</sup> These clear images are not, however, always visual. One woman told me that one of her main spirit guides came to only as "smoke, not tobacco or anything, but sweet grass like the native Indians use. Whenever he wants to tell me something, I smell smoke."



are taught to visualize journeys into the spirit realm under the guidance and protection of their spirit guides. They are also taught to practice clairvoyance using each other as clients, and to practice such things as psychometry, the reading of auras, and automatic writing. Each set of lessons is structured and interpreted within the Spiritualist possession idiom.<sup>94</sup> The lessons are followed by a guided meditation on the lesson topic. The mental images received while in meditation then become the focus of the discussion that takes up the remainder of the class.

Discussion begins when the students have spent twenty to forty minutes in guided meditation. The leader of the class asks them to "return" and to describe what they "saw" or "heard" while in the meditative state. It is here that what Crapanzano (1977:15) has called the "symbolic" aspect of learning to be possessed becomes foremost in the development class. Students in the class learn not only how to breathe, sit, concentrate and visualize, but what to see, hear, and say about their experiences during meditation.<sup>95</sup> As Crapanzano notes (1977:10), learning to be possessed involves

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<sup>94</sup> As Kim insisted, "what we do here is mediumship, it's not psychic work. Psychic work is the medium's own mind powers, but mediumship is the powers of Spirit." Most Spiritualists make this distinction between knowledge gained from spirit sources, and knowledge gained through parapsychological powers of the human mind.

<sup>95</sup> For example, Spiritualists learn which "spirits" are appropriate to "see," and by extension, which spirits are inappropriate. Within the Spiritualist context, the only truly appropriate spirits to "see" are the spirits of the human dead. Goodman (1988b) suggests that this limited supernatural pantheon stems from the "Calvinist roots" of Spiritualism. As she writes (1988b:34-35), "Spirits of saints, which play an important role in Umbanda, were no longer part of the belief system, and with evil spirits also excluded, the spirits of the dead were the only ones left. That has remained true in this country even in contexts having nothing to do with Spiritualism or other kinds of possession." The work of sociologists Fox (1992); Greeley (1987) and Kalish and Reynolds (1973), supports the contention that 'human spirits' are the normative "spirits" to "see" in a

adopting "an idiom for articulating a certain range of experiences. By articulation [is meant] the act of construing, or better still constructing, an event to render it meaningful." In the discussion that follows the meditation exercise, students are given the language and concepts they need to express their experiences in a meaningful fashion. They reinforce one another's perceptions ('Yes, I saw something very similar, a gold light surrounding this man, and the most peaceful feeling') and suggest appropriate interpretations for mediumship experiences ('Is it possible he is a guide, one you haven't met before?'). More influential is the role the medium plays in shaping, encouraging, or discouraging student interpretations and articulation of their experiences ('Gold is the colour of spiritual development, he is your guide, he's the guide that brought you here').<sup>96</sup> Anthropologist Irving Zaretsky (1977:202-203) has suggested that it is the role of the medium to guide both the interpretation of the students' experiences, and their articulation of these experiences in the appropriate "argot" or idiom. Over the course

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Protestant-informed North American context.

<sup>96</sup> The leader of the class is only rarely called upon to discourage blatantly a student's behaviour or interpretations. When it does become necessary to discourage a student, this correction is made within an ethical framework which questions the student's own level of spiritual development should the inappropriate behaviour or interpretation persist. One woman in my Lily Dale development class reported she had experienced very pleasurable erotic sensations while in contact with a spirit entity. Tom, the class leader, took this claim quite seriously (after an initial period of surprise), and firmly told the student that only spirits of 'low' vibrations would manipulate a person in such physical way, no matter how 'pleasurable'. The student was told to "block the vibrations" by throwing up a 'bright light of protection,' and to question her own motivations for letting such a 'low vibration' effect her. Within the Spiritualist context, one can only "sense" those spirits at the same "vibrational frequency" as oneself unless a spirit of "higher vibration" expends energy to make contact. Tom was clearly telling the woman that her own level of spiritual development was in question if she continued contact with her 'spirit lover'.

of the development class, students become increasingly sophisticated in expressing and "explaining" their experiences in appropriate ways. They gradually learn the appropriate terms, concepts, and assumptions about reality which form the "idiom" of spirit possession.

### Richard: One Man's Vision

Although one cannot generalize about Spiritualist belief from the experiences of a single individual, such experiences can provide illustrations of how alternate states of consciousness are constructed and articulated in a meaningful fashion within the Spiritualist tradition. As Crapanzano points out (1977:16), the idiom of spirit possession involves "a complex 'negotiation of reality' between the possessed and those about him... Often the particular characteristics [of the idiom] are made manifest during exceptional experiences such as dreams or visions. However private such experiences may be, they, or at least their enunciation, occur within a social setting and are addressed to an other." The communal perception of what does and does not constitute a 'legitimate' possession experience, therefore, interacts with the idiosyncratic characteristics of the individual's own preferences and personality. If the experience is to be accepted as legitimate, it must be structured and articulated in ways acceptable to the idiom of the group.

The following narrative is part of a lengthy visionary experience narrative told to me by Hamilton medium Richard in the fall of 1991. Richard experienced this vision

over the course of four nights.<sup>97</sup> At the time of his experience, he had been participating in development classes at the King Street Church periodically for six years. Shortly after this experience, Richard was asked to take over leadership of the development class at the King Street Church.<sup>98</sup> This evidence of acceptance for Richard's mediumistic ability within the Spiritualist community suggests, therefore, that the following narrative is constructed and articulated in "appropriate" ways:

"Einstein was into morphine for a while, when he was a young man, or a younger man. And  $E = MC^2$  came to him in a vision. Alright? Well I had a vision like that...

I was flying through this space that was black on black everywhere I looked, just darkness. And I was flying on, and far out ahead of me I could see this line of lights, pinpoints, stretching in either direction as far as I could see. And I made my way to the lights and as I came to the lights I saw these symbols. It was a circle with a triangle in it and a

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<sup>97</sup> Goodman (1989:30) suggests that Spiritualist mediumship experiences are similar to shamanic experiences in more traditional cultures. Goodman argues that A.J. Davis' visionary experiences were "shamanic" in nature. Eliade (1964) maintains that 'journeys to the centre of the world' and 'receiving spiritual knowledge,' and 'spiritual death and rebirth' are characteristics of shamanic visions. Richard's vision contains many of the "shamanic" elements defined by Eliade. Richard's vision took place over four nights: on the first night he was shown the 'origins and nature of the universe'; on the second night, he was given the 'key for travelling throughout the astral planes'; on the third night, he experienced his own death ("This sounds ominous, but, like most things, is not necessarily so"); and on the fourth night, was granted specific knowledge to help 'bring about the dawn of a new age.' This knowledge included topics such as "Mass control through combined light/sound techniques" and "Geometry as an inter-dimensional form of Living Sentient Creative Manifestation." The 'style' of the vision may well be shamanic, but the language and symbols of "science" clearly shape both the content and the articulation of the experience.

<sup>98</sup> It is necessary to note here that Richard was not the first choice of the Board of Directors of the King Street Church to take over leadership of the development class. However, according to Richard himself, reservations expressed about his leadership focused on his relative youth and "rock & roll" image rather than his mediumistic abilities.

mathematical formula with these symbols. And all of it was glowing in different colours, and energy moving through it. And I knew that I was looking at... the living embodiment, the power, the essence on which our material reality is contained...

I have seen that when a new cosmos is created, sub-atomic, spiritually and psychically charged particles flow out of the fountain at the 'Feet of God'. These protons, neutrons and electrons are marshalled and directed, focused and condensed into the span created by the opposition of positive and negative. They are further corralled by time and space as polarities, and the intersecting condensation of energy particles becomes so dense that atoms [and] then molecules form and we have materiality.

The marshalling of these forces is overseen by a circle of Twelve Individual Sentiences which are the equivalent of the Angels, but are really co-operative self-aware power curves. [They] use their own unique magnetic abilities to redirect, condense and thereby mould material and psychic form. They also have the power to create soul...

The energies of wisdom and compassion are prime curves, or wavelengths, of the thought form of God. This is where God thinks... in the Psychic Planes and further outward. In the Spirit realms God does not think. God is!

But here God bends things. All things are waves and God attracts or repulses specific wavelengths thereby directing them to a desired target and effect....

It was here that I glimpsed the most glorious of wonders I have ever had the privilege to view. So glorious was the sight, and subsequent revelatory powers, my very next thought shot my Essential Perspective elsewhere. And that is another story..."

Richard's vision cannot be taken as typical of all Spiritualist visions. The content of any individual's religious vision is "idiosyncratic" to a large extent, and as Crapanzano notes (1977:16-17), frequently "mirrors" inner aspects of the visionary's interests and personality in addition to reflecting communal norms for the spirit possessed. Folklorist Lauri Honko (1964) has argued that serious misrepresentations in scholarly literature have resulted when individual experiences were recorded as "beliefs" of the community

at large rather than as individual experiences.<sup>99</sup> Certainly it cannot be concluded from Richard's vision that all Spiritualists conceive of God as a cosmic wavelength manipulator, of angels as sentient power curves, or of the creation of the universe as a compression of spiritually charged protons and electrons. However, Richard's vision is consistent with the idiom of spirit possession taught within the development class. The use of "scientific" language and symbols in Richard's narrative reveal, therefore, the importance and prestige of "science" within the Spiritualist spirit possession idiom.

Crapanzano (1977) has argued that learning the "idiom" of spirit possession involves much more than learning the technical aspects of possession behaviour. It also requires, he writes (1977:10-11), learning the "traditional values, interpretational vectors, patterns of association, ontological presuppositions, spatiotemporal orientations, and etymological horizons... by which reality is interpreted" within the group. Learning to be possessed involves not only how to act and how to speak, therefore, but how to understand reality in a particular way. Through participation in message work services and development classes, Spiritualists learn much more than the technical aspects of spirit possession: they also learn a conceptual framework within which reality can be understood and articulated. The language in which possession experiences are articulated

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<sup>99</sup> Honko (1964:9-10) writes, "Do Ingrians generally believe that the barn spirit drives out those sleeping in the barn? On the basis of a broader body of evidence, it can be demonstrated that this is the case. This belief belongs to the so-called collective tradition. But quite often the result is negative... Quite often the belief is the creation of the collector. What he heard was a memorate, but he recorded the information in his notebook in a generalized form... Works concerning primitive religion are filled with statements which begin, "The Voguls believe..." just as though the belief were the possession of a broad society. The differences between individual and collective traditions are generally given no heed."

is the "medium" through which this conceptual framework becomes evident.<sup>100</sup> In looking at what Spiritualists say, their underlying assumptions about reality are revealed. And it is here, ultimately, as Richard's narrative suggests, that the legitimating discourse of science plays a role.

### Spiritual Vibrations: Mediumship, Language, and Popular Science

According to anthropologist Irving Zaretsky (1970, 1977), if one wishes to understand the structure of Spiritualist churches and the belief system of church members, one must learn the "argot," or specialized language, spoken by Spiritualists.<sup>101</sup> Much of this argot refers specifically to mediumistic phenomena.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Crapanzano (1977:10) suggests that "the idiom [of spirit possession] is probably structured as language [although] it is more than language insofar as the term is used daily". Within the broader meaning of "language" as discussed by Crapanzano are "spoken language, gesture, a behavioral sequence as in ritual, theatre, or the serving of dinner, or some endopsychic process." For Crapanzano, it is spoken language coupled with ritual action which forms the "medium of articulation" of spirit possession. The "idiom" of spirit possession includes language, action, and worldview.

<sup>101</sup> Zaretsky (1970, 1977) is much more interested in the social structure of Spiritualist churches than he is in the belief system of church members. His analysis of Spiritualist argot is undertaken for four reasons (1977): to uncover how appropriate use of specialized language fosters smooth social functioning within churches; to map the social relationships and institutional structure within and between churches; to reveal knowledge about the shifting and anonymous participants of Spiritualist services; and because "the argot is acknowledged by Church participants to reflect the belief system and social organization of the church (1977:168)." The meaning of argot terms is therefore stressed primarily to elucidate social relationships rather than Spiritualist assumptions about "reality".

<sup>102</sup> Zaretsky (1977:206-207) identifies eight "topical categories" of argot terms as "defined by informants": these are 1) manifestations of the spirit world; 2) the place where spirits reside; 3) physical features of spirits; 4) psychic experiences of parishioners; 5) mediumistic practices and related artifacts; 6) individuals who frequent spiritualist churches; 7) problems that individuals bring to the church for resolution; and

Zaretsky (1970, 1977) has identified several hundred specialized words within the argot of contemporary Spiritualism, each of which carries multiple meanings.<sup>103</sup> As Zaretsky (1977:190) notes, much of this vocabulary is shared with other metaphysical and New Age groups.<sup>104</sup> "What separates one group from another," he writes (1970:190), "is the particular meaning given to a term and the rules governing its proper use." During my own fieldwork period, it was necessary to become familiar with the specialized vocabulary used by Spiritualists. Within the Spiritualist context, argot terms have clearly understood, although frequently less clearly defined, meanings. Although Zaretsky does not stress the point, one word in particular, "vibration," forms the central core of mediumistic vocabulary. It is through Spiritualists' usage of this single word that fundamental assumptions regarding the compatibility of science and Spiritualist belief are revealed.<sup>105</sup>

In contemporary Spiritualist usage, the term "vibration" represents both the "fact"

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8) styles of mediumistic contact. Although Zaretsky does not make this point, only categories six and seven do not directly relate to mediumship practice and belief.

<sup>103</sup> Pinning down the exact meaning of argot terms is difficult because, as Zaretsky points out, many of them do not have material referents. As he notes, the "spiritual referents [of argot terms] can quickly transform themselves, and the dimensions describing them at one point in time do not remain constant and may not be valid beyond a certain time depth (1977:189)."

<sup>104</sup> Zaretsky (1977:190) also notes that "current youth culture" shares "a working lexicon" with Spiritualists, including "such terms as karma, reincarnation, rates of vibration, auras, astral travel, soul flight, psychic powers, [and] cosmic consciousness".

<sup>105</sup> Within the framework of his ethno-semantic study of Spiritualism, Zaretsky (1970, 1977) is not concerned to explore the issue of Spiritualism and science. Argot terms are analyzed for what they reveal about social structure and conceptual hierarchies, rather than beliefs about popular science.



and the "theory" of mediumistic phenomenon. The term carries meaning for Spiritualists on two distinct levels. At both of these levels, Spiritualist assumptions about the "scientific" legitimacy of mediumship experiences are expressed. At the primary level of meaning, the term represents "what" mediums experience: vibrations are the "object" of experience when mediums claim to "see" or "sense" spiritual essence. In this usage of the term, Spiritualists assert that the objects of their perception are "real" in an empirically verifiable sense. As Zaretsky (1977) has noted, emic classifications of argot terms include the "physical" characteristics of the objects of mediumistic perception. "Vibrations" are understood as "physical" (i.e., objectively "real") phenomena. The "fact" of their existence is therefore understood as "scientific" fact. Establishing the "fact" of mediumistic perceptions to Spiritualist satisfaction is the first way in which usage of the term "vibration" reveals the continuing importance of "science" for contemporary Spiritualists.

Use of the term "vibration" to represent the objects of mediumistic perception is readily apparent in Spiritualist usage of the term. It is this level of meaning for the term that Zaretsky (1970, 1977) notes in his ethno-semantic study of Spiritualist churches in California.<sup>106</sup> As Zaretsky also notes (1977:187), however, argot terms frequently

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<sup>106</sup> Zaretsky (1977:196-200) notes two "types" of meaning for the term "vibration": as a physical feature of spirits: "With you I have the vibration of a [spirit] woman that's coming in very, very strong..."; and as a problem that people bring to the church for resolution: "'What about vibrations around the office?'" In my own work, I found Spiritualists to use the word in a much more varied fashion. Judging by examples provided by Zaretsky himself, the Spiritualists in his study also used the term in ways not indicated in his categorical lists. For example, Zaretsky (1977:199) writes, "Reverend Cooper crumpled the billet in her hand as a way of psychometrizing it (receiving the vibrations from it which would indicate the nature of the question and

carry meaning beyond surface levels. In my own experiences, the word "vibration" connotes for Spiritualists not just "what" mediums perceive, but also a deeper level of meaning. Spiritualists also convey through their use of the term both "how" and "why" mediums are able to sense the spirits of the dead. In this respect, the word "explains" the process whereby mediumistic perception is possible. In offering an explanation, the term "vibration" expresses the Spiritualist belief that "natural" as opposed to "supernatural" causes underlie mediumistic awareness. Mediums "see" spirit vibrations through a natural, "scientific" process. The term "vibration," therefore, represents both the object of mediumistic perception and the "explanation" for it. Both levels of meaning assert the "scientific" nature of mediumistic experience.

#### "Vibration" as "Fact"

As the "object" of mediumistic awareness, the term "vibration" refers to any non-corporeal entity and various emotional or mental patterns perceived by Spiritualist mediums. As Zaretsky notes (1977:207), for example, it represents a "physical" feature of spirit entities when used in a context such as, 'I have with me a grandmotherly vibration.' In this sense of the term, "vibration" is synonymous with the word "spirit." As Zaretsky also notes (1977:207), the term can represent a problematic emotional

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establish the appropriate contact with spirit for an answer.)" In this sense, "vibrations" refers neither to 'a physical feature of spirits' nor to 'a problem' needing solution, but rather to an "energy signal" which the billet "radiates" and the medium "receives" - bringing this usage of the term much closer to the second level of meaning identified in my own research.

"residue," as in the context 'The house was filled with bad vibrations.'<sup>107</sup> The word is also used to represent the spiritual "energy" of living people, when used in the context, 'She has a high (or low) vibration,' or 'May I come into your vibration?''<sup>108</sup> In this usage, the term is synonymous with "aura," the energy field believed by Spiritualists to surround all living things. A person's aura reflects his or her physical, mental and spiritual status, and must be "read" or "entered" before a medium can psychically "sense" the questions or problems troubling church members. As an "object" of Spiritualist perception, therefore, the term "vibration" has numerous possible referents.<sup>109</sup> Learning to use the term properly in this sense of the word involves

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<sup>107</sup> Zaretsky uses this meaning of the term only in a negative sense: that is, vibrations can be "problems" when a house or place of work is filled with "bad" ones. However, in my own work, the term was also used to refer to positive emotional "residue," as in the phrase, "sing loudly to raise the vibrations." In Lily Dale medium Roy's narrative recounted later in the chapter, the use of vibrations in a positive context is apparent. Referring to "good" and "bad" vibrations is very much one aspect of Spiritualist argot shared with contemporary youth culture, as Zaretsky (1977:190) notes.

<sup>108</sup> When a medium "reads" a person's vibration or aura, they "sense" details about the person's mental, physical, and spiritual well-being. When a medium "reads" a spirit's vibration, the spiritual well-being or lack thereof is also "sensed." Spiritualists therefore speak in terms of spirits or people with "high" or "low" vibrations. In this sense of the word, "vibration" refers to degrees of spiritual attainment as well as to the "energy field" that the term aura implies.

<sup>109</sup> Because these referents are non-material, one must question whether Spiritualists intend their use of the term "vibration" as a literal or a metaphorical description of the "object" of mediumistic perception. Philosophers of religion such as Blackstone (1972), Broiles (1972), Smart (1978) and others have argued that in attempting to express the ineffable in the language of ordinary experience, all religious language becomes of necessity metaphorical. Similarly, theologian and philosopher of science Ian Barbour (1990) and mathematician John L. Casti (1990) have argued that all scientific language and theories are "analogical" or metaphorical, for "uninterpreted reality" cannot be described. Spiritualists appear to use the term "vibration" in both the metaphorical and the literal sense. For example, claims that "spiritual vibrations" are "like" sound or light waves implies a metaphorical interpretation, while the claim that mediumistic contact

learning what is and is not "possible" to perceive within the Spiritualist mediumship context. Those "objects" which are open to Spiritualist perception are then understood to be "facts"; that is, to be "real" in an empirically verifiable, "scientific" sense.

As noted in Chapter One, it has been suggested by numerous sociologists of science and orthodox scientific authors that two of the most common "misconceptions" of science are the perception of science as 'factual' and the perception of science as 'exact' - that is, as accurately describing reality 'as it truly is' (Barnes 1985; Bloor 1971; Casti 1989; Collins and Pinch 1982; Handlin 1972; McCain and Segal 1982). Spiritualists reveal both of these "misconceptions" in their attempts to assert the scientific legitimacy of their beliefs. Establishing the "factual" nature of Spiritualist experience has formed the basis of Spiritualist claims to scientific legitimacy since the nineteenth century.<sup>110</sup> Attempts to establish the "fact" of Spiritualist phenomena in the past have relied primarily upon the presentation of the testimony of reputable witnesses.<sup>111</sup> As sociologist of science Barry Barnes (1985) notes, attempts to establish something as "fact" based on the testimony of witnesses is a long-standing practice within emergent or 'fringe' scientific traditions. He writes (1985:51), "the testimony of [reputable]

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with spirits results from "two wave forms vibrating at compatible frequencies" may well be intended literally.

<sup>110</sup> For a discussion of these claims, see Chapter One. See also Britten (1870, 1884); Doyle (1919, 1921, 1926); Hill (1918) and Underhill (1885).

<sup>111</sup> Historically, Spiritualists also drew upon "cumulative" and "negative" evidence to "prove" their claims. 'Cumulative evidence,' according to Hill (1918:133-134), is "based not on a crucial test, but on a large mass of accumulated observations..." 'Negative evidence,' according to Doyle (1926[1]:76), results when achieving "negative or disordered results [during test seances] actually confirmed" rather than undermined Spiritualist claims.

witnesses... [and] agreement amongst many witnesses was taken as a sign that what was agreed to was indeed a genuine fact... that every man in a group of witnesses would testify to having observed a phenomenon was taken to show that... the phenomenon was really there, a fact of nature."

Contemporary Spiritualists attempt to assert the "fact" of spirit "vibrations" by providing "proof" that what they perceive is "real" in an objective, ontological sense. Assertions that more than one medium can "see" or experience the *same* phenomenon are one way in which the "factual" nature of the objects of mediumistic perception is established. For example, students in mediumship development classes learn to support one another's visions and interpretations in ways that reinforce the objective "fact" of what is perceived. Personal narratives are also frequently structured in such a way that supportive testimony of others is provided.<sup>112</sup> As Barnes (1985:48-49) notes, from the standards of orthodox science the evidential value of testimony is weak, but within popular perceptions of science, agreement of testimony is sufficient to establish the "scientific fact" of the phenomenon observed (Barnes 1985; Casti 1989; McCain and Segal 1982).<sup>113</sup>

Both the use of the term "vibration" to refer to the "objects" of mediumistic

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<sup>112</sup> For a discussion of the value of evidential witnesses in Spiritualist personal experience narratives, see Chapter Four.

<sup>113</sup> As Barnes also notes, however, unofficially within orthodox science, the testimony of witnesses does carry evidential weight, provided, of course, that the witnesses are orthodox scientists themselves. As Barnes writes (1985:49), "For something to count as a scientific fact it must [simply] be observed by a qualified scientist...".

perception, and the use of supportive testimony to establish the "fact" of such perception, can be seen in the following narrative of an elderly Lily Dale medium named Roy. Roy related the following narrative as one of the "many, many, many hundreds of wonderful proofs of Spirit" he had experienced during his lifetime. Many of these "proofs" came during meditation in a small meditation chamber in an upstate New York church of which his friend was minister. Roy told me:

"One room [had] no windows in it, there was just a door, and it was just a plain room. There was really no light in it, and no chairs... We used to go in there, just the two of us, just him and I... And we would meditate, and kind of tell one another what we see, and so-forth. And we would see the same things, he'd say what he saw, and oh, we used to see some of the most beautiful colours, the most beautiful beings, the highest of [spirit] vibrations, that would come in. They were just breathtaking, you would just hold your breath, they were so beautiful you know. And we would tell one another what we saw, and we always saw the same colours, and the same things..."<sup>114</sup>

And finally, the room would build up to a point where it was just as bright as day... The power was so strong, that of course you couldn't stand it for too long a time, you know, being [that] the vibration [was] so high. When you build yourself up to that particular height you can only go so far, and you can only stand it so long, which isn't very long. It seems like a long time, but [was] probably five or ten minutes at the very most. And we'd come out of there just filled with that energy, that magnetism, you'd just be walking on air.

And if you were not highly magnetized, or spiritualized, if your vibration wasn't high enough, you couldn't even stand it. It would take your breath away even to step in the door. Now my wife, as well as she

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<sup>114</sup> According to Zaretsky (1977:203), the word "colour" in a context similar to this one is often synonymous with "spirit." Roy continues this narrative beyond what is included here to describe the "colours" that he and his friend "saw," while meditating. Roy links his discussion of "colours" to a discussion of degrees of spiritual attainment, anthropomorphizing the "colours" in ways which support Zaretsky's analysis of the term. Consequently, I feel justified in inserting the bracketed word "spirit" in front of the term "vibration" in this context.

was [spiritually] advanced and all, she would see that light, and she was going to go in there too. She stepped inside one time, and she said, "oh, let me out of here, I can't breathe!" She couldn't stand it. But then again, I could, and I enjoyed it..."<sup>115</sup>

Roy uses the term "vibration" in this narrative in three ways. He uses the term to refer to 'spirit beings,' to 'spiritual energy,' and to 'degrees of spiritual attainment.' In his narrative, both Roy and his minister friend saw the same 'spirit vibrations,' whenever they meditated together in the meditation chamber. The "fact" that both saw the "same" things is intended to assure that these "objects" are "real" in an empirical sense. Both Roy and his friend could both also "stand" the level of "vibration" in the room. His wife, who was spiritually "advanced and all," could "see" the light in the room, thereby reinforcing the "fact" of its objective reality, but she could not enter the room because she was not "magnetized" sufficiently. She was spiritually advanced enough to "see" the "vibrations," in other words, but did not have a "high" enough "vibration" to "stand" the "vibrations" which built up in the room. Her failure to "stand" the high vibrations also serves to "prove" that those vibrations were really there, a fact of nature: if not, she could surely have entered the room without difficulty. Roy's narrative is therefore structured in such a way as to provide supportive evidence to "prove" that what he experienced in that room was "real" in an objective sense. The

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<sup>115</sup> Many of Roy's narratives dealt with the relationship between himself and his wife, who had "passed" by the time I met Roy in 1991. Judging by the content of many of his narratives, Roy's wife was generally considered the more "advanced" medium of the two. This narrative is interesting, therefore, in implying the spiritual inferiority of his wife. In the context of the body of narratives which Roy related to me at the same time, the narrative acts as "proof" that she was not as advanced as she (and others) had apparently thought. An analysis of the body of Roy's narratives as "proofs" would therefore be fruitful to pursue at a later date.

"fact" of his experience is established because others saw and experienced identical things.

For many Spiritualists, if something is established as "fact," it is then understood without question to be "scientific" fact. As has been argued, popular perceptions of science frequently misconceive of "science" as "factual" and as descriptive of reality "as it truly is." Any true "fact," any "real" object, must therefore be "scientific" within such perceptions, for "reality" is what "science" describes.<sup>116</sup> Because vibrations are real for Spiritualists, the "fact" of their existence is therefore understood as "scientific" fact.<sup>117</sup> As a result, "scientists" become an ideal source of evidential testimony to "prove" the "fact" of mediumistic phenomena. Although "test" seances and scientific investigations into Spiritualist phenomena are a thing of the past, many Spiritualists insist that "scientists" have in fact "proved" the existence of spirit vibrations.<sup>118</sup> The prestige

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<sup>116</sup> As discussed in Chapter One, representatives of orthodox science such as Donald Campbell (1988a, 1988b, 1989) also see science as "descriptive of reality." However, where Campbell acknowledges that scientific "facts" are consensually determined within the social boundaries of orthodox science, in popular perceptions, scientific "facts" are understood as ontologically "out there," independent of social factors.

<sup>117</sup> The objective reality of "vibrations" is such that for Lily Dale medium Mark, they actually exist within a physical context. In talking about God's love, for example, Mark said, "God's love is an actual material, an actual substance, its comparable to spiritual radium. It's the highest vibrational substance in the universe. When somebody has it in their soul, they'll glow, just like God is a great glowing mass... And when they have it in their soul, it changes the quality of the soul, because it replaces human love, natural love, with love of a higher vibration. And two things can't exist in the same place at the same time, so divine love replaces human love..."

<sup>118</sup> Spiritualists have a large body of folklore regarding what "scientists" have proved, and how "scientists" are too narrow minded to accept the results of their own tests. These stories are clearly part of a body of urban legends, however, rather than personal or family narratives (Bennett 1989; Georges 1961, 1971; Robinson 1981; Stahl 1977, 1983, 1985, 1989). During the course of the fieldwork, most of the Spiritualists



and authority of "scientists" within the Spiritualist context is drawn upon to legitimate the claim that spirit vibrations are objectively "real." The following narrative by Toronto medium Michael reveals the conceptual link between the truth or "fact" of mediumistic perceptions, and "science." He explained:

"Science tells us you can feel vibration through your senses. And also science tells us that for instance, if I could see your voice or you could see my voice you would actually see colour. It's true. There's actually a person in Toronto, scientists made her a machine that when people speak into the mike, their colour/energy patterns shows up, ok? So vibration is just energy, that is being produced by light. Like, every cell in your body has colour to it, there's a whole rainbow there. And that means it's light, and it's vibration. Vibration is colour, vibration is actually change... Vibration is just the universe changing. Now, there's something called a bubble chamber, that scientifically, some scientists came up with, to scientifically prove that. So vibration is just energy, change, light..."

As Zaretsky notes (1977:188-189), terms such as vibration are difficult to define because they "do not have demonstrable material referents."<sup>119</sup> Spiritualists themselves often have a difficult time defining argot terms to outsiders for this very reason.<sup>120</sup>

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with whom I worked had heard and could repeat various stories of this type, but none had ever personally participated in or read about such scientific tests or knew anyone personally who had done so.

<sup>119</sup> Other terms which Zaretsky identifies as 'without demonstrable referents' are "spirit, spiritual, sensitive, psychic, [and] clairvoyant".

<sup>120</sup> Zaretsky (1970:186) suggests that argot terms are not clearly defined by Spiritualists because "the argot is a secret and sensitive area." In my own fieldwork, I did not find Spiritualists protective of their argot for this reason. Rather, the Spiritualists with whom I worked took the meanings and usages of their argot terms so much for granted, it rarely occurred to them that these terms might need explanation. According to anthropologist T.M. Luhrmann (1989), neo-pagan initiates adopt the conceptual (and linguistic) framework of their groups gradually over time through a process she calls "interpretive drift." This process happens so slowly that initiates are not aware that their perceptions have changed. I suggest that in a similar way, Spiritualists come to adopt the meaning of argot terms so gradually that the specialized usages are simply taken for

Nevertheless, it is clear from the above passage that when Michael speaks of "vibrations," he is attempting to describe something that has ontological "reality." His assurance that "scientists" had built "machines" that could record the existence of vibrations reveals the implicit assumption of many Spiritualists that all true "facts" are "scientific" facts. Since Spiritualists are convinced that spirit vibrations are indeed "facts," proven through scientific means, Spiritualist claims therefore become "scientifically" true from this perspective.

Not everyone, however, can "see" spirit vibrations. Spiritualists recognize that this makes establishing the "fact" of the existence of vibrations difficult. Evidential testimony is valuable in this regard, but it is not always considered sufficient to "prove" beyond question the scientific legitimacy of Spiritualist belief. Spiritualists acknowledge that the uninitiated cannot "see" vibrations in the way that trained Spiritualist mediums perceive them, and so many Spiritualists seek other means to "prove" the "fact" of their existence. According to science writers Garvin McCain and Erwin Segal (1982:55), the principle known as "intersubjective testability," (where more than one person must, in principle, be able to describe an event before it can be considered a scientific "fact,") is an important criterion of "science."<sup>121</sup> Mediumistic perceptions are not intersubjectively testable *per se*, and consequently do not constitute "scientifically

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granted, and the shift in meaning from standard English usage to Spiritualist usage goes unnoticed.

<sup>121</sup> As McCain and Segal (1982:55) note, "It is rather difficult to describe accurately what can be included as... intersubjectively testable events. Informally, what is important is that the event described can be witnessed by more than one person and that the description of the event can be understood by most other people."

observable events" within the confines established by orthodox science. Although Spiritualists do not use the language of "intersubjective testability," many do recognize that establishing the "fact" of spirit existence is difficult when most people cannot even "see" the phenomenon in question.<sup>122</sup> Evidential testimony is not always sufficient to "prove" the "fact" of spirit existence, therefore, and other means of providing "proof" must be found.

According to McCain and Segal(1982:56), while the principle of intersubjective testability excludes subjective experiences from the realm of "scientific fact," secondary "events" which support subjective experiences and are observable by more than one person can be acceptable.<sup>123</sup> This distinction between subjective and objective "facts" is one which many Spiritualists recognize. Spiritualists insist that everyone has the potential to "see" Spirit, but they also recognize that many people have yet to do so. In order to establish the "fact" of mediumistic perceptions, therefore, and in order to assert that these facts are in accord with science, many Spiritualist mediums have adopted standards of verifiability that "test" the legitimacy of their perceptions not only against

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<sup>122</sup> An Asian-Canadian woman named Mae, who attended the Main Street Church's peer-development class, told me, 'I still kind of think in that way. Until you see them, you'd don't ever believe it, not in here [her heart], and not everyone can see them, or at least not easily, which is why I think they don't accept us at all. I mean, I can't [see spirits] anyway, and I've been trying. I know that others do see them, but still, I'd like to see for myself. Seeing is believing, I guess...'

