Andrew Jackson Davis and Spiritualist Constructions of Religion(s)

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With William Lloyd Garrison, Ernestine Rose, Henry C. Wright, Parker Pillsbury, Stephen and Abbey Kelley Foster, and a host of other radicals in tow, the prominent Spiritualist Andrew Jackson Davis (1826–1910) descended on an abandoned church in Hartford, Connecticut, for a convention. Held between June 2 and 5, 1853, before being broken up by a riot,[1] the stated purpose of the convention was "to explore and investigate *the origin, authority and influence of the Old and New Testaments*."[2] Over the course of the event, which attracted around two hundred attendees, newspapers across the country weighed in on the proceedings of "Jackson Davis' Convention," bringing new levels of publicity (one could say notoriety) to Davis and solidifying his position as a foremost Spiritualist voice.[3] To call the reporting on the event hostile would be an understatement. The *Hartford Daily Courant* denounced the "Infidel assemblage" of "Abolitionists, Women's Rights believers, Spiritual Rappers and Atheists, gathered for the purpose of spitting out their venom against all that this community hold sacred."[4] Dripping with irony, the *New York Times* begged for "some gentle let-down" after the destruction of the Bible, for "the descent to the *Natural Revelations of Andrew Jackson Davis*, is, we submit, too violent to be entirely wholesome or safe."[5]

Telling amid such animosity is the difference between what participants like Davis and Garrison believed they were doing and what their critics bemoaned. Where Garrison could opine to the audience that "a profession of faith in the Bible" was no better than "a profession of faith in the sacredness of the Koran in Asia" or Davis proclaim that the "essence of all religions" was "immaculate," even as the "symbols containing it be deformed," their detractors in the press railed against them for trying to "tear down the fabric that religion and morality have erected" and for striking a blow "at the

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Bible and Religion."[6] The deeper issue behind the origin, authority, and influence of the scriptures was a contest over whether *religion* was to be understood as a universal and abstract category or whether true religion was to be identified with Christianity alone.

Nor were the stakes of such universalization purely academic. They had everything to do with who did and did not have a *real* religion as well as who could speak authoritatively on spiritual matters in the young republic. While the participatory opportunities afforded by disestablishment have long been vaunted,[7] the politics of religious respectability remained highly contested. It was no accident that Davis and his associates chose "the *pulpit*—a consecrated battlement, where laymen, no matter how talented and accomplished, are not allowed to enter"—to deliver their harangue. Seizing upon the primary "authorized and authorizing place" (to use Bruce Lincoln's term) for American Protestantism,[8] Davis and his revolutionary band attempted a coup, asserting their democratic right to "*the freeman's pulpit*." Notable, too, is that the clergy declined Davis's invitation "to appear before a public tribunal, and defend their theology,"[9] apparently feeling it beneath their dignity to engage with the upstart prophet.[10] Because Davis's speech was seen as infidelity, not *religion*, it needed not be met on those terms. Though, legally speaking, new platforms (like the Lyceum lectern) were available upon which a larger number of ordinary people were theoretically permitted to speak, the transition was far from painless.[11] Believing that Davis had no right to even a defunct pulpit, yet unable to deny him because of disestablishment, the only recourse available to the angry mob that formed was to violently oust the speakers.[12] Thus Davis's appropriation of discourses of universal religion was inextricably bound up with his populist rejection of the authority of the clergy and the Bible as well as the desire to claim for his own beliefs the authoritative status of *religion*, indeed, its best expression.

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Davis and his associates exemplify a popular wing of an emerging discourse in the nineteenth century that increasingly naturalized and universalized religion as a shared human characteristic, particular to no time and place and uncoupled from a special revelation. An unremarkable proposition today, its radicalness incensed the convention's enemies. For indeed, the nineteenth century was crucial for the evolution of the concept of *religion*, even while this development remained highly controversial for traditional Christians.[13] Far from being an anthropological given —a concept whose naturalness appears so self-evident as to usually go unquestioned—the modern understanding of religion is revealed

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here to be of recent construction, its boundaries highly contested in ways informed by the changing sociopolitical landscape of early America as well as its growing global entanglement. A large body of scholarship building on Wilfred Cantwell Smith's landmark 1962 book *The Meaning and End of Religion* has convincingly shown that *religion* is not a natural or inevitable category, but is rather a recent one, which gradually came to be conceived of "as an objective systematic entity." Far from its Latin roots (*religio*)—signifying in the ancient world something akin to modes of worship (rites) or an attitude or obligation toward the divine—*religion* became, in the modern usage, a generic category to describe systems of beliefs, doctrines, and moral propositions as well as an internalized spiritual orientation.[14]

In nineteenth-century America, this construction, as the case study of Davis will demonstrate, was being negotiated in a situation wherein newly "discovered" Asian traditions were construed as *religions* with shared properties but cast to fit an implicitly Christian mold.[15] A brewing crisis of scientific materialism that threatened the traditional foundations of faith and the tumult unleashed by disestablishment lent this negotiation further urgency. Nineteenth-century Americans participated in this discourse in different ways, producing divergent versions of religion. For Davis, the pure essence of religion was located within the inner divinity, indeed Christhood, of every individual and was identical with the unchanging laws of nature. It was a progressively unfolding potential, actualized in history according to social conditions and biological evolution. Amid accelerating differentiation of *religion* from neighboring categories like *science* and *philosophy*, Spiritualists complicated this situation in interesting ways because of their insistence on the unity of all knowledge. By and large associated with radical politics,[16] Spiritualists linked revolutions in religion to political, social, and intellectual revolution.

