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## Supernaturalism

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# Supernaturalism



New England Puritans watched the skies for comets and astrological wonders—just as the Maya did—even as they were in the process of creating modern Protestantism. Nineteenth-century Americans loved machines and Yankee ingenuity, but they still combed for water and gold with divining rods, talked to their dead relatives in séances, and healed their own bodies through “mind-cures.” White people in the American South, otherwise contemptuous of black slaves, often secretly consulted black conjurers and healers for advice on health, love affairs, and other personal matters. Tourists flock to New Orleans in part to purchase goods that are the commodified remnants of centuries-old traditions of voodoo. Contemporary Americans rely on science and technology and yet consult astrologers and psychics for important personal decisions, avoid stepping on cracks in the sidewalk, attend church, and profess strong belief in the afterlife. Why? How do we explain the American propensity for mixing religion, science, magic, folklore, and the occult?

Historians of American religion contest the meaning of *occultism*, *religion*, and *magic*. *Occultism* describes beliefs that have roots in older intellectual traditions and ancient philosophies. *Religion* suggests veneration of or devotion to divine beings, and *magic* is traditionally understood as an instrumental practice that is primarily concerned with efficacy, with “what works.” In many contexts, however, the distinction between magic, occultism, and religion is blurred, especially when they are seen from opposing points of view. For ex-

ample, acts that are deemed “religious,” such as prayer or prophecy, might be virtually identical to some demonstrations of magic, which might be called “spells” and “divination” in the idiom of the latter.

The debate over the use and meaning of the term *magic* has a lengthy history. Scholars first defined *magic* as a mode of thought, in that it assumed that a particular relationship existed between causes and their effects. Theories of magic described this relationship as sympathetic (the idea that like produces like and that effects are similar to their causes) or contagious (objects that have been in contact with one another will continue to affect one another at a distance). In the late nineteenth century, the Scottish classicist Sir James George Frazer insisted that magic was an expression of the earliest stages of human belief and that magical practices revealed the spurious reasoning that characterized primitive modes of thought. Again, it is not entirely certain, according to this theory, whether magical approaches are completely different from religious (faith-oriented) or scientific (rational) ones. In fact, magical, religious, and scientific ways of thinking may overlap in any given historical moment.

For the purposes of this chapter, the term *supernaturalism* describes the myriad approaches human beings have used to interact with the unseen powers of the invisible world. The supernatural comprises a realm of forces and entities that might serve as the agents of such interactions, whether through ritual, intellectual theorizing, or practical experiments. Religion can speak of the supernatural, as it is included by the prior definition, among these agents. The chapters about cosmologies and science in this volume consider historical American ideas about humans’ relation to the cosmos and the interaction between the invisible (spiritual) and visible (material) worlds. This chapter has a more specific and delimited aim: to focus topically on the magical and occult traditions, ranging from divination, fortune-telling, and Conjuring to harmonialism in twentieth-century New Age religions. The term *magic* is used to refer to specific techniques that involve the manipulation of supernatural agents for particular ends. Occultism is focused on the recovery of divine wisdom and other sources of esoteric knowledge. The terms *occult* and *occultism* describe systematic attempts to predict and interpret the workings of the world using higher forms of knowledge. Finally, the term *harmonialism*, as defined by the religious history scholar Sydney Ahlstrom, is “based on the premise that this-worldly phenomena are in correspondence with higher truths in other realms of being, which are ultimate objects of our ongoing quest. . . . What is sought after, fundamentally, is a state of harmony with the ultimate principles that underlie the universe.” Obviously, the thought, behaviors, and

beliefs epitomized by these terms are not exclusive of one another. They have often converged, as we will see, in the American context.

## Precolonial Era

Magic and occult traditions have maintained an uneasy relationship with orthodox religion. Nevertheless, in societies both past and present, a fusion of ideas has occurred. Roman Catholicism in Europe provides one example. From the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries Catholicism was infused with beliefs and behaviors that drew from vernacular sources. This was the spiritual practice of the masses, what is usually known as popular religion. Throughout Europe, faithful Catholics created shrines at holy sites, consecrated relics of the dead, and brought their sick and afflicted before the priests, who petitioned the saints on their behalf. Above all, both laypersons and clergy possessed an awareness of the powers that were present in the invisible worlds of heaven and hell, including malevolent forces and satanic spirits, and took appropriate measures to ensure their well-being with talismans, amulets, and other protective devices. Some Catholics understood certain religious practices to be efficacious, such as the sacramental ritual of the Eucharist or the veneration of certain sacred objects, images, and other tokens of holiness. These beliefs were compatible with the official teachings of the church, but other activities, such as the unsanctioned use of ecclesiastical materials for personal gain, were not.

Roman Catholic Christians were heirs to a cosmology that presupposed the reality of an invisible, densely populated universe ruled from on high by an all-powerful creator. The creator, however, reigned at much more of a distance than the angels, saints, and other spiritual beings that were believed to inhabit the world in which people lived. From the Middle Ages onward, Roman Catholics speculated about the power of both God and his heavenly agents. Fear and fascination with unseen spirits, both divine and diabolic, formed the basis of a supernatural folklore that revolved around the angels, cherubim, and demons who regularly communicated with human beings. Other stories of miracles, such as the powerful acts of intercession by the saints, were passed on by believers from generation to generation. Over time, Catholics developed a pantheon of saints ranging from Saint Patrick, for whom the Irish day of celebration is named, to Saint Jude, the patron saint of hopeless causes.

In the wake of the Protestant Reformation, institutional Christianity fragmented, even as it remained the dominant faith of most Europeans in the sixteenth century. New spiritual alternatives, however, emerged that both com-



plemented and competed with the formal doctrines of the Christian churches. In making the institutional church the central repository of divine power, Christian dogma granted to humans the ability to intercede in the invisible realm, a role reserved for select mediators, the clergy. But spiritual assistance was also provided by practitioners who remained outside the pale of the churches. In England, these were known as cunning folk, “white witches,” or “wise men and women.” Christians and non-Christians alike sought out cunning folk for their skills in healing sicknesses, providing charms to guard people from evil, and divining hidden knowledge. Some of the cunning persons utilized techniques that were adopted from ancient pagan traditions, but others made use of resources with explicit ecclesiastical origins, such as prayers, biblical verses, and devotional artifacts, including crosses and saints’ images. Priests denounced such practices, but the institutional church found itself unable to weed out all the magical professionals. Laypersons continued to turn to them for their services and the promises of fertility, good fortune, and health that they offered.

### **Colonial North America**

Even with the English migration to the American colonies in the seventeenth century, Old World supernatural beliefs continued. Some colonists adopted traditions that augmented their religious practices, such as divination and fortune-telling, spell casting, magical healing, and various styles of occultism. The mental world of colonial settlers bubbled over with a ferment of ideas that supplemented Christianity. Some beliefs and practices, such as witchcraft or *maleficium*, were imported by the settlers directly from their homelands. Others, such as serpent gazing and treasure hunting, were original American creations.