<sup>123</sup> McCain and Segal write (1982:56): "It is interesting to note that sensations and pains do not meet this criterion [for intersubjective testability]; they cannot be witnessed by more than one person. But reports of sensations and pains are acceptable [and] if hypothesized... can be associated with observable consequences, such as a change of EEG patterns and rapid eye movements, as well as verbal reports."

the perceptions of other mediums, but against intersubjectively testable referents in the material world.

"Testing the spirits" is an essential part of the teaching in mediumship development classes. Messages from Spirit are understood to constitute "proof" of continued existence after bodily death. As such, both the source and content of messages must be open to verification if the "fact" of mediumistic perception is to be established.<sup>124</sup> Alternative explanations for Spiritualist perceptions are always possible, and consequently the "truth" of the spirit hypothesis requires empirical support.<sup>125</sup> Lily Dale development class leader Tom told his students that not all messages come from Spirit. Some, he pointed out, come from the medium's own subconscious mind.<sup>126</sup> He told us,

"It's not that those thoughts can't be right also. It's only, when you stand on the platform and claim to speak for Spirit, you must be sure you are

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<sup>124</sup> Not all messages are subjected to "testing" and verification - in fact, very few messages given during message work services are specific enough to be "tested" against referents in the material world. However, students in the development class are taught that testing is advisable and must at least be possible before one claims to "speak" for "Spirit".

<sup>125</sup> Spiritualists are not necessarily naive: alternative explanations for Spiritualist phenomena are always possible, including the possibility of fraud. As Lily Dale medium and healer Joel once said in reference to the trance mediumship of another medium, "I've seen better acting on "The Brady Bunch!," a clear indication that seeing is not necessarily believing for Spiritualists. Spiritualists prefer to accept the spiritualistic explanation for phenomena, however, should empirical referents be available. As Hamilton medium Richard told me, "Too many weird things have happened to me for me to discount it [the spirit hypothesis]. I've been told too many things that have turned out to be true to ignore what my guides are telling me. I'm not saying there aren't other explanations. But this is the one that makes the most sense to me."

<sup>126</sup> For an analysis of spirit possession experiences as symptomatic of subconscious fears, frustrations and desires, see Macklin (1977) and Obeyesekere (1977).

speaking for Spirit... When you heard those voices, did you know it was Spirit? You must test them out. Ah, suppose Sister Mary comes. Sister Mary tells me strange things, and I think maybe I've lost my marbles. "Ok, Sister Mary, tell me. Where were you born? Where'd you come from? If you can tell me all that stuff.... you can identify yourself. Let's go check it out. Where were you buried?" You understand? Test the spirits! The Bible says, test the spirits! For God's sake people, test the spirits! If they can't stand the test, to hell with them!"<sup>127</sup>

For Spiritualists, the point of "testing" the spirits is to establish that mediumistic perceptions are genuinely true in an empirically verifiable sense. When a Spiritualist medium claims to perceive a "grandmotherly vibration," for example, s/he is making a truth claim about the objective reality of the spirit entity, based on a subjective experience. Although such experiences are subjective, the spirit itself is considered objectively real, and hence a "scientific fact."<sup>128</sup> Since the perception of spirit vibrations is not intersubjectively testable, however, the "truth" of spirit existence must be verified in other ways. By "testing" the spirits, secondary "objective" evidence, such

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<sup>127</sup> Hamilton medium Richard, who led the King Street Church's development class for a period of several months near the end of the fieldwork period, also stressed the importance of "testing the spirits" if one wishes wants to know the "truth" of mediumistic perceptions. He suggested that there are at least three possible explanations for such perceptions, and argued that they must be "tested" in order to ascertain the truth of their origin. He said, "Test them. Qualify them. Either the messages are from Spirit, in which case I'm right. Or they're the product of my own mind, in which case I'm more horribly unsound than I thought. Or they have some other natural explanation, like telepathy or precognition, eh?"

<sup>128</sup> Some Spiritualists, such as Spiritualist author Rev. Bernard Baker (1991), go so far as to insist that the "fact" of mediumistic phenomena is indistinguishable from the "spirit hypothesis" used by Spiritualists to identify "what" they "see." He writes (1991:10): "From the very first manifestation of the phenomena of Spiritualism to the last, the cause or source of the phenomena [i.e. spirit entities] has been manifest as the phenomena [i.e. as vibrations; materializations; etc.]."

as records of birth and death for the spirit in question, becomes potentially obtainable.<sup>129</sup> While the experience of communication with the spirits of the dead is in itself subjective, therefore, Spiritualists believe that objective evidence of mediumistic claims is available. As a consequence, most Spiritualists believe that the "fact" of spirit existence can be "scientifically" established through empirical means. While orthodox scientists argue that the perception of "science" as "factual" is a misconception, within popular perceptions of science establishing an event as "factual" or objectively "true" is enough in and of itself to establish the "scientific" nature of the phenomena in question.<sup>130</sup> "Testing the spirits" therefore allows Spiritualists to claim "objective" as well as testimonial "proof" of their perceptions.

### "Vibration" as Explanation

Establishing the "fact" or objective reality of Spiritualist perceptions is not the only way in which Spiritualists reveal the importance and prestige of science through their use of the term "vibration." As mentioned, "vibration" conveys for Spiritualists not

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<sup>129</sup> During the fieldwork period, the only time that Spiritualists told me they had actually "checked" such things as birth and death records was in the case of "ghost" sightings, rather than for "normal" mediumistic communication with the spirits of the dead. When mediums such as Tom speak of "testing" the spirits, therefore, the insistence is simply that the spirit's identity and the "truth" of the spirit's messages must be testable "in principle."

<sup>130</sup> McCain and Segal (1982:13) suggest that as a result of common misconceptions of science, 'truth' and 'science' are often equated, if not confused. Within popular perceptions of science, if an observation or perception is 'true,' it must also be scientific. As Barrow (1986:143) notes with reference to the nineteenth century, this perception is certainly part of how Spiritualists understand "science". As Barrow also notes, however, orthodox scientists have never accepted this claim.

just "what" mediums perceive, but "how" and "why" Spiritualist mediums are able to sense the spirits of the dead. At this deeper level of meaning, the word "explains" the process whereby mediumistic perception is possible. According to science writers Garvin McCain and Erwin Segal (1982:67), a scientific explanation is "more than a description of events... [a scientific] explanation requires an interpretation of what the events are and an indication of the reason they occur the way they do". Through their use of the term "vibration," Spiritualists are articulating their perception of both "what" mediumistic phenomena are, and "how" and "why" they occur.<sup>131</sup> The explanation provided through this usage of the term is perceived as "scientific" because it shows how mediumistic perception "works" in terms of natural as opposed to "supernatural" causation. Spirit vibrations are "spiritual" in nature, but the mediumistic perception of them occurs through natural, explainable means.

When Spiritualists use the term "vibration" to explain mediumistic perception, they are no longer defining the term as "object," but as "action." Quite frequently, attempts to define the term "vibration" shift between "object" and "action" without the

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<sup>131</sup> According to philosopher Philip Clayton (1989:89-90), "Explanations are answers to why-questions." He suggests that scientific explanations and religious explanations do not differ so much in which questions are asked, as they do in what answers are given. A scientific explanation, he suggests, will give an account of why something happened the way it did by referring to empirical data and natural laws. For example, "In order to explain the fact or 'explanandum' that two magnets move together in a certain manner, one will give an account of why they did so, referring to the laws of magnetic attraction and the way that these particular magnets were aligned..." A religious explanation, on the other hand, "will include reference to the activity of the divine in or behind [an] event." Since Spiritualists insist that mediumistic perceptions are "natural" rather than "supernatural" or "divine" in origin, they are clearly trying to provide "scientific" rather than "religious" explanations for their experiences - despite failing to do so according to the standards of orthodox science.

apparent notice of the Spiritualists themselves. For example, when I asked Lily Dale medium and healer Joel to explain to me what a spiritual vibration "was," his answer shifted from a focus on "what" to a focus on "how," and back again. He said, "Vibration is static. It's something I actually sense, internally, a sense of internal movement, like sound waves that I tend not to experience auditorily so much as kinaesthetically. Like light, although it gets translated for me, I don't actually see it with my eyes, I just know where it is. Vibration is... vibration. Alterations in the wavelengths of energy that each person emits, and that some people are sensitive to."

Likewise, Hamilton medium Richard provided a very similar definition of "vibration." "Vibrations," he told me, are "signals of energy which strike our own energy systems and create a vibrational pattern or resonance. We communicate with the Spirit World as two wave forms vibrating at compatible frequencies." He later went on to say,

"Now, when we heal, when we take messages, or give messages, when we communicate with beings in a dimension that is removed from our everyday existence, we are opening ourselves up to receive a specific energy wavelength..."<sup>132</sup>

There is always an alternating current going back and forth, and as you practice, you can open yourself up and slip yourself into that stream [of energy]. So the stream goes through you, back and forth, and as you become conscious of whatever information is being carried on that stream, you become able to channel it off and direct a small amount of that stream... You attune the frequency of your thought patterning to the

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<sup>132</sup> According to many Spiritualists, the "spirit world" is not so much a different "place," as it is many different "dimensions". Richard refers here to the idea that "spirit worlds" and the "material world" occupy the same "space" and "time," rather like transparencies piled on top of one another. Each is usually invisible to the other, but sometimes communication between dimensions is possible.



frequency that you already find there..."

Both of these answers draw upon the idea that "vibration" is the action or motion of energy. "Sensing vibrations" is the process of receiving energy signals or "wavelengths" from spirit sources or from the "auras" of other living beings. Mediumistic perception is a matter of "tuning" one's "vibration" to match that of the being one wishes to communicate with. Spirit guides have very "high" vibrations, and as such must "lower" them in order to communicate with the living.<sup>133</sup> The vibrations of the living differ according to the degree of spiritual attainment each person has achieved. Spiritualist mediums can "see" spirit vibrations, and "read" auras because each emits a vibrational 'signal' that the medium has been trained to 'receive.' There is a cause and effect relationship implied in this usage of the term "vibration," therefore, which avoids any "supernatural" overtones.<sup>134</sup> Mediums don't simply instantaneously and inexplicably "know" what spirits think; rather, they "know" because they have

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<sup>133</sup> Not all Spiritualists accept the idea that "vibrations" are something "physical" which can be measured or manipulated in a materialistic sense. Spiritualist author Norman Blunsdon (1963:63) accuses most Spiritualists of misusing the term "vibration". He writes, "To reduce the spirit world to time and space concepts, is to make it of the same order of existence as the physical world... Spirit beings, to contact our environment do not have to do anything mysterious physically, like 'lowering their vibrations,' they contact us *as spirit* - 'behind' our sense impressions of space and time." Blunsdon, however, is in the minority on this point. In fact, Blunsdon's position actually provides support for the argument made here that many Spiritualists *do* perceive "vibrations" as "physical" or objectively "real," and do perceive the process of "seeing" vibrations as a natural process of attuning 'vibrational frequencies'.

<sup>134</sup> Richard and Adato (1980:187-188) quote one Lily Dale woman whose ideas support this point. As she told them, "There is no such thing as a miracle - all things exist and operate in obedience to the laws of nature. A miracle extends reason beyond natural laws... this we cannot and do not accept."

attuned their "vibrational frequency" to that of the spirit entity, allowing messages to be received.<sup>135</sup>

According to mathematician John L. Casti (1990:61), "science is defined in terms of *how* and *why* we know something, not *what* we know." Scientific explanations of "how" and "why" things "work" require, as Casti (1990:14) notes, a system of organizing principles in which isolated facts "are encapsulated into empirical relationships, or laws, which in turn are embedded in larger explanatory theories."<sup>136</sup> Scientific explanations, in other words, depend upon analysis of the empirical relationships between events and the construction of a theory to explain this chain of events. Astrophysicist Philip Morrison (1972:278-280) argues that if orthodox science is to accept "any hypothesis, however plausible or implausible... [the standards of] scientific evidence [require] the analysis of chains of events capable of satisfying a link

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<sup>135</sup> Moore (1977:228) has suggested that nineteenth and early twentieth century Spiritualists vehemently rejected the frequently applied label of "occult" to their beliefs because occultism implied for Spiritualists that spiritual knowledge was achieved through mysterious and supernatural means. Spiritualist knowledge, in contrast, was "'a true spiritual science'... that could be 'tested, proved and admitted by all competent persons.'" In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such knowledge was conceived to be transmitted by means of the 'Spiritual telegraph'. Today, it is seen as being transmitted by matching 'vibrational frequencies'. In both contexts, the method of transmission is understood as "natural" rather than "occult".

<sup>136</sup> Facts, laws, and theories in orthodox science must all be empirically based: that is, must all draw upon natural rather than supernatural evidence for support. The empirical basis of orthodox science is not universal across all disciplines, however. Particles in quantum physics, for example, are not directly demonstrable empirically. Similarly, mathematical formulas are not empirically based. However, as McCain and Segal (1982:42) note, "It is the *method* of attainment of knowledge that determines whether one is playing the game [of science] according to the rules," and those rules are empirically based in the scientific method, which begins, as Casti (1990:13) points out, with empirical observations of data.

by link test of meaning." The key distinction between theories that become "scientifically" acceptable (at least in principle) and those that are rejected, according to sociologist James McClenon (1984:52-53), is that "acceptable" theories incorporate some attempt at a "mechanistic" explanation of events.<sup>137</sup> McClenon writes (1984:55),

The idea of a "mechanistic" explanation seems to involve a description of how interrelated parts operate together in a machinelike fashion... scientists *do* value and seek explanations which explain the interaction of components of a system in a machinelike fashion, and... "apparent" verification of hypotheses derived from "mechanistic" theories leads to success in the process of argumentation. This [can subsequently] contribute to the reclassification of "extraordinary" claims into "accepted" ones.

When Spiritualists use the term "vibration" to explain mediumistic perception, they are attempting to describe the "mechanism" which links the "fact" of spirit existence to the "fact" of mediumistic perception through a causally connected chain of events.

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<sup>137</sup> According to sceptical scientist George R. Price (1978), "science" links events through natural causal processes, while "magic" ignores any causal links. Although a discussion of the religion/science/magic debate is beyond the scope of this dissertation, the distinction which Price makes in this regard is interesting. He writes (1978:152-153): "Let us compare scientific and magical methods of table levitation. A scientist sits in his living room and says: "Table, rise." His speech pattern is portrayed on the screen of a visible speech apparatus. Photo-tubes observe the pattern through masks of appropriate shapes. A switch is closed, turning on an enormous electromagnet on the floor above. This attracts an iron plate concealed within the table top, and the table rises to the ceiling. Similarly, the magician says: "Table, rise." And the table rises. The difference is that there is no iron plate, no electromagnet, no switch, and no speech interpretation apparatus... In the scientific process, each successive detail is provided for. In the magic process, there are just the wish and the result, and all intermediate steps are omitted... The essence of science is mechanism. The essence of magic is animism." Price (1977:153) suggests in fact that "the essential characteristic of magic is that phenomena occur that can be most easily be explained in terms of action by invisible intelligent beings." Spiritualist mediumistic phenomena would therefore be considered "magic" under this definition, but the Spiritualists with whom I worked would reject this categorization.

Although such an explanation would never be considered "scientific" by the standards of orthodox science, within Spiritualist perceptions of science, the "explanation" implicit in the term "vibration" is a "scientific" one.

The attempt to explain the "mechanism" or process of mediumistic perception can be seen in the following exchange that took place as part of a group discussion in Lily Dale in the fall of 1991. The passage is significant because the narrator disclaims any knowledge of or interest in "science," and yet presents an "explanation" of "vibration" which she assumes is "scientific."

Q: When you said you could "sense her vibrations," what did you mean exactly?

Leah: Well, everything in the whole world is energy. Everything is a form of pulsating energy. You knew that, right? And our thoughts and our feelings are all part of this energy field. And we're all vibrating at different rates. So if you put yourself into a different vibratory field, you can pick up the things that are in that vibratory field.

Q: So if you do a reading, you are as they say, "entering someone else's vibration"?

Leah: Well, what we learned in Carol's [development] class, 'cause she's very practical and down to earth, she says [first] you roll in your own aura. I roll it in... like a fishing rod. I roll in my own energy field, and bring it in, the whole thing. And then you take this energy, and I have no idea [how] - I have no understanding of science or anything but that's okay, because I don't care - and it goes into your aura. And I'm kinda like in your aura at that point... Some people can feel the energy as it changes, too. But it's all a matter of energy, 'tuning in the knobs,' or something like that. You tune it in by your vibratory level, which I think is your spiritual thoughts, don't you think? That's what changes your vibration, are your spiritual thoughts or not your spiritual thoughts.

According to Leah, when she 'senses' someone's 'vibrations,' there is a very real chain of events that takes place to make this perception possible. This 'chain of events'

includes the 'rolling in' of her own energy field; the projection of that field away from herself toward the person she wishes to 'read'; the metaphorical 'tuning in the knobs' that allows her to adapt her 'vibratory level' to that of the other person; and then the reception of knowledge contained within the other person's energy field. This chain of events was taught to Leah in her mediumship development class, and her uncertain grasp of the process is, in her own words, a result of the fact that she 'has no understanding of science or anything' to help make her comprehension clearer. The implication in Leah's disclaimer is that the process of 'sensing' another's "vibrations" can be explained "scientifically." Despite Leah's lack of interest in "science," she assumes that there is in fact a 'mechanism' which underlies mediumistic perception. While the very basis of mediumistic perception lies in the ability to communicate with "spirits," Leah does not appeal to animistic forces to "explain" how mediumship "works." When Leah uses the term "vibration," this entire "mechanistic" explanation is inherent in her usage of the term.<sup>138</sup>

Spiritualists do not often "define" their argot terms to the degree found in the few

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<sup>138</sup> In his discussion of parapsychology as "deviant science," McClenon (1984:186-187) argues that the search for "mechanisms" to explain parapsychological phenomena is a key element in parapsychologists' attempts to present parapsychology as 'scientifically legitimate.' "In the search for mechanisms," he writes, "the assumption is that, through diligent investigation, factors conducive to psi will be uncovered, replicability of experimentation can then be increased, and a valid theory explaining the factors which are psi conducive will emerge... This orientation hypothesizes that psi will eventually either be integrated within mainstream science through this uncovering of its physical mechanisms or else science will be changed by the parapsychological research effort." Contemporary Spiritualists are not as sophisticated in their attempts to discover the "mechanism" behind mediumistic phenomena as parapsychologists are to find the mechanism behind psi, but the motivating factor - the search for at least the appearance of scientific legitimacy - appears to be the same.

examples above. The definitions are learned through usage and example, and Spiritualists simply come to "know" what the terms mean. When I asked Lily Dale medium Roy if he could tell me what the term "vibration" meant, for example, he responded by looking at me blankly for a few moments, and then demanded, as if the term was clearly self-explanatory, "Well, you know what a vibration is, don't you?" Crapanzano (1977:11) suggests that this taken-for-grantedness is an essential characteristic of spirit possession idioms.<sup>139</sup> When Spiritualists use the term "vibration," therefore, they rarely contextualize it in the manner of the examples given above. More frequently, the meaning of the term is implied in the usage of the term, and one must simply be familiar with what Spiritualists "mean" if one wishes to understand what Spiritualists say.<sup>140</sup> For example, the usage of the term "vibration" as "explanation" is implied rather than fully articulated in the following statement of American medium John. According to John, "When a spirit doctor comes in to work,

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<sup>139</sup> When Crapanzano (1977:11) discusses the taken-for-grantedness of elements of the idiom, he is not referring to the language, grammar or logic of spirit possession, but rather to the "cultural units" of which the idiom is constructed. The spirit entities themselves are one "principle element" of the idiom which Crapanzano notes is a "given within the world of the believer." For Crapanzano, words are only vehicles for articulating the idiom of spirit possession, not part of the idiom itself. For Spiritualists, however, the word "vibration" encapsulates both the "what" and "why" of spirit possession, and as such does indeed reveal the traditional values, interpretations and presuppositions which Crapanzano identifies as "embedded within the idiom" of spirit possession.

<sup>140</sup> Zaretsky (1977:214) argues that "Concepts or objects presented to the public at large are more heavily articulated... while concepts or objects reserved for the faithful are least elaborated." Since the term "vibration" is clearly a specialized term in the Spiritualist context, the lack of concrete definition is perhaps understandable in this respect.

he has come in on a spirit vibration that is still alike physical vibration, therefore he is actually still working with the intensity of physical force." The phrase 'a spirit vibration' in this context does not refer to an "object" of mediumistic perception, but to an explanation of what is required for spiritual healing to take place. John's statement informs the Spiritualist listener that in order to heal 'on the earth plane,' a spirit doctor must project his energy vibrations toward a patient, and attune those vibrations to a lower vibrational level, so that doctor and patient are vibrating at compatible frequencies. Otherwise, the two vibrations will be incompatible, and the doctor will be unable to affect the material world.

Another example in which the term "vibration" is implicitly used as an "explanation" is as follows: "If you can visualize anything in the astral plane... and know the transfer of vibration, you can actually bring it into material form." Here, the term "vibration" is used to explain how one must go about producing material objects (apports) from mental images. The Spiritualist listener understands from this sentence that in order to materialize objects, one must first visualize them, project that visualization into the astral plane, mentally recognize the energy vibration associated with the object in the astral plane, and then alter the vibrational frequency of that visualized object so that the astral plane vibration is slowed to the rate of physical matter. None of the details in this explanation are verbally articulated, but they are communicated through the use of the term.

Underlying much of the Spiritualist usage of the term "vibration," is the assumption that "spiritual vibrations" are actually "electromagnetic" vibrations believed

by Spiritualists to be emitted by all living and spiritual beings. This "electromagnetic" energy is a natural force recognized within orthodox science, and therefore "proves" to Spiritualists that their perceptions of "spirit vibrations" have a natural, scientifically legitimate basis. In referring to his wife's lack of sufficient spiritual attainment, for example, Roy suggested that she was not sufficiently "magnetized" enough to enter the highly charged atmosphere of the meditation room. In describing the actions of God's angels, Richard suggested that they used "their own unique magnetic abilities" to shape and direct matter. Auras are understood by many Spiritualists to be "electromagnetic fields." Lily Dale healer Vera, for example, told me that when she heals, "I am healing through the etheric body... working through the aura, I'm working through the electromagnetic fields surrounding the body." When Spiritualists use the term "vibration" to "explain" mediumistic experiences, therefore, they are explaining "how" a chain of events is causally related: energy is emitted, transmitted, and received according to natural, understandable processes. Underlying this explanation of "how," is the assumption of electromagnetism, which provides the "cause" or the "mechanism" to explain "why" these events can occur the way that they do. This explanation is rarely articulated, but is understood by Spiritualists in their usage of the term.

Orthodox scientists would hardly accept "explanations" of this sort as "scientific." In fact, sceptical physicist Victor Stenger (1990) explicitly rejects attempts to claim scientific status for explanations of mediumistic phenomena that depend upon 'electromagnetic energy' to provide the "mechanism" by which such phenomenon "work" According to Stenger (1990:243), "Electromagnetic waves are demonstrably not the



vibrations of a cosmic aether and are considered a poor candidate for the psychic mechanism except among the scientifically illiterate."<sup>141</sup> Although the term "scientifically illiterate" is harsh, most Spiritualists have little knowledge of orthodox science, and can hardly therefore be considered literate in this sense.<sup>142</sup> Nevertheless, the explanation inherent in the term "vibration" is understood as "scientific" among Spiritualists themselves. The very attempt to provide a 'mechanistic' rather than 'supernatural' or 'animistic' explanation reveals the continuing importance of "science"

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<sup>141</sup> Sceptical scientists such as Stenger (1990) frequently resort to ridicule and 'name-calling' to challenge those who advocate popular rather than orthodox views of science. Interestingly, however, these popular perceptions of "science" as authoritative, "factual" and "exact" can also be found among sceptical practitioners of orthodox science itself. Perhaps one of the most ironic observations arising from the examination of Spiritualist claims to scientific legitimacy is that similar perceptions of "science" can be found in the very literature intended to discredit religious attempts to "colonize" scientific discourse. There has been a great deal of sceptical literature published since the 1970's criticizing and challenging the religious adoption of "scientific" language and symbols (Basil 1988; Edwards 1988; Gardner 1988; Harris 1988; Hines 1988; O'Hara 1988; Owen and Sims 1971; Price 1978; Radner and Radner 1982; Rothman 1988; Seckel 1988; Stenger 1988, 1990). This literature is part of what Gieryn (1983) has called the "boundary work" of orthodox scientists, in which claims to authority, resources, and prestige are bolstered through interaction with the "foil" of non-science. Ironically, as Hess notes (1993:61-69), this literature frequently constructs an image of "science" as rational, impartial, authoritative and "true" to combat what is seen as the "foolishness" and "pseudo-science" of groups such as Spiritualism or the Creation Science movement. In doing so, sceptical scientists reveal the same perception of science as the paradigmatic means to truth that leads many Spiritualists to adopt "scientific" language and symbols into their religious discourse. The popular perception of "science" as "factual" and "descriptive of reality," therefore, can often be reinforced by the very literature designed to criticize popular perceptions of science.

<sup>142</sup> Nelson (1988:112) argues that Spiritualists do not have sufficient knowledge of modern science to use "science" effectively to legitimate their beliefs. If they continue to insist on the scientific legitimacy of their beliefs, he suggests, then "There is need for updating, particularly in respect to the relationship between Spiritualist conceptions and the developing theories and methods of the natural sciences."

to contemporary Spiritualists. Through their use of the term "vibration," Spiritualists draw upon popular perceptions of "science" to claim legitimacy for their beliefs.

#### Appeals to Authority: Einstein and the Theory of Relativity

The importance and prestige of "science" for contemporary Spiritualists can be seen not only in their usage of the term "vibration," but in their utilization of popular science to legitimate and "explain" their beliefs. According to sociologist Oscar Handlin (1972:266), the growing acceptance of science as 'authoritative' in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, coupled with the increasing inability of most people to understand the complexities of orthodox science, resulted in the development of "popular science," which "touched upon the science of the scientists, but did not accept its limits."<sup>143</sup> Sociologist Eileen Barker argues (1981:262) that popular science today "encompasses a whole series of half-understood and half-digested facts, values, attitudes, theories and hypotheses and a language which frequently has more coinage in the works of science fiction than in learned journals."<sup>144</sup> While such half-understood facts,

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<sup>143</sup> As Barnes notes (1985), contemporary science has largely passed beyond the bounds of 'common sense,' and is consequently largely incomprehensible to the lay public today. He writes (1985:20), "a good proportion of what today is common sense knowledge is the scientific knowledge of yesterday in another guise... but for all that the perceived gap between science and everyday life has never been wider. Most people see science, quite rightly, as an activity beyond their understanding." Barnes suggests that it is this lack of understanding which leads to the acceptance of science as "authoritative." See also Weber (1952).

<sup>144</sup> Barker suggests (1981:262) that social scientists interested in studying the impact of science on religious faith should therefore take into account both "orthodox science" and "what[ever] the members of society variously take to be science... even if, for those of us who are more enlightened, it is trumped up blasphemy, fallacious nonsense or naive

theories and values do not constitute orthodox science, they are frequently drawn from the corpus of accepted scientific knowledge (Barker 1980, 1981, 1985; Barnes 1985; Casti 1990; Gardner 1988; Handlin 1972; McCain and Segal 1982). Accepted on faith but poorly understood, these elements of orthodox science take on new and unusual (often erroneous) forms in the public domain. As Handlin writes (1972:253), "the 'popular delusions' which the scientist encounters with surprise upon his occasional forays outside the laboratory are the normal beliefs of a world which uses, but does not understand, the learning he develops." Within the contemporary Spiritualist context, such popular "science" is used to provide a legitimating discourse within which to express Spiritualist belief.

Many of the Spiritualists with whom I worked during the fieldwork period argued that mediumship is explainable through "scientific" means. By drawing upon "scientific" explanations of their experiences, Spiritualists assert that what they believe is genuinely "true" in a "scientific" (that is, factual, descriptive of reality) sense. "Science," or rather the popular perception of science, is drawn upon to provide a pool of legitimating symbols that justify Spiritualist belief. Given the prestige in which science has historically been held for Spiritualists, this is not altogether surprising. As Barker argues (1985:198), "In the supermarket of competing ideologies, [if] a religion can claim the sanction of scientific approval, or - even better - scientific proof, there are those who will assume that it must therefore be valid. Thus, it is not altogether surprising that organizations and individuals should seek scientific (or scientific) support for their

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scientism."

beliefs."

During the fieldwork period, one orthodox scientific theory in particular was consistently drawn upon by Spiritualists to provide a "scientific" rationale for certain mediumistic experiences.<sup>145</sup> Einstein's theory of relativity, and the figure of Einstein himself, have been incorporated into the Spiritualist idiom of spirit possession as potential sources of legitimation for Spiritualist belief. Such an incorporation reflects what McCain and Segal (1982:29) have called the popular tendency to surround scientists "with an aura like that around ancient magicians."<sup>146</sup> For many Spiritualists, Einstein has become a larger than life figure. The theory of relativity has assumed the status of

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<sup>145</sup> Other "scientific" (or more accurately pseudoscientific) theories were proposed in support of Spiritualist belief by individual informants during the fieldwork period. Lamarckian genetics (inheritance of acquired characteristics); bioenergetics (human energy fields as photographed through Kirlian photography); and morphogenetics (universal holism and the interconnectedness of all things through energy fields) were all suggested as candidates to account for Spiritualist experience. However, none of these theories were mentioned in my presence by more than a single individual, and therefore probably represent idiosyncratic attempts to explain mediumship, rather than normative ones. As such, they support the argument that attempts to "explain" mediumistic experiences through 'natural' as opposed to 'supernatural' means constitute part of the Spiritualist possession idiom, but these particular arguments were insufficiently explicated to be included here.

<sup>146</sup> According to McCain and Segal (1982:30), this tendency to view scientists as "omniscient" leads to the acceptance of scientific theories as "true" among the lay public for the wrong reasons. Accepting a theory simply based on the authority of the scientist's reputation, they argue, is not science. They write, (1982:42), "If in answer to the question "How does energy relate to matter?" you read that  $E = mc^2$  and learn that "energy in joules equals the mass converted in kilograms times the speed of light in meters per second squared," you are not necessarily playing the scientific game. A statement might look like science and sound like science, but it is not science if the only reason you believe it is that you have read it or Einstein has said it." Within the Spiritualist context, it is precisely the authority associated with the figure of Einstein that leads Spiritualist to argue that their own beliefs are "scientific" and consequently "true."

epistemological "truth." While the Spiritualists with whom I worked revealed little true understanding of the complexity of Einstein's theory, they expressed no doubt at all that the theory of relativity could be used to "prove" the legitimacy of their claims.<sup>147</sup>

### Albert Einstein: "The Skilled Guide"

According to theologian and scientist Iain Paul (1982:ix), by the time of his death in 1955, Albert Einstein had "achieved world fame as the foremost scientist of the twentieth century." This fame extends beyond the boundaries of contemporary orthodox science. Within orthodox scientific circles, Einstein is remembered as a brilliant, innovative, somewhat conservative "realist."<sup>148</sup> Within popular perceptions, Einstein

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<sup>147</sup> Einstein proposed the "special theory of relativity" in 1905. This theory suggests that the velocity of light is constant for all observers: that is, that light travels at the same speed regardless of who is measuring it. Because the speed of light is constant for all observers (at approximately 300,000 kilometres per second), "time" becomes relative to the observer. Events which are simultaneous within one frame of reference will not be simultaneous in another. For example, someone standing inside a moving vehicle equidistant from front and rear would see light shot towards either end of the vehicle reach its destination at exactly the same time, whereas someone outside the vehicle would see the light reach the rear of the vehicle first, and the front of the vehicle somewhat later. In 1915, Einstein expanded this theory into the "general theory of relativity," which included a discussion not only of light and time, but of gravity. Most of the Spiritualists with whom I worked displayed no awareness of these details. The simple phrase, "Time is relative" summarized the extent of their knowledge. For a discussion of Einstein's special and general theories and their implications for religion, see Barbour (1990); Paul (1982); Rothman (1988) and Stenger (1990).

<sup>148</sup> The "realist" stance of Einstein is often summed up in his own words. In response to the conclusion implicit in quantum mechanics that "reality" does not exist until we measure it, Einstein declared: "The great initial success of quantum theory cannot convert me to believe in that fundamental game of dice... I am absolutely convinced that one will eventually arrive at a theory in which objects connected by laws are not probabilities but conceived facts... It seems hard to look in God's cards. But I cannot for a moment believe that He plays dice and makes use of 'telepathic' means (as

is perceived as the archetypal "relativist."<sup>149</sup> In either case, the reputation of Einstein has assumed legendary proportions. The status of Einstein as 'the foremost scientist of the twentieth century' has made him an ideal symbol of scientific legitimation for Spiritualists. Paul (1982:20) has called Einstein "the skilled guide" for those wishing to explore the relationship between religion and modern science.<sup>150</sup> For Spiritualists, he

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current quantum theory alleges He does)" (Einstein, Letters of April 26 and May 28, 1948, included in Pais 1982:438-440). Einstein was never willing to accept quantum uncertainty, although by the time of his death it had been well documented experimentally. Interestingly, in his rejection of quantum uncertainty in the passage quoted above, Einstein also seems to reject the possibility of telepathy, however - and telepathy is precisely one of the Spiritualist mediumistic experiences that Einstein's theory is drawn upon to support.

<sup>149</sup> According to theologian and science author Ian Barbour (1990:110-111), there are three common misconceptions about Einstein's theory of relativity: that it "proves" that time is illusory and events determined; that it "proves" that the human mind forms the reality of the world; and that it "proves" that everything is relative, including morality. The image of Einstein as a "relativist" follows from this third misconception about Einstein's theory. Spiritualists appear to display each of these "misconceptions," although not in the way outlined by Barbour. The Spiritualists encountered in the fieldwork period who drew upon Einstein's theory to legitimate their beliefs believe that time is illusory, but not that events are determined, since Spiritualists believe in free will. They do believe in the power of the human mind to shape reality, but they do not believe that "reality" is dependent on human beings - reality for Spiritualists is really "out there." And they do believe that actions and events are relative (that effect can sometimes come before cause, as in the case with precognition), but they do not believe in moral relativism - Spiritualists believe in moral "natural" law.