Yet the scholarship to date concerning the construction of *religion* has mostly focused on decidedly elite and mostly European actors. The American context in this global process has been more or less ignored until recently,[17] while Americanists have been slow to apply the insights of a global history of religion(s) approach, though it is an approach that has much to offer. As Michael J. Altman points out, such scholarship most often appears in a footnote as "a bibliographic badge of honor" or receives lip-service in "the introductory chapters of some books."[18] Notable exceptions, James Turner,[19] Alan Hodder,[20] and Jan Stievermann[21] have all studied the role of Unitarians and Transcendentalists in the rise of the comparative study of religions and the construal of religion as a

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category. While unquestionably fruitful, the existing scholarship, dealing as it does largely with comparative religion scholars in the academy and high-brow Transcendentalists, has not yet fully taken into account the popular uses and transformations of these newly constituted understandings of religion, of which Davis and his associates are a prime example. In a promising first step toward understanding its popularized forms, scholars are also beginning to untangle the contributions of figures within New Thought and Theosophy to this discourse.[22] Spiritualists have received only passing treatment in such narratives despite being something of a "missing link" between the Unitarian-Transcendentalist discourse and later metaphysical-esoteric ones.[23] Moreover, the radicalness with which many Spiritualists—notably those of Davis's sort—deployed such constructions of religion speaks volumes as to the social gulf between them and the Boston intelligentsia, despite occasional overlaps.

Powerful voices within Spiritualism, Davis's Harmonialist circle articulated a related but unique version of this nineteenth-century debate that has gone virtually unstudied. Their specific understanding of religion carried strongly anticlerical, sometimes even anti-Christian, overtones and radically naturalized religion—bringing with it strong racial inflections—in response to the growing tension with science and the specific political conditions of nineteenth-century America. They understood their attack on priestly authority as no less than a spiritual continuation of the American Revolution, which would spill over into the rest of the world. John Lardas Modern has written about Davis's particular understanding of "spirituality," attending primarily to its phrenological (indeed proto-neurological) qualities. Modern is primarily interested, however, in Davis's (and others') complex relationship to the antebellum "metaphysics of secularism" and, more recently, neuroscience, and does not explore the role of non-Christian religions in Davis's religious imaginary nor its global dimensions.[24] While Ann Taves[25] and John Buescher[26] have noted Spiritualism's universalizing tendencies and, in Taves's case, its pivotal role in the history of explaining cross-cultural and historical religious experience, especially for William James, no one has fully studied the Harmonialist-Spiritualist understanding of "religions" like Christianity and Hinduism and how these pertain to their ideation of the category of *religion* itself,[27] nor how contests over *religion* were just as much contests over who had the right to speak with authority on spiritual matters.

The relative omission of Spiritualism from narratives of "world religion" is significant when one considers the far greater reach

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of Spiritualism compared with Unitarianism and especially Transcendentalism.[28] Moreover, as Robert C. Fuller[29] and Catherine L. Albanese[30] have demonstrated, the eclectic, hyperindividualistic, and antiinstitutional ethos of Spiritualism and related "metaphysical" movements left a powerful legacy to later New Age spirituality in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[31] The deeper point that has gone unnoticed is that it is only through a more fundamental reimagining of *religion* as a universal and comparative category that such an eclectic stance becomes possible. Without the prior construal of *religions* as actually existing entities that bear a meaningful relation to one another and to science, efforts to transcend them or posit their similarities cannot be fully comprehended.

Furthermore, the construction of *religion* as a universal constant within Nature and each individual's interior cannot be separated from its democratic implications. To wrest control of religious authority from a clerical elite and a closed canon of scripture and place it in the hands of all is also a political act.[32] Certainly, Davis and his associates understood it as such when, for example, they celebrated the 1848 revolutions in Europe as part and parcel of a greater spiritual transformation taking hold,[33] or when an admirer compared Davis to Washington for having "severed the wand of priesthood" like the revolutionary general had done with "the sceptre of kings."[34] With older forms of institutional authority in crisis, Davis's direct revelations became a way to underwrite new forms of charismatic authority (in the Weberian sense) that afforded opportunities to those lower down the socioeconomic ladder.[35]

As Davis's autobiographical account of his own naming was doubtless intended to suggest,[36] Davis sought to be to religion what President Andrew Jackson purported to be to politics: an iconoclastic populist who would wrest power from the traditional elite and place it in the hands of the people. Hence Lincoln's pertinent observation that "religious claims are the means by which certain objects, places, speakers, and speech-acts are invested with an authority, the source of which lies *outside the human*," in order to gain "the capacity to speak a consequential speech and gain a respectful hearing."[37] In a transitional period in which political and religious power were very much up for grabs, Davis's claims that his Harmonial Philosophy represented not only a valid form of *religion* but the purest approximation of a transhistorical and universal natural religion was calculated to both further corrode the authority of orthodox Protestantism and authorize his own sweeping pronouncements. These pronouncements rejected the distinction between the religious and the secular altogether in order to birth a "Spiritual Republic."[38]