When compared with the peoples whom Europeans encountered in the New World, it appears that Anglo-Americans were not so unusual, considering the great range of spiritual beliefs they possessed. Native Americans, whose religious life was starkly supernatural, conceived of a universe in which the sacred was closely entwined with human existence. Native American religions presupposed a world that was alive with divine power, sacred entities, and other spiritual forces. Shamans, the religious leaders in American Indian communities, held a variety of roles, functioning as healers, spiritual protectors, and interpreters of divine mysteries. Perhaps the spiritual perspectives of American Indian peoples were not so completely different from the supernatural beliefs of many of the European settlers with whom they made contact. In-

deed, there would later be some interaction between the two worldviews, as Native American beliefs would influence the development of certain Euro-American folk healing practices and herbal medicines.

A third group of people who came to America during this time period had distinctively supernatural worldviews and religious ideas. These were the enslaved Africans who were brought to the Western colonies during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, nearly eight million by the end of the 1700s. Although Africans subscribed to a variety of religions, most maintained a core belief in the existence of a supernatural world. African peoples viewed the supernatural world as a realm that was full of life-giving spiritual power. They tapped into and sometimes manipulated this power through ritual prayer, hypnotic song, and communal religious dance. Traditional African religions, like Native American religions, were based on worship of invisible entities, many of which were believed to have originated in nature. Like Anglo-Americans, Africans viewed the universe as an accessible territory of powerful forces. Africans in the New World passed down these beliefs to their children, creating the context in which future African American religions—from slave Christianity to Brazilian candomblé and Haitian Vodou—would evolve.

The newly arrived English Protestants forged an eclectic spiritual course in America. Many shunned what they viewed as the “priestly superstitions” of Catholic devotionism, preferring a simpler style of ritual and worship. Leaders of the Protestant churches—including the Puritans of New England and the Anglicans in the colonial South—soundly condemned magic and occultism. Ironically, however, many Christians espoused beliefs that engaged the supernatural. Many Protestants, for instance, favored a lore of “wonders” that circulated in both oral and written form. This supernatural rhetoric held that the sovereignty of God was manifested in remarkable events that encompassed both the visible and invisible worlds, revealing the divine presence in natural elements, storms, meteors, comets, eclipses, rainbows, and other signs in the heavens. Other providential portents and miracles, from prophetic dreams to monstrous births, demonstrated God’s divine purpose and judgment. These “worlds of wonder,” as experienced by Anglo-American colonists, affirmed the faith of the collective community.

Other forms of supernaturalism surfaced among the colonists. Some traditions gave shape to the acute fears of the settlers as they negotiated the unknown physical terrain of the world in which they now lived. Lacking precise theological explanations for all the difficulties they faced, some Anglo-Americans enacted their anxieties by turning inward and identifying spiritual *maleficium*, or witchcraft, that they found to exist in their own communities.

For at least three generations, witchcraft accusations rent the fabric of early American culture, reverberating throughout the communities of Puritan New England (where the persecutions lasted up to the end of the seventeenth century) and the southern colonies as well (where the very first accused witches were identified). Accused witches were usually female, widowed or never married, and economically independent or well-off—a social profile suggestive of gender conflict in early America.

Supernaturalism in the colonies thrived independent of the churches. Despite state Christianity's monopoly on public religious expression, the spiritual inclinations of the population veered wildly, from the private magical experiments of curious individuals to the advanced occult investigations of learned elites. The variety of styles of supernaturalism in the seventeenth century reflected a diverse range of interests. Poor settlers and those on the frontiers bought and traded charms, amulets, and talismans for the health and protection of their families and communities. Some people turned to magical harming, using spells and incantations, in order to articulate their animosities and resentments. A minor conflict erupting between neighbors, for example, could have parties interpreting the sudden death of a farm animal as evidence of witchcraft.

Intellectuals in early America also adopted other, more sophisticated forms of supernatural practice. One of these was astrology, a system of prediction based on interpretations of the position of celestial bodies. Once the domain of medieval scientists and philosophers, astrology enjoyed a renaissance in the late seventeenth century among common folk as the result of the publication of almanacs, the colonial household guides of folk wisdom and farming lore. Widely available by the early 1700s, almanacs incorporated arcane astrological symbolism and prognostications on medicine and human anatomy, with calculations of the alignment of the planets and predictions of auspicious and inauspicious events, such as comets or eclipses. Aside from making use of almanacs, it was not uncommon for individuals to consult professional astrologers for insights on future trends or for guidance on conducting business. Merchants and shipping traders, for instance, sometimes utilized horoscopes in order to determine the most opportune times for securing new enterprises or preparing their departing vessels. In later years, a version of astrological insights would find its way into the *Farmer's Almanac*, which advised colonists on all manner of topics, including forthcoming weather patterns.

Colonial intellectuals also pursued alchemy, a pseudoscientific art of metallurgical and supernatural transformation. An acceptable subject of scholarly

inquiry among elites in Europe, alchemy made its way into Anglo-American intellectual culture sometime during the first half of the eighteenth century. Its traditional object was to transform less-valued substances into those that were precious—as with the conversion of ordinary metal into gold. Like chemistry, alchemy was considered a form of scientific investigation with religious overtones. Alchemy posited that the metamorphosis of common metals corresponded with the transformation of the self during the process of inner spiritual purification. The knowledge that the alchemist obtained by ascetic means paralleled the achievement of mystical human perfection, or immortality. The most prized and sacred material goal of the alchemists was acquisition of the Philosopher's Stone, a fabled substance that, with the proper techniques, would allow the transmutation of any metal.

By the late seventeenth century, interest in many of these practices had subsided. Magic and occult traditions became “folklorized,” meaning that they persisted, but in a less public, more attenuated fashion. Some supernatural beliefs became limited to narrower segments of the population. Many older traditions were incorporated into the subterranean culture of American folklore; others, as we will see, maintained a syncretic relationship with popular forms of Christianity.

Occult traditions in the eighteenth century emerged as an eclectic force, fusing the explanatory assumptions of reason with metaphysics. One influential occult movement in this period was Hermeticism, an esoteric system that followers purported to be rooted in a body of texts from second- and third-century Greco-Roman Egypt, written by one Hermes Trismegistos, the “Thrice-Greatest Hermes.” Hermeticism was based on a complex theory of correspondences between matter and spirit, undergirded by a concept of the divine intellect of humanity.

At the end of the seventeenth century, Johann Kelpius (1673–1708) brought the Hermetic tradition from Germany to America, where it meshed with sectarian forms of Christianity and flourished within organized religious communities in eastern Pennsylvania. Offshoots of Hermetic thought filtered down for several generations and influenced the development of traditions such as Theosophy, Freemasonry, and Rosicrucianism, a secret order of occult mysteries (see the next section of this chapter). Some Christians blended mystical piety and occult beliefs—as, for example, the Pennsylvania Germans, whose particular brand of spirituality had found its initial expression in Kelpius's Hermetic tradition, and the Swedenborgians, discussed in the next paragraph. The German mystics were well known for their skills in finding lost and stolen

items, curing witchcraft afflictions, and utilizing ceremonial magic, such as protective circles, for the common good.

Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) was a figure of great importance in the literate culture of occult spirituality that had formed in America in the early 1700s. Swedenborg melded the diverse streams of liberal religious knowledge that were circulating at this time into a comprehensive spiritual tradition. An aristocratic Swedish scientist and engineer, Swedenborg wrote extensively on issues as broad and varied as philosophy, anatomy, geology, alchemy, and astronomy. He turned to religion sometime in the mid-eighteenth century after he claimed to have received a series of revelations from angelic beings. Inspired by these revelations, he expounded on biblical events and taught a Neoplatonic system of correspondences that proposed that the world was constituted by several orders of being, or spheres. These spheres—the natural, the spiritual, and the celestial—existed in association with the heavenly system of God. This doctrine of correspondences also posited the existence of a reality that was described as the continuity of human experience, which evolved throughout eternity. Swedenborg's writings were filled with detailed descriptions of a new world, including heavenly landscapes, personalities, and radical sexual relationships that Swedenborg believed showed humanity's true moral and spiritual potential. Swedenborg's followers eventually coalesced into a Christian denomination, the Church of the New Jerusalem. One of the most famous Swedenborgians was John Chapman (also known as Johnny Appleseed), the legendary figure of American folklore who traveled the frontier, planting apple trees and preaching what he called “good news fresh from heaven.”

Some supernatural beliefs of the eighteenth century derived from the New World landscape. In the mid-1700s a strange new fascination gained the attention of people from various walks of life. Serpent gazing, a phenomenon described in a number of early folklore sources, reproduced many settlers' attitudes toward the strangeness of the natural environment, the animals, and the topography of America. Serpent gazing was based on the belief that human beings could be spellbound and captivated by some hidden power based in a snake's eye. Occult investigators insisted that there was an analogy between these fanciful descriptions of serpent fascination and the power attributed to some persons to harm others through the “evil eye.” Although serpent-gazing stories became a trend within a number of literary works by English and Anglo-American naturalists, the actual origins of these ideas are obscure, although some scholars have suggested a Native American provenance for the beliefs.



## Revolutionary and Early Republican America

The advent of the new nation saw a spectrum of developments in the arena of supernatural belief that reached across broad segments of the population. The early eighteenth century was a fertile period of alternative spiritual ideas. At that time older Renaissance traditions merged with new trends in both popular culture and intellectual thought. In the latter part of the century, with Enlightenment notions fostering religious doubt and skepticism, only some traditions retained the public acceptance that they had in earlier periods. Nevertheless, some significant spiritual novelties surfaced in this period.

In the postrevolutionary era, concerns for economic security were exemplified by pervasive materialism and self-interest, an outlook that was mirrored by a comparable phenomenon in supernatural practice—that of treasure seeking and money digging—frequently practiced in New England, western New York, Pennsylvania, and the southern states of North Carolina and Virginia. Treasure hunting, a mania that lured hopeful seekers of quick wealth to elaborate “money-digging” schemes, persisted in some areas for more than twenty years. The traditions surrounding these practices showed popular belief in a “supernatural economy,” for the treasures themselves possessed obscure origins. Some were believed to be buried by pirates and protected by invisible forces and could be located only by those with special divining abilities. Ambitious seekers used dowsing boughs and rods, seer stones, and magical rituals to ward off evil spirits and ghosts in their quest for precious boxes of money, gold, and mines of concealed wealth. These beliefs paralleled alchemy and other occult traditions that emphasized the acquisition of hidden wisdom by means of both physical rigor and spiritual faith.

With the rise of the Republic also came a rebirth of organized traditions with occult overtones. Some of these had been imported from Europe, such as Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry. The Rosicrucians were a latter-day manifestation of a fifteenth-century order (the Fraternity of the Rose Cross) that claimed to be founded by a legendary figure, Christian Rosenkreuz. In the early 1600s, accounts of Rosenkreuz’s initiation into Eastern mystery religions and his recruiting of monks into a fraternity called the Brotherhood of the Rose Cross were publicized by a Lutheran pastor, Johann Valentin Andreae (1586–1684), in a pamphlet, *Fama Fraternitatis*, in 1614. It was after the migration of German Protestants in the eighteenth century that the ideas of the secret society were introduced in the United States. The fraternity’s teachings and activities were relatively obscure until the nineteenth century, when American Rosicrucians Pashal Beverly Randolph (1825–75) and Ethan

Allen Hitchcock (1798–1870) revived interest in the society through their sponsorship of lectures, publications, and organizational efforts on behalf of the mystical brotherhood.

Rosicrucianism synthesized a number of ideas, including those concerned with spiritual “illumination” and theurgy, or devotional magic. One of the central principles of Rosicrucian thought was the idea that the individual must engage in a personal, heroic quest for wisdom and hidden knowledge in order to attain the highest level of spiritual development. Through discipline, one would be gradually awakened to metaphysical truths not available to the uninitiated person. Rosenkreuz’s teachings reflected the direct influences of Gnosticism, the esoteric teachings of an early Christian sect that espoused mystical insight over intellectual empowerment and promoted the idea of dualism, the body-spirit dichotomy.

Although details of Rosicrucian ritual and practice in America were shrouded in mystery, the organization of practitioners into orders reflected a pattern seen with other fraternal associations of the time, including the Freemasons. Deriving from a network of trade guilds founded in England and Scotland in the early eighteenth century, Freemasonry spread in America sometime in the late 1700s, mainly among male Protestants. The spiritual experience of the Freemason consisted of the attainment of “degrees” through a series of rituals and ceremonies designed to advance the initiate progressively through higher levels of knowledge. Some Masonic beliefs exhibited the rational orientation of eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought, with God represented as “Great Architect of the Universe” and an emphasis on human reason. There were, nevertheless, unelaborated references to “ancient mystery religions” from Greece and Egypt and a liberal use of symbols derived from older European occult traditions.

The spiritual practices of descendants of Africans in America evolved significantly in the latter part of the eighteenth century. The onset of the Haitian revolution in 1797 sent thousands of slaves and slaveholders fleeing to the French-held territory of Louisiana, transforming this swampy low country into the site of a second African diaspora. In New Orleans, large numbers of enslaved blacks created a unique synthesis of African, European, and American religious elements in the religion of voodoo. New Orleans at that time was home to the largest Haitian population in the United States. But because of the convergence of races and religions in this cosmopolitan port city, voodoo developed along a different trajectory than it did in Haiti. Haitian Vodou originated as a rural-kin-based religion with strong collective worship elements. Voodoo in early-nineteenth-century New Orleans, in contrast, in-



volved more of an emphasis on private, client-based supernatural rituals, including divination, healing, and spiritual harming. Although maintaining ties to its African sources in its practice of ritual activities such as spiritual possession, animal sacrifice, and serpent handling, New Orleans-style voodoo became widely known for its integration of Catholic iconography and the use of negative magic (that is, magic employed for the purposes of harm).