<sup>150</sup> Contemporary Christian theology has been challenged by the theory of relativity, and consequently several Christian theologians have attempted to integrate Christian doctrine with the implications arising out of Einstein's theory. Theologian William L. Graig (1990), for example, has argued that any adequate Christian understanding of God as "eternal" must take into account what modern science has revealed about the nature of time. He asks (1990:335), "How can one pretend to formulate an adequate doctrine of God's eternity and His relationship to time without taking cognizance of what modern philosophy and science have to say about time?" For discussions of the relationship between (Christian) religion and the theory of relativity, see Barbour (1990); Graig (1990) and Paul (1982).

has become exactly that: within the perceptions of a number of the Spiritualists with whom I worked, Einstein fills the role of "the skilled guide" who links "science" to Spiritualist belief.

According to Spiritualist medium and minister Ilene, Einstein is an example of what all humans could be, if we would only fulfil a larger portion of our full human potential. Ilene introduced Einstein as an example of someone who used more of his mind than most people do, and she proceeded to argue that astral travel, telepathy, and precognition are all within the realm of human possibility.<sup>151</sup> As part of a group discussion held in the basement of a boarding house in Lily Dale in 1991, she told me,

"we know that we only use approximately seven to ten percent of our mind, of our brain capacity. Einstein was only ten per cent, or was it eight? It wasn't very much, but the rest of us use somewhat less, we're a little less than what he was. And actually his brain, when they did the autopsy afterward, his brain mass was smaller than the average person. But he was using more of his brain than most people do... And it's the same with astral travel."

According to Ilene, the human mind is powerful enough to do much more than is generally conceded. By suggesting Einstein as an illustration of this point, she was clearly drawing upon the popular image of Einstein as a brilliant and well-respected scientist. As Barker (1980) argues, from the perspective of popular science, the prestige in which scientists are held makes them ideal sources of legitimation for religious claims. Barker writes (1980:81), "What counts for knowledge in modern society? There is only one universally acceptable answer: Empirical Science. There is only one élite which is

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<sup>151</sup> Ilene proceeded to tell me numerous instances in which telepathy, precognition, and astral travel had happened to her. One of these narratives is included in Chapter Four, Appendix One.

universally acknowledged [to have] privileged access to truth: that of the Scientific Expert." It is the stature of Einstein as "scientific expert" which makes him an ideal illustration of Ilene's claims.<sup>152</sup>

Ilene's description of Einstein as 'using more of his brain than most people do,' is an excellent illustration of Spiritualist attitudes toward Einstein. As Moore (1977:228) has noted, Spiritualists historically were very egalitarian in their beliefs: anyone who wished to do so could develop mediumistic abilities and explore Spiritualist "truths." Contemporary Spiritualists also stress this egalitarian view that everyone is capable of developing mediumistic abilities in themselves. The portrait of Einstein as 'using more of his brain than most people do' is not intended to imply that Einstein was fundamentally "different" from or superior to ordinary people, therefore. Rather, Ilene is suggesting here that Einstein is a role model or guide for the rest of us to follow. As Ilene tells us, we are all 'somewhat less than what he was,' but by implication she suggests that we too could do remarkable things, if we were to develop our potential in the way that Einstein did.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Ironically, the success of what Garrouette (1992, 1993) calls the attempt by nineteenth century positivists to exclude Spiritualist speakers as "authoritative" and to establish scientists as the sole legitimate sources of "truth" about nature can be seen here.

<sup>153</sup> Spiritualists are not the only ones who look up to Einstein as a larger than life, admirable role model. In a 1981 survey of religious beliefs undertaken to provide a control group for her study of Unification Church members, Barker (1981:269-270) notes that one respondent proclaimed: "Jesus Christ is the greatest man to have ever lived, followed by Albert Einstein." Barker points out that this quite remarkable claim was unsolicited: the survey form she used did not ask for or mention attitudes towards "science" in any way.



Einstein has come to fill the role for some contemporary Spiritualists that Benjamin Franklin filled in the nineteenth century. As a figure of immense prestige and scientific authority, Einstein has become a powerful symbol to lend credence to Spiritualist claims. In the nineteenth century, many prominent Spiritualist mediums counted Franklin as one of their spirit guides (Britten 1870; Braude 1989; Isaacs 1983; Moore 1972). While none of the Spiritualists with whom I worked ever claimed Einstein as one of their guides, the role that Einstein plays within contemporary Spiritualism is very similar to that previously played by Franklin.<sup>154</sup> Like Franklin in the nineteenth century and the figures of biomedical doctors in the contemporary Spiritualist context, Einstein has been "spiritualized." For example, Einstein is apparently aiding human scientific development on 'the earth plane,' as the following passage from Toronto Spiritualist healer Pam's autobiography indicates:

"Where do you think inspiration comes from? It comes from your spirit guides. Everyone who has ever lived on earth now lives in the spirit world. Adam's there and everyone else since. Albert Einstein. Sigmund Freud... They're all there, the whole mob of them, waiting to be of service. Mind, they're all busy - Freud, for example, he probably works in the hospitals [and] Einstein, he's helping some research physicist with a math problem... Where do you think most inventions come from?"

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<sup>154</sup> During the fieldwork period, it did not occur to me to ask my respondents if they had ever "spoken" to Einstein as a spirit guide. All of the passages included in this section of the chapter are unsolicited. While it is impossible to make predictions with any degree of accuracy, the status of Einstein as a source of scientific legitimation within Spiritualist perceptions is such, that it appears likely that Einstein has indeed filled the role of guide for some Spiritualists. I did record one narrative in which it is implied that Einstein acts as spirit guide, but his name is never mentioned; Toronto medium Andrew told me of a vision in which "a being of light," whose vibration was "recognized," taught him about the nature of time and space, but the "being" goes unnamed, and so the passage is not included here.

They come from the spirit world..."<sup>155</sup>

The claim that Einstein is "helping some research physicist with a math problem" reflects what Lily Dale medium Joy told me was the nature of the spirit guide/human bond: "Like calls to like in this business," she said, "at each stage [of spiritual development] you get the guide who can best help you on your path." Presumably, Einstein is working with orthodox scientists to help them 'on their path' in pursuit of scientific knowledge. In this claim, one can see an echo of the nineteenth century Spiritualist argument that scientific development on "the earth plane" depends upon the work of scientifically-minded spirits in the spirit realm. Since 'most inventions' are the product of spirit-induced inspiration, the claim that Einstein acts as a guide for living scientists reinforces both the prestige which science holds for Spiritualists today (after all, if spirits are interested in science, surely science is a worthy pursuit), and the perception common among Spiritualists that orthodox science limits itself by refusing to recognize a spiritual realm.<sup>156</sup> If scientific advancement is dependent on spiritual aid,

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<sup>155</sup> This passage is taken from the unpublished autobiography of Toronto Spiritualist Pam, who gave me a copy when she heard that I was interested in "proofs" of spirit communication. The document is disconcerting to read because it shifts from first-person narrative in Pam's voice, to third person narrative in the voice of Pam's spirit guide, without warning. Much of the document is the result of "automatic writing" on Pam's part. Verbatim conversations between Pam and others are recorded. The passage included here is one taken from a sermon Pam attended in Toronto with Rev. Baines. The passage may indicate Pam's own belief in the role of Einstein in the spirit world, or it may represent an actual conversation with Rev. Baines that Pam recalled and then recorded. In either instance, the belief that Einstein guides scientific development here on earth is expressed. I hesitate to analyze the implications of the inclusion of Freud in the passage.

<sup>156</sup> This claim also reveals a "common misconception" of science; namely, that "science" and "technology" are one and the same thing. Casti (1990:12-13) calls the

the failure of orthodox science to encompass a spiritual as well as physical reality becomes a serious limitation within orthodox science.

### Explaining Away Time: Einstein and the Theory of Relativity

A large part of the prestige in which Einstein is held for many Spiritualists comes from the common perception among them that Einstein's theory of relativity supports their beliefs. According to Barker (1980, 1981, 1985), this search for scientific support for religious belief is a mark of modern times. Barker suggests (1980:99) that religious groups increasingly turn in the modern world to "the new priesthood [of scientists] for reassurance that their beliefs have not been left behind in the wake of the revolutionary revelations of science." The new priesthood, she suggests, does not disappoint. "That of which we disapprove is disproven," she writes, "and that of which we approve is proven. Science has spoken." For Spiritualists, this is very much the case. Spiritualist minister Ilene, in the passage quoted earlier, introduced Einstein as a role model to follow while trying to convince me that astral travel, telepathy, and precognition were humanly possible. Her choice of example was not arbitrary. According to Ilene, it was Einstein who 'scientifically proved' that such abilities were possible. She told me,

"As far as time, I think it's irrelevant. We only have time on the earth plane anyway. I think it was Einstein who said that. You know, time is relevant [sic] and 'cause they [material objects] go through space, it,

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assumption that science equals "gadget production" the "General Electric Syndrome," and writes, "if GE is doing it, it probably *isn't* science, at least not the kind of science that most members of the global scientific community would recognize... The developments of these gadgets is the main business of such an institution, and that development is definitely not science; it's technology."

everything, slows down. I think we can go forward in time, we can go backwards in time, we can go sideways in time. We see it as [if] we're just going this way with time [forward], but I don't think so. I don't have the scientific verbology to explain it, but I think [that] there are many scientists who could, explain away time. I think it's our belief that makes it a reality for us... There's only limitations to the physical, the mind transcends all of that, the mind can go in any direction, forward, backward, sideways. And they've proven it with all the inventions they've made."

In this passage Ilene expresses a viewpoint held by most Spiritualists regarding the nature of time. According to Ilene, it is only our 'belief' in time that makes it 'a reality for us.' We can step outside the bounds of linear time to travel forward, backwards, and 'sideways,' because time is not 'real' except as a concept to which we are accustomed.<sup>157</sup> According to Ilene, the human mind is capable of 'transcending' time. While she 'does not have the scientific verbology' to explain how such a transcendence of time might operate, she is sure that there are scientists out there somewhere who could 'explain away time.' Ilene is clearly correct when she claims not to have the 'scientific verbology' necessary to explain the illusory nature of time - after all, according to Ilene, Einstein claimed that time was 'relevant' rather than "relative." However, Ilene does "know" enough about "science" to name Einstein as one of those scientists who could 'explain away time.' According to Ilene, after all, it was Einstein who said that 'we only have time on the earth plane anyway.' In making this claim, Ilene draws upon the prestige that Einstein holds in popular perceptions to lend

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<sup>157</sup> Toronto Spiritualist medium Michael told me something very similar. He said "There is a part of your brain that doesn't know time. That's why when you sleep at night you can dream into the past, present, future... time is a belief system [within which] you can learn a lot of things [but] its just a belief system."

legitimacy to her claims that time is no barrier to mediumistic visions. As she notes, "science" has proved this proposition to be true 'with all the inventions they've made.'

If time is just a "belief" that we mistakenly hold, it should be possible, as Ilene insists, to transcend linear time and travel to both past and future. This is exactly the claim that mediumship development class leader Tom made to his students in Lily Dale in 1991. According to Tom, as developing mediums, the students could expect to receive periodic "warnings" from their spirit guides about events that had not yet happened. Since Spiritualists believe in free will, however, these warnings were not to be considered infallible. People can always choose to act in ways that invalidate the visionary images the medium receives. Indeed, this is precisely the reason for such messages, for spirit guides send warnings of impending danger or disaster so that preventative steps can be taken. To legitimate the linked claims that visions of the future are possible, and that such visions are not necessarily infallible, Tom explained that 'time was not set.' According to Tom, this had been 'scientifically proved' by Einstein. He said,

"I don't believe in predetermination. I don't buy it... time is not set... There's a whole different kind of theory involved [in visionary experiences]. Let me throw this out to you, it's fascinating, fascinating. Einstein, time, and travel in time. Einstein proved that time was not set. His whole theory that one is able to travel in time by being able to see the future, it's possible, it's possible. It's been scientifically proven that that is indeed possible. And if we can travel in time physically, can we not travel in time in our own mind? And if we can travel in our own mind, is it not possible to perceive what that life is like, and what is happening there [in the future]? I think THAT is how our visions come, very often."

Tom's claim that time travel was a 'scientifically proven' possibility is a clear

reference to Einstein's theory of relativity. As Tom claims, it was Einstein who 'proved' that 'time was not set.' Einstein's whole theory, according to Tom, is that 'one is able to travel in time by seeing the future.'<sup>158</sup> As Tom says, 'It's been scientifically proven that that is indeed possible.' Tom is drawing on Einstein's theory explicitly here to "prove" that precognitive visions are a possibility. In a fascinating twist, however, Tom also uses Einstein's theory to justify the fact that predictive visions are not always correct. After all, 'time is not set,' and as a result, a precognitive vision can only reveal what *might* happen, not what *will* happen: human action through the exercise of free will might invalidate the content of the vision. In this context, therefore, both "true" and "false" mediumistic visions of the future receive "scientific" legitimation. It is through the 'scientifically proven' possibility to travel in time that mediumistic visions 'come,' but since 'time is not set,' these visions are given a "scientific" rationale for being wrong. Clearly, as Barker notes (1980:99), "science" can be used to provide a powerful "explanation" for almost any religious claim.

The difficulty in accurately predicting the future is a problem that Hamilton medium Richard addressed when he drew upon Einstein's theory of relativity to "explain" to me his own visionary experiences of travel in time. In this narrative,

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<sup>158</sup> As disappointing as it might be for Spiritualists to learn, Einstein's theory of relativity does not support the idea of travel in time. Physicist Milton Rothman (1988:150) notes that one-way travel into the future would not necessarily violate physical laws (although he confesses he cannot imagine how this trip might be accomplished), but he argues that two-way travel is impossible. Theologian and science writer Ian Barbour makes a similar point. According to Barbour (1990:111), "Everyone carries their own clock and their own time zone, but the order of causally related events does not change... Einstein took pains to show that while phenomena do vary among frames of reference, the laws of physics are invariant among them."

Richard uses Einstein's theory of relativity as the 'backdrop' against which to explain his own experiences. Richard's description of how Einstein 'supposedly saw time-space' differs quite markedly from an orthodox scientific perspective, however. Richard incorporates Einstein's theory of relativity into his narrative, but he reinterprets and redescribes this theory in more "appropriate" Spiritualist terms. He told me,

"Einstein supposedly saw time-space as sort of a grid-work stretched out over a black space and... offset with valleys or pits where planetary or solar mass existed. And each one of those intersections of the grid-work are a crossing of lines of fate, or joss, or kismet, or whatever you want to call it, eh? They are actually - the segments in between each one of the interstices - the span of a lifetime, a complete lived experience..."

So, I know that in that place I can jump time. I have many times jumped to the past but very rarely to the future. Each time I have made a trip to the future to see what was going on I've been warned severely against it. Right? Something about the entropy effect, of fucking up there and then being trapped in the time loop to make sure that the fuck up doesn't happen..."

Based upon his personal experiences, Richard argues in the narrative above that time travel is indeed a possibility. He uses Einstein's theory of relativity to contextualize this claim. While travel to the past is apparently non-problematic for Richard, he suggests that travel into the future is difficult and not without risks. According to Richard, the 'entropy effect' makes travel to the future difficult, for unwary time travellers can become 'trapped in the time loop' should they create a paradox through their actions. The problem of "paradox" is precisely the reason why orthodox scientists insist that "time travel" is *not* a scientific possibility. Physicist Milton A. Rothman, for example, observes (1988:150): "Time travel violates the principle of causality. It allows a cause to come later in time than the effect, while the universe allows chains of events

to go only in one direction... To see into the future... violates causality. There is no interaction that goes backward in time."<sup>159</sup> In referring to the problem of paradox in this narrative, Richard reveals his awareness of orthodox scientific reservations about the possibility of travel in time. Richard reinterprets these reservations, however, to better suit his own religious perspective.

The objection to precognition and travel in time within the boundaries of orthodox science is that it violates causality and is therefore a physical impossibility. A 'time loop' or paradox is simply not possible within the physical realm of orthodox science as governed by natural, causal laws. However, Richard's concern with paradox or 'time loops' is different from that of the orthodox scientist. Richard invokes the name of Einstein to give a sense of "scientific" legitimacy to his claims about time travel, but he is not concerned with the "scientific" objection to the possibility of paradox. Rather, Richard notes that each time he had 'jumped to the future' he had been 'warned severely

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<sup>159</sup> Rothman (1988:221-242) provides a very clearly written argument against the possibility of time travel and instantaneous communication. His argument centres around the idea of a 'time loop' like that mentioned by Richard. After explaining the nature of relativity and providing examples to illustrate what would be involved in travelling through time, Rothman writes (1988:242): "Here is the kind of thing that can happen: Sometime in 2109 a disaster occurs, say the assassination of a president. In 2110 a message is sent to the spaceship telling them of this event. The ship immediately sends a message back to Earth, telling them all the details of the assassination. Since Earth receives the message before the assassination takes place, [because of relative time differential between earth and ship] the authorities are able to apprehend the perpetrator before he fires the shot. But then the assassination never takes place, so no message is sent to the ship. So no warning is received by Earth and the president is killed. So a message is sent to the ship and the assassination is prevented. And so on... This is a true paradox. If an event takes place, then it does not take place. This is an impossible state of affairs. An event cannot take place *and* not take place. *Either* it happens *or* it does not happen. Therefore, the entire chain of events is an impossibility."



against it.' For Richard, it is not impossible to see the future, it is merely "wrong" to do so. Richard's guides were warning him that using knowledge of the future to interfere in the present was not morally acceptable. Should he endanger the natural course of events, he would be trapped 'in the time loop' to prevent his interference from damaging the present. Richard therefore casts his discussion of the difficulties inherent in precognition and time travel in "moral" rather than "physical" terms. For Richard, "reality" represents more than the physical world encompassed by orthodox science. While he draws upon orthodox science to legitimate his claims, he is not bound by the limitations which orthodox perceptions of reality entail. Richard uses "science" to legitimate and "prove" Spiritualist claims, therefore, but he also finds "science" too limited to express his experiences adequately. For Richard, "science" is only the starting point in explaining Spiritualist reality.

#### Challenging the Boundaries of Orthodox Science

The adoption of Einstein and the theory of relativity as symbols of legitimating authority into the Spiritualist idiom of spirit possession reveals the status that "science" holds for many Spiritualists today. Einstein is admired as a larger than life figure by many Spiritualists precisely because his status is that of the 'foremost scientist of the twentieth century'. The theory of relativity, as poorly as it is understood by the Spiritualists with whom I worked, is used by Spiritualists to "explain" their experiences because they believe it to provide orthodox scientific support for their beliefs. Because "science" is understood by Spiritualists to be "factual," and "descriptive of reality,"

incorporating Einstein and the theory of relativity into their belief system allows Spiritualists to present their own beliefs and experiences as "true" in an empirical, "scientific" sense. Since Spiritualists "know" that what they experience is "true," they also "know" that it must be compatible with and explainable through "scientific" means.

The Spiritualist idealization of "science" as "truth" does not prevent many Spiritualists from being critical of what they perceive to be the "narrowness" of orthodox science, however. The incorporation of Einstein into the Spiritualist idiom of spirit possession does not simply reveal the prestige in which science is held. It also reveals the "spiritualization" of a major scientific figure. Einstein may have been a genius when he lived on 'the earth plane,' for example, but as Richard assured me at one time, the formula  $E = MC^2$  appeared to Einstein in a vision. Now that Einstein is a spirit himself, he is giving other scientists the benefit of the knowledge he has gained in the spirit realm. Scientific advances on earth depend upon the help of spirits like Benjamin Franklin and Albert Einstein. By refusing to recognize this "fact," orthodox science itself is "unscientific," for it fails to accurately describe "reality" as it "truly is."

Reality, for Spiritualists, includes more than the physical world around us. It also includes a spiritual realm. Although Spiritualists insist that the spiritual realm is as "natural" as the physical realm, they argue that it both supersedes and encompasses the material world recognized by orthodox science. The "vibrations" of the spiritual realm are simply "higher" than earthly vibrations, and have consequently gone unnoticed and unmeasured by scientists. As a result, orthodox science is failing to describe reality in

its fullness.<sup>160</sup> In the lengthy narrative below, Hamilton medium Richard argues that until orthodox science takes the spiritual realm into account, scientists will continue to fail in their attempts to understand and accurately describe "reality." He told me,

"One of the first things that came through to me, and it's one of things that I've never passed on to anybody, my guides told me the reason that Einstein's theory of relativity is still a theory and not a law is because they're using  $c$  as the wrong coefficient. They're using the speed of light as a constant, but  $c$  is not a constant,  $c$  is a variable.  $c$  is the living vibratory rate of the mass being used. So at any rate, I've got all these formulas, how to arrive at  $c$ , how to arrive at the frequency of living matter. And all matter is living, by the way....

Anyway, wavelength frequency is basically the inverse of Lambda, okay, if you're listening to one hundred megahertz, right? Which is one hundred times ten to the sixth, or one times ten to the eighth power, okay? Then the frequency is, sorry, the wavelength is the reverse of that, the actual length of it, is the inverse of that, one over that. So instead of - oh, this is in metres by the way - so if it was one times ten to the eighth, you'd have one times ten to the minus eighth, or sorry, ten micro-metres, at any rate, nano-metres, ten nanometres.

So, knowing that from electronics, [I came up with] the frequency for the living vibratory patterning after I went through a bunch of pretty simple mathematical equations. I came to the realization that there are twelve portals in and out of any sphere of containment....

Um, twelve, basically, because there's twelve facets to our personality; there's twelve sides to a carbon molecule; its kinda neat, twelve disciples Jesus had...

When I arrived at the fact that there was twelve, I found that there were gates, in between each aspect, each facet, which was equivalent to five degrees, plus or minus actually five degrees in and out of phase, in

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<sup>160</sup> According to Casti (1990) and McCain and Segal (1982), the accusation that science 'distorts reality' by failing to account for the 'fullness of experience' is a common "misconception " of science. McCain and Segal write (1982:16-17): "If distorting reality means that scientists select only one small portion of phenomena for investigation at any time, then they happily plead guilty...[if it means that the scientific "approach" is inadequate] this argument is nonsense".

all directions, from a point of reference taken twelve "r" from the core of the mass being vibrated, or irradiated. So I think the formula, I can't remember exactly but I thought Lambda was one over twelve pi "r," I'm pretty sure that's what the formula worked out to be. Oh, no it wasn't, it was one over twelve pi co-sign "r," wham! That was it.<sup>161</sup>

At any rate, that gives you the reason why Einstein's theory of relativity doesn't work, because all of our mass tables are off. They actually measure something like that, and it's vibrating so fast they haven't been able to slow it down to measure it accurately. They're measuring ten percent more. Right? The size, cause it's going back and forth, it's taking up more space, than it actually is. So it's throwing all our mass tables out, just a little bit, but they are out."

In Richard's narrative, the importance and prestige of science are clearly apparent. Richard uses the language and symbols of "science" to articulate his revelatory mediumistic experience, and the content of the "message" he receives is itself "scientific." According to anthropologists Crapanzano (1977), Bourguignon (1973, 1974, 1976, 1977) and Goodman (1988a, 1988b), the actual "experience" of spirit possession is often shaped by the communal "idiom" used to interpret such experiences. Within the context of Richard's vision, the importance of "science" as a legitimating discourse has influenced not only how the vision should be expressed, but what the vision itself revealed. Richard's vision can therefore be seen as an illustration of the importance of "science" in the contemporary Spiritualist context.

Richard's vision reveals more than just the importance of "science" to contemporary Spiritualists, however. It also reflects the critique of orthodox science prevalent within contemporary Spiritualism. In his narrative, Richard claims that new

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<sup>161</sup> This equation could be written in one of two ways:  $\frac{1}{12\pi \cos r}$  or  $\frac{1}{12} \pi \cos r$ . Which equation is intended by Richard is unclear.

scientific knowledge was revealed to him by his 'spirit guides.' This claim echoes those made by nineteenth and early twentieth century Spiritualists, that it is through the intervention of spirit entities that scientific advancement on 'the earth plane' is possible. The spiritual realm plays a role in the development of science, according to Spiritualists, a role which orthodox scientists refuse to acknowledge. If Lily Dale medium Joy is correct that "like calls to like in this business," it is unusual for Richard's spirit guides to have revealed this knowledge to him. After all, Richard is not a research scientist. Richard is, however, open to spirit influences, whereas from the perspective of contemporary Spiritualists, orthodox scientists are not.<sup>162</sup>

The content of the new "scientific" knowledge revealed to Richard also reflects the critique of science prevalent within Spiritualism. Richard's spirit guides informed him that the reason why Einstein's theory was 'still a theory and not a law' was because orthodox scientists were failing to make accurate measurements of the mass of the universe. 'Einstein's theory doesn't work,' according to Richard, 'because our mass tables are off.' Orthodox scientists keep making faulty measurements because they fail to account for the spiritual vibrations of all matter in the universe. They are using 'c as

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<sup>162</sup> In this perception, Spiritualists are probably not wrong. Physicist Victor Stenger (1990:304) for example, writes: "Not only has revelation proved unproductive as a source of knowledge about the universe, it has served to impede progress in knowledge... still, the belief that knowledge can somehow be obtained by paranormal means persists. I have issued a challenge to New Age channelers or others claiming that they are in contact with spirits or superhuman entities, to prove their claims by asking their sources to provide the answers to certain fundamental questions about the universe. All of these questions should be answered by the normal development of science within the next decade, so this test can provide us with definitive proof of a world beyond..." Needless to say, Stenger doubts that such "proof" will be forthcoming.

the wrong coefficient.' Since all matter is actually vibrating 'back and forth' so rapidly that it can't be measured using orthodox means, scientists will never be able to discover the correct coefficient for  $c$ . It is only when 'the frequency of living matter' is taken into account ('and all matter is living, by the way...') that accurate measurements can be made. Once the "fact" of the spiritual vibration of matter is accepted, 'a bunch of pretty simple mathematical equations' will give scientists the correct measurements to describe the universe accurately. According to Richard, the necessary equation to arrive at "lambda" is  $1 \text{ over } 12 \text{ pi co-sign } r$ . This equation could only have been achieved with the help, guidance, and knowledge of the spirit realm.

Richard was certainly the most 'scientifically articulate' Spiritualist with whom I worked during the fieldwork period, making ready use of "scientific" language and symbols to express his experiences and beliefs. Acceptance of the central meaning of the narrative above, however, is not confined to Richard alone. In the narrative above, Richard claims that the physical world and the spiritual world are part of the same reality: attempts by orthodox scientists to 'measure' the physical world are incomplete, because they fail to account for spiritual "vibrations." Several of the Spiritualists with whom I worked during the fieldwork period expressed similar ideas, although not in quite the same elaborate fashion.<sup>163</sup> The belief that reality encompasses both "spiritual" and

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<sup>163</sup> For example, visiting Lily Dale medium George told me that "God" 'flows through' the material world 'like an electrical current.' This idea, George suggested, is not easy for people with a materialistic mind set to accept. He said, "accepting that... it's the ultimate leap in faith, a quantum leap, and a person that has the, ah, faith, is the word I'll use... can feel it. It's like an electrical current. That's how I would describe it... It's like electricity that flows through, the current that goes through, the whole universe. God, Universal life force, whatever you want to call it, it's, whatever your

"material" existence, however, is integral to Spiritualist belief. No matter what the degree of idealization of "science" found within Spiritualism, therefore, all Spiritualists agree that orthodox science is too "narrow" if it cannot encompass this "truth." As a consequence, Richard's narrative can be taken as illustrative not only of his own idiosyncratic experience, but also of communal Spiritualist assumptions about the nature of "science" and "reality."

### Extraterrestrials as Spirit Guides

The idealization of science revealed by many contemporary Spiritualists, coupled with their criticism of orthodox science as too "narrow" in scope, can also be found in another somewhat surprising aspect of contemporary Spiritualist mediumship. One of my most unexpected findings during the fieldwork period was to discover that some Spiritualists have recently begun to adopt extraterrestrials as spirit guides. Like the Spiritualist belief in the compatibility of spiritual and material reality, the existence of UFOs and extraterrestrials remains unaccepted by orthodox scientists. Nonetheless, a few Spiritualists have begun to adopt extraterrestrials as spirit guides with the clear perception that belief in such entities is at least potentially compatible with "science." This incorporation of extraterrestrials as spiritual guides is directly attributable to the presumed scientific and technological superiority that extraterrestrials are held to display. This scientific superiority becomes linked in Spiritualist perceptions to a "spiritual"

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belief is, and what you want to call it... it's, you know, it's out there some place, we know that..." For both George and Richard, spiritual reality is 'out there some place,' and cannot be ignored or "science" will remain incomplete.

superiority. Extraterrestrials are seen as spiritually superior because they are scientifically more advanced than human beings. Concurrently, their superior "science" is perceived as more advanced than ours because unlike contemporary earthly science, the science of extraterrestrials incorporates a recognition of spiritual "truth." Consequently, within the Spiritualist context, the adoption of extraterrestrials as spirit guides can be seen to reflect both a strong idealization of "science," and a critique of orthodox science for ignoring the "spiritual" realm.

### Spiritualism & Extraterrestrials

The similarity between Spiritualism and that component of the New Age Movement referred to by sociologist Robert Ellwood (1973, 1992) as "UFO religion" has previously been noted in the academic literature, but it was nevertheless startling to discover the apparent fusion of these two similar but separate faiths among some contemporary Spiritualists.<sup>164</sup> While increasingly popular, however, it is important to

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<sup>164</sup> Although the initial discovery that some Spiritualists had adopted extraterrestrials as spirit guides was startling, on reflection such an adoption could not really be considered unexpected. As sociologist Jean-Bruno Renard (1991:i) has noted, "Le mouvement spirite et le mouvement de contact extraterrestre paraissent être de nature radicalement différente... cependant, l'analyse socio-historique des deux mouvements révèle un parallélisme dans leur évolution, en particulier la différenciation entre un courant "scientifique" (métapsychique, ufologie) et un courant "religieux" (spiritism, soucoupisme). Elle révèle même une convergence sur certaines croyances cosmiques et certaines pratiques médiumniques." Among the parallels that Renard notes (1991:3-8) are the attribution of mysterious phenomena to non-human entities; the influence of fiction in shaping belief; the similar emphasis on pivotal 'origin myths'; the rapid diffusion of spiritualistic and UFO ideas among the wider populace; the rapid multiplication of observed phenomena; the hesitancy of "orthodoxy" to accept the non-human explanations for observed phenomenon; the attempt to claim both scientific and religious status; and the link between both movements and a social activist stance.



note that this "fusion" of faiths has not gone unchallenged by some of the more traditional Spiritualists with whom I worked. Some, like Spiritualist medium Abby, rejected the inclusion of extraterrestrials into Spiritualist faith on "scientific" grounds. She told me, "I don't believe in [extraterrestrial communication]. I know some [Spiritualists] do, but I don't. Look at all the thousands of reported UFOs that could never be proven. You'd think if it was true, that scientists could have proved it at least once..."<sup>165</sup>

As the result of reservations such as the one expressed above, belief in extraterrestrials cannot be considered mainstream within the Spiritualist religious tradition. Similar to the incorporation of psychic surgery into Spiritualist healing beliefs discussed in Chapter Two, the acceptance of extraterrestrials into the Spiritualist belief system is confined to a small percentage of contemporary Spiritualists. Faith such as Abby's in the ability of scientists to "prove" things, however, is typical within the Spiritualist context. Of course, the parameters of what constitutes acceptable proof are generally somewhat wider among Spiritualists than within orthodox scientific circles.

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Among the convergences noted by Renard (1991:8-12) are the belief within both movements in a plurality of worlds; belief in the ability to contact beings on other planets; the popularization of Spiritualist and UFO themes within wider society; and the need for a "medium" or intermediary in both groups to communicate with the divine-like beings.

<sup>165</sup> Others, like the president of the Lily Dale Assembly, rejected the inclusion of extraterrestrials on religious grounds. In referring to one of the Spiritualist churches on the grounds at Lily Dale, she told me, "The one church that's opened, I think in the last three or four years... they are more interested in New Age, which is not necessarily Spiritualist. It encompasses Spiritualism, but it branches out into things other than the National Spiritualist Church does. Ah, which is extraterrestrials, you know, but that's not a religion..."

While scientists decry the poor state of anecdotal evidence and the lack of physical proof for the existence of UFOs, it is often precisely experiential or anecdotal evidence that constitutes acceptable proof within a Spiritualist context. While Abby rejects belief in extraterrestrials because "science" has failed to "prove" their existence, others stress that personal experience of contact with such beings constitutes in and of itself "scientific proof" of their existence. Lily Dale healer and medium Joel, for example, told me, that "the nature of Spiritualism almost forces it to incorporate these things, because when the phenomena starts to appear, you just can't avoid it. [Until] about three years ago... when I had my first encounter, in a meditative state... with an extraterrestrial... I had 'poo hoo'd' the whole matter."<sup>166</sup>

According to Ellwood (1973, 1992) and anthropologist David Hess (1993), there are direct connections between nineteenth century Spiritualism and the development of New Age UFO and extraterrestrial "cults" in the twentieth century.<sup>167</sup> Hess argues (1993:22) that the evolution of New Age thought from its Spiritualist roots has in part entailed a shift from an 'otherworldly' focus on spirit communication among nineteenth century Spiritualists, to the somewhat more 'rationalized' focus on extraterrestrials and

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<sup>166</sup> For a discussion of the role of personal experience as "proof," see Chapter Four. For a discussion of testimony as "evidence," see Chapter One.