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While estimates of Spiritualism's reach varied wildly, Uriah Clark of the *Spiritualist Register* claimed 780,000 Spiritualists in 1857 and 1,745,000 in 1861, though his numbers must be treated with caution, as even he admitted.[39] Nonetheless, David K. Nartonis's statistical analysis of Spiritualist subscription lists uphold a picture of rapid growth in the 1850s and the period immediately following the Civil War, before a decline in the last quarter of the century.[40] Spiritualism, within which Davis wielded significant influence, has, until recently, largely been appreciated for its social dimensions.[41] But when read within a global religious history framework, Spiritualism, itself no monolith, becomes a powerful discursive battleground upon which a war over the modern understanding of *religion(s)* was being waged, bringing this debate to unprecedented numbers of ordinary Americans and further chipping at Christianity's privileged position, particularly that of its more formalist varieties. That, broadly speaking, we do not, like the seething commentators on the Hartford convention, see a denial of the Bible's unique status as an attack on religion itself speaks volumes as to how far-reaching and naturalized such an understanding of religion has become. It is a given, therefore rendered invisible.

The Seer of Poughkeepsie

Andrew Jackson Davis, the "Poughkeepsie Seer," burst onto the scene with his allegedly trance-channeled revelations, published in 1847 under the title *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind*. Controversial though it was, the work sold nine hundred copies in the first week and made twenty-one-year-old Davis instantly famous. By the end of the year, it had run through four editions, probably reaching its seventeenth by 1876, though the publishers claimed more.[42] While *Nature's Divine Revelations*, as it was often called, was Davis's sole book dictated in a trance, it was hardly his only work; the seer was prolific, producing more than thirty books, notably his five-volume encyclopedia, *The Great Harmonia* (1850–1859), in addition to his considerable lecturing activities and articles. The 1871 *American Book Sellers' Guide* claimed overall sales of twenty thousand works by Davis per year, with each new book purportedly selling five thousand in its first year and five hundred per year thereafter.[43]

Following the publication of *The Principles of Nature*, Davis and his circle—Samuel B. Brittan, William Fishbough, Woodbury M. Fernald, Joshua K. Ingalls, Thomas Lake Harris, Frances

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H. (Fanny) Green, Selden J. Finney, and Wilshire S. Courtney—calling themselves the Harmonial Brotherhood, went to work promulgating his teachings in lyceum lectures and through *The Univercœlum and Spiritual Philosopher*, a New York–based paper, which ran from 1847 until 1849, before it was bought by William Henry Channing. Though it was only ever modest in its reach—about 2,700 subscribers at its height—as Spiritualist historian and medium Emma Hardinge Britten wrote, it "formed a nucleus from which the irradiations of spiritual thought and influence flowed out in abundant and startling force."[44] Wielding influence far beyond their small numbers, in the wake of the spirit rappings of the Fox sisters in 1848, the Harmonialists spread out into the fledgling movement as Davis's revelations became the basis for Spiritualist cosmology, bringing his ideas to a larger audience, though, naturally, Davis and his associates by no means spoke for all Spiritualists.[45] Nonetheless, as Catherine Albanese observes, "Davis's pronouncements found echoes seemingly everywhere within the huge spiritualist community" as well as in the writings of prominent metaphysical figures, like the mental healer Phineas Parkhurst Quimby and the Theosophists Helena Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott.[46] Beyond the English-speaking world, Davis's works were translated into French, German, and Russian, and in Germany found a reception among the 1848 revolutionaries.[47]

The alarm sounded by papers like the *United States Review* provides anecdotal evidence as to Davis's influence. Lamenting in 1853 the prevalence of rationalistic and visionary minds "dissatisfied with existing religious creeds, or rather, perhaps, disbelieving in any religion at all," the *Review* noted that their "guiding star . . . was and is Andrew Jackson Davis, whose name is familiar to every reader." "Societies are being organized all over the Union, under the title 'Harmonial Brotherhood,'" the editors complained, and wherever "the rappings are heard throughout the remotest parts of our land, . . . they are always closely followed by the voluminous works of Davis."[48]

Nature's Divine Revelations

What were the ideas that commanded the attention of so many Americans? The contents of *The Principles of Nature*,[49] the first of Davis's "voluminous works,"[50] are not easily summarized. The revelations ranged from an account of the creation of the universe from an infinite sea of liquid fire to a geological history of earth resembling Robert Chambers's popular *Vestiges of the Natural History*

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of Creation.[51] From there, they encompassed life on other planets and the spirit land in the mode of Swedenborg, Fourierist schemes for global reform, and a progressive model of evolution in which crude matter became increasingly spiritualized. In Neoplatonic fashion, the entire cosmos embodied a first principle called the "Great Positive Mind." Like a mighty magnet in the center of the universe, the Deity attracted refined, spiritualized matter and repelled lower, crude matter, dividing the cosmos into six concentric spheres of increasing perfection in a universalistic twist on Swedenborg's three heavens and hells.[52]

The implications of this radically monist cosmology were profound for Davis's—as well as later Spiritualists'—understanding of religion, at once interiorly located and materialist. In one move, Davis naturalized religion and spirit, rationalizing it in a manner agreeable to the popular Baconian sensibilities of the "village enlightenment" and meeting the challenge of scientific materialism head-on by appropriating its terms of debate.[53] In doing so, Davis could lay claim to the considerable authority of science in nineteenth-century American culture, yet also sidestep its more troubling implications.[54] Yes, everything was matter, but some of it was *spiritual* matter. Writing in 1850, Davis affirmed that "the Deity is himself an organized substance—yea, organized upon anatomical, physiological, mechanical, chemical, electric, magnetic, and spiritual principles." Whatever the protests of "the unphilosophical Christian [,] . . . startled at this seeming materialism," the truth was "*the Deity is a substance moving substance*."[55] In this, Davis helped set the tone for late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century occultists, whose articulation of a spiritual science as a counter to materialism presents a challenge to traditional narratives of disenchantment, as several revisionist historians have shown.[56]