The reputation of New Orleans as a capital of “black magic” was secured by Marie Laveau, the famous “Queen of Voodoo.” Partly a real figure and partly a creation of myth and rumor, Laveau symbolized the *mélange* of cultural forces that eventuated in a unique form of voodoo practice. Laveau was a “free woman of color” (mixed race) who worked as a seamstress and hairdresser for the city’s white and Creole elites. She was also associated with the public drum dances held in Congo Square by New Orleans’s black community, whose members revitalized many of the African-based spiritual practices. Laveau became a legendary spiritual adviser to numerous clients, as well as an influential patron of the clandestine network of voodoo practitioners in the city. In keeping with her mysterious career, the date of her death is not certain. Nor is it clear whether there was even a single Marie Laveau or whether her name was adopted by other family members who were associated with New Orleans’s unique voodoo tradition.

As the Revolutionary War fostered belief in the unrivaled potential of ordinary persons, so did conventional religious life begin to reflect a growing receptivity toward experimentation and spiritual innovation. No longer constrained by the limitations of state sponsorship, Protestant Christianity exploded with creative impulses. Evangelical religion, boosted by the potent, sweeping impact of the Second Great Awakening, manifested supernaturalism in its institutional dimensions as well as in its outward, experiential aspects. Evangelical Christians were encouraged to seek the divine presence in dreams and visionary episodes and to accept supernatural manifestations of God’s grace. At the height of the revivalist furor in the late 1700s and early 1800s, Baptist and Methodist preachers promoted exuberant experiences and enthusiastic styles of worship for seekers and converts. Evangelical Methodists also institutionalized practices of supernatural healing, drawing from an older Wesleyan tradition of miraculous cures.

The postrevolutionary era witnessed a pervasive rise in claims of spiritual revelation by individuals. In some cases their inspired leadership resulted in the formation of new religious movements and sects. From the Mormons, the adherents of America’s first homegrown religion, to utopian societies like the Shakers, institutional religious life in the United States articulated the yearn-

ing of believers for true spiritual experience. The Mormons were a prime example of a church that synthesized beliefs in magical healing, occult ritual, and divination. Such traditions had characterized the world inhabited by the church's founder, Joseph Smith. Described by contemporaries as a prophet, Smith received divine dreams and angelic visitations in his youth. He was well known as a powerful seer to the network of treasure diggers and Masonic initiates in western New York in the early 1800s. Supernaturalism clearly permeated the cultural milieu in which Smith and the early Latter-day Saints found themselves. An understanding of this supernaturalism is essential to a full comprehension of this period of American religious history.

### **Antebellum Nineteenth Century**

In terms of supernatural beliefs, the United States during the mid- to late 1800s was particularly rich, as a number of new voices presenting claims to divine truth and unmediated access to spiritual experience came to the fore. Some movements in this period linked conventional religious beliefs with older occult traditions that had circulated for generations.

Many of these new movements were influenced by the ideas of Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815), an Austrian physician who developed an influential theory of affinity called “animal magnetism.” Mesmer (from whose name the term *mesmerize* derives) believed that most diseases of the body were caused by imbalances in a vital invisible fluid, called animal magnetism, that surrounded all living organisms and physical matter. The imbalance of animal magnetism resulted in a deprivation of the energy of this invisible force, and with the proper techniques, a skillful practitioner could “magnetically” transfer the fluid and correct the imbalances. Mesmer’s teachings became popular in the United States in the 1840s as they were joined with psychic practices such as clairvoyance and hypnotism. Although Mesmer’s ideas were adopted by members of the sectarian healing culture in nineteenth-century America, the concept of animal magnetism was consistently denounced by religious, medical, and scientific authorities as false.

One of the most significant traditions to be given impetus by Mesmer was Spiritualism. This movement reflected the period’s excitement with science, combined with atavistic longings for religious truth. The Spiritualist movement ostensibly began with events in 1847 at Hydesville, New York, where two sisters, Margaret and Katie Fox, were believed to have established contact with the dead through a series of mysterious “rappings,” or knocking sounds, in their home. These rappings were taken to be messages from be-

yond the grave, delivered with the assistance of the sisters as mediums of contact. As more and more people became convinced that the rappings were legitimate communications, the publicity from these events grew, and a new religion was born.

For nearly thirty years, Spiritualism bridged the line between religious experience and commercial spectacle. In the stolid Victorian era, Americans experimented with Ouija boards, table turning, parlor séances, and, in some instances, spectral materializations, all efforts to communicate with the dead. To many, Spiritualism provided irrefutable confirmation of the immortality of the soul, the existence of heaven and an afterlife, and the presence of an immanent and benign deity. Because of Spiritualism's frank affirmation of the essential goodness of human beings and its denial of the existence of hell or the need for salvation, its followers believed it to be a more benevolent expression of Christianity than that which was taught in many of the churches. Many Americans of note were either avid Spiritualists or at least dabbled with the practice, including many antislavery activists and advocates of women's rights.

Although it was widely practiced in the United States, Spiritualism never achieved the status of a national church or a denomination. It was promoted through public lecture tours and séance demonstrations by mediums and trance speakers, many of whom were activists in the progressive reform movements that surfaced in the latter part of the nineteenth century, such as temperance and suffrage. The movement's leading spokesperson was Andrew Jackson Davis (1826–1920). He was a prominent mesmerist who gave Spiritualist beliefs a consistent philosophical and theological foundation. A skillful medium, Davis was able to self-induce trance states, in which he would receive communications from departed spirits, such as Emanuel Swedenborg and other figures.

The attempt to reconcile science and religion found articulation in a number of new occult traditions that sought to address age-old religious problems such as the existence of life after death and the nature of the human soul. The so-called harmonial religions (so named by scholars who have studied this constellation of religious beliefs and institutions) were an example of the merging of occult ideas with late-nineteenth-century popular scientific thought. Harmonial groups shared belief in an underlying oneness, or harmony, that existed between all forces within the universe, in accordance with a correspondence between the visible and the invisible realm, or the material and the metaphysical world. Harmonial faiths also emphasized that well-being, health, and psychic enlightenment were contingent on one's ability to

realize perfection, or one's fullest spiritual potential, by recognizing the fundamental hierarchy of spiritual development that existed in this world and the next and establishing a rapport between them. Lacking a firm dogma, harmonial religions embodied a rich variety of traditions and included some beliefs that resonated with mainstream religion, as well as a number of influences that eschewed historical commonalities with the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Supernaturalism also influenced the healing practices of blacks in the nineteenth century. African Americans, who had maintained traditions of magical therapy since the earliest days of their enslavement in America, engaged in a system of belief and practice known as Conjure, a form of healing and counterharming that adopted both Christian and African-based religious elements. Practitioners of Conjure posited the belief that body and spirit were connected and that certain untreatable illnesses stemmed from the animosity of other persons who possessed the ability to harm others using supernatural methods. Conjurers, who were also known as hoodoo doctors and rootworkers, treated physical ailments with magical medicines. Some conjurers used herbs; others cured stubborn afflictions with mysterious, handmade charms. During slavery, conjurers were often responsible for the physical well-being of members of black communities. In his famous autobiography, Frederick Douglass relates his experiences with a conjurer whose root charm, he suggests, had saved him from the violent advances of a ruthless overseer. Although operating without sanction from the churches, most conjurers drew from a familiar repertoire of religious symbols and beliefs, utilizing Christian talismans, Bibles, and prayers for their treatment of affliction.