<sup>167</sup> Ellwood writes (1973:131), "Spiritualism and the UFO groups fundamentally reflect a new and direct discovery of symbols of mediation in the fabric of American life. The wise ones come as American Indians, Spirit Doctors, departed relatives, or from a futuristic technology. Both types of groups employ the same manner of communication: vision and marvellous journeys, trance speaking and writing, seance circles, and telepathy. The close interaction between Spiritualism and UFO cults is not surprising, for one finds there is much exchange of persons between them."

UFOs in the New Age movement today.<sup>168</sup> This shift can be seen as part of what sociologist Eileen Barker (1981) has called the 'rerouting' of religious mystery. She writes (1981:264),

In the age of science journeys of mystery have been symbolically rerouted. New concepts have emerged with which to explore the beyond... the absolute formula "I am that I am" is reduced to  $E = MC^2$ ; Cramner gives way to Von Daniken or Stars on Sunday and the Miracle of Lourdes is surpassed by Strange Encounters of the Third Kind.

To date, the academic literature on "UFO Religion" has stressed this "rationalized" focus to the virtual exclusion of other concerns.<sup>169</sup> However, if sociologist Max Weber (1952:138-139) is correct to situate the process of "rationalization" of the modern "disenchanted" world within attempts to explain the seemingly "miraculous" in scientific and technological rather than "supernatural" terms, this emphasis has certainly not been unwarranted.<sup>170</sup> To a large extent, the history of modern "UFO religion" is the history

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<sup>168</sup> "Rationalization" is one of the key concepts developed and explored by sociologist Max Weber (1952). The concept of "rationalization" as discussed by Weber is complex. Indeed, sociologist Rogers Brubaker (1984:2) identifies sixteen different usages of the term in the body of Weber's work, including the concepts of "deliberate," "systematic," "calculable," "impersonal," "instrumental," "exact," "quantitative," "rule-governed," "predictable," "methodical," "purposeful," "sober," "scrupulous," "efficacious," "intelligible," and "consistent". As Hess uses the term, it might be translated as "depersonalization" or perhaps "empiricized".

<sup>169</sup> See for example Bouchard (1992); Bullard (1982); Ellwood (1973, 1992); Jacobs (1983); and Renard (1990, 1991).

<sup>170</sup> In his discussion of the impact of science and technology on the process of "intellectualist rationalization," Weber argues (1952:139) that the modern world has become "disenchanted" because the world has become "explainable" in naturalistic as opposed to spiritistic or supernatural terms. Weber writes (1952:138-139), "Scientific progress is a fraction, the most important fraction, of the process of intellectualization... Let us first clarify what this intellectualist rationalization, created by science and by scientifically oriented technology, means practically. Does it mean that we, today, for instance, everyone sitting in his hall, have a greater knowledge of the conditions of life

of attempts to "explain" the unknown in scientific and technological terms. This has necessarily entailed a strong emphasis on the search for scientific legitimation for the extraterrestrial hypothesis. If UFOs are to be accepted as the product of extraterrestrial science, it becomes of tantamount importance to believers that terrestrial science recognize this fact.

The interpretive emphasis on the scientific and technological implications of UFO phenomena can be traced to Washington in 1947, when deputy sheriff Kenneth Arnold reported seeing nine oddly shaped *metallic-looking* objects moving like 'saucers skipping over water'.<sup>171</sup> Since that time, tens of thousands of UFO sighting reports have been made world -wide.<sup>172</sup> The fact that about ten percent of these sightings have defied conventional explanations and analysis has lent credence to the idea that UFOs are extraterrestrial and technological in origin.<sup>173</sup> An estimated six thousand cases of

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under which we exist...? [It does not.] It means something else, namely, the knowledge or belief that if one but wished one *could* learn it at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed." For a further discussion of contemporary Spiritualism in the context of Weber's ideas, see the Conclusion of this dissertation.

<sup>171</sup> The history of UFO sightings can actually be traced back much earlier than 1947. For example, Jacobs (1975) begins his account of the UFO controversy with a discussion of sightings made in 1896-'97.

<sup>172</sup> Bullard (1982:458) reports that there have been an estimated 60,000 cases of UFO sightings since 1947.

<sup>173</sup> Sociologist Jean-Bruno Renard (1990:93-94) suggests, in fact, that such a belief in the extraterrestrial hypothesis of UFO origin is found across all economic, social, and educational boundaries. Popular perceptions of UFOs rarely question the assumption that UFOs are the result of extraterrestrial technology. Belief in the extraterrestrial

unexplained UFO sightings have been the subject of major scientific investigation and controversy. Beginning with the U.S. Air Force's classified projects "Sign," "Grudge" and "Blue Book," and culminating in the joint University of Colorado/U.S. Senate Committee's Condon Report in 1968, a consistent effort has been made to investigate and explain UFO phenomena in scientifically acceptable terms.<sup>174</sup> Three potential "scientific" explanations have been suggested: UFOs are presumed to be either unknown natural or psychological phenomena, misidentifications of known phenomena, or objects of extraterrestrial origin.<sup>175</sup> All three potential explanations have found adherents

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hypothesis is certainly not confined to the Spiritualist context, therefore. For further estimates of the number of UFO sightings outside the Spiritualist context, see Hynek and Vallée (1975:23-25), and Jacobs (1983:218). For attempts to "explain" UFO and extraterrestrial sightings within a psycho-physiological framework, see Dittburner and Persinger (1993); Persinger (1992); and Spanos et al. (1993).

<sup>174</sup> The parallels between these investigations and the early investigations into Spiritualist mediumship are striking. As in the nineteenth century investigations into mediumistic phenomena, the construction of what constitutes 'legitimate' orthodox science shapes the verdict of any 'reputable' investigation into UFOs. Scientists such as Dr. James McDonald (1969) who have investigated the phenomena and have accepted the extraterrestrial hypothesis are labelled as 'deviant' or 'gullible' by their fellow orthodox scientists. See Hynek (1972) for an orthodox critique of McDonald's conclusions. There are also strong parallels between nineteenth century attempts to scientifically "prove" the existence of spirits and twentieth century attempts to "prove" the existence of UFOs. For a discussion of these parallels, see Jacobs (1983).

<sup>175</sup> A fourth possibility, that UFOs represented 'secret' terrestrial technology, was rejected in 1949 by the U.S. Air Force, and was not seriously considered after that point, owing to the apparent technological impossibility of certain commonly reported UFO manoeuvres (for example, rapid acceleration from hovering to speeds in excess of 2000 miles per hour, right angle turns in mid-air, etc.) For a discussion of the U.S. Air Force investigations into UFOs as a potential Soviet threat, see Jacobs (1975:35-62).

among the scientific community.<sup>176</sup>

With the publication of the influential Condon Report, which stressed the first two explanations of UFO sightings to the exclusion of the third, orthodox scientific investigation into UFO phenomena sharply declined.<sup>177</sup> Nevertheless, full scientific consensus on this issue has remained impossible to achieve.<sup>178</sup> Forty-five years of serious scientific inquiry has lent an aura of tenuous scientific legitimacy to the issue.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> For example, astronomers Dr. Donald H. Menzel and Lyle Boyd (1963) argue vehemently that UFO sightings are either misidentified natural phenomena or, in rare cases, psychological in origin. Astronomer Dr. J. Allen Hynek (1972), on the other hand, argues that UFOs represent, in some cases, genuine unidentified phenomena in need of further scientific inquiry. Physicist Dr. James McDonald (1969) argues vehemently in favour of the extraterrestrial hypothesis.

<sup>177</sup> Orthodox scientific investigation into this issue dropped off sharply at this point. Researchers who did continue to investigate the issue stress the overwhelming lack of verifiability for the extraterrestrial hypothesis. The quality of anecdotal evidence in its favour is poor, there is a complete absence of physical evidence in its support (no UFO has yet been discovered on earth, despite numerous claims to the contrary in the popular media), and the seeming impossibility of overcoming the incomprehensible distances between solar systems have made the hypothesis almost untenable (Jacobs 1975, 1983). a discussion of grounds on which the Condon Committee reached its conclusions, Condon (1968).

<sup>178</sup> Orthodox scientific "believers" in the extraterrestrial hypothesis of UFO origin often receive the same kind of "deviant labelling" that sociologist Eva Garroutte (1993) suggests scientific proponents of Spiritualism received in the nineteenth century. In fact, according to Jacobs (1975:252), one effective technique in discrediting scientific believers in the extraterrestrial hypothesis was to group them in with believers in "astrology, spiritualism, psychokinesis, and other pseudosciences". Despite such labelling techniques, however, a few researchers remained committed advocates of the extraterrestrial hypothesis. See, for example, Hynek (1972) and McDonald (1969).

<sup>179</sup> According to Renard (1990:93) discoveries such as the existence of other solar systems and galaxies, the statistical probability of life on other planets, the radio-astronomy search for signals from space (SETI), and the launching of space probes with messages from mankind, have all served to emphasize the 'scientific' nature of the extraterrestrial hypothesis.

Even sceptical orthodox scientists admit that other intelligent and technologically sophisticated species might exist somewhere in the universe.<sup>180</sup> Combined with continuing debate and controversy surrounding the Condon Report's "mistake or delusion" conclusions, this assumption has been enough to keep the otherwise moribund extraterrestrial hypothesis alive.<sup>181</sup> Whereas the extraterrestrial hypothesis remains somewhat unlikely if not actually impossible from the perspective of scientific orthodoxy, in popular perception the extraterrestrial hypothesis has become the most apparently logical explanation of UFO phenomenon.<sup>182</sup> It is this assumption of extraterrestrial origin that underlies the New Age movement's "UFO religion," and which shapes in turn

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<sup>180</sup> Less sceptical scientists go even further. For example, Carl Sagan (1972:267), a prominent astronomer active in SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) engages in what he calls the "entertainment" of estimating how many sentient, technologically advanced species might exist in the universe. He states, "I will not here run through what numbers have been assigned to the various quantities involved... [but] we come out with a number for such technical civilizations in the galaxy of about a million: that is, a million other stars with planets on which today there are such advanced civilizations."

<sup>181</sup> See for example the proceedings of the American Association for the Advancement of Science symposium on Unidentified Flying Objects in December of 1969 (Sagan and Page 1972).

<sup>182</sup> Belief that UFOs are extraterrestrial space craft and that this explanation is the most "likely" one is expressed in the following conversation held in Lily Dale in the spring of 1991. In this brief exchange, the belief that UFOs are extraterrestrial in origin, and that the American government "knows" this to be true, is expressed. The popular television shows about UFOs "prove" that the extraterrestrial hypothesis is correct: *Cheryl*: "Have you been seeing all the shows [about UFOs] on TV lately? It's like it's, stepped up." *Elizabeth*: "What's happening is, the government is encouraging private people to do this, because they want the American public to realize, that this is now so, in a gentle gradual way, because there's going to be a big surprise one day pretty soon!" *Cheryl*: "They want people prepared for it. They're preparing people."

the Spiritualist incorporation of extraterrestrials as spirit guides.<sup>183</sup>

### Extraterrestrials, UFOs, and Orthodox Science

The failure of orthodox scientists to discount the extraterrestrial hypothesis completely enables some Spiritualists to view the possibility of extraterrestrial existence as scientifically warranted.<sup>184</sup> Toronto medium Michael told me, for example, that

"If this universe is as big as it's supposed to be [according to scientists], then to think that we are the centre of the universe is really kind of naive. I mean, really!"

Given therefore the perception that the existence of extraterrestrials is scientifically valid, the apparent scientific and technological accomplishments of these extraterrestrial visitors can become "proof" of the technological and scientific superiority of these alien beings.

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<sup>183</sup> While the technological emphasis remains strong within UFO religion despite a decline in orthodox scientific interest in investigating the extraterrestrial hypothesis, there has also arisen an "ultra-terrestrial" emphasis which stresses the psychic qualities of UFO contacts rather than the physical ones. This shift in emphasis was sparked initially by burgeoning accounts of "alien abductions," beginning with but not limited to that of George Adamski. For a discussion of the shift within the UFO movement away from a technological emphasis and towards a quasi-mystical one, see Jacobs (1983).

<sup>184</sup> This perception of extraterrestrial existence as a "scientific" possibility is bolstered by the fact that orthodox scientific investigations into UFOs and extraterrestrial existence have been conducted. In nineteenth century Spiritualism, "test" seances formed the basis of Spiritualist attempts to establish the "scientific" nature of their beliefs. Scientific investigations into extraterrestrials and UFOs serve a similar function for today's Spiritualists. As the disbelieving Abby insisted, she rejected the possibility of UFOs and extraterrestrial visitations because 'if it was true, scientists could have proved it at least once.' For less sceptical Spiritualists, "science" has already proved the possibility of extraterrestrial existence by the very willingness of orthodox scientists to investigate the issue. Paralleling the scientific investigations into nineteenth century mediumistic phenomena, there have been a long chain of investigations into UFO sightings. These investigations, although almost uniformly negative, give an aura of scientific legitimacy to belief in extraterrestrials and UFOs.



Extraterrestrial space ships, after all, can do things that twentieth century terrestrial scientists declare impossible. According to Hamilton medium Richard, for example, the possession of such technological abilities argues for the existence of a science that far exceeds our own. Only a science that understood the specifics of faster-than-light space travel, for example, could explain the physical structure of observed UFOs. Richard commented,

"Space ships, UFOs and stuff like that, that we've sighted and whatnot, they're referred to as cigar shapes or like flattened shapes, which makes sense, 'cause if they're in the perfect shape for space travel then they're in a sphere, but they would have built their sphere to be a sphere at above light speed. So that, if they slowed down to come into our space-time, they - stretch, and flatten - they become a disk. This, don't take this as gospel, this is suspicions I have, it's what's stimulating my research, eh? Cause I see that, and I think, fuck, it makes sense! You know, it makes sense!"

From the perspective of Spiritualists such as Richard, the "scientific" knowledge and technology of these alien visitors is obviously vastly superior to our own. Spiritualists who believe in the extraterrestrial hypothesis suggest that only a superior form of science could account for the seemingly impossible feats accomplished by UFOs. Folklorist Thomas Bullard (1983:473) suggests that reports of UFO sightings "have the UFO not merely surpass the limitations of present technology but escape the confines of physics altogether". Orthodox scientific objections that UFO phenomena are physically impossible (for example, the ability to make right angle turns in mid-air at speeds in excess of two thousand miles per hour) are consequently ignored, since extraterrestrial

scientific understanding so obviously exceeds our own.<sup>185</sup> Believers in the extraterrestrial hypothesis insist that some form of "superior" science could account for the seemingly supernatural abilities displayed by UFOs.<sup>186</sup>

This perception of UFOs as the space ships of a technologically and scientifically superior race has led to an interesting development within the Spiritualist context. The presumed scientific and technological superiority of this alien race has led to a corollary perception that it is also a *spiritually* superior one. This clear sense of spiritual superiority is apparent in Lily Dale healer and medium Joel's description of his first contact with extraterrestrial entities. When asked how he knew they were extraterrestrials, he replied,

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<sup>185</sup> For example, Donald Menzel (1972:126), astronomer and prominent UFO 'debunker,' writes: "Hynek has further admonished us to remember that there will be a science of the twenty-first, and of the thirtieth, centuries. Presumably they (sic) thus seek to refute the old-fashioned scientists who, like myself, continue to believe in the second law of thermodynamics, the impossibility of perpetual motion, the laws of conservation of matter and energy, and the laws of action and reaction."

<sup>186</sup> Philosophers of science Daisie Radner and Michael Radner (1982:73-74) suggest that the argument that scientific objections are irrelevant because a future science might one day be able to explain the seeming impossibilities of UFO flight is widespread among UFO believers. For Spiritualists, the future of science requires that the spiritual as well as the material realm be encompassed within the boundaries of orthodox science. Any "science" which unites both realms would clearly be superior to that of contemporary Western society. The current inability of orthodox scientists to "prove" or even accept the extraterrestrial hypothesis of UFO origins does not therefore detract from the belief of many that UFOs are nonetheless the result of a science that surpasses our own. In contrast, Radner & Radner (1982:73-85) argue that science must only be understood within its own temporal context: just as we do not criticize nineteenth century scientific theories as 'unscientific' on the grounds that they have been superseded by twentieth century theories, so too we cannot dismiss 20th century science on the ground that some hazy possible future science might prove current theories wrong.

"The awareness, the energy, the quality of the beings were completely different from other beings that I encountered on the spiritual level. Completely different from a departed relative, completely different from a guide, a teacher, a master, or an angel."

In his response, Joel runs through his entire range of spiritual contacts, from the least spiritually advanced entity previously encountered (a departed relative), to the most advanced (an angel). The extraterrestrial entities he encountered far surpassed even the angel in spiritual development.

Extraterrestrial entities are apparently so spiritually superior, in fact, that contact with them is exceedingly difficult for those less spiritually advanced than they. As discussed earlier in the chapter, within the Spiritualist belief system it is understood that every individual possesses a spiritual "vibration," and that the higher the level of spiritual attainment, the higher the vibrational level of the individual. People of lower vibrational frequencies cannot psychically perceive those of higher vibrational levels unless the more highly developed individuals attune their vibrational frequencies to match those spiritually beneath them. According to Joel, the vibrational level of extraterrestrials is exceptionally high. In recounting a contact with an extraterrestrial entity that occurred during meditation, he recalled,

"Just for a moment, I felt this being, this presence, that was completely, completely different from what I had felt before. And I asked, you know, I thought, 'who are you?' And the answer I got back was that this being, who was of so high a vibration I could only hold the contact for a minute, was from a planet in a galaxy many light years away from earth. And the sense I got was, that this being was going to be my guide, only I wasn't ready yet. So I know that, when I'm ready, this being will be my guide."

Joel is a highly regarded medium and healer who counts an "angel" among his regular spiritual contacts. The fact that he considers himself to be so spiritually inferior

to this extraterrestrial entity that he could only hold the contact for a 'minute' is a clear indication of the immense aura of superiority that extraterrestrials are perceived to hold. Another experienced Spiritualist healer recounted a similar contact, again stressing the vast spiritual superiority of the alien beings. Michael recalled,

"About three years after I learned how to meditate, I was in my room at home alone, in Montreal, and I said, in my mind, 'If there are extraterrestrials I'd like to see you.' And then I had a very strong impression of two beings in the room, the visual effect was almost like, if you ever see 'Star Trek,' and the particles [in the transporter beam] haven't quite come together. So it was almost like two images like that. And the feeling that I got from them was, 'We're here, and, when we feel... that you are ready to work with us, then we'll be here, but until then there is no purpose in this.' And they haven't come back. Quite obviously I'm not ready!"

During the fieldwork period, every Spiritualist who told me of experienced contacts with extraterrestrials readily identified their vibrational energy as too 'strange,' 'odd' or 'different' to belong to earthly entities.<sup>187</sup> One Spiritualist medium, who believes his daughter to be a reincarnated extraterrestrial, recalled his immediate recognition of her alien vibrational frequency at the moment of her birth. Much to his wife's embarrassment, he exclaimed in the delivery room, "Oh my God! We've got a child who's from outer space!" Hilary Evans (1984:156-157), a popular occult and UFO author, suggests that extraterrestrial entity contacts are more immediately recognizable

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<sup>187</sup> According to popular occult and UFO writer Hilary Evans (1984:156-157), the process of naming or labelling the identity of an "entity" experienced through alternate perception is the result of negotiation between the individual percipient and societal or communal norms. She argues, however, that extraterrestrial entity contacts are more immediately recognizable as such than any other type of entity contact (including ghost sightings, fairies, and saints).

as such than any other type of entity contact.<sup>188</sup> Certainly there is no doubt in the minds of either Joel or Michael that the entities they encountered were extraterrestrial in origin. These entities were clearly different from the spirits of the dead that Spiritualist mediums normally encounter. Their vibrational level was such that earthly beings had difficulty sustaining the spiritual contact. The superiority of extraterrestrials in this context, therefore, is clearly a superiority of both "spiritual" and "scientific" development.

### Implications

While the alien quality of extraterrestrial entity contacts might be indisputable for Spiritualists who have experienced them, what is most revealing within the Spiritualist context is that any such alien entity contact should be perceived to occur at all. There is a general consensus among anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists who have studied "anomalous" contact experiences that the cultural milieu of the percipient shapes

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<sup>188</sup> In the narrative below, the "remarkableness" of his daughter's "vibration" was so apparent that non-Spiritualist witnesses provided corroborative support for his conclusion. This is in keeping with the strong stress Spiritualists generally place on the evidential value of non-Spiritualist testimony. Michael told me, "When our daughter was born... when she first came out of my wife's womb - now here's the ability to discern energies or spirits, ok? -like her vibration was really different. So I jokingly said, 'Oh my god we've got a child who's from outer space!' And of course my wife said, 'Shhhhh!' [laugh] A couple weeks later we brought her to this centre in Montreal, where this Anglican priest that I know looked at my daughter from a distance... and said, 'You know what, you're daughter feels like she's an extraterrestrial!' Okay, you know? And then, a couple of months later a person who writes about all those things came up and said the same thing to me. I know she's a very strong channel, spiritually... So what I feel is that she obviously has been recently incarnated on another planet... I know she's a very special being..."

the experience and interpretation of "anomalous" events.<sup>189</sup> As anthropologist Felicitas Goodman (1988:4) notes, "not just any spirit [entity] can be involved in a particular possession [experience]. It has to be the *right* spirit. That is, the respective spirit is 'culture specific.'" Within the Spiritualist context, there is no apparent need for Spiritualists to identify mediumistically contacted entities as "extraterrestrial."<sup>190</sup> As discussed earlier in the Chapter, the Spiritualist belief in communication with the spirits of the dead provides Spiritualists with an established interpretation of any alternate state

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<sup>189</sup> For example, psychologists Spanos, Cross, Dickson and DuBreuil (1993:627,629) note that "the finding that most clearly differentiated the UFO groups from the comparison groups was belief in UFOs and in the existence of alien life forms... post hoc comparisons indicated that the two UFO [study] groups failed to differ [from one another] on this index. However, both UFO groups scored higher on this index than either of the comparison groups, [which] failed to differ from one another." While it is hardly "profound" to note that extraterrestrial contactees believe in UFOs more frequently than do non-contactees, the implications of this finding are significant. As Spanos et al go on to note (1993:630), "these findings suggest that many of the UFO subjects may have been drawn to beliefs about alien life before having UFO experiences." This conclusion further reemphasizes the conclusion that anomalous contact experiences are shaped by previous cultural expectation.

<sup>190</sup> Interpretation of entity contacts as "extraterrestrial" in origin are not entirely confined to the contemporary twentieth century context. There is one documented case of a nineteenth century Spiritualist woman who communicated with an extraterrestrial entity while in mediumistic trance. Flournoy (1963) provides a detailed psychological analysis of the 'martian cycle' of mediumistic visions of "Mlle. H  l  ne Smith." Smith reportedly communicated with "the great man Astan  ," who lived on Mars, through the services of another spirit named "Esenale," who had lived on both Earth and Mars in previous incarnations, and could therefore act as interpreter. There is some evidence that Astan  's superior spiritual nature is linked to his mastery of superior technology. Flournoy writes (1963:162,178) that on September 5, 1896, H  l  ne "saw before her a landscape and some peculiar people... On the bridge there was a man of dark complexion (Astan  ), carrying in his hands an instrument somewhat resembling a carriage-lantern in appearance, which, being pressed, emitted flames, and which seemed to be a flying-machine... He rises superior to the crowd, inasmuch as he alone possesses a flying-machine incomprehensible to us."

of consciousness interpreted as the result of 'contact' with spiritual beings. Spiritualists believe that the spiritually advanced spirits of the human dead become the spiritual "guides" or teachers of living Spiritualists. Any "advanced" entity contact within the Spiritualist context should therefore be understandable and "explainable" within this traditional interpretational framework. The incorporation of extraterrestrials as spirit guides is significant, therefore, precisely because it reveals an alternative interpretation of experiences readily understandable within traditional Spiritualist terms.

One potential explanation for the adoption of extraterrestrials as ideal spirit guides by some contemporary Spiritualists is that, unlike the existence of spirits, the existence of UFOs and extraterrestrials is at least potentially acceptable within orthodox science. As folklorist Thomas Bullard (1990:474) has suggested, "Science made technological UFOs possible, and scientific interest in extraterrestrial life breathed plausibility into them." As a consequence, in Spiritualist perceptions, communication with extraterrestrial entities is compatible with a scientifically acceptable worldview in a way that pure spirit communication is apparently not. In contrast to the existence of spirits, the existence of extraterrestrials at least remains a point of scientific debate. Whereas the dominant orthodox scientific hypothesis suggests that the existence of extraterrestrial life is likely but that interplanetary visitations from such life forms are highly unlikely, popular perception fails to distinguish between the likelihood of their existence, and the likelihood of their presence here on earth.<sup>191</sup> For some Spiritualists, the fact that extraterrestrial

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<sup>191</sup> Carl Sagan (1972:265-275) is a representative of this first "scientific" position. According to sociologist Jean-Bruno Renard (1990:82-92) a 'scale' of believers in the extraterrestrial hypothesis can be identified, from most sceptical to least: 1)scientists;

life is a scientific possibility can be enough to "prove" the scientific legitimacy of the extraterrestrial hypothesis. The incorporation of extraterrestrials as spirit guides, therefore, provides at least marginal "scientific" proof for Spiritualist belief.

In combining superior spirituality with scientific superiority in the figures of extraterrestrials, and in stressing the scientific legitimacy of belief in extraterrestrial existence, Spiritualists reveal the "rationalized" emphasis of contemporary "UFO religion." As analytical psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1959) noted with reference to UFOs, extraterrestrials in this context can assume the status of "technological angels." Jung (1959) suggested that the entire extraterrestrial hypothesis of UFO origin stems from a concern with the challenges modern scientific theory and technology present to everyday life.<sup>192</sup> In idealizing the figures of extraterrestrials and UFOs, science and technology can replace the supernatural and the miraculous as sources for potential salvation. Sociologist Jean-Bruno Renard (1990:82) in fact suggests that belief in extraterrestrial contact reveals a sacralization of science unparalleled elsewhere, for contactee reports express communication with divine-like beings in scientific and

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2)the "cultured" public; 3) UFO researchers; 4)the "general" public; and 5) flying-saucer contactees.

<sup>192</sup> Jung (1959) suggests that the extraterrestrial hypothesis could not have arisen in a non-technological period of history, because technological intervention was not necessary in ages when the direct intervention of heaven was considered a rational possibility. Today, however, it is common to "backdate" the extraterrestrial hypothesis in the historical record as a means of explaining anomalous historical accounts, for example the Biblical narratives of Ezekial, Elijah and Elisha (Ezekial 1:4-13; II Kings 2:11).



technological terms.<sup>193</sup> Within the Spiritualist context, extraterrestrials clearly reveal a 'divine-like' character in their superior scientific, technological and spiritual abilities.<sup>194</sup> In moving potential sources of spiritual wisdom away from a spiritistic realm and toward an empirical one, the "rationalization" of Spiritualist religious belief is clearly apparent.

The Spiritualist incorporation of extraterrestrials as spirit guides reveals more than a simple rationalization of Spiritualist belief, however. The adoption of extraterrestrials into the Spiritualist belief system also points to a critique of the "disenchanted" rationalized world of orthodox science. The one significant difference between the figures of extraterrestrials as spirit guides and more traditionally accepted spirit entities is that these extraterrestrial guides are representatives of a living, scientifically advanced species. It is precisely this scientific and technological superiority that establishes their

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<sup>193</sup> He writes (1990:94), "L'existence des groupes soucoupiste, dont les mythes et les rites sont fondés sur une relation avec des entités de l'espace et leurs vaisseaux, démontre de toute évidence la dimension religieuse de la croyance aux extraterrestres. Les groupes soucoupistes présentent plusieurs caractéristiques où l'on repère l'articulation du scientifique et du religieux."

<sup>194</sup> Theologian and religious studies scholar Ted Peters (1977) has identified four characteristics which he calls 'the criteria for divinity': transcendence, omniscience, perfection, and the offer of redemption. According to Peters (1977:119-166), believers in UFOs conceptualize extraterrestrials in these terms. Although Peters himself (1977:167-174) does not accept the "divine-like" character of extraterrestrials, he suggests that the appeal of such an image is widespread. He writes (1977:20), "The religious interpretation of the alleged UFO occupants as celestial saviours [often] goes unrecognized for what it is, namely, a naturalized or scientized theology of salvation. The religious dimension is almost hidden... the religious dimensions [of UFO contact experiences] were sublimated, i.e., unconsciously redirected away from a superstitious belief in a God who saves and toward a much more acceptable belief in a natural universe where technology saves. Are we not all tempted at least a little to believe and hope [in such salvation]?"

spiritual superiority in Spiritualist perception. Just as our modern human science cannot account for the presence or anomalous motion of UFOs, neither can our spiritual knowledge encompass their alien wisdom. Extraterrestrials exceed our spiritual development just as they exceed our technological development. The question that consequently arises, however, is precisely what Spiritualists mean when they claim that extraterrestrials are spiritually, scientifically and technologically "superior"?

According to philosopher of science Nicholas Rescher (1985), the very concept of a "superior" extraterrestrial science is meaningless, for in order to be superior to terrestrial science, this alien science would have to be the *same* as ours, only *better*. If extraterrestrial science *differed* from earthly science in ways, means, or goals, it could not be said to be either superior or inferior, only different. Like comparing apples to oranges or opera to rock music, in such a case one could merely judge each endeavour on its own merits, rather than hierarchically valuing one over another.<sup>195</sup> For Spiritualists, however, it is precisely the *difference* between terrestrial and extraterrestrial

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<sup>195</sup> Rescher (1985) argues that the chain of coincidences which resulted in the development of "our" kind of science is exceedingly unlikely to be duplicated elsewhere by a race different from ourselves. "Our" science has been shaped by our experience. The science of "others" would be shaped by different experiences, and could not therefore be considered the "same" as ours. Rescher acknowledges, however, that some might find it "comforting" to think that there are "superior scientists" out there somewhere. He writes (1985:112), "For many there is, no doubt, a certain charm to the idea of companionship. It would be comforting to think that, however estranged we are in other ways, those alien minds and ourselves share *science* at any rate - that we are fellow travellers on a common journey of inquiry... It would be pleasant to think ourselves not only colleagues but junior collaborators whom other, wiser minds might be able to help along the way... we are tempted to look to alien inquirers who surpass us in scientific wisdom and might assist us in overcoming our cognitive deficiencies. The idea is appealing but it is also, alas, very unrealistic."

science which makes the science of extraterrestrials *superior* to our own. The very reason extraterrestrials are capable of doing things with their science and technology that we cannot do, nor even comprehend, is that extraterrestrial science has merged both empirical and spiritual truths. For example, according to Hamilton medium Richard, any successful attempt to exceed the speed of light, as UFOs apparently do, must be based both on "scientific" and "spiritual" knowledge. He told me,

"I think the time break, the fact that life as we know it does not exist past the speed of light according to Einstein's theory, right? Well, it's true, material life does not exist past that point... to break that barrier, we've got to jump out of the material plane. WITH our material... [To do that], we need to tap Spirit, the living energy..."

Extraterrestrials, in surpassing the "time break" above which "material life" as we know it does not exist, consequently reveal a consolidation of "spiritual" and "scientific" knowledge toward which Spiritualists themselves have been working since the nineteenth century. Like the "spiritualized" figure of Einstein discussed earlier, extraterrestrials have recognized a "truth" about reality that orthodox terrestrial scientists have failed to acknowledge. From the perspective of several of the Spiritualists with whom I worked, therefore, contemporary orthodox science is flawed because it cannot comprehend the "truth" of a spiritual realm. In their idealization of extraterrestrials, these Spiritualists consequently implicitly criticize the narrow limits of orthodox science. Like the figures of Einstein and Benjamin Franklin, as entities who have mastered both scientific knowledge and spiritual wisdom, and who have fused the two in such a way that scientific and technological marvels result, extraterrestrials have understandably become for some Spiritualists ideal choices for spirit guides. Given both the idealization and the

Spiritualist criticism of "science," therefore, and given the perceived technological and spiritual superiority of extraterrestrials, the inclusion of extraterrestrials and UFOs can be seen as a coherent and consistent development within contemporary Spiritualism. The incorporation of extraterrestrials as spirit guides can indeed be perceived, as one Spiritualist informed me, as "the next phase... of [Spiritualist] evolution."

### Conclusion: Spiritualist Mediumship and the Discourse of "Science"

Spiritualism has been criticized for its reduction of the mysterious or supernatural realm to the mundane level of everyday "science" (Brandon 1983; Moore 1972, 1977; Pearsall 1977). According to Moore (1972:498), attempts by nineteenth century Spiritualists to make religion scientific "reduced the cosmos to the size of man at his worst. No amount of moralizing about the courage to confront truth could salvage that kind of damage to the human imagination."<sup>196</sup> Despite such charges of trivialization, however, contemporary Spiritualists maintain their insistence that Spiritualist beliefs are compatible with "science." The assumptions underlying their use of the term "vibration," for example, their adoption of scientific symbols of authority into their idiom of spirit possession, and their use of orthodox scientific theory to "explain" their experiences all reveal the continuing importance of "science" in the contemporary

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<sup>196</sup> With this statement, Moore is arguing that the use of "spirit messages" to "prove" the continued existence of the human spirit after bodily death revealed the failure of Spiritualism to achieve any lasting religious impact. "In their craving for scientific respectability, " he writes (1972:498), "they neglected philosophy. Had all their supposedly indisputable evidence proved true, they would have filled the world with spirits without illuminating at all a spiritual dimension in man."

Spiritualist context.