It is in this understanding of spirit and the Deity that we find probably the greatest difference between Spiritualists and not only the broad mainstream of Christianity (with the exception of other nineteenth-century American movements such as Adventism and Mormonism) but also at least the early Transcendentalists. Such an emphasis lent itself to orienting the interiority of true religion around scientifically understandable modes of revelation—hence an interest in Mesmerism, dreams, and altered states of consciousness—and affirmed the ability of spirit to directly act upon matter, something that Transcendentalist idealism downplayed by comparison. While Transcendentalists, too, viewed revelation as progressive, many Spiritualists, following Davis, tied this process to psychological (and phrenological) development and a linear model of evolution that saw gross matter progressively refined into higher forms of life,

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bringing them into closer association with the divine.[57] The appeal of quantum physics to contemporary New Age and metaphysical spiritualities, with its potential to rationalize the spiritual and synthesize knowledge, is no doubt a legacy of this type of cosmology.[58]

In the Harmonialist understanding, higher revelation naturally unfolded in tandem with biological evolution and cultural conditions, fundamentally challenging notions of biblical exclusivity and sufficiency. Hearkening back to liberal Protestant optimism about the potential divinity of humans, not to mention older notions of *gnosis* and Hermetic ascent, and looking forward to New Thought affirmations of virtual godhood, this evolution brought one into closer communion, almost unity, with the Deity. As Samuel B. Brittan wrote in the *Shekinah*, a successor to the *Univercœlum*, in 1852, "God is enshrined in the human soul; and . . . all men, as they become God-like in spirit and life, are rendered susceptible to divine impressions, and may derive instruction from a higher sphere of intelligence."[59]

The Primitive History

Understood as a stepping-stone to spiritual enlightenment, the Hebrew and Christian scriptures were rendered historically emergent rather than specially revealed—repositories of history, and perhaps wisdom, but inferior to natural revelation and not exclusive. Here, Davis worked to corrode biblical authority, placing it in continuity with "heathen" beliefs, while relocating religious truth into natural revelation to which he possessed direct access. The Old Testament, Davis asserted in *The Principles of Nature*, was merely an allegorical and correspondence-based record of the "primitive history" of humankind, which had been transmitted in several stages from its origins in Asia. Thus, for example, "Adam and Eve correspond to two distinct nations—which . . . formed one, in the interior of Asia" and birthed two new nations corresponding to Cain and Abel.[60] The destruction of the latter at the hands of the former was allegorically preserved by "the early Egyptians" in the story of Osiris, "a good and gentle brother . . . loved by Brahma," and Typhon, who "cultivated the things of the earth." The myth passed into "the Chaldeanic writings. Afterward it was transcribed into Greek, and ultimately into the Hebrew oracles and manuscripts."[61]

Authenticated by clairvoyance rather than learning, Davis's hermeneutics recall a popularized form of orientalist scholarship that conflated "Hindoo" and Egyptian beliefs. Similarly, they invoked

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eighteenth-century euhemerism—the attempt to link various pagan gods to each other and to biblical figures. Such a strategy was favored both by radical Deists for discrediting Christian claims and by Christian apologists for proving corrupted knowledge of the Bible persisted worldwide.[62] However, Davis also evinced a Romantic understanding of *myth* as conveying historical truth beneath a nonliteral surface as well as the selective use of a Swedenborgian-esoteric hermeneutic whereby symbols in the Bible corresponded to deeper spiritual referents. Beyond the company he kept, Davis may have been exposed to popular digests, newspapers, and textbooks that provided Americans with orientalist scholarship and reports from Asia. Certainly, he would not have been alone in his fascination, as missionary reports and translated texts entered the United States through colonial networks.[63]

Echoing Emerson's remark in *Nature* that "the corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language,"[64] Davis explained that, with symbolic language, allegorically connected to the Tree of Knowledge, primitive humans ceased displaying their interior thoughts through their expressions and became capable of deceit and strife.[65] This gave rise to "*mythological theology*"[66]: a "germ of error" in Asia,[67] further warped by deliberate priestcraft—a reoccurring theme in *The Principles of Nature*—which burgeoned into increasingly complex systems.[68] The eventual result was an ancient Indian creation myth wherein a "great spirit" named "*Parama*" (later Brahma) slept within the primordial waters and "breathed forth . . . *Narasayana* [or Vishnu]," who created dry land and humans.[69] Thus was formed the basis for the subsequent biblical narrative in Genesis, paralleling the theory of Louis-Mathieu Langlès, a French orientalist who posited Vedic origins for the Pentateuch.[70]