In African American slave traditions, the roles of preacher and conjurer were sometimes shared by a single person. William Webb was one such individual, a bondsman who embodied the dual capacities of magician and minister. While enslaved in Kentucky in the early 1800s, Webb recalled that once he had prepared special bags of roots for other slaves to carry in order to keep peace between masters and bondspersons on local plantations. The roots, he explained, were to be used in conjunction with prayer. When asked by other slaves about the bags, he explained, "I told them those roots were able to make them faithful when they were calling on the Supreme Being, and to keep [their] mind at work all the time." A believer in the mystical significance of dreams, prophecy, and sleight of hand, Webb combined the characters of supernatural specialist and religious functionary. Webb was not unique. In the 1840s an observer described a black preacher she had met on a farm in Virginia. This "man of many gifts," she wrote, was simultaneously popular as "a

conjuror who could raise evil spirits, and a god-man who wore a charm, and could become invisible at any moment.” “Prophet” John Henry Kemp was another. This Mississippi-born man was a loyal representative of the “True Primitive Baptist Church” but was also gifted with the ability to determine the future, read palms, and cure sickness with the aid of “charms, roots, herbs, and magical incantations and formulae” for “those who believe[d] in him.” Thus, as spiritual pragmatists, black Americans utilized both traditions of Christianity and conjuring as they responded to any number of concerns (illness, death, the brutality of a master, the fate of a love affair) they might face. Both conjuring and Christianity were anchored in their perceptions of a supernatural, responsive universe. Each met specific needs that the other did not.

The lack of a sharp dichotomy between the sacred and the secular led many blacks to view the supernatural world as directly impinging on human experience. From slavery, African Americans put a premium on spiritual empowerment, an empowerment that was potentially available to all believers. The exuberant practices of community worship, the Afro-Christian traditions of “shouting,” spiritual possession, mystical revelation, and the drama of conversion—all of these might serve to bring the individual into a transcendent experience in which the boundaries between the self and the spirit were made permeable. Magic, as a practice intended for contacting and manipulating the spiritual, had similar goals. Black Americans placed a great emphasis on the acquisition of supernatural power and the practices by which persons could tap into that power to make it “work” for them. For some, conjuring and hoodoo were a legitimate appropriation of spiritual energies. For others, these traditions possessed a theurgic function and provided personal spiritual empowerment. The complementary nature of supernaturalism and religion produced much of the variety—and much of the tension—that existed in the cultural arena for slaves and their descendants. In the eyes of many blacks, supernatural practitioners bridged the heritage of their ancestors (hence the frequent description of conjurers as “full-blooded Africans”) and the adopted cultures of North America.

## **Postbellum and Industrial Nineteenth Century**

Nowhere were supernaturalism and occultism more pronounced than in the various strains of alternative healing that proliferated in America during the mid- to late 1800s. Healing physical affliction continued to be a central preoccupation for a number of spiritual traditions that arose during this time.



Christian Science and Seventh-Day Adventism were two denominations that institutionalized their approaches to healing and the body in a religious context. To a similar extent, each of these sects emphasized the supernatural origins of affliction and sickness, the distinction between spirit and body, and the efficacy of divine treatment of diseases.

Ellen Gould White (1827–1915) founded the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in 1863, following a divine vision she received in which she was instructed in the development of a new gospel of health. White was originally a convert to the Millerites, a loose collective of believers who were organized around their faith in the imminent return of Jesus Christ. White became an active promoter of the benefits of hydropathy, a water cure treatment that was popular among middle-class Americans who took part in alternative therapies at this time. After receiving her initial vision, White assumed the role of a prophetess. She preached and wrote on the practicality of healthful living. Under her prophetic authority, the Adventists taught the benefits of dietary correction through a vegetarian regimen and the avoidance of alcohol, coffee, and tobacco. Although White's spiritual understanding was obtained from her own supernatural experiences, she explicitly condemned the occult healing practices that were in vogue at the time, such as hypnotism, mesmerism, psychology, and "mind-cure."

The Seventh-Day Adventists' distinctive ideas coincided with those of another nineteenth-century healing movement, the Christian Scientists. Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910) founded the Church of Christ, Scientist, in 1879. Eddy had been subject to nervous disorders since her youth, and in her adult life she had sought a variety of remedies, including the homeopathic treatments of Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, a healer who was well known in occult circles in the mid-nineteenth century (see below). In 1866, after spontaneously healing from a severe spinal injury, Eddy became convinced that reality itself was ultimately spiritual, that God is all that exists, and that all matter, evil, and even sin itself were illusory. This radical denial of the existence of matter, Eddy believed, formed the foundational principle through which physical healing could take place.

The Theosophists provided one of the most interesting alternatives to mainstream Christianity. Strongly influenced by Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, the Theosophical movement brought a decidedly international flavor to American occultism. Theosophy was organized in the United States in 1875 with the founding of the American Theosophical Society by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–91) and Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907). Both Blavatsky and Olcott had been deeply affected by the idea of medi-

umship, or communication with the spirit world, and created an organization that would function as an open platform for those who were interested in psychic and occult matters. In their travels throughout the world, particularly in the East, Blavatsky and Olcott studied the metaphysical concepts of Asian religions. Eventually they developed Theosophy into a system of belief that incorporated theological and philosophical ideas from many traditions.

Theosophy was centered around acquisition of “ancient wisdom” in the form of secret teachings from invisible masters, or adepts, who conveyed their messages through select spiritually evolved individuals. The invisible masters were also called mahatmas (after the adepts from the Hindu tradition). They were said to be part of the Great White Lodge, a mystical brotherhood of leaders whose role was to guide the world through its various stages of spiritual evolution. Theosophists believed in a single Infinite Reality, from which everything flowed and from which the key to all scientific and religious knowledge derived. All individuals, they believed, possessed the knowledge that enabled them to reach perfection, and hence harmony, with the Infinite Reality. In order to achieve this ascendancy in consciousness, however, one needed to acquire mystical insight through a series of spiritual initiations and ascend through the seven planes and cosmic cycles that constituted and defined the universe.

Although Theosophy was popular among members of the educated upper and middle social classes, other, less intellectualized traditions such as New Thought and I AM drew from its ideas, displaying the attraction of harmonicism across broad segments of the population. New Thought was initially established as an alternative to mainstream medicine. It would garner acclaim because of its influence on Mary Baker Eddy and Christian Science. New Thought practitioners conceived of their tradition as a form of mental healing, believing that the mind was the greatest source of power and that, with self-motivation and through true unity with the divine, all individuals could attain both health and material prosperity. These ideas were introduced by Phineas P. Quimby (1802–66), a former clockmaker from Maine who successfully cured patients using a vicarious treatment. Quimby would acquire the symptoms of the sick person while encouraging them to adopt a positive mental attitude by fixing on healing energy and the presence of God. Quimby believed that a person’s mental conviction—his or her inward ideas and beliefs—was the key to sickness and health and that all healing derived from realization of the true divine within. Harmony with the divine occurred when one was awakened to an awareness of one’s true spiritual nature. Therefore, as manifestations of bad thoughts or faulty ideas, all afflictions were seen to be rooted in the mind. By instilling balance of thought through positive affir-



mations, disease and sickness could be banished. The goal was to eliminate “wrong beliefs” so that harmony could be realized between divine and human being. New Thought had many followers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (most notably Mary Baker Eddy), yet even prior to Quimby’s death, the movement was unable to sustain itself institutionally and remained a diffuse collective of believers.