The readily apparent idealization of science within Spiritualists' mediumship beliefs does not go untempered by criticism, however. Contemporary Spiritualists do not wish to "reduce" spirituality to the level of material concerns. They are critical of the refusal of orthodox scientists to expand the boundaries of orthodox science to admit the "reality" of a spiritual realm. For many contemporary Spiritualists, the language, symbols and theory of science are means to express the "truth" of Spiritualist belief. However, this "truth" surpasses the boundaries of orthodox science even while it uses "science" as the medium of its expression.

Contemporary Spiritualists are aware that orthodox scientists have as yet proved unable or at least unwilling to confirm Spiritualist claims. They are also aware of the charge of "trivialization" often levelled at Spiritualists for their desire to integrate religion with science. When informed of the focus of my own dissertation research, Hamilton medium and minister Kim quickly informed me that 'There is much more to Spiritualism than that!,' clearly defending the religion against any implied charge of reductionism that my thesis might entail.<sup>197</sup> Other Spiritualists have informed me that

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<sup>197</sup> During the course of fieldwork I was always uncomfortable when asked about my thesis by the Spiritualists with whom I worked. Most of the Spiritualists who helped my research by agreeing to interviews did not think to ask me what my argument was going to be. Indeed, throughout the first year of field research, I myself did not know what aspect of Spiritualist belief I would concentrate upon. Once the topic was settled, however, whenever a Spiritualist asked about the thesis, I would explain the thrust of my argument. I always expected to be charged with "trivialization" myself, for as Kim insisted, there is indeed much more to Spiritualism than its stress on "science". To my surprise, however, most of the Spiritualists with whom I discussed the thesis simply internalized the argument that "science" holds immense prestige for Spiritualists, and articulated their perception of why this might be so in terms of their own spirit

the Spiritualist stress on the compatibility of "science" and spirituality results from the important role that "science" plays in our everyday lives. According to sociologist Eileen Barker (1985), the perception that "science" plays a dominant role in everyday life is not confined to marginal religious groups. She suggests (1985:198) that within 'Western society' generally, there is "a healthy (some might say unhealthy) respect for science." For Spiritualists, this perception of the dominant role that "science" plays is reflected in the messages that "spirits" impart. After I had explained the thrust of my dissertation research to one Spiritualist woman at Hamilton's Main Street Church, she told me that the presence of scientific language and symbols within Spiritualism was only to be expected. According to Helen, 'Spirit tailors their messages to us to suit the culture that we live in. And since this is a scientific culture, that's why Spirit gives us messages the way that they do.' Another Spiritualist woman from Hamilton's King Street Church named Sherry commented that 'we tend to understand things in a science sort of way. So Spirit explains things that way, so we'll understand.' For Sherry and Helen, the "scientific" messages received from "Spirit" are shaped "at the source" to fit the cultural expectations of those to whom they are sent. For many Spiritualists, therefore, the presence of scientific language and symbols within the Spiritualist mediumship idiom is not to be seen as a "reduction" of spirituality to the level of 'mundane science,' but simply as a means of expression of Spiritualist "truths."

Some Spiritualists argue that the strong stress placed on "science" within the

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possession idiom. Scientific language, symbols and theory are present within Spiritualist mediumship, according to several of the Spiritualists with whom I worked, because "spirits" express things that way.

Spiritualist mediumship idiom is not the result of Spiritualists' own idealization of "science" at all, but rather the result of their desire to communicate the "truth" of their beliefs to an audience that refuses to accept anything which science has not "proved" to be "true." According to Lily Dale medium and healer Joel, "scientific" or empirical "proof" of Spiritualist belief is only necessary to convince the spiritually less advanced of Spiritualist claims. Joel told me that "The proof of the continuation of life is like the kindergarten of spiritual growth." Non-Spiritualists frequently fail to develop spiritually past this point, however, which means that "proof" of Spiritualist claims is continually required. This charge that "proof" is only required because non-Spiritualist sceptics demand scientific support before being willing to accept Spiritualist claims is one that Hamilton medium Richard levelled at me near the end of the fieldwork period in 1992. Richard himself clearly shows the influence of "science" in his descriptive language, his incorporation of scientific theory in support of his religious beliefs, and in the very content and structure of his spiritual visions. Nevertheless, in challenging me on my continuing status as a non-Spiritualist despite my research on Spiritualism, he argued that it was I who was under the sway of "science" and that only "science" would convince me of Spiritualism's "truth." He said:

"What you need is for science to come back to you and say "we believe your research," because you're basing... the potency of your accumulated data on their reaction. Probably because you've been grist in their mill for quite a while. I bring this up because you're still in school, more or less, and I'm not. And it was hard for me to break, oh, I don't know, the expectations I felt I needed to fulfil in my peer group. Now I've learned I have no peer group. None. At least none in the flesh. And that I think is the first step..."

According to Richard, my continued resistance to Spiritualist teachings was based

on my unthinking acceptance of "science" as the only legitimate and authoritative source of knowledge about "truth." He suggests in fact that any knowledge that I had gained from my research among Spiritualists would have to be confirmed by orthodox scientists before I could accept it. Consequently, it is through the disbelief of myself and others like me that the strong stress on "science" within Spiritualism became necessary. While Richard perceives himself as having passed beyond the need to integrate his beliefs with any societal standards of "truth," he also argued that most people have not escaped the need for scientific legitimation for truth claims. As a result, the only way in which the "truths" of Spiritualism will become widely accepted is through scientific verification and the demonstration that Spiritualist beliefs are compatible with orthodox science.

While the demand of sceptical non-Spiritualists such as myself for "scientific" legitimation for Spiritualist claims reveals, according to Richard and Joel, a certain lack of spiritual development or awareness, it might also prove useful in encouraging orthodox scientists to expand the boundaries of "science." According to Richard, "science" needs to account for the spiritual realm before it can adequately describe "reality" as it truly is. Before spirit guides can help orthodox scientists to understand the "true" nature of "reality," however, these scientists need to be at least somewhat amenable to Spiritualist claims. Through the demand of individuals like myself for scientific "proof" of Spiritualist claims, scientists might be encouraged to explore Spiritualist truths. To facilitate this development, Richard proposed to adapt to this demand for scientific legitimation. He told me:

"I want to assemble a group of scientists, and I know that they'll come to me, and I know as they do, the beings that I speak to on the other side



will empower themselves through those people... It's kind of weird. I know you are going to play a part in it... 'cause you are going to expose some of the concepts I have to the right folk. And, the keys [of spiritual knowledge] will be dropped in the right place."

In this way, the use of science as a legitimating discourse within contemporary Spiritualism can benefit both Spiritualists and orthodox scientists. Spiritualists can articulate their experiences in the language of "science" and so receive "scientific" legitimation, and scientists can receive the 'keys of knowledge' to help them understand "reality" as it truly is.

For many of the Spiritualists with whom I worked, "science" carries immense prestige and is the idiom within which their religious beliefs are articulated. The language, symbols and theory of "science" are prevalent throughout Spiritualist mediumship beliefs. Within the perceptions of many contemporary Spiritualists, "science" is the only means by which "truth" can be expressed. Even when Spiritualists such as Richard or Joel challenge the need for scientific legitimation, the assumption that "science" is the means by which reality is described and "truth" revealed is not questioned.<sup>198</sup> When Spiritualists claim that their beliefs are compatible with "science," therefore, they are claiming ontological status for Spiritualist "truths." The continued rejection of Spiritualist "truths" by orthodox science only underscores the need for Spiritualists to adopt the discourse of science to legitimate their beliefs. If "science" is the sacral and so authoritative means of knowing in our society, as Langdon Gilkey

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<sup>198</sup> In this respect, contemporary Spiritualists reflect the same unwillingness to ultimately challenge the pre-eminence of science that Garrouette (1993:324) notes with respect to nineteenth century Spiritualists.

(1987) suggests, Spiritualist beliefs must be compatible with "science," for Spiritualists "know" that their beliefs and experiences are "true." In addition, Spiritualists argue that orthodox science itself is "unscientific" in that it fails to describe reality adequately as Spiritualists know it to be. The perception of "science" as factual, authoritative, and descriptive of reality, therefore, leads Spiritualists to articulate their experiences and beliefs in what they perceive as the only legitimate idiom for communicating "truth." Within the contemporary Spiritualist context, the primary means for Spiritualists to communicate the "fact" or "truth" of Spiritualist experience is through personal experience narratives, as the next chapter shows.

#### Chapter Four: Personal Experience Narratives as "Proofs"

*I'll tell you a very strange story that happened and thank God that this happened... there were about twenty-six people present at the time that it occurred, so when I say this story can be verified... I've got evidence! - Tom.*

*If such a public agreement of evidence does not establish a fact then it is indeed impossible, as Professor Challis remarked long ago, to prove a thing by any human testimony whatever - (Doyle 1926)*

Contemporary Spiritualism is a religious movement based primarily upon the personal experiences of its members. Mediumistic contact with the spirits of the dead and spiritual healing experiences form the subjective basis of this experiential faith.<sup>1</sup> Because of this experiential emphasis, personal experience narratives assume a place of major importance within the tradition. It is through the articulation of personal experience within a communal context that Spiritualist beliefs are reinforced as accurate

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<sup>1</sup> Anthropologist Erika Bourguignon argues (1977:243) that members of experiential religious movements are considered "deviant, pathological, [and] suspect" in modern industrial societies. This marginalization, she suggests, means that only "alienated" individuals join such groups. She writes, "I should like to suggest that those who utilize these states, then, are most alienated from the total society, most demanding of immediate gratification, requiring immediate experiential evidence of the cult's promises, a down payment, as it were, on the promised celestial rewards. The ethic of altered states, it seems, places itself at the polar opposite to the Protestant Ethic, with its postponement of gratification, of work for the future." Contemporary Spiritualists, however, cannot be considered "alienated" nor demanding of "instant gratification," despite their experiential emphasis. As Macklin (1974a:417) in fact argues, "The data suggest that... those Protestant values... are, in fact, serving Spiritualism's clients very well." Contemporary Spiritualism is based on personal experience and alternate states of consciousness, but Spiritualists themselves argue that their experiences are "rational" and "normal" and structure their narratives to de-emphasize any differentiation between Spiritualist and non-Spiritualist belief systems.

descriptions of "reality." Personal experience narratives communicate the "fact" of Spiritualist experiences, and provide evidential detail to "prove" the "truth" of Spiritualists claims. Personal experience narratives consequently carry the burden of "proof" through which the legitimacy of Spiritualist belief is established.<sup>2</sup>

Spiritualist worship services informally reflect the important role of personal experience narratives within the Spiritualist tradition.<sup>3</sup> The church services themselves are divided into healing, worship, and mediumship portions, but there is almost invariably a social gathering which follows the formal church service.<sup>4</sup> It is during such coffee-hour social gatherings that personal experience narratives are often told. This

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of Spiritualist perceptions of "science" as "factual" and "descriptive of reality" see Chapter One and Chapter Three.

<sup>3</sup> Personal experience narratives are "informally" recognized, but do not have a formal place within the worship service structure. On one occasion at Hamilton's King Street Church, a visiting Spiritualist minister from Brantford, Ontario brought with her a recent "convert" to Spiritualism who had previously belonged to an evangelical Christian church. This man spoke to the congregation during the time usually devoted to the "lecture". Interestingly, he proceeded to "witness" to his new faith in a style much more in keeping with evangelical Christianity (Harding 1987) than with Spiritualism. Such testimonials in a formal setting are unusual. Informal testimonials, however, are vital within the Spiritualist movement.

<sup>4</sup> Both the King Street Church and the Main Street Church held "coffee-hours" after each worship service, as did the two Toronto churches I visited, and the two churches in Lily Dale. During the coffee hours, the core membership of each church would meet for informal discussion and social interaction. Personal experiences were frequently exchanged in small conversation groups, and communal meanings would be negotiated in this setting. Anthropologist Irving Zaretsky argues that social interaction is *not* a major part of Spiritualism. He writes (1977:204), "Social activities such as dinners, bazaars, or card games are not pervasive in Spiritualist churches... there is very little conversation about personal life or daily activity." In my own fieldwork experience I found this to be only partially true. Many church members did not attend coffee-hours or other social functions such as fund-raisers, but those who did attend exchanged personal experiences and informal gossip, and often formed social bonds which extended beyond the church setting.

social expression of individual experience allows communal bonds to be maintained, and communal belief systems to be reinforced. Appropriate interpretations are placed on individual anomalous experiences through group discussion, and communal faith is reinforced through exposure to the "proofs" of spirit existence that other members of the church communicate. Within the Spiritualist context, therefore, coffee-hours and other social occasions can be seen as an integral part of the Spiritualist tradition, for it is in such social settings that the "proofs" of personal experience narratives are exchanged.

In the Spiritualist use of personal experience narratives as "proofs," the connection between Spiritualism and science is not as readily apparent as it is within the framework of Spiritualist healing and mediumship discussed earlier in the dissertation. As will become evident, contemporary Spiritualists use personal experience narratives as evidential testimony, and structure their narratives in such a way that the "fact" of Spiritualist experience is established. This does not, however, make such narratives "scientific" in any orthodox sense. Sociologist Eva Garrouette (1993:263-265 ) in fact argues that establishment scientists in the nineteenth century worked hard and successfully to eradicate Baconian perceptions that "testimony" could ever be considered scientifically "evidential," save where such testimony was offered by scientists themselves.<sup>5</sup> Today, as a consequence, the link between "science" and "personal

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<sup>5</sup> She writes (1993:49-54), "[Positivism] attacks the democratic Baconian ideal of the individual investigator who faithfully intends his mind to the observation of nature, in full confidence of the accuracy of his perceptions. It adds a new, distinctly positivistic criterion of factuality; namely, the consent of a scientific community... the rise of positivism implied a loss for religious speakers. Their means to authoritative speech on a wide range of topics was cut off. No more was nature, in this ideology, the necessary and obvious signature of the divine, but rather, a depersonalized bundle of forces.

testimony" seems nebulous at best. The use of personal experience narratives as "proofs" within the contemporary Spiritualist context, however, reveals that for many Spiritualists the link between "science" and testimony remains intact.

The following analysis of Spiritualist personal experience narratives as "proofs" represents in many respects an inversion of the argument found in previous chapters. Throughout the dissertation it has been maintained that Spiritualists incorporate "scientific" language, symbols and theory into their religious system to legitimate and express religious truth claims. As has been mentioned, for many Spiritualists "science" is the means by which facts are established and reality described. By adopting scientific language, symbols, and theory, Spiritualists articulate their religious beliefs in an idiom understood to convey empirical "truth." The following chapter, however, does not concentrate on explicitly "scientific" elements within Spiritualist narrative. Rather, it argues that the very structuring of personal experience narratives themselves as "proofs" of the "fact," "truth," and empirical reality of Spiritualist experiences makes such narratives "scientific" in Spiritualist perceptions. Although these narratives are rarely "about" science, therefore, since "science" is the means by which facts are established and reality described, structuring their narratives as "proofs" of the factual reality of Spiritualist experiences reveals an ongoing, if implicit, connection between "science" and testimony in the contemporary Spiritualist context. This chapter consequently argues that from the perspective of many Spiritualists, personal experience narratives provide not

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[Consequently,] Scientists inherited the sole rights [to speak authoritatively on nature]."

only "proof" of Spiritualist beliefs, but "proof" that these beliefs are compatible with "science." In being accepted as "proof" by the narrative community, Spiritualist narratives establish the *scientific* legitimacy of Spiritualist faith.<sup>6</sup>

### Historical Context

The perceptual link between "science" and personal testimony as "proof" has a long standing history within the Spiritualist tradition. Spiritualist historians rely almost exclusively on the presentation of reputable testimony to establish the "fact" of Spiritualist phenomena (Britten 1970, 1884; Cadwallader 1917; Doyle 1919, 1921, 1926; Hill 1918; Underhill 1885). Sociologist Eva Garroutte (1993:26, 251) suggests that the use of reputable testimony as "scientific" evidence is part of a Baconian view of science that Spiritualists shared with many non-Spiritualists prior to the ascendancy of the positivist school of establishment science in the late nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Neither nineteenth century Spiritualists nor non-Spiritualist Baconian scientists relied *exclusively* on testimony to provide scientific evidence of "facts," however. For Spiritualists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, evidential testimony was bolstered by scientific

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<sup>6</sup> Surprisingly, the concept and term "proof" does not figure in Zaretsky's (1969, 1970, 1977) ethno-semantic study of Spiritualist groups in California. This may indicate a difference between the Spiritualists in the present fieldwork study and those studied by Zaretsky, or may more likely indicate the different emphasis of Zaretsky on social structure and hierarchical ordering systems in the argot, rather than on Spiritualist attempts to assert the scientific legitimacy of their claims.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the use of "testimony" in Spiritualist histories, and a brief examination of Garroutte's argument in this regard, see Chapter One.

investigations into the mediumship of "test" mediums.<sup>8</sup> Such investigations held out the hope that "objective proof" of Spiritualist claims could be established to the satisfaction of sceptical investigators. As Spiritualist and psychical researcher Hereward Carrington (1931, 1954) indicates, objective evidence was deemed necessary to "prove" the legitimacy of Spiritualist claims to sceptical establishment scientists. Carrington writes (1931:311-312):

It is probably true that thousands of individuals have become convinced of the truth of Spiritualism because of ... personal experiences, spontaneous in character. The difficulty here lies in the fact that this evidence is often incommunicable, and is evidence only to the individual himself... in order to convince others - and particularly the scientific man - more objective proof must be provided. And such objective proof can come, as a rule, only by means of experimental tests and demonstrations.

The history of Spiritualism is filled with instances in which the search for "objective proof" led mediums to volunteer for the experimental tests and demonstrations that orthodox scientists required (Brandon 1983; Britten 1870; Crawford 1919; Doyle 1926; Isaacs 1983, Moore 1972, 1977). After the separation of psychical science or parapsychology from its Spiritualist roots, however, such investigations became a thing of the past.<sup>9</sup> The demand for "proof" of Spiritualist claims did not become of less

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<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of "test" mediums and scientific inquiry, see Chapter Three.

<sup>9</sup> "Psychical science" still exists as a field of research, but it separated from American Spiritualism after J.B. Rhine began his search for scientific legitimacy for the field of parapsychology. According to Barrow (1986) and Swatos (1990), the field of psychical science was originally developed by those with strong religious Spiritualist roots, in an attempt to oppose the atheistic protest reformers who perceived the phenomena of Spiritualism as primarily "natural" or material rather than as spiritual phenomenon. Gradually, however, the psychical researchers drifted away from the religious movement in favour of a more research oriented perspective, largely under the impetus of Rhine and his wife Louisa. Today, members of the religious movement have



importance within the Spiritualist context, but the loss of interest among establishment scientists in investigating Spiritualist claims limited opportunities to provide this kind of "objective proof."<sup>10</sup> As a result, personal testimonials became the only source of "evidence" available to Spiritualists in support of Spiritualist claims.<sup>11</sup> Personal testimonial has always played a major part in "proving" the "reality" of Spiritualist experience, but in the contemporary context, it has necessarily taken on an even more dominant role.

### Contemporary Importance of Personal Experience Narratives

Within the contemporary Spiritualist context, the "proof" of personal experience narratives is considered to "prove" the "objective" or "scientific" nature of Spiritualist phenomena. Personal experience narratives have assumed the burden of providing

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little or no contact with psychical research, although some psychical researchers may still maintain religious interpretations of the phenomena they study. See Rhine (1978); Leshan (1976); Soal (1978) and Weinberger (1977) for discussions of parapsychology from a parapsychological perspective. See Alcock (1981); Garrouette (1992); Moore (1977) and McClenon (1984) for scholarly analyses of the field of parapsychology.

<sup>10</sup> As mentioned in Chapter One, the exclusion of Spiritualism as a legitimate field of scientific study occurred during the latter half of the nineteenth century. As Coon (1992) and Garrouette (1992, 1993) argue, the professionalization of positivist science during this period led to an exclusion of those perceived by establishment scientists as lay interlopers in an increasingly specialized field of study. Garrouette (1993:264) in fact argues that it was only for a very short period - during the 1870's - that establishment scientists took Spiritualism seriously enough to investigate Spiritualist claims to scientific orthodoxy. After this period, positivist science had been safely "professionalised," and Spiritualism as a threat could be safely ignored.

<sup>11</sup> It is ironic that while the shift towards a complete dependency on testimony as "evidence" was taking place within the Spiritualist movement as a result of intensifying scientific disinterest in Spiritualist claims, "testimony" in orthodox scientific circles was simultaneously becoming increasingly seen as completely "non-evidential."

"objective proof" within their story structures. The importance of "proof" within contemporary Spiritualism is a continuation of the nineteenth and early twentieth century Spiritualist emphasis on "scientific" legitimation for Spiritualist beliefs. Among many contemporary Spiritualists, "science" has become a legitimating discourse within which Spiritualist beliefs can be expressed.<sup>12</sup> The concept of objective or empirical "proof" is part of the legitimating discourse of "science" which Spiritualists have adopted.<sup>13</sup> Personal experience narratives have become the means for "proving" Spiritualist claims, and this "proof" establishes the "scientific legitimacy" of Spiritualist belief.

The importance of "proof" in Spiritualist narratives can clearly be seen in the following narrative context. On February 14, 1992, two members of one of the Toronto-based Spiritualist churches accepted an invitation to visit me at my home after church services at Hamilton's King Street Church.<sup>14</sup> We spent several enjoyable hours discussing a variety of topics related to Spiritualism. I had known both Heather and Bob casually through church meetings for eighteen months at this point, and had come to

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<sup>12</sup> Zaretsky (1969:4) notes that in some cases the claim to psychical research status itself acted as a legitimation for Spiritualist church and seance attendance - the aura of scientific credibility that psychical research conveyed made attendance at such marginal religious groups acceptable.

<sup>13</sup> Sociologist Eva Garroutte points out (1993:53) that for the positivist scientists of the nineteenth century, "proof" of scientific claims was indeed obtainable, if rigorous scientific investigations were conducted. In the context of contemporary orthodox science, absolute proof is no longer a requirement of "science," although "evidence" remains important. For a discussion of what constitutes 'scientific proof' or 'evidence' see Morrison (1972) and Price (1978).

<sup>14</sup> Heather and Bob lived in Toronto, but were both members of Hamilton's King Street Church. They attended church there regularly at least once a week, as well as attending healing services and development classes in a Toronto-based Spiritualist church.

know them both better over a long weekend in Lily Dale the previous fall. Like most Spiritualists, Heather and Bob are open minded and tolerant of other religious beliefs. On this particular evening we had been discussing how differing cultural expectations influenced the expression of religious faith.<sup>15</sup> Bob expressed the opinion that each individual's "library of symbols" influenced his or her expression of religious experience.

The following narrative is from the transcript of a recording made at the time.

Q: I wonder if it is possible to say, that perhaps the reasons you conceive of these [clairvoyant messages] as coming from Spirit rather than through telepathy or any of a number of the other explanatory models people use to explain these... extra-normal... things, is simply because spirits are part of YOUR "library" of cultural symbols, and not an external reality? I guess what I'm asking is, to put it pretty bluntly... how do you know that Spirit is OUT THERE, that you're not just picking things up telepathically...?

Heather: Some of us have actually encountered Spirit. My father had passed on, and, oh, not even three years later, I had him touch me. I was going up a flight of stairs, and this hand came - I'm notorious for walking in the dark at night, people tell me I'm part cat, I just don't turn lights on - so this is, you know, two-three o'clock in the morning and I'm downstairs changing the baby's bum and I'm heading back upstairs and all

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<sup>15</sup> Garrouette (1993:315) makes the interesting observation that nineteenth century Spiritualists foreshadowed contemporary deconstructionist theory by challenging implicitly the positivist claim that "science" was a path to ontological truth. In many respects, the Spiritualists with whom I worked continue to reveal this kind of "deconstructionist" thinking. For Bob, expressions of faith or opinion are not "objective" descriptions of reality, but rather constructs dependant upon individual or societal influence. However, as Garrouette (1993:314) also observed in the nineteenth century context, such a stance does not imply a belief that there is no ontological reality "out there" that can be accurately described. Garrouette (1993:324) calls this the "failure" of Spiritualists to fulfil the critical potential that Spiritualist discourse carried. However, it may be less of a failure and more of a reflection of the reluctance of Spiritualists and non-Spiritualists alike to discount the existence of some kind of ontological reality. Like the moderate social-constructionists discussed in Chapter One, Spiritualists like Bob see "reality" as an ontological given, and expressions of faith as constructed mirrors of 'reality as it truly is.'

of a sudden it like this [grabs her own right hand with her left] on my hand. And as soon as I felt it, the size of the hand and the grip, and I said 'Dad!' And it... it didn't immediately release, it just very slowly released. It just dragged its hand back this way, it's like... you know, 'I'm here, it's ok,' and like that was as real to me as when I held his hand on the death bed. And I know it was him.

And then, five or six months later he was right in my bedroom sitting on the edge of the bed. You couldn't see him, you could just see the indentation on the edge of the bed, and smell this distinct tobacco scent. And as soon as I said 'Dad?' the bed just rose, but there was a wisp of tobacco smoke.

And then in the kitchen a few months later, there was a very cold spot and it was the same thing again, the smell of tobacco, and as soon as I said 'Dad?' it disappeared. And this was just every... like every few months, you know? But he said, on his death bed, that if there was a way to communicate, he was going to do it, and he promised this to me and to one other sister. But the other sister, she's gone very staunch Roman Catholic, and this is absolute taboo so she won't believe any of it. So... but I've... I've sensed him around me many times, many times. And I could go on and on and on and on, there are so many things...<sup>16</sup>

The stories that Spiritualists tell about their experiences with "Spirit" play a vital role in their perception of Spiritualism as compatible with "science." Heather offered this story as "proof" that her belief in Spirit was based on firm empirical evidence. The story represents her assertion that her beliefs are not just based on faith, or tradition, or wishful thinking, but on the empirical evidence of her own senses.<sup>17</sup> Within the

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<sup>16</sup> Heather's narrative reveals evidence of traditional motif patterning. The narrative "Dad" fits the following motifs from *The Motif Index of Folk Literature* (1955-1958): E327 Dead Father's friendly return; E363.4 Dead Reassures Living; E374.1 Return of dead to keep promise and tell of Land of the Dead; E542 Dead man touches living; E555 Dead man smokes pipe; E568.1 Revenant leaves impression of body in bed.

<sup>17</sup> Statements such as Heather's are not found solely within a Spiritualist context. Folklorist Diane Goldstein (1991) suggests that the concept of personal experience of the supernatural constituting scientific "evidence" can be found among individuals across a wide spectrum of social, religious and educational backgrounds. She writes (1991:27),

confines of orthodox science such a personal experience narrative would clearly not constitute scientific "proof" of the "fact" of spirit existence. Within the Spiritualist context, however, in which testimony has long played an accepted role as scientific evidence, Heather's narrative can be seen as a clear attempt to assert the empirical "truth" of the ghostly communication.

The story above is structured to "prove," through the narrated experience itself, the "fact" that Heather's father continues to exist in a spirit form. Spiritualism is defined as "a science, a philosophy and a religion," and as a "science" it lays claim to sources of external verification of Spiritualist belief.<sup>18</sup> In contemporary Spiritualism, personal experience narratives act as the major source of external verification, just as nineteenth century Spiritualists relied heavily upon witness testimonials to "prove" Spiritualist claims. Stories like Heather's both reaffirm and reinforce Spiritualist teachings. They are offered as empirical "proof," and accepted as such, by the narrative community.

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"Several years ago during a lively late night discussion about the supernatural, Francis, a Newfoundlander with several years of post-secondary education, said to me, '...those people at the University can say all they want about physics and science, but I'll tell you one thing, I know what exists and what don't because I see it with my own eyes.' 'If I see a ghost, you can say what you want, but I seen it, I know.' Francis's assertion of personal empirical adequacy was not an isolated case. I had heard such statements before and suspect that most scholars of belief have encountered similar attitudes. Belief functions on the basis of evidence, and no matter how strongly belief scholars might argue that such notions are "popular fallacies," "irrational ideas," or "odd human quirks," our informants know otherwise." See also Honko (1964).

<sup>18</sup> The National Spiritualist Association of Churches defines Spiritualism as: "the Science, Philosophy, and Religion of continuous Life, based upon the demonstrated fact of communication, by means of mediumship, with those who live in the spirit world..." (National Spiritualist Association of Churches, 1967:40) Reference is frequently made to this definition by members of churches unaffiliated with the N.S.A.C. organization as well as by N.S.A.C. members.

Whereas nineteenth century Spiritualist testimonials were bolstered by empirical scientific investigations, however, there is an almost exclusive reliance by contemporary Spiritualists on personal narratives as "proof." This constitutes a shift from historical attempts at external verification of religious experience to an internal experiential validation of religious belief. The contemporary Spiritualist perception of Spiritualism as a "science" now rests almost entirely on the perception that personal experience narratives "prove" the "reality" of Spiritualist religious claims.

### Theoretical Context

Since the late 1970's, the value of personal experience narratives as indicators of both individual and wider societal patterns of belief has become evident.<sup>19</sup> The role of personal experience narratives as indicators of religious belief within small religious groups and communities has recently been explored by a number of anthropologists and folklorists.<sup>20</sup> Oral personal narratives can be particularly valuable in revealing details of contemporary religious belief within such small, voluntary religious contexts. Within Spiritualism, personal experience narratives reveal underlying religious concerns in both the "events" that the narratives describe, and the purpose for which they are told. As can be seen in the narrative "Dad," above, Spiritualist narratives have as their 'event'

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<sup>19</sup> See for example Labov and Waletzky (1976); Robinson (1981); Stahl (1977, 1983).

<sup>20</sup> See for example Lawless' (1988) study of Pentecostal conversion narratives; Narayan's (1989) study of an Indian storyteller; Slater's (1986) study of Brazilian pilgrimage narratives; and Tilton's (1988) study of Baptist narratives.

some instance of contact with the so-called "supernatural" or spirit realm. According to folklorist Lauri Honko (1964:10), "memorates" or stories with supernatural content are ideal resources for the study of religious belief because they reveal "those situations in which supernatural tradition was actualized and began directly to influence behaviour". Within Spiritualist personal experience narratives, therefore, can be found expressive statements of fundamental Spiritualist belief. These narratives are more than just entertaining anecdotes. They reveal both instances of personal experience of contact with the spirit world, and the implicit affirmation that such instances constitute "proof" of Spiritualist teachings.

Any discussion of the form and content of personal experience narrative must of necessity address the contributions of theoretical folklorists to this issue. Folklorists have written widely on the classification of oral narrative. As a result, the issues of terminology and categorization of oral narrative raised within the field of folklore must be addressed. This literature is particularly valuable in discussing personal belief narratives. Because of their "supernatural" content, the personal experience narratives of Spiritualists should more properly be considered "memorates." According to the categorizations of folklorist C. W. Von Sydow (1934), any story that recounts a purely personal, non-traditional encounter with the supernatural is a memorate.<sup>21</sup> Von Sydow

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<sup>21</sup> Von Sydow coined this term to distinguish this type of story from the broader category "legend," because it lacked two distinctive features of legend: poetic character and traditional content. Von Sydow (1934:73) writes, "Zu allererst muss von der Sage ein Gebiet abgetrennt werden, das zwar mancherlei Verwandtschaft mit ihr hat, aber weder dichterischen Charakter noch Überlieferung aufweist: die Erzählungen der Leute über eigene, rein persönliche Erlebnisse. Diese geben eigene Erinnerungen wieder, weshalb ich sie Memorates nennen will". Folklorists have subsequently challenged almost

coined this term to distinguish this type of story from the broader category "legend," because it lacked two distinctive features of legend: poetic character and traditional content. However, folklorists have challenged almost every aspect of Von Sydow's categorization, from its "purely personal" nature to its lack of traditional content (Honko 1964; Pentikäinen 1973; Dégh 1976). The "purely personal" and "non-traditional" elements of Von Sydow's definition imply that wider societal or religious beliefs have no influence in shaping either the experience or the story told about that experience. Spiritualist narratives reveal clear evidence of the influence of both the Spiritualist narrative and traditional motif patterning. As we will also see, Spiritualist narratives do not necessarily have the first person "purely personal" Ich-bericht quality that Von Sydow identified as a necessary characteristic of "memorates." In addition, Spiritualists themselves would not categorize their experiences as "supernatural" in nature, but rather as normal and natural and in accord with "science." Consequently, despite their presumed "supernatural" content, the present analysis of Spiritualist personal experience narratives will avoid the problematic term *memorate*.

"Personal Experience Narrative" is not an unproblematic term in itself, however, as it applies to Spiritualist narratives. Within folklore studies it has become axiomatic that personal experience narratives articulate group values by delineating identity boundaries and reinforcing in-group cohesion.<sup>22</sup> The work of anthropologists Elaine

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every aspect of Von Sydow's categorization (Honko 1964; Pentikäinen 1973; Dégh 1976), making the term "memorate" problematic.

<sup>22</sup> Jansen (1959) for example has argued that esoteric folklore serves to reinforce internal solidarity within sub groups and exoteric folklore to delineate the social



Lawless (1988) and Susan Harding (1987), for example, illustrates the value of personal experience narratives in religious contexts for fulfilling both esoteric and exoteric functions.<sup>23</sup> Various attempts at defining and categorizing what constitutes the personal experience narrative as a genre stress the boundary/identity maintenance function of these narratives through their emphasis on the 'remarkableness' of the narrated event (see for example Stahl 1977, 1983; Labov & Waletzky 1967; Kalcik 1975; Robinson 1981).<sup>24</sup> For example, Labov and Waletzky (1967:34) argue that personal experience narratives "are so designed as to emphasize the strange and unusual character of the situation" narrated. However, such a theoretical orientation presumes that the religious or folk group in question wishes to differentiate itself from the surrounding social context. Personal experience narratives within a Spiritualist context are precisely intended to minimize such boundary distinctions. Spiritualist stories deal with remarkable events (that is, events worthy of remarking on), but these events are not "strange" or "unusual" within the narrative community in which they are told. To the contrary, like the stories told in anthropologist Susan Kalcik's (1975) study of women's narratives, Spiritualist

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boundaries which distinguish insiders from outsiders. For further discussions of "boundary work," see Fine (1987); Gieryn (1983); Mewett (1986).