Claiming clairvoyant mastery of languages, Davis asserted that the Bible passage "'And the darkness was upon the face of the deep,' was derived from the passage in the Sanscrit language which reads [in translation], 'And *Brahma* was within the great waters and was *asleep*'; the word 'asleep' being rendered 'darkness' in the other passage."[71] The myth told, too, of a third, evil spirit, Siva, who could only be placated by the chieftain by means of sacrifices, thereby ensuring priestly dominion.[72] Reversing the direction of influence presumed by some orientalists like Sir William Jones,[73] Davis explained that these three spirits also served as the eventual basis of the Christian Trinity: "The expression, 'Let us make man,' is derived from the early myth in which the '*us*' means Brahma, Vishnu or Narasayana, and Siva. It corresponds also to the . . . Father, Son, and Spirit."[74] Davis's associates, such as William Fishbough in the *Univercœlum* and R. P. Ambler, under the control of spirits in the

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Spirit Messenger, followed his lead in propagating variations of this theory, with Fishbough emphasizing a "twofold philosophy" in which the priests understood their theology in symbolic-esoteric fashion while deceiving the populace.[75]

The ancient Indian Ur-myth reverberated throughout history, informing the mythology of the Chinese,[76] as well as "more matured, yet no less misdirected minds, such as Hesiod . . ., Thales, Pythagoras, and also the *Zend Avesta* of Zoroaster." From Zoroaster, the ancient Hebrews acquired their theology during an unrecorded captivity in Persia.[77] Then, "the Greek received it from the Hebrew; and the Latin from the Greek; and the English from the Latin."[78] Like an inversion of the older notion of a Noahic religion, wherein the pure, primitive monotheism—the *prisca theologia*—practiced by Noah and his sons had been corrupted and lost,[79] Davis posited that the "the gross materials of the primitive family" had mushroomed into the tyrannical theologies of the world, "claiming authority to govern the freeborn minds of mankind!"[80] While he held to an eternal religion of Nature, Davis here nonetheless opposed the "primitivist" logic of mainstream Protestant thought in the United States, which posited a pristine origin and subsequent corruption of the primitive religion.

Ironically, despite their shared basis, the variegated theological systems that emerged from the primal error came into conflict as sectarian prejudice and hereditary belief fanned the flames of mutual hatred. "For behold," Davis warned, "how much the [*sic*] more devotedly the Hindoo is attached to *his* religion, because he *hates yours!*"[81] Behind this castigation of Christian mission was a belief that the various "external religions" shared the hostile, mutually exclusive logic of Christian denominations. The newly constituted "world religions . . . were created through a projection of Christian disunity onto the world."[82] As the world's religions were constructed as distinct entities all offering answers to the same metaphysical and cosmological questions, the lines of demarcation hardened between them, a process simultaneously occurring in countries like India themselves as local religious authorities moved to assert their unity in the face of Christian missionizing.[83] So then could Davis pointedly inquire of Christians, "Can there be more than *one* true religion?"[84]

The truth claims of each religion were similarly predicated on conflicting evidence. While the Christian derided the "inexplicable" miracles of the "mussulman" (i.e., Muslim), Davis warned that "the mussulman disbelieves the claims of *your* religion, and *its* miracles, because it is written *in the Bible*, and that by authors unknown." Striking a blow against perceived Christian rationality, Davis

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reminded his reader that "you have also a book that proclaims mysteries almost as inconsistent, and *them* you *believe!*"[85] Evidence of biblical miracles was no different from evidence brought forward in the present time by the Mormons and Shakers—that is to say, superficial and worthless.[86] Ubiquitous claims of divine authorship for holy texts called into question why Christian claims were any different.[87] What "the conviction of the Mohammedan, the Chaldean, the Persian, and the Christian" all shared was a violent sectarian bigotry derived from "hereditary impressions." Grounded in the same evidential logic, Christianity joined the ranks of irrational false religion. "All are seriously *convinced*," Davis asserted, "and all are as seriously *deceived*."[88]

The World's Bibles

While he recognized them as independent traditions in their own right, Davis cast all religions in the mold of Christianity and Judaism. For one, his treatment of religions was almost wholly concerned with their doctrinal content; he speaks of "ideas," "conceptions," and "principles" but rarely of practice and ritual, unless to denounce them as examples of superstition or as an unflattering foil against Christians.[89] The emphasis on content reflects longer processes stemming from confessional schisms within Christendom following the Reformation wherein intellectual assent to a set of doctrinal propositions differentiated one from competing creeds. This propositional understanding was increasingly applied to other religions, especially as polemicists branded each other as heathens.[90] By the nineteenth century, the tendency to equate religion with content can be seen clearly in works such as Lydia Maria Child's *The Progress of Religious Ideas through Successive Ages* (1855) or earlier in the writings of the Unitarian Hannah Adams, though with an Enlightenment penchant for static categorization over progress.[91]

Alongside an emphasis on ideas was an understanding of scripture as normative, a tendency that both undermined the Judeo-Christian Bible but also paradoxically lent its perceived authority to other texts in furtherance of Davis's universalizing project.[92] Davis's historical genealogy of theology and the Hebrew Bible was predicated on the existence of other bibles, which oriented his construction of historical religion, though, as we shall see, *true religion*—its essence—was explicitly not anchored in scripture. Not only did the Bible become relativized and historicized but, much like Emerson and the Transcendentalists as well as comparative religion

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scholars conceptualized it, a "bible" became the primary hallmark of a religion per se. This served to destabilize Christian claims about the Bible's special status; however, it also made Protestant bibliocentrism normative for all religions and lent the cultural authority of the Bible to other traditions. Even texts arguably lacking a "scriptural" use became, by virtue of comparison, analogous to the Bible—if not in fact its literal source texts, as Davis's clairvoyant history revealed.