One successful offshoot that emerged from New Thought was the Christian-based Unity school, a movement founded in 1889 that taught that good health and personal fulfillment could be achieved through prayer and unification with the “Christ mind.” New Thought writers, moreover, were split between those who saw the goal of “harmony” as the ability to see beyond the material and others who touted New Thought as the key to achieving prosperity. The movement eventually produced popular writers such as Norman Vincent Peale, whose *Power of Positive Thinking* was a kind of popularization of what had been esoteric ideas in the nineteenth century, simplified now to a formula for success and prosperity.

In the years prior to the turn of the twentieth century, more and more Americans took an interest in the spiritual life of the “Orient,” that is, the religions of the East, including Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam. For many Americans, this exposure to the religious life of India, China, and Japan came about through the World’s Parliament of Religions, an international exposition billed as an exhibition of the world’s cultures and peoples at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893. After the parliament, some American occultists sought to develop a dialogue with non-Western spiritual practitioners by exploring some of the more obscure mystical practices and beliefs, such as yoga and reincarnation. Asian culture, with its venerable sacred traditions and its ancient texts, represented to many Westerners the unelaborated wisdom of the ages. For occultists, the appropriation of Asian culture represented a natural convergence of Eastern and Western mysticism and the apogee of harmonial enlightenment.

## Early Twentieth Century

Occult and supernatural practice in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century was tenuously connected to institutional religious life. New ideas were continuously propagated by ambitious spokespeople who gave intellectual credence to their mystical visions. They sometimes attracted numerous disciples and created a vast synthesis of occult knowledge. Occult tradition in this period can be viewed as a form of piety that functioned as an alternative

to conventional religious thought. In these belief systems, the supernatural world was verifiable, and God was not viewed as something outside being and consciousness. The divine was conceived as something within, a linking of finite and infinite personality, a cosmic extension of the human self.

A prominent early-twentieth-century group that integrated elements of Christianity while using the rhetoric of the Theosophists was the I AM Religious Activity, introduced in 1932 by Guy Ballard (1878–1939), a former miner from Arizona. Ballard claimed to have made contact with a great spiritual adept by the name of Saint Germain, who revealed to him instructions to the “Great Law of Life,” the fundamental truths of the Ascended Masters. Ballard, who was chosen as their messenger, announced the advent of the “I Am” Age of Earthly Perfection, a golden age in which divine harmony would awaken humanity. Recording the messages of the Ascended Masters, Ballard held classes, gave lectures, and published several books with their verbatim dictations. Ballard’s workshops and seminars, which were attended by thousands, also offered lessons and affirmations by which believers could tap into their own divine insight and communicate with the Ascended Masters themselves.

I AM grew into a national movement as Ballard and members of his immediate family promoted the teachings of the Ascended Masters. They emphasized human unity with the divine (I AM, the biblical name of God) and the existence of an invisible, spiritual hierarchy that was attainable by humans through personal elevation. I AM members considered their beliefs to be compatible with Christianity, as Jesus was himself represented as one of the highest Ascended Masters. Furthermore, in the name of “Jesus the Christ” all decrees, or affirmations, were repeated by I AM members for their own peace and self-empowerment. Similar groups, such as Alice Bailey’s Arcane School and, most recently, Elizabeth Claire Prophet’s Church Universal and Triumphant, have adopted many of the ideas and language of the original I AM organization.

Like their predecessors of the nineteenth century, harmonial religions emphasized healing as a practical consequence of spiritual development and placed a great importance on the power of mind over body. Even as it was believed to be centered in the realm of science, occultism gradually shifted to the realm of psychic phenomena. One reason for this shift had to do with the understandings of the causes of disease and sickness that harmonial religions promoted, which went against the grain of conventional medical thought. In the harmonial worldview, healing was not viewed as purely physiological in cause; rather, both affliction and health were nonmaterial in nature, with ori-

gins that were found in the spiritual and metaphysical arenas. In other words, the healing and rehabilitation of the body began with the mind and the spirit.

Protestant Christianity in the early twentieth century had also seen a greater openness to interpositions of the supernatural in everyday life, particularly in the area of miraculous healing. An emphasis on observable evidence and experiential spirituality was prominent in Pentecostalism, a Christian movement that sprang forth from a series of revivals dating from 1906 in Los Angeles. Pentecostals believed that the presence of God was manifested in the power of the Holy Spirit, as foretold in the New Testament Book of Acts. Pentecostal Christians witnessed the presence of God in supernatural events, which included the practice of speaking in tongues, visions, “signs and wonders” such as prophecy, and spontaneous healings. From an occult standpoint many of these experiences could be interpreted as paranormal phenomena, with the acting supernatural forces none other than God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. In any event, Pentecostal ideas of the supernatural met with great acceptance, for within two decades the movement had ignited a worldwide phenomenon.

Like their enslaved forebears of previous generations, blacks in the years of freedom relied on material objects for supernatural mediation. An array of amulets and talismans, called “hands,” “MoJos,” “gris-gris,” “jacks,” “tobies,” “goopher bags,” and “wargas,” were utilized by practitioners for purposes of protection. The contents of the specialist’s “trick bag” varied. One conjurer’s favorite item included balls of tar, sulfur, and assorted lumps of color that blazed when set afire. The fabrication of “voodoo dolls,” “luck balls,” and other supernatural artifacts became the mainstay of successful practitioners. Other popular items in black American supernatural traditions included red flannel bags filled with dried leaves, potent crumbling powders, or metallic dust. Bottles of various liquids, pins, and needles were interred by practitioners or strung on trees as a snare for invisible forces.

In the twentieth century, African American conjuring traditions emerged as cultural icons, as they were appropriated by blues musicians and artists whose lyrics referred to supernatural practices (e.g., “I got my mojo working,” “That ole black magic,” “You put a spell on me,” and many others). Conjuring also made its way (in remnant form) to the nation’s cities, where practitioners or the merely curious could buy love potions, High John the Conqueror root, and numerous other items that were the commodified form of conjuring practice. One of the most important ingredients in the apothecary of African American supernaturalism consisted of organic roots taken from designated plants. In particular, the root of the High John the Con-

queror vine, with its twisted or tuber-shaped body, was most valuable. Of all the charms carried by African American practitioners, these roots were especially prized for their potency and effectiveness. It may be that the prominence of the root in African American magic traditions harkens back to Kongo African beliefs in *minkisi*, the supernatural medicines that incarnated powerful spirit beings and divinities as composite and created artifacts. An early African American Pentecostal preacher named Charles Harrison Mason, founder of the Church of God in Christ (the nation's largest black Pentecostal denomination), often preached with strangely shaped roots, tubers, and other like objects in his hand, using them to impart spiritual lessons and power. Mason's practice shows how, among African Americans, the visual influence of conjuring traditions outlasted slavery and continued in various forms throughout the United States after the turn of the twentieth century.