<sup>23</sup> Harding (1987) discusses the role of narrative in helping to construct individual and group identity in an evangelical Baptist context; Lawless (1988) discusses the role of narratives in constructing Pentecostal identity.

<sup>24</sup> This approach is in keeping with the functionalist school of folklore, as particularly outlined in seminal work by Bascom (1954). Remarkableness is Van Dijk's term. Van Dijk (1975) argues that in order to be story-worthy an incident must be "remarkable". Remarkableness, he argues, is consensually defined by the narrative community.

stories are told specifically to assert that the experience is *not* 'strange or unusual' at all.<sup>25</sup> Within a Spiritualist context, oral personal narratives are deliberately structured as "proof tales" to minimize in Spiritualist perceptions such insider/outsider identity boundaries. The whole "point" of the stories, as will become evident, is to stress the validity and normality of the experience, and hence the validity and acceptability of Spiritualist belief.

According to folklorist Teun Van Dijk (1975:276), the "remarkableness" of a narrated experience is consensually defined by the narrative community. Spiritualist personal experience narratives, while relating the experiences of individuals, are nonetheless shaped by the Spiritualist community's interpretation of what constitutes a "good" story. Folklorist Livia Polanyi (1979) argues that the narrative community defines both what is worth telling a story about, and how that story is told. Spiritualist stories encompass a range of traditional motifs, from full physical manifestations of the spirits of the dead (hauntings or ghost stories), to intuited sensations of 'otherness' (*déjà vu*, precognition).<sup>26</sup> These motifs recur frequently in Spiritualist narratives. While

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<sup>25</sup> Kalcik (1975) argues that women's narratives are often structured to reassure other women that they are not alone in their experiences. Mutual support is the goal of some personal experience narrating. In the Spiritualist context, affirmation of the "fact" of Spiritualist belief is the primary function of personal experience narrating, and consequently the "normative" rather than "unique" status of the experience must be stressed.

<sup>26</sup> Traditional motifs found in the narratives analyzed in the body of the present chapter and in Appendix 1 include, as defined in *The Motif Index of Folk Literature* (Thompson 1955-1958): E320 Dead Relative's Friendly Return; E321 Dead Husband's Friendly Return; E323 Dead Mother's Friendly Return; E327 Dead Father's Friendly Return; E334 Non-malevolent ghost haunts scene of former misfortune, crime, or tragedy; E334.2.2 Ghost of person killed in accident seen at death or burial spot; E338

Spiritualists interpret the similarities between narratives as evidence of the "reality" of the underlying experiences, it is also possible to perceive them as evidence of the influence of the Spiritualist narrative community on both the structuring of the narrated tales, and the interpretation of the experiences themselves.<sup>27</sup> The structure of Spiritualist personal experience narratives is not usually "polished," although according to folklorist Sandra Stahl (1983:269), a personal experience story usually "becomes increasingly polished in terms of form and style... until it becomes a fairly stable performance piece." According to folklorist Larry Danielson (1983:203-204), extraneous detail, even detail that would support the narrative 'point,' tends to be dropped from a narrative over time, making the narrative more polished and succinct. Spiritualist stories, however, like "Dad" above, are usually filled with "extraneous" details and frequent pauses, and are generally very unpolished in presentation. According to Honko (1964) and folklorist Juha Pentikäinen (1973), such "extraneous" details are what

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Non-malevolent ghost haunts building; E363.4 Dead Reassures Living; E364 Dead Returns to say Farewell; E374.1 Return of Dead to Keep Promise and Tell of Land of the Dead; E402.1.2 Footsteps of Invisible Ghost heard; E542 Dead Man Touches Living; E544 Ghost Leaves Evidence of His Appearance; E545.3 Dead announce own death; E555 Dead Man Smokes Pipe; E568.1 Revenant leaves Impression of Body in Bed; E599.6 Ghosts move furniture; E599.10 Playful Revenant; E723.6 Appearance of his Wraith as Announcement of Person's Death.

<sup>27</sup> Folklorists David Hufford (1976), Gillian Bennett (1987) and Leea Virtanan (1990) suggest that a supernatural or paranormal content does not invalidate the 'reality' of the experience narrated in a 'supernatural narrative.' Folklorist Larry Danielson (1983:197) argues that the presence of traditional motifs does not detract from the genuineness of the 'true experience' story. Traditional motifs within personal experience narratives reveal, according to Danielson, "the complicated interrelations among the recall of experience, the influence of traditional belief and concept on the account, and the aesthetic decisions made in the performance of the story for the narrator's audience...".

distinguish a true memorate from a fabulate or legend.<sup>28</sup> These additional elements that the teller deems essential but which do not advance the "plot" are vital in Spiritualist stories in identifying what Polanyi (1979) calls the "point" of the narrative. Unlike most personal experience narratives, Spiritualist narratives retain extraneous details in order to provide evidential detail in support of the "factuality" or "reality" of the experience. As folklorist Robert Georges (1981:245) argues, "There is... always much more to narrating than merely characterizing unique or memorable experiences or events, the dramatic portrayal of which we regard as the telling of a story". As will become evident, Spiritualist stories are "about" contact with the Spirit realm, but their "point" is to illustrate the validity of Spiritualist experience, and consequently to "prove" the "truth" of Spiritualist belief. Spiritualist narratives are specifically constructed with a wealth of evidential detail to act as "proofs" of those beliefs.<sup>29</sup>

According to Georges (1981), conceiving of personal experience narratives as

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<sup>28</sup> For example, Pentikäinen writes (1973:231): "The surest signs of the memorate in this case are the perceptual psychological authenticity of the report, as well as, in regards to the narrative, the profusion of "unnecessary" details."

<sup>29</sup> Goldstein (1991:34-35) supports this claim that "extraneous" detail in personal narratives of contact with the supernatural can function in an evidential capacity when she writes, "The extraordinary amount of detail evident in supernatural experience narratives has been noted over the years by several scholars... Clearly, at many levels, Francis's narrative recounts details which do not seem to advance the narrative action. Yet if we for a moment posit the notion that what appears "unnecessary" to the analyst may be central to the narrator and shift our notion of "where the action is" we may begin to see a different picture. If we allow Francis to include in his narrative not only what took place, but his feelings and decisions, reactions, associations and conclusions, we begin to see a narrative that can carry us through Francis's thinking processes... Such references appear often in Francis's narratives and are indicative of his desire to scientifically explain his experiences."

"stories" is a mistake, because this approach leads to a perception of story-as-item. Georges prefers the term "narrating" to "story-telling" because it has no object referent, and consequently requires one to focus on the action (the telling) instead of the object (the tale). However, this does not mean that "stories" cannot be separated out from surrounding context and identified as coherent narrative units. As has already been mentioned, Spiritualist personal experience narratives reveal identifiable motifs and evidence of traditional patterning by the narrative community. Individual narratives are also, nevertheless, dependent upon the specific conversational context in which they are embedded. Certain types of narratives are told only when the context of the conversation specifically warrants the telling. As will be argued later, Spiritualist "ghost" stories fall into this category. In many ways, the narrative context is just as important in establishing the 'point' of the narratives as the choice of motif or the style of narration. As will become evident, the structure, content, and context of Spiritualist narratives all contribute to the role of Spiritualist narratives as "proofs."

### Structure and Content of Spiritualist Narratives

Spiritualist personal experience narratives fall into distinct patterns. From an analysis of the narratives collected during field work, it is possible to identify six major thematic groups within the body of Spiritualist oral narratives. The most common narrative types are 1) miraculous healing narratives; 2) "visitation" narratives; 3) altered perception narratives; 4) "presence" narratives; 5) childhood experience narratives; and

6) ghost stories.<sup>30</sup> Most Spiritualist narratives have one dominant thematic element, often expressed in terms of traditional motifs, and one or more additional thematic elements in supportive roles. As folklorist Susan Kalcik notes (1975), personal experience narratives are often built of building blocks, "kernel stories," and expanded upon and renegotiated within the conversational context. Spiritualist narratives follow this less rigid story form, often combining two or more story themes into one narrative. For example, the "childhood" narrative "Company's Coming" provided in Appendix One for comparison purposes has as its dominant element a childhood experience; the experience itself is one of altered perception, in this case precognition. The "childhood" story "Carol's Story" discussed in the body of this chapter is a ghost story. The story theme, the temporal placing, characterization and even the plot are dependent upon the given narrative context.

Because of this situational character of Spiritualist personal experience narratives, the following narratives can be analyzed on three distinct levels. On the first level, Spiritualist personal experience narratives reveal specific details of explicit Spiritualist belief. For example, most Spiritualist personal experience narratives reveal in some fashion the central Spiritualist claim that life continues after bodily death and that communication with the spirits of the dead is possible. On a second level of analysis, Spiritualist narratives reveal implicit details of Spiritualist belief. Through an analysis

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<sup>30</sup> Throughout the dissertation, examples of each of these types of narratives can be found. For miraculous healing narratives and visitation narratives, see Chapter Two. For altered perception and presence narratives, see Chapter Three and this chapter; ghost stories and childhood experience narratives are found within this chapter only.

of narrative detail and structure, the underlying "point" of the narratives can be uncovered. Spiritualist personal experience narratives can have more than one "point" in any given conversational context, but the central point of any narrative is to offer "proof" for Spiritualist belief. On a third level of analysis, Spiritualist personal experience narratives reveal details about the specific narrative context in which they are embedded. The narratives analyzed in the body of this chapter provide a wealth of information on all three of these levels.

### The Narratives

This chapter provides an analysis of one particular sequence of personal experience narration. The stories that follow were offered by Heather and Bob shortly after the narrative "Dad" recounted earlier in the chapter. However, these narratives depart from the traditional personal experience narrative format in that they represent third-person narratives rather than first-person recitals of personal experience. According to Von Sydow (1934) and Stahl (1989, 1985, 1983, 1977), personal experience narratives must maintain a first-person "Ich-bericht" format in order to be considered a personal experience story. Stahl would therefore categorize the following narratives as "true stories" or "family stories," given her insistence on strict terminological accuracy. According to Bennett (1989), such narratives can profitably be analyzed as "Belief Stories" - narratives that express community patterns of belief as experienced by either

the narrator or those known to her.<sup>31</sup> The narratives analyzed here are not, strictly speaking, personal experience narratives. However, they contain the same traditional motifs, the same thematic patterning, and the same "proof" function that Spiritualist first-person narratives contain. As will become evident, these atypical narratives are the result of the particular narrative context in which they were embedded. Because of their atypicality, comparison narratives that are structured in the more typical first-person format have been included in Appendix One at the end of the dissertation. The narratives presented in the body of this chapter were chosen for analysis specifically because their atypical patterning reveals the importance of the "proof" function in Spiritualist oral narrative.

According to Polanyi (1979), analysis of narratives for evidence of "repetition of key words or phrases, the use of reported speech, increased use of modifiers, or suspension of the action by retarding discussion" can provide insight not only into what the story was about, but why the story was told. An analysis of the following set of oral narratives reveals details of explicit and implicit Spiritualist belief, as well as details about Heather and Bob's individual response to the specific narrative context. The narratives to be analyzed below were evoked as a result of the following conversational exchange between myself and Heather. Heather's question was prompted by her own narration of the "presence" type narrative "Dad" given at the beginning of the chapter:

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<sup>31</sup> Bennet (1989:291) uses the term "Belief Story" to classify those narratives which "1) illustrate current community beliefs, 2) tell not only of personal experiences but also of events which have happened to other people, and 3) are used to explore and validate the belief-traditions of a given community by showing how experience matches cultural expectations."



Heather: "You've probably experienced it where you've just... you've turned around thinking someone's watching you but there's no one watching you. But you know, in your mind... that... there's a pair of eyes on you?"

Jennifer: "No, I haven't, that's why I find this all so fascinating. I've had a few experiences, but not too many. I tried automatic writing once, as a teenager. I had been practising it for about a week... you know, how you have to work at it a while before you get anywhere? And then one day my hand had JUST started to move, and there was this really clear thought in my head, and it was: 'That's not my hand.' But it was MY hand, so I think, the thought was of somebody else, in my head, looking at my hand and thinking that. Well, my adrenaline level went WAY UP, and I never tried it again after that."

Questions such as Heather's had been asked of me before, in one form or another: had I ever felt watched when no one was there, had I ever had a sense of déjà vu, had I ever had objects go missing and then mysteriously reappear? During most of the fieldwork period, I took these questions as requests for affirmation or support of the experiences being related to me, and invariably answered "yes," to encourage people to continue with their story. On this particular evening however, I answered Heather's question with a "No." Heather and Bob were aware that I was not a Spiritualist, and that my interest in Spiritualism was primarily academic rather than religious. My negative response, followed by my recital of an altered perception narrative, initiated the round of oral narratives that follows.

#### "Carol's Story"

Heather: "My son had an experience when he was a year and a half, two years old. 'Till he was almost three, we lived in this particular place and he WOULD NOT go into the bathroom. It was a procedure trying to toilet train him and this kid would just spread eagle in the door way and scream the walls down. And everybody kept saying you know "What's wrong, what's wrong? What did I do?" He was terrified to go in the bathroom. He'd go in anybody else's but he WOULD NOT go in the bathroom."

And one day I was winding up my business, and he comes in and he's just... starting all this talk about Carol, and she's eaten his cookie, and she took my toy, and all this started happening, and this went on for months, and months and months. And one day, right out of the clear blue, eleven o'clock in the morning, he comes in to me and says "Mummy, I need time," you know, so I said "okay." I'd told him if he wanted to talk to me to tell me he needed time, 'cause he couldn't enter the room I was in. It was too dangerous for him, so I would have to leave the room and go upstairs.

"Mummy, I need time" [he said], so I said "Okay go upstairs and wait for me." So he's jibber-jabbering to me, right, about what Carol's doing and what Carol's been saying and he's [saying], "Carol go um... road, no not road mummy, not road, um ...". So I was encouraging him, "Okay never mind just tell me the rest of the story." So it ended up that what he was trying to tell me was that this little girl that he'd been playing with for months told him the story that she'd left the house through a particular door and walked onto the road and was hit by a vehicle and was killed.

Now, this shook me up because I didn't know anything about any of this stuff, and a few weeks later I went next door and got the woman that owned the property and had her come in and had him relate the story to her. And she just went white as a ghost and started to shake, and I said "What's going on?" She said "Heather you're not going to believe this, honest to God, you're not going to believe this," and I said "What?" She said three or four years after this house was built, the builder, his wife and his three daughters lived in this house, the youngest one was two to two-and-a-half years old. [She] went out that window, [the bathroom window] which used to be a door, went across the field and was hit and killed by a horse and buggy that travelled down the path which is now the road in front of the house. And her name was Carol.

And she even went and got me her... her death... death announcement. And like this was MY little guy, you know! A year and a half, two years old, telling me all this. But he wasn't able to... see, he knew that she went onto the road, but it wasn't a road, because it was just a path, it wasn't paved. You know a child today, it's [only] a road with cars on, and he knew that she was hit and killed by a car but "not car, mummy." He didn't understand horse and buggy, he understood a vehicle as steel, with four wheels. He didn't understand it, and this just blew her away. And for weeks she'd come over and say "Did he say anything else, did he say anything else?" And I'd say "No, nothing else, nothing else!"

### "House Call"

Bob: "When my mother died, there was one house that she had not visited. I have a brother who lives in Grimsby, and she had never been invited out to visit this particular brother's new house... and ... she ... took it upon herself... the night she died... to visit.

But my brother wasn't home, my brother was in the hospital, because we were all there, at her deathbed, or death-side. And... the babysitter, along with... I guess there was two children there at the time, encountered at roughly the same time that my mother died... an apparition... that... opened up the door... to the family room... and walked up the stairs to the living room... and then walked up the stairs to the landing that... leads to the children's bed room... and... spent some time there... and then... walked down from the landing down the stairs and then... back out the way she came. But... he couldn't see anything, he just heard it, he heard the door open, he heard the noise, down below when he heard the footsteps walking across the floor... and she just walked up... and took a look at the pictures, and inspected the house just a little bit, and then left.

And he got freaked out, royally. He cowered in the corner while it was going on... then he quickly... gathered the kids up and packed them away in the car, and took off for his house. A close friend of my brother's. I went out to visit my brother about a month and a half later, and he was there, and he wanted to talk about it 'cause he knew I was involved in that kind of thing, and he wanted to find out whether it was possible. And I says 'Yeah, that was my mother.' It was a REAL experience for him. I didn't encounter it, but he did. But ... he had a REAL experience. My mother... got to visit... my brother's house... before she... went on her way."

### "The Landlord"

Heather: "My sister had a similar experience where, her and her husband were just separated, and she had this little fellow, he was three or four, with her. And she said she'd JUST fallen asleep, when she heard footsteps, and of course this scared the daylights out of her because she knew she was home alone. She opened her eyes, and directly at the end of the bed stood this figure, and she said "I sat right up," and she said "It wasn't just me, Jimmy sat up too, and said 'Mummy who's the man?'" Sarah said, "I don't know," and then she said, "Mr....," I think its Ashton or Asherly or something, that was the fellow she'd bought the house from

ten years earlier. And all he did was nod his head, and just, faded away. She looked at the clock, and it was twelve-oh-two.

The next day in the newspaper they announced at twelve midnight Mr. Asherly passed away. So he'd come to see the home. He'd built the home, and for years afterward, he... there's this one mantle he was particularly proud of, that he'd built, and Sarah would, you know, wax it and polish it. And she had a collection of, I don't know, geese or ducks, actually I think they're ducks, and she would line them up a certain way, and she'd turn her back, and they'd all be turned, every single one would be turned to face the window. She'd turn them back, [then] they'd be turned the other way. She'd put the vacuum cleaner in the closet, it would be turned off, then she'd take a load of laundry downstairs and it would be taken back out. Like, it was just crazy. Absolutely nuts. But he was just, he wanted to be part of that home. He just wasn't ready to leave it.

So my brother-in-law owns the home, and they still have the odd visit. It's got now where its been, you know months and months and months between visits, where before it was a regular thing. Like Sarah said, "I swear he just waited for me to wax that mantle, you know he just waited there for me to do it, so he could turn my ducks around."

These three narratives follow typical Spiritualist motif and thematic patterns. The first narrative, "Carol's story," is a "childhood" narrative, where the dominant element is the youth of the primary percipient. The event that it describes is a ghost story, for "Carol" was a spirit who had not yet found her way to the spirit realm, and was instead tied to the home she had lived in at the time of her death.<sup>32</sup> The second narrative, "House Call," is a "visitation" narrative, describing the event of a death bed visitation.<sup>33</sup> The third narrative is a combination of death bed visitation and ghost story, for "Mr.

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<sup>32</sup> "Carol's Story" matches motif numbers E334; E334.2.2; E338; E599.10 in the Motif Index of Folk Literature (Thompson 1956-1958).

<sup>33</sup> "Housecall" matches motif numbers E320; E323; E364; E402.1.2 in the Motif Index of Folk Literature (Thompson 1956-1958).

Asherly" does not "go on his way" after his initial visitation, but stays tied to the home which he loved and had built.<sup>34</sup>

These narratives are also atypical, however, in that they are third person narratives, told about the experiences of others rather than the experiences of the narrators themselves.<sup>35</sup> Most Spiritualist oral narratives are in fact told about the narrator's own experiences, thereby maintaining the first-person format necessary for a true personal experience narrative. In the fieldwork data there are very few instances of Spiritualists telling such third-person narratives.<sup>36</sup> The fact that Heather and Bob chose to do so is therefore revealing. Why should they choose to tell other people's stories rather than their own in this context? Heather claimed at the end of the narrative "Dad," given at the beginning of this chapter, that she could "go on and on and on and on" because she had experienced so many instances of contact with the Spirit world. Obviously, Heather made a conscious choice to relate the stories of her sister and her son, rather than some of her own. The initiator of this particular tale round was my own recital of an altered perception narrative. As this narrative was told in first-person format, why did this spark a series of third-person narratives?

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<sup>34</sup> "The Landlord" matches motif numbers E338; E402.1.2; E544; E723.6 in the Motif Index of Folk Literature (Thompson 1956-1958).

<sup>35</sup> The argument could be made that Heather's first narrative, "Carol's Story," is also a first-person personal experience narrative about Heather's experience with her son.

<sup>36</sup> Spiritualist teachings stresses individual experience strongly. Development classes are attended by most Spiritualists at one time or another, to develop abilities to contact spirits and to channel healing energies from Spirit into those who need it. The majority of personal experience narratives are therefore based on the narrator's own experience, as a means of expressing an individual's own ability to contact Spirit, and indirectly as a statement of the individual's own degree of spiritual attainment.

According to folklorist Barbara Allen (1989), 'second stories' or stories given in response to another personal experience narrative shape themselves according to the narrative context established by the initial story. Second stories are interactive, taking their cues from the "point" of the story that came before. Folklorist Michael Moerman (1973:208) has argued that "We... come to know what the first story was about in part because of what the teller of the second story successfully took it to be about". Deciding what stories to offer in response to an initial story is no easy task. According to Polanyi (1979:211), narrators generally take great care in choosing what topics to narrate in story form, for "A narrator dare not misjudge what is worth telling a story about too often, lest he be punished by being considered boring, overly talkative, or generally socially inept". As Heather and Bob were neither boring, over-talkative, nor socially inept, their choice of experience narratives must be directly related to their perception of myself and what they took my own initial story to be about.

### Narrative Analysis

The superficial common denominator between these narratives and my initial story is the theme "Someone was frightened by Spirit." Heather begins "Carol's Story" with a description of how her young son was terrified to go into one particular room, the bathroom. She stresses her son's fear with the descriptive metaphor "scream the walls down"; with repetition and heightened stress: "he WOULD NOT go ..."; and with direct speech: "What's wrong, what's wrong?" This emphasis on fear ties the opening of her story into the conclusion of mine, in which I stated that "my adrenaline level went WAY

UP"; Heather's emphasis on fear indicates that she interpreted my comment to reveal my own fear of the experience. Heather shifts her story away from a focus on a frightening experience fairly quickly, however, with the phrase "and one day..." which initiates a new focus. The story is no longer about her son's fear, but about her son's friendship with an imaginary playmate. "One day... he's just, starting all this talk about Carol... and this went on for months, and months and months." Heather indicates through her repetitious "months and months and months" that her son's contact with this playmate was a long term event, and therefore not just a game of pretend on her son's part. Then, "right out of the blue," Heather learns Carol's story from her son. Heather's phrase, "right out of the blue" indicates her surprise, and consequently highlights the point that neither she nor anyone else had influenced her son's story: it was completely unexpected, and therefore "genuine." Heather stresses the innocence and hence the reliability of her son's reporting through direct speech, "No not road, mummy, not road," again illustrating the genuineness and unrehearsed character of the story. The phrase, "Now, this shook me up because I didn't know anything about any of this stuff" establishes Heather's credentials as a credible witness at that time because she had no preconceived ideas about "any of this stuff." Heather did not become a Spiritualist until many years after this event took place.<sup>37</sup> The brief synopsis of Carol's story that Heather next provides is sparse and without detail: Heather does not identify at this time which door Carol exited by, nor what kind of vehicle Carol was struck by. By not doing

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<sup>37</sup> According to Danielson (1983) and Bennet (1987), the average length of time between the event being narrated, and the narration recorded by folklorists, is approximately 10 years. Many narratives are therefore "childhood" narratives.

so, Heather heightens the impact of the revelations made by the neighbour.<sup>38</sup> The neighbour is established as a credible, impartial witness to the truth of the events through graphic description "She went white as a ghost," and repetitive direct speech "You're not going to believe this, honest to God, you're not going to believe this." The neighbour is obviously a non-Spiritualist for she would not have gone "white as a ghost," nor "started to shake," if she had been a believer. The revelation of details of Carol's story are consequently presented extremely forcefully. This impartial witness provides the explanation for Heather's son's fear of the bathroom and explains why he was unable to relate Carol's story clearly. The neighbour even goes so far as to produce "the death announcement" as independent corroborating evidence for the truth of that story. The trustworthiness of the young child's testimony is affirmed: its very uncertainty is its strongest support. Finally, the independent impartial witness is overcome by the evidence of life after death, the child's story "just blew her away." Heather concludes her narrative with direct speech and repetition: "Did he say anything else? Did he say anything else?" "No, nothing else. Nothing else." The impartial witness is now actively seeking further knowledge of the Spirit realm.

"Carol's Story" is an example of a childhood story, a common Spiritualist thematic type. This type of narrative relies on the youth and innocence of the percipient to communicate the trustworthiness of the account. Bennett (1987) has discussed the role of childhood experience in oral personal narratives, but she fails to note the evidential

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<sup>38</sup> According to Stahl (1977, 1983), linear sequential progression is one of the characteristics of personal experience narratives. Heather is revealing details of the story as she herself discovered them.



value that a young child represents. It is assumed that a young child would not be capable of making up such an experience, nor of lying about it successfully. The fact that a child has such an experience validates the experience as "real," "factual," and "true" in Spiritualist perceptions.<sup>39</sup>

Heather's narration of "Carol's Story" begins with a description of her son's "irrational" fear, finding a common denominator with my own story and also making a subtle comment on the rationality of my narrated response. It then presents a series of inexplicable events (the fear, the "imaginary playmate," the narration of Carol's story, and the inability of Heather's son to communicate that story properly), and through the person of the "impartial witness," the neighbour, implies a "rational" explanation for everything. Heather never refers to "Carol" as a ghost, never calls this narration a ghost story, and yet the "point" is clear: through the testimony of innocent children and impartial neighbours, the existence of Spirit is proven. The narrative also makes a second "point." Despite the initial fear of her son, and the disbelief and shock of her neighbour, neither actor in the narrative allows these initial negative reactions to stop their contact with nor interest in the spirit realm. It follows from this narrative that my own response to my own frightening experience was not an acceptable one.

Bob also picks up the theme "someone was frightened" in his narrative "House

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<sup>39</sup> The perception that the youth of a percipient lends credence to the claim that an experience was "factual" or "true" has been present both within and outside Spiritualism since the nineteenth century. Braude (1989:87) for example writes, "Youth was also considered to reduce the motivation for fraud. 'Sceptics have more faith in that which is given through children than older mediums [because] they consider there is less ability, as well as less desire, to practice trickery and deception in the child than the adult.'"

Call," although in this instance the description of fear is embedded in the middle of the narrative, rather than placed at its beginning. Bob began his story immediately after Heather had concluded hers, although he was forced to interrupt it when I asked Heather a question about her son at the same time as he began with the words, "When my mother died..." Heather answered my question (no, her son is not a Spiritualist now) and Bob picked up his story exactly where he had begun it before. Bob's story begins with a statement of explanation, "There was one house that she had not visited." By starting his story in this way, Bob establishes a reason for his mother's death bed visit, and a rationalization for his identification of the "apparition" as his mother. Bob then sets off his conclusion that the spirit apparition was in fact his mother by pausing and using formal phrasing, "she took it upon herself." The next sentence must be understood within the context of "typical" Spiritualist death bed visitation narratives. In a typical narrative, the deceased person visits a loved one shortly after death, to inform them of the death or to comfort them in bereavement.<sup>40</sup> In the comparison story "Jane, Jane..." provided in Appendix One, the deceased husband calls out to his wife from 'beyond the veil,' to inform her that he has 'passed beyond'. In "House Call," Bob is being defensive, explaining why his mother visited a stranger in a house empty of her own children. Bob's explanation, "But my brother wasn't home, my brother was in the hospital, because we were all there, at her deathbed, or death side," serves to justify why neither Bob nor his brothers or sisters perceived the apparition themselves. This

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<sup>40</sup> This typical personal experience narrative pattern conforms to traditional motif numbers E320-327; E364; E723.6 in the Motif Index of Folk Literature (Thompson 1955-1958).

sentence both serves to explain why they did not experience the visitation, and ameliorates any suspicion that the reason for this failure was the result of neglect or lack of love and respect for their mother. The implication is clear that Bob or his brother might have perceived the apparition, if they had not been doing their filial duty at the time, and so rather than visit them, their mother went off instead to fulfil one last dream.

Bob then switches to formalized, impersonal language: the babysitter "encountered at roughly the same time my mother died... an apparition." By doing so, he draws back from his earlier assertion that the apparition was in fact his mother, and presents the event of the "supernatural" encounter impartially, reflecting the babysitter's lack of awareness as to the apparition's identity, and allowing the subsequent behaviour of the apparition to establish that identity in the minds of the listeners. After all, what *other* spirit would drop by the house at the time of his mother's death, take a look around, view the family portraits, and then leave? The babysitter's fear is then strongly stressed through descriptive modifiers, he got "freaked out, royally," and "cowered in the corner," allowing Bob to link his story in with the initial common theme of "someone was frightened," and to establish the babysitter as a credible witness. The babysitter was a non-Spiritualist, did not know of the mother's death, and so would not have manufactured or misrepresented the story. The phrase, "a close friend of my brother's" breaks up the narration, and provides a "character reference" for the individual: this was not some flighty teenager, given to spooking when left alone in a house. The babysitter was therefore an impartial and reliable witness. Bob then stresses the convincing nature of the occurrence by including in the narrative an event that took place "a month and

a half later." The babysitter "wanted to talk about it," thereby showing the influencing effect of the experience, and the babysitter's pursuit of further knowledge about contact with spirits. Apparently, despite being "freaked out," this non-believer also pursued further knowledge of the spirit realm after his frightening experience. Bob then uses direct reported speech to re-emphasize his conclusions about the identity of the apparition, "Yeah, that was my mother." He concludes "House Call" with two assertions. He sets off the first one with increased stress and repetition, "It was a REAL experience for him," reinforcing the reliability of the babysitter's story and the reality of his contact with spirit. The final assertion is set off with measured speech, "My mother... got to visit... my brother's house... before she... went on her way." With this sentence, Bob reinforces his earlier assertion that the event was a "real" instance of contact with his mother, and reiterates his conclusion about 'what really happened'.

"House Call" is a death bed visitation narrative. Its primary element is the juxtaposition of the event, "something strange happened," and the time of death of an individual. This type of narrative relies for its effectiveness on the lack of knowledge about the death of the individual on the part of the event's percipient. An external verifier is usually provided, often a noting of the precise time that the 'event' took place and its correlation with the time of death. In "House Call," the exact time of death is not given, rather the inexact phrasing, "at roughly the same time" is used. The verifier in this story is an internal one that takes the form of the disbeliever or non-Spiritualist status of the percipient. It is likely, although the information is not specifically provided in "House Call," that the "impartial witness," the babysitter, did not think to look at his

watch at the time the event occurred. Bob structures his story so that the babysitter's graphically described fear is juxtaposed to the description of his subsequent developing interest in Spiritualist phenomena. As in "Carol's Story," Bob's presentation of "House Call" is both a "proof" of spirit contact, and a critique of my own lack of further investigation following a frightening experience with Spirit.

Heather's recounting of "The Landlord" followed immediately on the conclusion of "House Call." Heather announces her intention to relate another death bed visitation narrative by her words, "My sister had a similar experience." In this case, Heather is indicating not only that her narrative's "event" will be that of a death bed visitation, but that the "experience" of this visitation was similar: that is, that her sister, who experienced it, reacted in a similar way to the percipient in Bob's narrative. In this way, Heather continues the initial common denominator of "Someone was frightened," linking her story immediately not only with the one that directly preceded it, but with the other two narratives that came before. Heather sets the stage for her narrative rapidly: her initial sentence carries most of the narrative's descriptive structure, identifying her sister as alone (the only adult), unused to being alone, "just separated," responsible for the safety of a small child, and tired. These descriptive and situational details provide support for her sister's initial reaction of fear upon hearing footsteps unexpectedly, justifying that reaction as appropriate for the circumstances. Heather's phrasing, "scared the daylights out of her" is structured and colloquially patterned, evoking shared cultural understandings about levels of fear, and stressing the complete fear and startlement of her sister. Her sister then "opened her eyes," establishing that she was not simply

dreaming the event, and "sat right up," reinforcing the idea that she was wide awake at the time the event happened. Heather then uses direct reported speech to emphasize the presence of a corroborating witness, "It wasn't just me, Jimmy sat up too, and said 'Mummy who's the man?'" The supportive speech from the child is embedded within the quoted direct speech of the sister, thereby doubly reinforcing the reliability of the account. The child is just a "little fellow," "three or four," and therefore acts as an innocent childhood witness. The sister herself is a non-Spiritualist, as evidenced by her fear and initial uncomprehending reaction to the visitation, "I don't know...". The sister then recognizes her visitor, and identifies him by name. Heather inserts here needed descriptive material so that the listeners will understand who the deceased visitor was. Upon recognition, the deceased visitor just "faded away."