Davis was not alone in fixating on what he took to be a canonical "Hindoo Bible," the "*Shaster*,"[93] "composed of the Vedas and Brahmanas."[94] With a knowledge of Indian traditions and texts that was shaky at best, he ascribed a unitary and Christian bibliocentric understanding to the sacred writings of India. By ignoring (or being unaware of) equally important texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, he, like some pervious commentators, inadvertently imposed "a Vedic and brahminical bias" on his imagined "Hindoo religion," understood as a monolithic entity.[95] Even as he employed radically different methods to orientalist scholars or intellectuals like Emerson, Davis nonetheless threw his own weight into the discourse that "invented" *world religions* as discrete, more or less stable, and homogeneous faith communities, typically identifiable with a nation, and strictly demarcated from other religions by their orientation around a biblical analogue.[96]

Of course, the existence of other equivalent "bibles" contested perceived biblical authority, a move that pushed against the country's "nonspecific Protestantism," even though Davis implicitly shared many of its values.[97] With a deistic-polemical edge, Davis warned readers "that the *Hindoo* has a Bible which he venerates as much as you do yours. So also has the *Mohammedan*, and the *Persian*." Little better was "a book voted as being the word of God" by Constantine and his bishops.[98] Championing the democratic ethos of his namesake and American Protestant ideology concerning individual conscience, Davis linked the free exercise of reason to republican values.[99] He even went so far as to publish a spiritual Declaration of Independence, asserting the natural right to freely "examine *all* sciences, and discoveries, and mythologies, and theologies, and religions," past and future.[100] To venerate a book, arbitrarily compiled by temporal rulers and clergymen, was mentally subservient. "Are we not *as fully* authorized . . . as any emperor or bishops . . . to determine the shape and pattern of our religion?" Davis asked in Hartford. In a swipe at the cultural association of Protestantism with liberty, he noted at the same convention, "I can see *no difference* between the *infallibility* of the Pope and the infallibility of Paul." Moreover, tapping into the considerable authority of the sciences and progress narratives in antebellum

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America and the growing sense of warfare between religion and science, Davis announced, "The progress of scientific discovery . . . is carrying the war into the very *heart* of biblical authority." Christians claimed a rational foundation for the Bible that fundamentally placed them above superstitious "heathen" nations. Davis retorted, "Who would not 'be wise above what is written' (in any book) is a miserable pagan."[101]

Still, books had value so long as they were not uncritically followed. In his relativization of scripture, Davis gravitated toward an eclectic new canon that was never closed nor authoritative. "No book is worthy the veneration which the Mohammedan pays to the Koran, the Brahmin to the Shaster, the Persian to the Zend Avesta, or the Christian to the Bible,"[102] Davis declared in *The Principles of Nature*. But "it is proper for every mind to venerate revelations of every kind, in proportion to their congeniality with the uniform teachings of Nature, and . . . a well-constituted judgment."[103] Twenty years later, he made good on his conviction by compiling a "new collection of living Gospels," printed in two columns, mimicking the layout of the King James Bible. Like *The Dial*'s "Ethnical Scripture" series, Davis's gospels summoned "Saints of the past and present, whom the churches reject as sinners and refuse to canonize."[104]

With less emphasis on mythological error, the mature Davis increasingly validated the manifold historical expressions of "divine ideas," articulated "as *perfectly* in the Indian as in the European consciousness." Alongside extracts from the *Vedas*—"*the Scriptures of the devout people of the Orient*"—and *Zend Avesta* were "gospels" according to "St. Menu, the Son of Brahma," and "St. Confucius" as well as a host of new American saints, such as "St. Ralph [Waldo Emerson]"; "St. Theodore [Parker]"; "St. Octavius [Brooks Frothingham]"; and the "*prophet-poet of New England*," "St. John [Greenleaf Whittier]."[105] By including these latter saints, Davis stretched the concept of revelation and inspired texts beyond the normal bounds of scripture—part of the broader Romantic tendency to sacralize literature and poetry. Despite his warnings about reverence for a book and his own denials of being a reader,[106] Davis's literarization of scripture, much like Emerson, could at times make religion an individualistic and "bookish" affair.[107] This did not, however, preclude a concern for reform, which was arguably even more pronounced in Davis's writings. The actualization of natural principles in society was crucial for Davis's notion of true religion as seen by his various reform schemes, such as his short-lived Moral Police Fraternity and still-extant Children's Progressive Lyceums.[108] As well as encouraging a contemplative "seeker spirituality,"[109] Davis's canonization of American

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writer-prophets and his own associates Samuel B. Brittan, Selden J. Finney, phrenological reformer Eliza Farnham, and the medium Emma Hardinge Britten placed the New World in sacred history and pointed toward its liberal, American, and Spiritualist futurity.[110]