## Modern America

Like American religion generally, supernaturalism in the post–World War II years burgeoned and blossomed, took on characteristics from the faith in science and technology that followed the war, and deeply influenced (and was deeply influenced by) the counterculture and movements of alternative spiritualities that sprang up in the 1960s and 1970s. Americans' faith in the scientific and the material seemed as much complementary as contradictory to their fascination with the unseen, the esoteric, the strange, and the supernatural.

One kind of mixture of the scientific and the supernatural lay in America's simultaneous fascination with and horror of drugs—especially in the case of those drugs that affected the American middle classes in the 1960s and after. For decades prior to that, natural hallucinogens quietly had become part of Native American religious expression, namely, in the form of the peyote buttons taken by members of the Native American Church as part of all-night religious rituals. And for generations before that, mushrooms and other botanicals were part of the religions of many groups in the Americas. White Americans, however, remained largely ignorant of those traditions.

In the postwar era, drugs—marijuana, speed, and lysergic acid (LSD)—entered American life through the counterculture. They came from a variety of sources—from the black jazzmen emulated by the Beat poets to the controlled hallucinogenic experiments conducted by psychology professors such as Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert. One drug in particular, LSD, developed a small following in the early 1960s, when Leary conducted “trials” with it: groups of academics and (especially) divinity students came to Leary's

home to ingest the drugs and reported on what happened to them. Eventually he formed the aptly named League for Spiritual Development to encourage mind-expanding drug-taking sessions in carefully controlled environments. Coming from a background of behaviorist psychology, Leary originally had little use for the religious terminology that would come to be associated with LSD. He quickly grew intrigued by the fact that it was divinity students, ministers, and others from religious backgrounds who were attracted to consciousness expansion through LSD. Leary placed himself in the tradition of William James and others earlier in the century who had been fascinated by the varieties of religious experience, including psychic phenomena such as hypnotism and mesmerism. One of Leary's coenthusiasts, another Harvard psychologist named Richard Alpert, also tried LSD, several hundred times. As he later said, "God came to the United States in the form of LSD." Later, he decided that LSD was a temporary expedient needed to introduce followers to the new realms of consciousness but that other religious traditions could produce the same effect without the need for drugs at all. Richard Alpert set off to India and Nepal to discover these traditions, just as the poet Gary Snyder had done in the 1950s during his twelve-year period of Zen Buddhist study in Japan. Alpert's stay was much shorter but profoundly influential. After taking the new name Ram Dass, he returned to the United States to spread the new gospel of natural enlightenment. His 1971 book *Remember, Be Here Now*, subtitled "cookbook for a sacred life," told of his spiritual quest. In easy 1-2-3 steps it introduced to Americans formerly exotic paths to the supernatural, including meditation and yoga.

If Timothy Leary was the sacred clown and enthusiast of drug-induced changes in consciousness, Alan Watts, an English-born scholar and popularizer of Eastern religious traditions in the United States, was its theoretician. In the 1960s Watts also experimented with psychedelics—a continuation, in his way of thinking, of the psychic experiments of the late nineteenth century and the religious explorations of William James in the early twentieth. Much like Leary, only with more self-consciously serious prose and manner, Watts saw psychedelics as one means to mystical experience. If this use of psychedelics was not "practical" in the Western sense, if the new consciousness broke down hierarchies and encouraged unorthodox visions, so much the better, Watts believed. Religious resistance to drug use, Watts argued, came in part because "our own Jewish and Christian theologies will not accept the idea that man's inmost self can be identical with the Godhead." Watts later turned away from psychedelics, seeing them as one baby step in Westerners' attempt to shed the skin of techno-rational culture along the path to spiritual enlightenment.



After World War II, occult and supernatural beliefs also took on other scientific, and pseudoscientific, forms. Beginning in the late 1940s, occult beliefs began to reflect the burgeoning fascination with the nascent fields of air and space technology, as well as the common concern for national security that gripped the country after World War II. In June 1947, a businessman named Kenneth Arnold reported to authorities that he had seen an inexplicable phenomenon while flying in a plane over Washington State. His report, in which he described several shiny saucerlike objects that moved in formation at more than twelve hundred miles per hour, gained national attention and immediately was followed by a number of accounts of additional sightings in other parts of the country. Thus began a new wave of excitement—and controversy—surrounding the existence of unidentified flying objects, or UFOs.

From that time, thousands of other sightings, encounters, and physical abductions of individuals by extraterrestrial beings were reported by witnesses in the United States. The rising Cold War fears of Americans may have contributed to an unusual surge of paranoia that was given graphic expression in stories of mysterious and potentially dangerous invaders. Accounts varied, from the credible to the incredible, with witnesses describing objects in the skies, anomalous lights, and strange visual phenomena. Some people claimed to have seen actual landings of spacecraft and their inhabitants, and others reported contact with the aliens, often described as short, hairless creatures with distended heads and orblike eyes. Other witnesses told of subsequent visits by persons dressed completely in black (the original “MIB”) who, they claimed, discouraged them from telling others of their experiences.

Within a generation, a thriving subculture of believers in UFOs had formed, and occult interpretations filled the gap when the official explanations left many in doubt. For some occultists, the extraterrestrials were none other than the invisible Ascended Masters, who now sent their messages using different channels of communication. Some occultists claimed that the alien adepts actually lived on other “worlds” or planes of existence. The intent of these evolved entities was benign; their mission was to act as guides for human beings, who were stalled at a lower stage of spiritual evolution. Although scientific and government research into the existence of UFOs yielded little actual evidence, proponents of these beliefs, with their elaborate hypotheses of extraterrestrial invasions and alien transmissions, continued to gain adherents well into the 1970s. As was the case with mesmerism, Theosophy, and many other movements, the literature on UFOs mixes the supernatural and the superrational, occult belief and scientific explanations.

Interest in magic, occult, and supernatural phenomena in the United States

underwent another resurgence in the 1960s and 1970s, one that replayed many of the themes of harmonial religions, healing therapies, and Spiritualist practices from the antebellum era. In films, books, and other media, popular culture promoted many of the ideas of previous decades. Some “new” occult and supernatural concepts were actually restatements or reinterpretations of former traditions. Spiritualism, or communication with the dead, for example, was now called “channeling.” Such traditions as shamanism and witchcraft likewise incorporated beliefs from pagan religions that were purportedly thousands of years old.

The rise of alternative religions, the increasing viability of metaphysical healing techniques, and the growth of scientific investigation into paranormal phenomena renewed public interest in these ideas. This revival of the occult also coincided with major transformations in the social, political, and cultural environment of the United States between 1960 and 1980. Astrologers marked this period as the start of the Aquarian Age, referring to a two-thousand-year epoch of spiritual evolution that was concurrent with the entry of the spring equinox into the constellation Aquarius, believed officially to begin in the year 2740. For many, the Age of Aquarius represented the dawn of spiritual enlightenment on the earth and was evidenced by an abandonment of traditional cultural constraints, a new receptivity to holistic approaches to health, and positive developments in human consciousness.