Heather's description of the visitor 'fading away' is important, for it mutes the earlier stress on the original theme "Someone was frightened," and acts as a bridge to the second portion of the narrative. The verifier is provided in the assertion that the sister "looked at the clock," and the exact time is noted. The newspaper then acts as an external corroborating source, confirming the death of the visitor as well as the time of his passing. The "reality" of the event and the reliableness of the account is therefore triply confirmed: by the non-believing percipient, the innocent child witness, and the external corroborating evidence provided by the newspaper account. Heather then provides an evaluative assessment of why the visitor appeared. She relates her explanation back to the fact of the visitor's primary identity from the sister's perspective;

that is, he was the man who sold her the house.<sup>41</sup> She now reveals that the man had not only sold the home, he had built it, thereby establishing a bond between the deceased and the place he chose to visit. Heather uses her evaluative assessment to shift her narrative from a death bed visitation narrative to a typical Spiritualist ghost story. She also shifts completely away from the initial theme, "Someone was frightened," emphasizing instead the intrusion of the ghostly visitor into everyday events. The "inexplicable" occurrences that Heather then relates are presented in a non-frightening and non-threatening manner, preceded by an explanatory justification, "There's this one mantle he was particularly proud of, that he'd built," which establishes the proprietary concern of the visitor. Heather then relates instances of interference by the ghostly visitor, one after another, using a conditional verb tense to establish the on-going and repetitive nature of these occurrences. These occurrences were "just crazy" and "absolutely nuts," stressing their strange, trivial and non-threatening nature. By presenting them as such, Heather establishes support for her interpretation of why these "inexplicable" events occurred. Heather then presents her interpretation, the only "reasonable" explanation: the ghostly visitor still felt tied to the house, "He wanted to be part of that home. He just wasn't ready to leave it." The inexplicable events that

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<sup>41</sup> According to a study of 69 vernacular American memorates conducted by Danielson (1983), 86% of such narratives revealed some kind of direct, emotional bond between the percipient and the supernatural visitor. Bennet (1985) notes a link between bereavement and contact with ghosts of loved ones in 100% of the 78 women who narrated supernatural memorates to her in her study of a small English community. The three main narratives presented here, however, have no strong emotional bond between percipient and ghostly visitor. Contrary to certain theoretical assumptions (see in particular Bennet (1985)), grief and bereavement do not seem to be the primary impetus behind supernatural experiences among Spiritualists.

occurred in the house are therefore linked to the earlier death bed visitation, and both are explained by the presumed love of the deceased for the home that he had built. Heather presents the chain of argument persuasively: what other explanation for these events could there be? Heather therefore draws on the listener's desire to explain such inexplicable events. The explanation she provides is then reinforced in her closing sentence, in which her sister, the non-Spiritualist percipient, confirms the "identity" of the source of these strange phenomena, "I swear he just waited for me to wax that mantle."<sup>42</sup> The non-Spiritualist sister thereby confirms the Spiritualist interpretation of events, articulating a belief that a spirit or ghost is responsible for the strange occurrences, an admission of the "truth" or "reality" of Spiritualist beliefs.

"The Landlord" begins as a death bed visitation narrative. Like Bob's narrative "House Call," it relies on the juxtaposition of a "strange event" with the coinciding time of death of the perceived ghostly visitor. "The Landlord" follows the typical pattern for death bed visitation narratives, providing internal and external verifiers for the event through the characters of the sister and her son, and the newspaper verification of both the identity of the ghostly visitor and the significance of the time he appeared. The narrative shifts away from the visitation narrative type, however, into a ghost story pattern. With the shift to ghost story, Heather emphasizes her sister's adaptability and acceptance of the visitor, rather than her initial fear reaction. In stressing her sister's

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<sup>42</sup> In Heather's narrative "Dad," she refers to "one other sister," a "staunch Roman Catholic," who refuses to accept Spiritualist interpretations of anomalous events. The percipient in this narrative, Sarah, confirms Spiritualist interpretations of such events. Although Heather never explicitly discusses this point, it can be assumed from this that Sarah was not the "one other sister" mentioned in "Dad."



acceptance, Heather's narrative both confirms the Spiritualist interpretation of the described phenomena, and again comments negatively on my own response to my contact with Spirit as described in my own altered perception narrative.

### Discussion

Personal experience narratives form an integral part of Spiritualist religious experience. Because Spiritualism is an experiential religion, it is vital that the religious experiences of individuals be shared with the group. Unlike those of some other religious groups (see for example Lawless's (1988) study of Pentecostalism), the majority of Spiritualist religious experiences take place in private. Spiritualist worship services contain a mediumship or "message-work" portion, in which messages from Spirit are received by mediums and passed to members of the congregation, but this forum provides the opportunity for direct public contact with the spirit realm for only a few qualified mediums.<sup>43</sup> Personal experience narratives therefore function as an outlet for sharing individual private experiences with others of the narrative community.

The role of personal experience narratives in creating and maintaining communal belief patterns within any folk group is strong (Fine 1987). Within an individualist experiential religious movement like Spiritualism, such a role is paramount. Skultans (1974) has noted that the explicit emphasis in Spiritualism on individual inspiration

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<sup>43</sup> For a discussion of the "message-work" portion of a Spiritualist service, see Chapter Three.

results in little influence by wider national organizations on local groups or individuals.<sup>44</sup> Personal experience narratives therefore act communicatively within local groups to delineate the boundaries of acceptable experience and belief and to maintain some degree of communal coherence in patterns of belief. The narrative community provides the belief structure within which individual supernatural events are first experienced and then articulated: the "point" of the narrative can only be what the narrative community defines it as being (Polanyi 1979; Georges 1981, 1969; Kalcik 1975). Each personal experience narrative is therefore shaped by the understandings of the narrative community about what constitutes a valid spiritual experience. Each narrative in turn shapes those understandings among individual Spiritualists. The relationship between Spiritualist belief and personal experience narratives is clearly a symbiotic one.<sup>45</sup>

Given the symbiotic relationship between Spiritualist belief patterns and oral

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<sup>44</sup> There is very little institutional or hierarchical influence on small Spiritualist groups by larger national organizations. However, Zaretsky (1977, 1970, 1969) notes that a common reservoir of language, symbols and beliefs are maintained by geographically diverse Spiritualist groups. As Zaretsky notes, this is largely a result of the importance and power of verbal communication within Spiritualism. The value of personal experience narratives for maintaining this communal belief pattern is great.

<sup>45</sup> In "Carol's Story," for example, Heather presents a childhood narrative about contact with the ghost of a child. If presented and interpreted differently, this narrative could equally have been about an instance of past life recollection on the part of her son. Heather did not interpret the experience this way, despite the acceptability of reincarnation beliefs in the church to which she belongs. No matter what else Spiritualist personal experience narratives do, they act first and foremost as proofs of the primary Spiritualist belief, the belief in the existence of spirits and the possibility of communication with them. As a result, "Carol's Story" "proves" that spirits do exist, and not that reincarnation does happen.

narrative, an initial level of narrative analysis can reveal explicit details of Spiritualist belief. Inquiry into the nature of what the narrator and other Spiritualists believe to have occurred (what exactly do they believe the "event" was?) reveals the range of "supernatural" or extra-normal phenomena Spiritualists incorporate into their system of belief. Inquiry into the narrator's perception of the reasons for the extra-normal occurrence (why exactly did it happen?) reveals details of his or her conception of what the spirit world is "like." In "Dad," the presence narrative at the beginning of the chapter, Heather clearly indicates her belief that the "event" was her father's visit from the spirit realm. Her explanation of why the event occurred is twofold: firstly, to bring her comfort, and secondly, to fulfil his promise and bring "proof" of existence on the other side of life. "Dad" clearly reveals that Heather not only believes that spirits continue to exist after bodily death, for example, but that she believes spirits continue to take active interest in their loved ones, that they have control over whether they "come back" or not, and that receiving these reassurances from Spirit is dependent on an individual's openness and willingness to do so.

All of these beliefs are inherent in the very nature of the event that Heather recounts in "Dad." The "event" in a Spiritualist experience narrative can be almost anything: from the sense of presence in "Dad" or the comparison narrative "Smoke Rings and Roses," to the full physical manifestations in "The Landlord" or the comparison narrative "All Haunted Houses Burn Down." Spiritualist interpretations of the reasons for the events also vary, from the spirit's desire to offer comfort in "Dad" to the spirits' unwillingness in "The Landlord" and "All Haunted Houses..." to leave the things of

earth behind. All of these narratives draw heavily on traditional motifs, revealing not only details of Spiritualist belief but the influence of wider societal supernatural traditions. What is revealing on this level of analysis, however, is that Spiritualist narratives rarely draw upon the equally prevalent wider societal tradition of the "malevolent ghost."<sup>46</sup> The Spiritualist belief patterns revealed in personal experience narratives reveal the optimism with which Spiritualists approach the concept of life after death. On this level of analysis, therefore, the value of personal experience narratives lies in their explicit communication of the range of possible (and not possible) manifestations and motivations of the supernatural within the Spiritualist context.

On a second level of narrative analysis, Spiritualist personal experience narratives reveal implicit details of Spiritualist belief. In this sense, one does not ask what beliefs are expressed within the personal narratives, but what is expressed in the narration of the experience. Why do Spiritualists tell the stories that they do? According to Georges (1969:319), every storytelling event has certain social uses. These social uses are the "actual uses the participants conceive the whole storytelling event or any one or more of

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<sup>46</sup> The "malevolent ghost" tradition can be found in the Motif Index of Folk Literature (Thompson 1955-1958) numbers E200-299. During the fieldwork period, I only heard one example of a "malevolent" ghost story - and I did not hear the whole story, for when the narrator realized I was part of the group, she stopped her narrative. I am not sure if she halted the narrative because she knew I was a non-Spiritualist (which she did), or if she simply did not feel that she should tell tales about absent members of the congregation in front of a relative stranger. Her story dealt with the spirit of a woman's abusive husband. The man had apparently been physically violent in life, and the woman was experiencing threatening physical spirit manifestations, namely that she had been "pushed" down the stairs by ghostly hands. This is very definitely a "malevolent ghost" story, but is very unusual within the Spiritualist context, and may be taken as an example of the Spiritualist doctrine that an individual's degree of spiritual advancement in life dictates the kind of existence they find after death in the spirit world.

its aspects to have for themselves and for the other participants". The social use of Spiritualist narratives is to "prove" the "fact" of Spiritualist phenomena, and consequently to validate Spiritualist beliefs.

The "proof" motif is evident in the narratives discussed here in the presence of strong evidential detail, particularly the external and internal verifiers of the narrated events. In "Dad," a wealth of 'extraneous' evidential detail is provided. The internal verifiers in the narrative are the non-believing percipient and the assertion of a deathbed promise; the possibility of an external verifier is given with the inclusion of mention of a hostile witness (the Catholic sister). This hostile witness functions as potential "objective" evidence and a source of potential intersubjective testimony. In "Carol's Story" the internal verifiers are the non-believer status of the narrator at the time of the event, and the innocent child percipient; the non-Spiritualist witness and the newspaper death announcement act as external verifiers. Presumably, anyone who wished to do so could speak with the non-Spiritualist neighbour to receive confirmation of the "truth" of Heather's narrative, and could find a copy of the 'death announcement' to provide an intersubjectively testable referent for the story's truth claims. In "House Call," the non-believer status of the babysitter and the juxtaposition of time of death with the appearance of the apparition act as internal verifiers. In "The Landlord," the internal verifier is the non-believing percipient; the child witness, and the newspaper account are external verifiers.

The stories analyzed here rely heavily on "internal" verification; that is, on verification of the event that is dependent on the testimony of the percipient or the

narrator. Owing to its non-scientific character, such internal verification is often questioned by psychical researchers and orthodox scientists interested in psychical phenomenon.<sup>47</sup> This strong emphasis on internal verification is a result of the third person "disbeliever" structure of these particular narratives. The disbeliever status of the percipient allows stronger weight to be placed on internal verification.<sup>48</sup> The comparison narratives in Appendix One, narrated as they are in first-person format by Spiritualist believers, are also structured so as to rely heavily on verifiers. The "proof" motif is as present in them as in the third person narratives related here. The comparison narratives rely, however, much more heavily on the "external" verification of witnesses or newspaper clippings, or, in the case of "All Haunted Houses Burn Down," on the presumed evidence of the burned structure. Spiritualists are well aware that their faith makes them suspect witnesses: in first person Spiritualist personal experience narratives, external verifiers carry more of the evidential burden.

According to anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1986), narrative analysis often overlooks the point that people who share a common cultural background can speak "telegraphically" through personal narratives to one another. Spiritualists are doing more

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<sup>47</sup> Danielson (1983:196-197) provides a discussion of 'reliable' as opposed to 'unreliable' evidential details as perceived by parapsychologists and psychical researchers. Reliable evidential details are those details that can be externally corroborated. This distinction provides a further example of the principle of intersubjective testability discussed in Chapter Three. See also Owen & Sims (1971:59).

<sup>48</sup> As Spiritualist historian Emma Hardinge Britten notes (1884:4), non-Spiritualist testimony is "quite sufficient to demonstrate the facts of spiritual agency, and place the cause [the spirit hypothesis] on a basis of proof, that rises triumphantly over the most injudicious partisanship, or the most bigoted antagonism."

with their narration of personal experience than simply cataloguing the nature of events. They are providing implicit "proof" of the "reality" of Spiritualist claims. The strong verification element in the narratives "proves" to other Spiritualists that the events described did in fact take place. This process in turn "proves" that Spiritualist beliefs are accurate. This understanding is not arbitrarily imposed for the sake of analysis, but is present in the "social uses" of the narratives for Spiritualists themselves. As Rosaldo (1986) suggests, something need not be explicitly stated in order to be understood by members of a narrative community. That the "proof" motif is understood by the Spiritualist community is indicated in Jane's closing comments in the comparison narrative "Jane, Jane..." She says, "I could never disbelieve, because I've had so many things happen in my life. I'm not afraid, when the day comes and I've got to go, I KNOW... I'm going to my loved ones, I BELIEVE that, and nothing will make me feel different."

On a third level of analysis, the importance of narrative context in shaping the "point" of Spiritualist narratives is revealed. As Dundes (1980:24) argues, "Only if such data is provided can any serious attempt be made to explain WHY a particular text is used in a particular situation." Honko (1985:39) argues that a narrative "text is loaded with meaning only in context; it becomes filled from the attitudes, values, intentions, and reactions of speaker-listeners." As has been mentioned previously, the narratives contained in this chapter are atypical third-person narratives: the reason why these atypical narratives were given lies in the context of the narrative event. According to Georges (1969, 1981, 1987), the social identities of the narrator and audience interact

with the narrative roles in ways which affect the dynamics of the story-telling event. Furthermore, he argues (1987) that certain stories will only be told in particular contexts when narrators judge it timely and appropriate to do so. In the narratives discussed here, the specific context gave rise to a set of atypical narratives cast in third person format. The social roles of myself as an interested non-believing "student" and the narrators as Spiritualist "teachers" resulted in a unique storytelling event. My own non-believer status and the third-person format of the narratives added an entirely new level of complexity to the "proof" function of narratives in the Spiritualist context.

The present "tale round" was initiated when Heather recounted in "Dad" her own experience with the sensation of spiritual "presences," and asked if I had experienced similar sensations. When I answered "no," but related an instance of altered perception, the set of narratives discussed here were evoked. The most recognizable common element of the narratives is that the percipient in each narrative is a non-Spiritualist. This detail is a direct reflection of my own perceived status as a non-believer who had experienced contact with Spirit. These "non-believer" narratives assert a number of things. They act as "proofs" for the reality of spirit contact and hence Spiritualist beliefs. The narratives also assert that not only do Spiritualists experience these things, but so do non-Spiritualists, and thereby the experiences are validated as more than the fulfilment of religious expectation. In addition, the "non-believer" narratives emphasize that the experience of such events is "normal" rather than "marginal," and consequently such narratives affirm the normality of Spiritualist believers within the wider cultural



context.<sup>49</sup>

Another recognizable common element uniting these narratives is the willingness of all of the non-believers to pursue further contact with Spirit, or at the very least their willingness to express further interest in pursuing knowledge about Spirit. This element is also a direct response to my altered perception narrative. The narratives discussed here very gently rebuke me for my failure to pursue spirit contact further. My expressed fear reaction is used as the initial common denominator in the narratives, and is transformed in each narrative into a positive accepting or questioning rather than rejecting response.

Both the disbeliever status of the percipients in the narratives and the positive rather than malevolent encounters with spirit revealed are indicators of the traditional patterning present in the narratives. These third-person narratives may have been consciously (or unconsciously) chosen to draw upon the legitimating power that wider societal supernatural traditions carry. Spiritualists draw heavily upon socially accepted supernatural traditions to bolster their narrative "proof" claims. They also draw heavily upon socially accepted religious traditions to bolster those claims, as is evident in their use of Biblical stories as "proof tales" (see Appendix Two). Bennett (1987) suggests that belief stories such as those analyzed above can function as powerful debating tools when

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<sup>49</sup> Bennett (1987:298) has noted that percipients often reveal ambivalent attitudes towards their own supernatural experiences as related in supernatural experience narratives. This ambivalence reflects the perceived mainstream disbelief in supernatural occurrences coupled with the narrator's personal experience which seems to contradict this non-supernaturalist worldview. The Spiritualist narratives analyzed here are designed to suggest that even those who accept a non-supernaturalist worldview experience supernatural events.

the audience is hostile or inclined to disbelief. These third-person narratives borrow the traditional format of the legend, which in turn bolsters the "proof" function of Spiritualist narrative in response to my own disbeliever status. According to Bennet (1987:301-302) "An antagonist cannot refute the powerful argument made by a belief story without impugning either or both the narrator's veracity and the wisdom of the ages: on the one hand, the stories draw on ideas and attitudes that are accepted and communal; on the other hand they show how the individual experience matches these cultural traditions." By adopting the third-person format in this particular context, Heather and Bob reinforced their position that Spiritualist beliefs can be proven "true."

A final recognizable element of these narratives in their specific narrative context is the presence of ghost stories in the tale round. Spiritualist ghost stories draw on the same motifs as the wider societal supernatural tradition, but the Spiritualist interpretation of what constitutes a ghost story is perhaps narrower than traditional folkloric categorizations.<sup>50</sup> Spiritualists distinguish between "Spirit" or "Spirits," and "Ghosts," and very few Spiritualist narratives are ghost stories. Within the Spiritualist belief system, every person's "soul" is intended by natural law to seek spiritual development.

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<sup>50</sup> The Motif Index of Folk Literature (Thompson 1955-1958) refers to "ghosts" and "revenants" in contexts where Spiritualists would refer to "spirits": for example, E363.2 Ghost returns to protect the living; or E568.1 Revenant leaves impression of body in bed. In these cases Spiritualists would say that "Spirit" had returned from the spirit world for a brief span of time. Zaretsky (1969:229) defines the Spiritualist usage of "Spirit" as follows: "That part of an individual that continues to live in spirit land after the change called death." Among Spiritualists encountered during my own fieldwork, the term ghost, on the other hand, refers to souls that cannot find their way to the spirit world: they "live" in our world ("on a material vibration") all of the time. [Note: Zaretsky does not gloss the Spiritualist usage of the term "ghost"]

When an individual's body dies, his or her "spirit" survives bodily death and should continue to pursue further spiritual development in the spirit world. Alternatively, the spirit should be reborn onto the earth plane to learn a new set of spiritual lessons in a new earthly context.<sup>51</sup> To become a ghost is to fail to accomplish this ultimate human purpose. A ghost is a soul that is unwilling or unable to let loose its ties to things on the earth plane and remains trapped at the same level of spiritual development achieved before death. Both "Carol's Story" and "The Landlord" are ghost stories. Georges (1987) is correct when he argues that stories with "unpleasant" motifs are not told indiscriminately, and ghost stories in a Spiritualist context are always 'unpleasant'. While it may be carrying this analysis too far, I suggest that the choice to narrate ghost stories in this specific narrative context is yet another subtle comment on my own perceived state of spiritual development. Faced with an individual who had experienced contact with the spirit realm and then rejected further development of her potential to initiate such contact, Heather and Bob perceived it as both "timely" and "appropriate" to relate ghost stories in this context.

#### Conclusions: "Facts," "Proofs" and "Truths"

The idea that Spiritualist beliefs can be "proved" through personal experience is integral to contemporary Spiritualist belief. Many Spiritualists believe that what they

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<sup>51</sup> Not all Spiritualists believe in Reincarnation, but for those who do, the "spirit" of a deceased person is understood to have a set of "lessons" which must be learned in each lifetime, lessons which can only be adequately learned here 'on the earth-plane'. For a discussion of reincarnation and the issue of "proof," see Appendix Three.

experience through mediumistic ability is "true" in an objective, ontological sense. "Spirits" or "ghosts" really exist "out there somewhere" for Spiritualists, and the mediumistic perception of them is therefore an accurate perception of "reality." What is "seen," "heard," or "sensed" by Spiritualists is based on "fact," and is consequently compatible with "science" as the process by which "facts" are determined and "reality" described. Personal experience narratives act as "proofs" in the Spiritualist context because they serve to communicate the "fact" of the narrated events. In "proving" the "fact" of the continued existence of the soul after bodily death, personal experience narratives present an accurate description of "reality" as it truly is. In the use of personal experience narratives as "proofs," therefore, Spiritualists assert that their beliefs and experiences are "true." Since "science" is the means for expressing "truth" within the perceptions of many Spiritualists, the "proofs" of personal experience narratives consequently establish the "scientific" truth of Spiritualist claims.

The connection between personal experience, "proof," and "science" can be seen in the Fifth Spiritualist Principle of the National Spiritualist Association of Churches, which reads: "We affirm that communication with the so-called dead is a fact, *scientifically* proven by the phenomena of Spiritualism."<sup>52</sup> This affirmation is vital to understanding the Spiritualist perception and presentation of oral narratives as "proofs." For Spiritualists, the 'phenomena of Spiritualism' (which include a full range of mediumistic and healing "events") constitute by their very existence "scientific proof" of

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<sup>52</sup> As discussed briefly in the Introduction, variations on the "Principles of Spiritualism" are recited by members of all Spiritualist churches, not just National Spiritualist Association churches. Italics mine.

Spiritualist claims. The phenomena constitute "scientific proof" because, in Spiritualist perceptions, the very "fact" of their existence makes them "scientific facts." As discussed earlier in the dissertation, popular perceptions of "science" frequently equate "science" with "truth." If Spiritualist experiences are "true," they must without question also be "scientific," for "science" is the means by which truth about "reality" is expressed.

Orthodox scientific understandings of "proof" differ quite considerably from this perspective. According to astrophysicist Philip Morrison (1972:280), for example, scientific proof consists of "independent and multiple chains of evidence, each capable of satisfying a link-by-link test of meaning... If we are to believe any hypothesis, however plausible or implausible, concerning new events - particularly those that do not satisfy the easy quality of being reproducible at will... then we must find a case as clearly filled with multiple, independent chains of evidence [as possible]." Spiritualist narratives do not provide this kind of orthodox scientific evidential detail. However, Spiritualist personal experience narratives are clearly *intended* to offer evidential detail or "proof," as became evident in the analysis of the narratives presented in this chapter. The narratives above are clearly structured to provide verification of the "fact" of Spiritualist claims. The fact that Spiritualists do not, from an orthodox scientific perspective, "prove" the "reality" of their beliefs through the narration of personal experience does not in any way detract from the perception of Spiritualists themselves that personal experience narratives "prove" that their experiences are based on objective, ontological, "scientific" truth. For Spiritualists, "science" is the process whereby facts

are accumulated and "reality" described: personal experience narratives establish the "fact" of spirit communication, and thereby "prove" that the spirit hypothesis accurately describes "reality." From the perspective of Spiritualists themselves, therefore, the "proofs" of personal experience narratives can do nothing but establish the "scientific" legitimacy of Spiritualist claims.

### Conclusion: Contemporary Spiritualism and the Discourse of Science

*By having these things be proven scientifically... it just helps us gain more acceptance, by everyone. - Vera.*

*Whatever your belief is, God... is out there someplace, we know that, and we know, whatever we call it, you can call it Universal Life Force, or just 'electrical force'... [but] whatever you want to call it, it's the same thing. - George.*

In continuing to assert the compatibility of science and the "spirit world," several scholars have suggested that Spiritualism voided its potential for significance as a viable religious movement in the twentieth century (Garrouette 1993:374; Moore 1977:65; Swatos 1990:476) It has been argued by a number of researchers (Brandon 1983; Garrouette 1992, 1993; Moore 1972, 1977) that the Spiritualist religious movement was relevant only in the peculiar cultural milieu of the mid-nineteenth century, when competing religious and scientific paradigms gave rise to the curiously hybrid phenomenon of Spiritualism. As nineteenth century epistemological uncertainties evolved into the current preeminence of "science" as the path to knowledge, Moore (1977:65) suggests that "Spiritualism became much less important as a widespread cultural phenomenon." Garrouette (1993:374) further adds that by the end of the nineteenth century, the movement had lost almost all significance "in the estimation either of scientists or the general public." While it is undeniably true that contemporary Spiritualism lacks the broad appeal of the mid-nineteenth century movement, such assertions as those quoted above further imply that contemporary Spiritualist concerns

are merely anachronistic expressions of nineteenth century issues long resolved for the majority of North Americans. However, the on-going concern of contemporary Spiritualists to integrate "science" with spiritual faith reveals that the issues which gave rise to the movement in the nineteenth century are far from currently resolved.

### The Thesis

It has been argued throughout the preceding pages that contemporary Spiritualists remain concerned to integrate their religious beliefs with popular perceptions of "science." In doing so, many contemporary Spiritualists reveal what Gilkey (1987:170) has called the perception of science as the "paradigmatic and so sacral form of knowing." Many contemporary Spiritualists, like those in the nineteenth century, insist that their experiences are "true" in a "scientific," empirical sense. In articulating the "truth" of those experiences and the "reality" of the explanatory spirit hypothesis, the language and symbols of science are transformed into a sacred discourse that at once legitimates and affirms Spiritualist belief while simultaneously criticizing the "narrow" limits of orthodox science. For many contemporary Spiritualists, "science" has become the language in which religious truth claims are expressed.

The integral link between Spiritualism and "science" in both historical and contemporary contexts has been discussed through a survey of relevant literature in Chapter One. Histories of the movement by such prominent Spiritualist historians as Emma Hardinge Britten (1870, 1884, 1957), J. Arthur Hill (1918) and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1919, 1921, 1926) reveal the strength of this connection, as do a number of non-



Spiritualist histories and social scientific accounts of the movement (Bednarowski 1973; Brandon 1983; Garroutte 1993; Isaacs 1983; Macklin 1977; Moore 1972, 1977; Nelson 1969a; Pearsall 1977; Podmore 1902, 1910). As Chapter One argues, attempts to claim scientific legitimacy for Spiritualist beliefs have rested historically upon attempts by Spiritualists to establish the empirical, ontological "truth" or "fact" of Spiritualist phenomena, and on attempts to argue that the explanatory "spirit hypothesis" represents an accurate description of "reality." Relying primarily on the presentation of "reputable" testimony as a form of "scientific" proof, Spiritualists have argued that their experiences and beliefs are empirically warranted, and hence legitimate in a "scientific" sense.

Chapter One consequently argues that Spiritualist claims to scientific legitimacy have rested throughout the history of the movement upon the assumption that "science" is the process by which "truth" about "reality" can be revealed. A survey of literature in the sociology of science indicates the degree to which this perception of "science" as "fact" or "truth" differs from more orthodox definitions (Barnes 1982, 1985; Bloor 1971, 1981, 1982; Campbell 1988a, 1988b, 1989; Collins 1985; Hollis 1982; Kuhn 1969; Lukes 1982). The Spiritualist emphasis on "facts" and "truth" reveal what orthodox scientists call popular "misconceptions" of science. Nevertheless, it is argued in Chapter One that in attempting to articulate "truths" about "reality," Spiritualists understand themselves to be, in the words of Moore (1972:36) "on the side of science."

Attempts by contemporary Spiritualists to integrate their religious beliefs with popular perceptions of "science" are frequently manifest in the adoption of scientific language and symbols as sources of legitimation for Spiritualist belief. As Chapter Two

argues, there is a pattern of medicalization within the domain of Spiritualist healing that is illustrative of this wider attempt to incorporate scientific language and symbols into Spiritualist discourse. Spiritual, non-biomedical healing is one of the most important elements within contemporary North American Spiritualism. Despite the non-biomedical nature of such healing, many Spiritualists nonetheless draw upon the language, symbols and authority of allopathic biomedicine to legitimate the efficacy of spiritual healing techniques. As Chapter Two argues, in the adoption of biomedical symbols into the Spiritualist healing system, a sacred discourse that ultimately affirms the legitimacy of both systems of healing is established.

The process of medicalization and the idealization of scientific biomedicine is readily apparent within the contemporary Spiritualist context. Chapter Two maintains that the adoption of deceased biomedical doctors as sources of spiritual healing power is one clear illustration of this incorporation of biomedical symbols into the Spiritualist healing system. Spiritualist patterns of health care resort in which allopathic biomedicine supersedes spiritual healing as the system of first resort, the acceptance of individualized aetiologies of illness by contemporary Spiritualists, and their willingness to accept self-blame for illnesses incurable by allopathic biomedicine are further revealing of this medicalization process. As biomedicine and "science" are clearly equated within the Spiritualist healing context, Chapter Two subsequently suggests that the medicalization of Spiritualist language, symbols and concepts of healing are indicative of the wider incorporation of scientific symbols as a legitimating discourse within the Spiritualist tradition.

The incorporation of scientific language and symbols is also found within that central and most defining characteristic of Spiritualism: the practice of communication with the spirits of the dead through mediumship. As Chapter Three argues, most contemporary Spiritualists recognize that orthodox science has failed to provide "proof" of continued existence after bodily death, and consequently criticize orthodox science for its "narrow" focus. Such criticism has not prevented contemporary Spiritualists from continuing to place importance on claims to scientific legitimacy for Spiritualist belief, however. While there are no overt "scientific" elements to Spiritualist mediumship practice, contemporary Spiritualists have adopted the use of "scientific" language, symbols, and theory as a means to assert the scientific legitimacy of their experiences of contact with the dead. The popular perceptions of science as "authoritative" and "descriptive of reality" form the basis of a legitimating discourse for mediumship that reveals the continuing salience of "science" for contemporary Spiritualists.

For many contemporary Spiritualists, scientific language, symbols and theory have become the idiom within which to express their experience of contact with the dead. As Chapter Three maintains, the utilization of scientific language and concepts in contemporary Spiritualist mediumship can variously be perceived in the adoption of empirically descriptive terminology to communicate Spiritualist experience; in the use of "scientific" theory to explain how Spiritualist phenomena "work"; and in the adoption of scientific figures of authority into the Spiritualist system of belief. Such an incorporation of scientific language and symbols reveals an idealization of science that nevertheless does not go untempered by criticism. Chapter Three argues that

contemporary Spiritualists are critical of what they see as the refusal of orthodox scientists to expand the boundaries of science to admit the "reality" of a spiritual realm. Consequently, while the language, symbols and theory of science are the means by which many contemporary Spiritualists express the "truth" of their beliefs, this "truth" is understood to surpass the boundaries of orthodox science even while it uses "science" as the medium of its expression.

Chapter Four then explores the way in which contemporary Spiritualists express their experiences of contact with the dead. Here, it is argued that Spiritualists construct their personal experience narratives in such a way that the "truth" or "fact" of mediumistic experience is established. Because of the experiential emphasis of contemporary Spiritualism, personal experience narratives become the means by which communally held Spiritualist beliefs are reinforced as accurate descriptions of "reality." Personal experience narratives communicate the "fact" of Spiritualist experiences and provide evidential detail to "prove" the "truth" of Spiritualist claims. Chapter Four consequently argues that personal experience narratives carry the full burden of "proof" through which the legitimacy of Spiritualist belief is established.

In the Spiritualist use of personal experience narratives as "proofs," the connection between Spiritualism and science is not as readily apparent as it is within the framework of Spiritualist healing and mediumship discussed in earlier Chapters. The link between "science" and "personal testimony" initially seems nebulous at best. However, as "science" is understood by many Spiritualists to be the means by which "facts" are established and "reality" described, by structuring personal experience

narratives as "proofs" of the "fact" or "reality" of Spiritualist experiences, contemporary Spiritualists' narratives reveal an ongoing, if implicit, connection between "science" and personal testimony. Chapter Four consequently argues that Spiritualist personal experience narratives provide not only "proof" of Spiritualist beliefs, but "proof" that these beliefs are compatible with "science." In being presented and accepted as "proof" of the "truth" of Spiritualist beliefs by the narrative community, these stories can establish for contemporary Spiritualists the *scientific* legitimacy of Spiritualist faith.

#### Further Reflections

The idiom of popular science constitutes a dominant rhetorical strategy in the articulation of personal experience and Spiritualist faith among the majority of Spiritualists with whom I worked. It is perhaps important to acknowledge at this point, however, that as an outsider within the Spiritualist context, my very presence at Hamilton's Main Street and King Street Churches may well have encouraged some Church members to augment their inclusion of such language and symbols into their expressions of religious faith. Similarly, given my role as a non-Spiritualist "student" of Spiritualism, many of the mediums and spiritual healers who generously and patiently answered my questions may well have magnified their claims to empirical "truth" as a means to convince "that college girl writing her paper on Spiritualism" of the legitimacy of their claims. No anthropological researcher can investigate the beliefs of a particular group of people without in turn influencing (and being influenced by) those with whom she works (Abrahams 1986; Bruner 1986a, 1986b; Clifford 1986; Geertz 1986; Marcus

and Fischer 1986; Rosaldo 1989). Although many of the Spiritualists with whom I spoke casually over the fieldwork period never knew I was anything other than a Spiritualist myself (my own Spiritualist ancestry being useful in this regard), I nevertheless "confessed" my absence of Spiritualist faith to all of those with whom I spoke in depth. This awareness my non-Spiritualist status must inevitably have shaped the articulation of personal experience and belief by most if not all of the Spiritualists whose voices are heard in the preceding work. In addition, it must be acknowledged that my own desire to 'make sense' of Spiritualist discourse has doubtless shaped my analyses in this regard throughout the dissertation. Nevertheless, it has become apparent throughout the course of the preceding chapters that the extent to which the language and symbols of "science" are present within contemporary Spiritualist discourse far exceeds any attempt by the Spiritualists with whom I worked to convince an interested non-believer of the truth of Spiritualist claims. The language and symbols of "science" are endemic throughout contemporary Spiritualist discourse, their presence consequently indicative of far more than a simple idiosyncratic means of expression for religious faith.