The Book of Nature

Nonetheless, the true religion lay somewhere other than books, though they may express it imperfectly. "Beloved reader," Davis promised in *The Principles of Nature*, "there is a Book" of "beauties and divine truths . . . that no Egyptian, Jewish, Persian, or Hindoo priest or theologian can counterfeit." Teaching "purity, morality, and immortality, and . . . the loveliness of the Great Creator," this book was inscribed in the "divine qualities of Nature,"[111] decentralized and accessible to all regardless of education and social station. In shades of Deist nature religion—the American Deist Elihu Palmer, too, wrote a *Principles of Nature* in 1801, after all[112]—as well as a shared Romantic-Emersonian emphasis on Neoplatonic correspondence, Davis asserted that man is "a *microcosm*"[113] and "a child of Nature . . . governed by her principles; for they run into and constitute his being."[114] Natural principles could be discerned through humanity's "choicest gift" of "*Reason*."[115] Like Emerson, who declared, "The progress of religion is steadily to its identity with morals,"[116] Davis viewed natural principles as synonymous with morality. The progressive realization of these principles in society through reform and moral self-culture became the highest expression of religion and its utopian *telos* in a Fourierist-inspired future based on natural law.[117] Tellingly, "the clerical profession" would "form an institution for the purpose of moral culture and spiritual progress,"[118] aligning their social role with a true religious calling. Indeed, while the modern understanding of religion was predicated on the creation of a secular sphere differentiated from religion,[119] Davis, and Spiritualists more generally, even as they operated on the basis of this distinction, were at the same time animated by a desire to overcome this binary and realize a harmonious society organized on spiritual law.[120]

Within the embrace of a divine and all-encompassing nature wherein "nothing is natural which is not moral," religion collapsed back into unity with co-constitutive concepts like *science*, *philosophy*, and the secular. "There is no division between science, philosophy, metaphysics, and religion,"[121] explained Davis, claiming to harmonize each within his own system. At first glance, such an instance on the unity of knowledge might seem like an atavistic

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throwback to premodern ways of thinking—a "backward-looking view of progress" in which "Renaissance, rather than Enlightenment, models of progress were pursued," as Cathy Gutierrez estimates the general Spiritualist worldview.[122] And yet Davis and his followers' outlook was, quite to the contrary, predicated on the presupposition of these modern categories of thought. Their insistence on the inseparability of differing spheres of knowledge paradoxically reified these as distinct. As Peter Harrison notes, prior to the nineteenth century, "'Science' and 'religion' were not independent entities that might bear some positive or negative relation to each other."[123] The project to reconcile them must, too, necessarily be a modern one, quite alien to the approach of Renaissance Platonists, like Marsilio Ficino or Nicholas of Cusa, toward the world's many rites, which were valid only to the extent that they embodied a Christ-like piety.[124]

As the category of religion came to exclude science while encompassing Asian traditions, it only then became possible to announce a universal religion of the future that would avoid the "tunnel vision" of materialism and synthesize all knowledge—an attempt "to rebut materialism empirically" and "scientifically substantiate religion." In this "new situation that arose because of scientific materialism,"[125] Davis and Spiritualists more broadly revealed a keen awareness of these cultural categories. Thus at Hartford, Davis could proclaim that "the Battle of the Evidences of Christianity is to be fought on the broad field of scientific and positive principles" rather than the "old metaphysical ground of idealistic impossibilities,"[126] while still affirming a synthesis of science and religion, properly understood. Gutierrez's argument "that Spiritualism was a renaissance of the Renaissance," a "moment where science and religion seemed mutually reinforcing,"[127] appears as a retrospective category mistake. Without this new and modern crisis at the forefront, Spiritualist responses to it are unintelligible. Spiritualist insistence that science and religion were one belied a profound anxiety that, in fact, they were not.

Prophetic Evolution

The Harmonialist understanding of religions as historical entities was organicist and evolutionary, a construction that held radical, yet racially troubling, possibilities for democratizing revelation. As with Emerson and, to a lesser degree, Theodore Parker, religions were never static for all time and advanced toward an absolute religion that was never fully realized. In the first issue of the *Univercœlum*, editor Samuel B. Brittan expressed well the

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religious sensibilities of the Harmonial Brotherhood and their millennialist hopes that the nineteenth century would outgrow old outward forms: "Those who worship a creed; whose religion is a set of opinions and ceremonies, may well tremble at the signs of the times. But to the great Soul . . . whose religion is spiritual growth and illumination . . . the present, is full of encouragement and hope."[128] But rather than just the abstractions of poetic genius, the harmonial men wanted to understand the concrete mechanics by which revelation unfolded to the prophets of all ages. To this end, they looked to Mesmerism, spiritual influx, psychological states and dreams, phrenology, and (later) spirit communication for answers. The man who embodied this human potential in its highest degree was Jesus.

While Davis held that the Christian Trinity was mythological dross merely, he had great reverence for the person of Jesus—"a good man, a noble and unparalleled Moral Reformer" and "a type of a perfect man, both in physical and spiritual qualities."[129] Picking up the Unitarian humanization of Jesus, Davis maintained his culture's reverence for the Nazarene but naturalized him through the twin sciences of Mesmerism and phrenology in a clairvoyant retelling of the life of Jesus that looked back to the rationalist Jefferson Bible and forward to later "hidden gospels."[130] Because of his "perfect symmetry of . . . form and cerebral structure," Jesus "possessed a great *physical soothing power* over the disordered or disconcerted forces of the human system." It was through these innate magnetic and mental attributes, couched in the language of phrenology, that Jesus was able to perform what had erroneously been labeled miracles and attain intimate knowledge of natural principles. The "ignorant and uninformed," who "bowed with a trembling veneration at the mere mention of the name 'Jesus, the Son of God,'" were responsible for the unreal mythology that surrounded him, not Jesus himself.[131]