The popular occult belief that the Ascended Masters were transmitting knowledge to specially chosen members of the human race gained wider acceptance in the 1970s and 1980s when a number of people claimed to be able to summon these forces from the invisible world. These persons, known as psychic channelers, were actually predated by others with such abilities, including Edgar Cayce (1877–1945), known as the “Sleeping Prophet,” and Jane Roberts (1929–84), who relayed the communications of an entity named “Seth” in the 1970s. In the latter part of the twentieth century, the rise of numerous new channelers was accompanied by exceptional media attention and, with that, a greater potential for monetary profit and fame. In 1977, J. Z. Knight, a Washington housewife, made contact with a thirty-five-thousand-year-old entity named “Ramtha” while in a trance. Knight became one of the more successful of a number of psychics who widely promoted their abilities to communicate with a realm of unseen beings. Using Ramtha’s channeled wisdom, Knight became a popular teacher, offering the ancient teachings of her spirit guide to audiences who paid as much as a thousand dollars per session.

Channeling in this period was viewed by many middle- and upper-class Americans a form of psychic therapy, particularly after its endorsement by



the actress Shirley MacLaine. MacLaine wrote three books recounting her own experiences with spirit guides and reincarnation, two of which were produced as made-for-television movies in the late 1980s. In her successive autobiographies and self-help treatises, MacLaine narrated her religious pilgrimage toward “inner transformation.” Her works crested along with the surge in popularity of the New Age movement, itself a descendant of the countercultural prophets of the 1950s and 1960s. MacLaine came to the conclusion that personal transformation would have to precede “transforming the world I live in,” an argument ironically parallel to the long-standing evangelical call for personal salvation as the necessary prerequisite to any change in the social order. Practices of meditation, chanting, and reading crystals were all in pursuit of discovering the true “Higher Self” that lay trapped within the mortal self. MacLaine’s popularity peaked in the mid-1980s, with a television special touting her guru’s powers of levitation and reincarnation. Following the exposure of some prominent New Age teachers as fraudulent and the acknowledgment of some practitioners that their faith in crystals was just that—faith—and not verifiable in any sense, the movement went into decline. As was often the case with supernaturalism, the spiritual needed the complement of the scientific, as least as the “scientific” was defined in a particular age. The writings of MacLaine and other New Age adherents were a popularized form of a long American tradition of the quest for the true “higher” self, a common theme in the exploration of supernaturalism.

Gradually, the Aquarian Age gave way to the New Age of the 1980s. In the New Age, occult and supernatural traditions were promoted as spiritual resources that could engender transformations in every area, from prosperity and spiritual awakening to environmental reform and world peace. The tools of the New Age practitioner included healing crystals, tarot cards, and astrological charts, as well as a plethora of how-to publications. New Age products displayed a growing emphasis on commercialism. Like the older traditions of mesmerism, New Thought, and alternative medical therapies through spiritual practice, New Age became big business.

Some occult and supernatural traditions have drawn on the practices of marginalized or submerged religions in the United States. For example, shamanism, which called forth the primal sensibilities of New Agers, underwent a rebirth in the 1970s. Shamans are the magicians or medicine men of tribal societies who are believed to possess supernatural knowledge and special magical abilities. One current of shamanism’s popularity was traced to the influence of a series of books by a Peruvian-born writer named Carlos Castaneda (1925–), who published accounts of his personal experiences with Don Juan

Matus, a Yaqui Indian mystic and sorcerer. Matus, or Don Juan, as he became known, acted as Casteneda's guide while he was doing anthropological research in California. Don Juan accompanied Casteneda during his apprenticeship in several mystical adventures and spiritual journeys that involved the use of mescaline, a mind-altering drug. Although certain characters and events in Casteneda's books were apparently fictionalized, the ideas concerning a higher reality and the emphasis on shamanic power stimulated the imagination of an entire generation of spiritual seekers.

Shamanism also figured in the New Age milieu as a form of religious practice. Whereas some Americans appropriated the spiritual traditions of Native American peoples by taking part in sweat lodges and vision quests, others sought a connection to shamanism in traditions that related to their own racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds. Many Anglo-Americans, for instance, turned to the ancient religions of pre-Christian Europe. This movement, known as neo-paganism (as opposed to paganism, which sometimes involved animal and human sacrifice), comprised a broad cluster of traditions, including the Wiccan, Celtic, Norse, and Druidic religions. Like other shamanistic religions, neo-paganism was a nature-based, polytheistic faith in which believers used ritual and magic to communicate with spiritual beings (practices that disturbed and frightened many conservative Christians).

Shamanism also flourished among minority group members. Two African-based religions from the islands of Haiti and Cuba, Vodou and Santeria, were brought to the United States by immigrants throughout the late twentieth century. Both Vodou and Santeria revolve around human interactions with the spirit world through ritual, animal sacrifice, drumming, and dance. In Vodou, bodily possession by invisible forces called *loas* is accomplished by invocation. Similarly, in the religion of Santeria, divine beings known as *orisha* enter the bodies of believers when called, much like the spirits of the dead in the nineteenth-century Spiritualist movement. While in the trance state, possessed persons walk, talk, and act as if they have become the spiritual beings who inhabit their bodies. Both Santeria and Vodou integrate practices from Christianity: hymns, chanted preaching, prayer, and testimony, for example. Although both religions celebrate the powers of the supernatural realm, their practitioners generally shun any association of their beliefs with sorcery, negative magic, and witchcraft.

## Conclusion

At the turn of the twenty-first century, beliefs in magic, supernaturalism, and occultism show few signs of abating. Interest in these phenomena can be

seen in their popularity in contemporary American culture. Films such as *Ghost* and, more recently, *The Sixth Sense* revisit the idea of human communication with the dead. Other media tap the public fascination with unsolved mysteries, such as the *National Enquirer*, a best-selling newspaper that presents weekly accounts of UFOs, angels visiting the earth, and local ghostly disturbances. Cable television's "Psychic Hotline" has exploded into a multi-million-dollar industry. The preoccupation with supernatural prediction has even reached the highest levels of government. In the 1980s, while Reagan administration officials relied on the system of technology known as "Star Wars" to defeat the Soviet threat, first lady Nancy Reagan admitted that she had consulted an astrologer in order to arrange her husband's schedule. The rational and the supernatural again commingled, this time in the political realm.

How do we understand the enduring grasp that magic, supernaturalism, and the occult have on American consciousness? To many scholars it is unclear why such ideas prevail in modern, technological, and scientifically minded societies. To be sure, for some people they are entertaining and function as little more than intellectual curiosities. To others, they are more meaningful. One explanation for the persistence of such beliefs may be that occult and supernatural traditions provide philosophical and theological perspectives that rival conventional views. For believers they offer a glimpse of a transcendent, self-sustaining reality. And because they emphasize spiritual development and therapy, they may supplement and support mainstream religious beliefs rather than challenge them.

Magic, supernaturalism, and the occult promote a vision of a universe that is powerful, mysterious, and infinite but at the same time accessible. These beliefs are essentially religious in that they appeal in compelling ways to the existence of an alternative realm. Far from being ephemeral, beliefs in magic, supernaturalism, and the occult display enduring qualities such as faith, the desire for spiritual advancement, and the relentless grasp for certainty in an uncertain world. In American history, they have persisted despite opposition, their premises accepted on faith when other explanations fall short.

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