It has been argued throughout the course of the dissertation that many contemporary Spiritualists conceive of science as the preeminent means of knowing and expressing "truth" about reality. The discourse of "science" has become, for many contemporary Spiritualists, both the means through which meaning is imposed upon Spiritualist experience, and the language in which experience and faith can be meaningfully expressed. It has been suggested by Geertz (1973a:126-127) that the most effective religious symbols are those that succeed in uniting the evaluative judgements

imposed upon experience by an individual or group, and the assumptions a group makes about the world regarding "the way things in sheer actuality *are*." As Geertz notes (1973a:127), "This demonstration of a meaningful relation between the values a people holds and the general order of existence within which it finds itself is an essential element in all religions, however those values or that order be conceived." In making sense of Spiritualist experience, in grounding that experience in a perception of "reality" as it 'truly is,' and in articulating that meaningful ordering of experience in the language understood by many Spiritualists to convey "truth," the discourse of science becomes a very effective *religious* discourse for contemporary Spiritualists.

It has been further argued by Geertz (1973b) that no individual can live conceptually in a symbolically religious world at all times. "The everyday world of common sense," he writes (1973b:119), is "the paramount reality in human experience". Geertz (1973b) and Berger (1969, 1970) additionally note, however, that in order to facilitate interpretations of experience that coincide with culturally-informed views of reality, religion frequently provides believers with an overarching conceptual paradigm within which *all* of experience may be said to make sense. The common-sense world of everyday experience can consequently be overlaid by assumptions of meaning and order that subsequently encompass and transcend a purely existential perspective. The common-sense world of everyday experience remains paramount, but a dimension of meaning is added that transcends existential "reality."

Of course, no such conceptual ordering system can be universally effective in supplying meaning to experience. As Geertz (1973b:100) and Berger (1970:53) both

note, personal experience can breach even the most coherent and consistent of religious conceptual paradigms, and can undermine the assumption of meaning in an otherwise ordered perception of reality. However, this observation of the imperfection of religious attempts to impose meaningful order on experience does not invalidate Berger's claim (1970:53-57) that the very attempt to make sense of experience in some kind of universal framework is inherently religious. In their use of the language and symbols of "science" to integrate religious experience with everyday reality, Spiritualists reveal the fundamentally religious concern to unite multiple conceptual worlds into one coherent whole. Since, as Weber (1952:139) astutely notes, the "rationalized" perspective of "science" has become in the modern context the paramount perspective with which to understand "reality" as it 'truly is,' it is not therefore surprising that it is with the language, symbols and concepts of "science" that Spiritualist discourse has become engaged.

While the emphasis on "science" within the Spiritualist context is not ultimately surprising, it is perhaps ironic that in the perception of "science" as the authoritative means to "truth," in the utilization of scientific language and symbols to articulate spiritual experiences, and in the use of such symbols to make religious truth claims, Spiritualists reveal themselves to be the ideological inhabitants of Weber's "disenchanted world." Weber suggests (1952:138-139) that one of the clearest indications of intellectualist rationalization in the modern context is the widespread recourse to science as a source of potential explanation for events. He further adds, however, that this recourse to rationalized explanations of experience does not imply that the majority of



people understand the science upon which they rely. Rather, Weber suggests (1952:139) that the process of disenchantment "means something else [entirely], namely, the knowledge or belief that if one but wished one *could* learn [how and why things work] at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no incalculable forces that come into play [when attempting to make sense of events], but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation."

As has become evident throughout the preceding chapters, the Spiritualist religious world is populated by immaterial spirits and spiritual forces, and by members of the living who hold the power to heal the sick, see into the future, and communicate with the dead. It may therefore seem initially surprising to locate contemporary Spiritualist discourse within Weber's conception of the "disenchanted world." Where Spiritualists reflect the "disenchantment" of the world, however, is in their assertions that these spirits, forces, and powers are not "incalculable" in Weber's terms. Like the more "mainstream" members of Western society of whom Weber speaks, most contemporary Spiritualists assume that 'if one but wished,' one could understand the nature of such spiritual entities and abilities through recourse to "science" without additional "recourse to magical means" (Weber 1952:139). Consequently, contemporary Spiritualists can be seen to reflect the "rationalization" of modern society even while they maintain their belief in spiritual forces and beings.

Weber himself would doubtless find the Spiritualist attempt to unite religion and science in this fashion ludicrous. "Who... aside from a few big children in the natural sciences... university chairs or editorial offices," he asks (1952:143), still believes

science to be "the 'way to true being,' the 'way to true art,' the 'way to true nature,' [or] the 'way to true God?'" Underlying this challenge lies the assumption for Weber that "true science" is ultimately meaningless, and cannot therefore lead to meaning in human experience (Weber 1952:143). It is herein that the fundamentally *religious* impulse underlying the Spiritualist incorporation of scientific language and symbols becomes evident. If Weber's assertion regarding the central place of "science" in the intellectual rationalization of the everyday world is correct, by incorporating scientific symbols into Spiritualist discourse, contemporary Spiritualists can live conceptually in the everyday world while simultaneously, in Geertz's (1973b:112) words, "mov[ing] beyond the realities of everyday life to wider ones which correct and complete them". In upholding the "scientific" legitimacy of religious faith, contemporary Spiritualists "live" in the "disenchanted world" while simultaneously reconceptualizing that world in religiously meaningful ways.

Spiritualists are not alone in their religious inhabitation of the "disenchanted world." Viewing the Spiritualist insistence on scientific compatibility in light of the search for conceptual coherence in a world strongly shaped by the rationalization of science can help elucidate religious claims to scientific legitimacy in other contexts. While a full examination of the literature on the relationship between religion and science in the Christian framework is beyond the scope of the present work, it is nevertheless possible to extend the insights gained through the study of Spiritualist discourse to contemporary Christianity. Attempts to claim "convergence" between scientific observation and Christian teachings are common. Gilkey (1985) and Eve & Harrold

(1991) discuss the assertion by members of the Christian science movement of the "scientific" status of the Genesis creation account. Barbour (1990) and Dyson (1979) note attempts by mainstream Christian theologians to link the scientific "anthropic principle" to the Christian argument from design. Mackay (1978) and Austin (1985) discuss Christian endeavours to unite the concept of divine creation with the findings of evolutionary biology. The questions of how and why Christian teachings remain relevant in the modern scientific world preoccupy vast numbers of Christian thinkers (Barbour 1990; Brooke 1991; Coulson 1968; Cupitt 1976; Graig 1990; Hovenkamp 1978; Leslie 1988; Lindberg and Numbers 1986; Russell 1973). Barker suggests (1980) that these efforts are informed by the presumption that "science" is the objective standard against which all truth claims must subsequently be judged. "However disillusioned we may be with its uses and limitations," she writes (1980:81), "if we go beyond the limits of science and empiricism we must not be seen to be unscientific. Science and logic must at least *allow* the truth that transcends their boundaries." Here once again, therefore, we see the religious effort to ensure conceptual coherence in a world strongly shaped by rationalization and "science." The adoption of scientific discourse to legitimate faith is clearly not confined to the Spiritualist context.

The religious attempt to co-opt and redefine scientific language and theory can be seen as part of an attempt to ameliorate the perception of conflict between religious and scientific paradigms for evaluating experience. As Berger (1969:134) has argued, only when all experience is understood to make sense within one coherent framework can a religious system remain ultimately plausible to believers. Through the utilization of

scientific language and symbols as a legitimating discourse in their healing, mediumship, and narrative practices, contemporary Spiritualists succeed in encompassing and articulating the every day "reality" of the disenchanted world and the spiritual "reality" of Spiritualist experience in one conceptual whole. While it is true, as Moore (1977:65) suggests, that the majority of North Americans no longer find contemporary Spiritualist solutions to the problem of relating religion and science meaningful, the underlying search for conceptual coherence that motivates the adoption of scientific discourse by many contemporary Spiritualists remains of considerable relevance in the broader religious context of contemporary Western society.

### Appendix One: Comparison Narratives

Included in the following pages are personal experience narratives related to me during the course of the fieldwork period. They are included here for comparison purposes to illustrate the "typical" thematic patterning in the atypical third-person narratives analyzed in Chapter Four. The first narrative is the full "proof" narrative excerpted and offset at the very beginning of the chapter. It was told to the Lily Dale development class August 2, 1991 by development class leader Tom. This narrative is an example of an altered perception narrative. Five other narratives follow.

#### "Anybody Home?"

Tom: "I'll tell you a very strange story that happened and thank God that this happened, there was, there were about 26 people present at the time that it occurred, so I, so when I say it, the story, this story can be verified.

I go to a party, a whole bunch of people [are] having a great time, but I was out of it - so usually I could meet the oddest women in the whole bar, but you know, I was just out of it, I didn't feel well, - and suddenly, I've got evidence! It was so clear, I got an address, and I had to go, I had the urge, I had to go, I could not fight this, I had to go, so I told it to a friend of mine, and he said, 'Hey, let's go, let's go take a look, where's the address?' [I said] 'I have no idea, it's in Toronto, but I have no idea where it is. Does anybody know where Sixth [street] is?' Garry said 'Yeah, I think I know where Sixth is, let's go,' so we pile into a car, mind you this is at eleven-thirty at night, we pile into a car, we go down we drive down the street, we find the street, we find the house, everything is dark. What are we going to do now? [laughter]

So we decided that, or I decided, you know, I'd get out and I'd knock on the door [laughter] and if anybody answered I'd ask if this was Joe's home? [laughter] And if it turned out people lived there well I'd say, 'Well I'm very sorry, I've got the wrong address.' But me, I'd get

some FEELING with it. With people maybe I could get some sense of what's going on. I walked around, I knocked on the door, and as I knocked on the door the lights come on... and the door... opened. So I poke my head inside, and I holler inside, 'Anybody home?' And I hear moaning. Scared the heck out of me!

So I call the guys over and I say, 'Come on'. We go into the house. Walk into the house and stand there, living/dining room on the left hand side, there's a living room, and as we walk over to the dining room over there, look through the hallway, into the living room, and there's an old man laying on the ground. And he's laying in his own dirt and God knows how long he's been laying there, and he's moaning, and he's, you know, making noises, as if - and you know I still can see his face, because it was like his skin was like waxy paper, it was totally dehydrated - so we walked into a home, and if that wasn't enough we walked into a back room, and everything there is exactly the same as the vision.

Call the police, how are you going to explain to the police? [laughter] 'Well, I was at a party and I got this vision...' [laughter] So we decided to say, well, you know, we, we, we were looking for, 'Mrs Jones,' and ah [laughter] so the police come and the ambulance comes, and thank God he came out okay. He was suffering from a virus, that he had gotten, he was totally dehydrated. The doctor said if we hadn't found him he would have been gone.

Now what the heck made me get that address? Isn't that wonderful?"

\* \* \*

The next narrative was collected on November 3, 1991 in Lily Dale, from a visiting Spiritualist minister. I had been introduced to the minister and her husband, also a minister, at lunch that same day, by a mutual acquaintance who was aware of my interest in Spiritualist healing and mediumship. Ilene related this narrative and the one that follows it during a long discussion with myself and her husband in the basement of the boarding house in which I was staying. While other boarders dropped by for brief periods during the afternoon, the conversation was largely restricted to the three of us.

The narrative is an example of a "presence" narrative, and is provided as a comparison to the presence narrative "Dad" at the beginning of Chapter Four.

### "Smoke Rings and Roses"

Ilene: "I've sat in the living room - Dad likes our living room, others come to me most often in my office in the house, but he comes mostly as a social call, in the living room. When I was a little girl he used to blow smoke rings for me as a child, and I can be sitting there and look directly across the room and see smoke rings coming up from a chair. And I'm not the only one who has seen them, so it's not just a figment of my imagination.

Also, my mother was a person who dearly loved roses, she always said she would rather someone gave her one rose than a whole bushel basket of any other flower. Although she loved all flowers, she dearly loved the rose, and a lot of people have come into our house and have said, 'Where are the flowers, I smell roses?' And there is no reason for them to smell any, 'cause I've not put them there and I've not put incense or anything. A number of times we've had people come in and say, 'Oh it smells good in here, where are the roses?' I've had people come to the door and as they're coming in the house say, 'Have you had flowers or something out here? I smell roses,' even before they come into the house. It's my mother's presence that brings the scent of roses.

And we had talked about that - she had been ill for many years, and the last five years we worked together with death and dying counselling, since her doctor told her that her heart was dying and there was nothing to help that, to be prepared. She used to say: 'Well, don't spend a lot of money on flowers at my funeral but put a rose on my casket and... I... will... bring... you... roses... if I can...'. And she's still doing that.

But everybody - it's not just me, so you know when you get the confirmation from other people. Sometimes you think 'Well, is it just my imagination?' you know, but when other people walk in and you've just been sitting there smelling roses and somebody comes in and says 'Boy, do those roses smell good! Where are they?' or somebody comes in and says 'I thought you didn't let anybody smoke why are those smoke rings still 'round that chair?' Well... [laughter]."

\* \* \*

The next narrative is an example of a childhood narrative about an instance of altered perception. It was recounted at the same time as the preceding one by Spiritualist minister Ilene in Lily Dale.

### "Company's Coming"

Ilene: "My mother had a... she was a very psychic woman, and [had] a great deal of awareness, but also a great fear of what was - she was told was the supernatural and therefore unnatural. And she was raised in her life as a child [with] hell fire and damnation [preaching], and so she was afraid of what she used to refer to as my gifts. Yet she had her own, which you know came through very very strong.

When I was... I can't remember exactly how old, I would say five or six years old, I can remember lying on the carpet in our living room. I can still see it, and my girlfriend named Elaine from next door and I were colouring in our colouring books and my mother was setting the table for dinner, and I remember saying to her, 'Mommy, better put two more plates on the table'. And she said 'Why, is Elaine staying for dinner? And who else wants to stay?' And I said 'No, but the minister and his wife are coming for dinner'. And we weren't even members of his church yet. But they had been talking to my parents and wanting them to join, and my parents had taken my sister and I to the church for Sunday school classes. And my mother said 'No, honey, you're day dreaming again, they're not coming 'cause they're not even in town, they're on vacation and won't be back until next week.' And I remember thinking, 'That's funny, she doesn't know.'

And it wasn't five minutes later there was a knock on the door, and my mother opened the door and there they were. And they had decided... got tired on their vacation and decided to come home early. Had stopped at a farmer's market and had bought some peaches and fruit that was real, real ripe and got it at a real mark down, so they bought some... I guess bushel baskets of it, and stopped at the grocery store and got some bags and they had bagged up some fruit. And [they] were stopping at some people's houses on the way home... that they knew, and were asking if they could use some fruit. So my mother invited them in, asked them if they'd eaten, and they said 'No,' and she invited them to supper, and all through supper she kept doing this [looking sideways at her daughter] and that night as she was tucking me into bed I remember her saying 'Honey, [voice drops to a whisper] don't do that any more, people will think you're weird.' So that's when I stopped, at least outside



my home, talking about it. But I still kept my friends, my spirit friends. I still have a lot of contact with them, and always have had."

\* \* \*

The following narrative was collected on July 31, 1991, at a house party in Lily Dale. The narrator was an elderly woman, well known in the community for her knowledge of Spiritualist history and her deep faith in Spiritualism. The gathering was a social gathering of ten summer residents (those who live on the Lily Dale Assembly grounds only during the short summer season) one year round resident, one student boarder, and myself. I was the only non-spiritualist present, having been invited by the student boarder with whom I was attending a healing development class. The personal experience narrative was offered by Jane in response to a lengthy discussion of why the "physical phenomena" of Spiritualism's early days were no longer common, and in agreement with the general consensus that such blatant physical manifestations were no longer necessary to "prove" the existence of Spirit. The narrative is an example of a death bed visitation narrative.

"Jane, Jane..."

Jane: "I'll tell you what happened, just before my husband died. I was going to the healing [Temple with him], and he said 'I've got to go into the hospital, I can't stand this any more.' So my son went like this [waves hand]: 'Don't aggravate him'. I said, 'All right,' I said, 'If you don't feel any better, tell them at the hospital to call me and I'll be right there.' So he said, 'All right.'

Well, I went up to the healing temple. He was desperate, and he sat in a chair, and where he was sitting in the chair - I had two friends sitting beside me - the light shone through that stained glass window, the light shone right on his face, and I said to my friends, 'Oh, ... they're getting ready to take him away.' Well when they finished, he could

hardly walk, the lady brought him over, and I said to him, 'Are you, do you feel any better Bill?' And he said, 'A little.' He says, 'You know, but a funny thing, I saw my mother, and she was smiling at me.' And I knew... I knew that was the end.

Now three days after it, my son drove the car to come back to Canada, and... I woke up at EXACTLY five past three in the morning, and Annie Thatcher, she saw the light on and she came over in her dressing gown and slippers. I heard them saying, 'Jane, Jane, Jane,' [whispering] and I jumped, and I thought, 'I can't phone home, oh... he must have passed away.' And I was so upset, because I - I never had the strength, all the time I was ill, you know - I, 'cause I couldn't do anything for him. And so I came downstairs and I thought, 'I'll wait till it's eight o'clock and I'll phone home.'

So, Annie Thatcher saw my light on... she came over to me, and she said 'What's happened?' and so I told her. I said, 'I know he's passed away because he just said 'Jane,' just like that' and she said, 'Well dear, I'm sure he has,' and as she was standing the phone rang, and my son said 'Mom,' and I said 'When did your father pass away?' 'Who the hell told you?' That was his words. I said, 'Nobody told me, I've been up since three o'clock.' 'My God mother you're giving me the creeps, Dad passed away exactly five passed three.' I'll never forget it, 'cause I could hear his voice. It was after three o'clock, so I... nobody could ever tell me otherwise that there's not another life, never. I just heard quite clearly 'Jane, Jane' just like that. Oh, I'll never forget it. I could never disbelieve, because I've had so many things happen in my life. I'm not afraid, when the day comes and I've got to go, I KNOW... I'm going to my loved ones, I BELIEVE that, and nothing will make me feel different."

\* \* \*

The following narrative was collected on July 5, 1991 at Lily Dale. The narrator is a year round resident of Lily Dale who regularly visits the lobby of the Maplewood hotel on the Lily Dale grounds in the evenings. This narrative was offered as part of a round of narratives regarding haunted houses. The discussion involved the question of why the original Fox cottage (the place of origin for modern Spiritualism, which had been moved from Hydesville to Lily Dale in 1957) had burned down, and why all

subsequent restorations of the cottage had also burned. The narrative is an example of the Spiritualist ghost story genre.

### "All Haunted Houses Burn Down"

Ed: "Well, you know that all haunted houses eventually burn down. That's why they haven't been able to rebuild the cottage [the Fox cottage] anyway. It's got something to do with the vibrations, how, you know, the spirit disrupts the vibrations in the house, and accidents happen there.

When I was a boy, my father moved our family to this old house outside of, Niagara Falls, you know, around there, and this house was old, it had been used to treat the soldiers, you know, in the war, the war we had with Canada? [The war of 1812] Anyway, everyone said the house was haunted, but my father... he didn't... he didn't believe it, I guess, and he moved us all there. Well, right after we moved there we noticed things - that things would move and when you went to look for them they'd be moved. And there was this one room especially, in the back, where things were always happening, where my mother kept her things, the baking things, and supplies, and tables were always falling over and dishes breaking and everything.

So, one night my mother was cooking supper and she went back there... to get something I guess... and anyway, we heard her gasp... like... you know, like she was real, real frightened, and my father yelled 'Martha' and ran back there, and we, my two brothers and I, we ran too. And we got to the door, where my mother was standing, and right in the doorway was this man... he was... he was solid, just like anybody, and he was wearing this uniform, you know, kind of a uniform, but he was so thin it kind of hung on him, like it was too big. And I looked down you know, I don't know why, and he didn't have any feet, he just faded out before his feet, like he was floating. We all saw him, even my father, and he just stood there. I couldn't tell if he was seeing us or not, but then he turned and walked to the back wall and laid down, and just kind of... disappeared.

Well we found out afterward that the house had been a kind of infirmary, where the people who got sick with dysentery, that was a big problem then, where they could be treated. And I guess quite a number of them died there, and this must have been one of them. We only lived there about a year, my father got a job in Rochester, and we moved there,

but we saw him again several times, in that back room. And things all over the house still got moved, and broken.

But when we moved the house was bought by this other man. I heard years later, from a friend of mine who still lived there [outside Niagara Falls], that a group of local kids wanted to see the ghost, and he let them take a tour of the house, and they went in there and after a few minutes they came out white as sheets and took off, so that... after that, the new owner took the stories more seriously. My friend told me, just a few years ago, that the house burned down one night. No one could ever figure out how it caught fire, but it burned down, right to the ground. Just like the Fox cottage."

\* \* \*

## Appendix Two: Christian "Proof-Tales"

One of the longest standing controversial issues within Spiritualism is the compatibility of Christianity with Spiritualist belief. Because the Hamilton King Street Church is a "Christian Spiritualist" church, it is important to touch briefly upon the relationship between Spiritualist and Christian affiliations. Historically, the Spiritualist movement was unconnected with any theological or doctrinal position. Very quickly, however, Spiritualists found themselves divided according to religious conviction. The largest percentage of Spiritualists in the 1850's and 1860's followed the pattern of nineteenth century liberal positivism epitomized by Andrew Jackson Davis (Moore 1972). Christian Spiritualist organizations appeared as early as 1860, however, and Spiritualism was very quickly drawn upon to provide proof of Christian teachings (Braude 1989; Moore 1972; Nelson 1969). The seance room provided an ideal opportunity for Christians to bolster revealed faith with personal revelation. Indeed, the major value of Spiritualism as perceived by many individuals was its potential to revitalize a faith sharply undercut by the ongoing development of natural science. For nineteenth century Christian Spiritualists, Spiritualism seemed the ideal way to prove the tenets of traditional religion, to add experiential legitimacy to a religious tradition previously dependant entirely upon faith.

In contemporary Spiritualism, however, the importance of "proof" to Christian Spiritualists has become inverted. Spiritualism, rather than Christianity, appears to be

the primary religious allegiance of Christian Spiritualists, and attempts to use Spiritualism to "prove" Christianity have apparently died out.<sup>1</sup> In contemporary Spiritualism, Biblical narratives now operate much as folk legend or 'third-person' belief narratives, in support and 'proof' of Spiritualist belief. As Bennet (1989:301) argues in reference to belief stories, one cannot refute the argument presented by a belief story without challenging either the truthfulness of the narrator or conventional wisdom. Christian biblical stories are equally difficult to refute, given the weight of long standing faith and tradition behind them. Consequently, they become ideal tools to bolster the proof claims of Spiritualist belief.

Both Zaretsky (1969, 1972, 1977) and Goldstein (1983) note the continued presence of Christian language and symbols within Spiritualist and New Age contexts. Jesus plays a prominent role as model and guide. For Christian Spiritualists, the figure of Jesus and the story of his life as told in the Bible become sources of primary evidence for the spiritual capabilities of mankind.<sup>2</sup> Toronto Spiritualist Heather told me, "Christ walked the earth after the death of his physical form. He left his body behind, and wandered the earth in his astral body. That's why his followers didn't recognize him. It wasn't his physical body they were seeing.... There are a lot of Spiritualists who've

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<sup>1</sup> None of the Christian Spiritualists in the fieldwork data drew upon Spiritualist experience to prove the truth of Christianity. Apparently, Christianity did not appear threatened or questioned, and therefore was not in need of proof or defense.

<sup>2</sup> The potential for Biblical stories to act as "evidence" for Spiritualist phenomena can be seen in the ninth Spiritualism Principle as adopted by the National Spiritualist Association of Churches mentioned in the Introduction. It reads, "We affirm that the precepts of Prophecy and Healing contained in the Bible are Divine attributes proven through Mediumship" (N.S.A.C. 1991:i).

done some astral travelling..." In Heather's comment, Christ is referred to explicitly to support the possibility of astral travel, and then to indicate the potential of others to travel in this manner. The life of Christ as told in the gospels becomes a long series of third-person proof tales supporting Spiritualist belief. By borrowing from Christian teachings about Christ, Heather borrows the weight of accepted tradition to support and prove her less accepted Spiritualist beliefs.

Other parts of the New Testament also become incorporated into the corpus of "proof" tales. According to Bob,

"The Bible points out, in something called the Transfiguration, that Jesus is not the only one who has survived death. Because Jesus stood on the mountain with two other beings. Moses, who was supposedly dead, and Elijah, who was supposedly dead. Where did they come from? That has been my question for a long, long time. But the Bible points it out, in black and white, that Peter looked up and there they were, in their bodies of light, they were so brilliant they transfigured into their bodies of light.... he saw three people, but only one came down. The other two, just, swoosh, went somewhere. And they're still around somewhere."

In this instance, Bob is drawing on Biblical narrative to support the Spiritualist belief in the continuation of spiritual life after bodily death. The fact that Peter saw Elijah and Moses as well as Jesus experientially (and therefore, in Spiritualist perceptions, scientifically) proves that Jesus is not the only one to survive death. If Jesus can do it, and Moses, and Elijah, then so too can Spiritualists today.

Spirit communication and the spiritual or psychical abilities of everyday people are also "proven" by evidence in Biblical texts. As one Toronto Spiritualist told me,

"The Bible proves that spirit communication is possible. Doesn't it say to test the spirits? Well, how can you [test them] if they don't exist? And didn't Jesus cast out demons? What were demons, then, if they weren't possessing spirits? And what about speaking in tongues, eh? What is that, if it isn't spiritual

communication? So you see?"

His question, "so you see?" is clearly a request for corroboration of his perception that the Bible does in fact "prove" these Spiritualist beliefs. The Biblical stories are drawn upon as illustrations of the innate Spiritual abilities of mankind. Ordinary people can talk to spirits, just as Jesus did. They can also do considerably more than that. Bob told me that:

"The Bible has lots of stories about how these things are possible. I'll give you an example, about a fellow by the name of Peter. Jesus was not the only one who knew how to walk on water. He [Peter] could walk on water until his faith started to falter. If he had the faith he could walk on water, he could walk on water."

By clear implication, if other people truly believed they could walk on water, they too could develop this ability. And this "ability" is "proven" to exist in the Peter narrative.

Not all Spiritualists are Christian, but both Christian Spiritualists and non-Christian Spiritualists alike seem to respect and revere Jesus as a highly developed spiritual master. His divinity, however, is not particularly stressed, even by Christian Spiritualists. When his divinity is affirmed, it is almost always done in such a way as to stress the divinity within all mankind. As Christian Spiritualist Bob explained: "Jesus is the Son of God, but we are all Sons of God. We are all parts of the Godhead, and carry the divine spark within us." As a consequence, Christianity acts more as a source of legitimation of Spiritualist beliefs, by appeal to Biblical passages as proofs, than as the primary religious affiliation of believers. The "proof" motif, so prevalent in Spiritualist oral narrative, again assumes importance. While no claim is made that this Biblical "proof" is scientific proof, the utilization of Biblical passages to support



Spiritualist belief illustrates how vital it is for Spiritualism to gain acceptance as a legitimate religion. In this instance, the Western religious tradition is drawn upon to "prove" Spiritualist teachings, in a similar way to that in which traditional narrative patterning was drawn upon in the narratives analyzed in the body of the chapter. In this way, Spiritualism's adoption of the scientific ideal of verifiability or "proof" extends not only to the incorporation of the legitimating discourse of science, but to the incorporation of Christian Biblical narratives as proofs in support of Spiritualist teachings.

### Appendix Three: Reincarnation and Proof

One controversial "teaching" that Christian narratives are often drawn upon to prove is the possibility of reincarnation. Christian proof tales are utilized by many Spiritualists in this regard because in the perception of many Spiritualists, both scientific and unproblematic experiential proof in reincarnation's favour is lacking. According to Macklin (1974), it was French Spiritist Rivail-Kardec who first introduced reincarnation beliefs into the Spiritualist mix of mesmerism, magnetism, mediumship and scientific positivism prevalent in the nineteenth century. Macklin (1974:390) suggests, however, that North American and British Spiritualists rejected the inclusion of reincarnation beliefs because they were perceived as incompatible with the emergent Western worldview. "Scientism," she suggests, "provided them with a much more promising assumptive system" than the romantic, idealistic system of Rivail-Kardec. Hess (1991), in contrast, suggests that Kardecian Spiritists themselves firmly believed reincarnation was not only possible, but scientifically valid. Today, many Spiritualists do accept reincarnation beliefs, but the Spiritist claim that such beliefs are or can be scientifically proven is less readily accepted.

The ambivalence that contemporary Spiritualists feel for reincarnation beliefs is directly attributable to the perceived absence of "proof" in its favour. A National Spiritualist Association of Churches pamphlet states that "reincarnation is a debatable subject - while organized Spiritualism as a whole has not, as yet, accepted it as part of

its belief, it is nevertheless believed to be true by thousands of Spiritualists".<sup>1</sup> This statement was supported in the fieldwork data. Lily Dale healer Joel expressed the issue clearly: "There's a few old timers who hold onto their stubborn beliefs, but you won't find many young people who believe, who are modernists, and who aren't reincarnationists. You only find it in older folks... There is nothing at all in that [reincarnation] that is antithetical to the major tenets of spiritualism, other than that there is no absolute proof."

The presence or absence of "proof" assumes major importance with regards to reincarnation beliefs. Despite Spiritist conceptions of reincarnation as "proven," within Spiritualism the strong stress placed on the necessity of verifiability leads to an unwillingness on the part of many to state unequivocally that reincarnation is "true" in the same way that they state the existence of and communication with Spirit is "true". Toronto medium and healer Antony clearly expressed this ambivalence with regard to reincarnation and proof. Despite his training as a past life regression hypnotist, and despite his willingness to believe in reincarnation, he was unwilling to say with surety that reincarnation was a "proven" phenomenon. He told me,

"I learned how to regress people from a Jungian psychologist who used it as a therapy. So, for instance if I were to regress you into a past life now, your mind would show you a past life. And you would actually

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<sup>1</sup> This statement is actually a mild acknowledgement of an often bitter dispute within Spiritualist organizations, including the National Spiritualist Association of Churches. As Melton (1992:123) writes, "Reincarnation... is an issue that has continually divided the N.S.A.C... in 1930 the N.S.A.C. adopted a strongly worded statement condemning reincarnation as being subversive of Spiritualism. This resolution led to the loss of the New York State Association, which formed the General Assembly of Spiritualists. [Nevertheless], reincarnation... has steadily gained adherents throughout this century".

see mirrors of what's going on in your life today, but it would be played out in a past life. And that's how it's used in a therapy.

So, being regressed into a past life has nothing to do with whether you believe in it [reincarnation] or not, it's something that the mind knows how to do. There are some past lives that the mind brings up in order... to teach the mind something to help you in your life today.

And then there are those that I feel are for real. Sometimes it's difficult to tell the difference between what is a psychological-spiritual manifestation to help you teach you something about your life today, versus the ones that really did happen. Okay? The thing is, where it gets very interesting, is the subconscious mind doesn't know the difference. Okay? That's where it becomes therapy.

So, I'm into doing it as a self-help tool, I'm not into trying to prove it. I believe that, of course, the thing is that if I'm going to live after I die, I obviously came from somewhere before I got here. Okay? It's just common sense. So I personally believe in that, but I don't, don't push that... not like I do my mediumship... I believe in it, but there's no real proof that any of these past lives really happened."

According to Harris (1988), past life regressions can best be explained as the result of "cryptomnesia," where the subconscious human mind weaves consciously forgotten details into elaborate stories to satisfy the desires of the hypnotist. Anthony, despite his personal belief in reincarnation, is unwilling to claim anything more than cryptomnesia for past life regression accounts. Dismissing the evidence of past life regressions as cryptomnesia makes reincarnation truly bereft of evidence. Without this evidence, as Anthony says, there truly is "no real proof" that past lives happened.

Because of the perceived lack of experiential or scientific proof associated with reincarnation beliefs, many Spiritualists draw on the legitimating power of Biblical narratives to support their acceptance of reincarnation. Bob referred to reincarnation as a "Christian" belief. He told me, "The Christian belief is reincarnation. Some of the

Christian people don't believe in reincarnation, but some of them do. It depends on how versed you are in Christianity." While many Christians might be surprised to find that Christianity supports a belief in reincarnation, Bob clearly believes this to be the case.

As he told me,

"If Jesus is supposedly a "truth" or "sooth" sayer, he's told those people that were swarming him, those groupies, those disciples, those followers, that there was a particular figure who was amongst them who was Elijah, and they knew him not. In fact, that they didn't know him so. I think two of the four gospels talk about Elijah coming again, and they knew him not. And then the disciples knew that he [Jesus] was talking about John the Baptist. John the Baptist, Jesus was telling them, was the reincarnation of Elijah. It says so, really! See, that's my interpretation of that particular passage. Reincarnation is a possibility. It's a fact. That's the way I interpret it. Someone else might interpret it another way."

Another Spiritualist made reference to the Transfiguration to support a belief in reincarnation. "Peter knew them, knew Elijah, knew Moses. How did he know them? He'd never seen them before. Unless he had seen them before...[Q: Psychically? Or in another life?] Yah, in another life."

In the case of reincarnation, lacking any scientific proof in its favour, Biblical stories are drawn on to provide at least some legitimation for accepting the "reality" of reincarnation. The Biblical stories fulfil the "proof" function that personal experience narratives normally fill for Spiritualists. Because these narratives are so few, however, most Spiritualists refuse to accept reincarnation as "proven". The importance of "proof" in a Spiritualist context is clearly revealed in relationship to reincarnation beliefs. Lacking what they perceive as acceptable proof in its favour, reincarnation is not accepted at 'true' by most Spiritualists. Many consider it "possible," but its truth content

remains in doubt. Until and unless further "proof" can be found, Spiritualists generally are unlikely to adopt reincarnation as an accepted tenet of faith.

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