Despite his outstanding qualities, Jesus was neither unique nor necessary for salvation, upsetting Christianity's privileged position. Already in "one of the eastern states," there was a precocious youth "surprising the learned doctors and philosophers by his astronomical and mathematical powers," Davis informed readers. Whether by this Davis meant in Asia or the eastern United States (maybe he was even referring to himself) is unclear. What is clear, however, is that even as he upheld Jesus as the model for human development, Davis was decentering Christianity in his construction of religion. Instead, scientific truth and spiritual knowledge poured into the "interior faculties" of minds in "an abnormal condition [of clairvoyance]," which made them "suitable for the influx of superior

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knowledge."[132] While Jesus's "moral teachings should be regarded with deep veneration," he was in "the same category with those worthy and noble philanthropists who have lived since . . . and those who still live to adorn the world."[133] As with the Bible, Davis undermined Jesus's special status while employing it to validate the teachings of other prophets, himself included. Like the Unitarian-Transcendentalist Jesus, he stood as a moral exemplar, whose primary value was his articulation of a code of ethics. In contrast, however, what enabled his higher order moral sense was not poetic genius or special divinity but a superior physicality. Less one of Emerson's holy bards, Jesus was ahead of the evolutionary curve.

While *Nature's Divine Revelations* championed inward reason, the later Davis emphasized the indwelling Christhood of all humans as the true essence of religion in a radical democratization of religious authority that sat in uneasy tension with his new hierarchies of spiritual evolution and leadership exemplified by the world's prophets. In 1868, he described this inner divinity, the "Arabula" or "divine guest," as "the world's religious mystery. It appears in the philosophical, moral, and spiritual teachings of Persians, Indians, Chinese, Jews, Greeks, Romans, Christians. It is peculiar to no people; to no religion; to no sect of believers; to no epoch or era in human history. . . . It everywhere dies upon the cross . . . , forgiving its enemies and blessing every thing human." By this point in his life, Davis sounded less the Deist, railing against superstition and priestcraft, and more the Romantic, affirming individual holiness and subjectivity, though both tendencies run throughout his works. "Do you not perceive its presence in all the *good* men do, and in all the *truth* they speak?" Davis wrote. "Do you not discern the *same qualities*, though differing in quantity according to person, circumstance, condition, or country?"[134] Thus, the seed of divinity in each person progressively flowered into the image of a universal Christ. But it was a process influenced both by individual development as well as circumstance and nation, signaling larger narratives concerning the advance of civilizations, particularly as embodied in their "great men."

Reminiscent of Emerson's representative men, Jesus stood as foremost in a line of great "men who are called *prophets*" but were really "reformers and philosophers."[135] Sweeping in scope, Davis's prophets included Confucius, Brama (*sic*), Zoroaster, and Mohammed as well as more unusual choices like Swedenborg, the Seeress of Prevorst, Galen, Martin Luther, John Calvin, the natural philosopher Baron d'Holbach, Plato, Cicero, Socrates, and the socialist reformer Charles Fourier. All revealed great truths, commensurate with their circumstances and development.[136]

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Significantly, Davis's prophets stretched the conventions of the label. Confucius, for instance, was similarly so conceptualized by Emerson and others, which contributed to reifying Confucianism as a world religion, however questionably.[137] Moreover, Davis's deliberate conflation of religious, scientific, and philosophic teachers and visionaries spoke to his dream of unifying all knowledge and a broadly Romantic view of revelation as individualized yet universal in all human productions: art, science, or otherwise.

Yet, as his later "Pantheon of Progress" in *The Great Harmonia* would suggest, individualized revelation happened within a normatively Christian framework and in tandem with the upward march of civilizations. Hierarchy and homogeneity went hand in hand with universalizing. Thus "Budda [*sic*] appeareth like a Luther among the priests and receivers of Brahma" to reform their religion. Mapping the course of Christian history—itself understood in evolutionary terms—onto all other religions, Davis declared that "Budda was to Brahma what Jesus was to Moses, or Luther to Catholic Rome." Similarly, Brahma himself was, like Jesus, "in the mazy solitudes of Oriental antiquity, and . . . mythology of Hindoo religionists," "inseparably identified and confounded with the Chief Deity."[138] Davis's understanding of Buddha as a "Protestant" reformer of the more ritualistic and priestly "Hindoo" religion was in line with common orientalist views of his time.[139] In the same way, the legalistic religion of Judaism had given way to the higher, supposedly more ethically oriented religion of Christianity. Though partaking of the hereditary traits of the parent, the child surpassed it.

Tellingly, the pantheon moved from Asian and ancient prophets through Christian ones on to American radicals and religious outsiders, culminating in a Spiritualist-Harmonialist synthesis of the world's religious history, validating it as the highest form of religion. As American civilization became ascendent, in the upper echelons of spiritual evolution sat Emerson alongside John Murray, William Ellery Channing, John Humphrey Noyes, Theodore Parker, William Lloyd Garrison, and even Mother Ann Lee. "Modern Spiritualism" and the "Harmonial Philosophy" crowned the pantheon, the former as "a perfect antidote to . . . world-wide skepticism" and the latter for teaching "that all religions, creeds, sects, theories of man, laws, institutions, and governments, are of human origin, and . . . indicate the wants of the age and the *status* of the different minds in which they appeared; that man's only infallible authority . . . is the divine Light which ever shines in the highest faculties of his mental organization."[140] Again making intellectual propositions the stuff of religion, each reformer expressed a central idea that added to global progress. With Spiritualism and

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the Harmonial Philosophy no longer associated with a single prophet, they heralded an approaching utopian moment when true spiritual principles would become generalized and democratized to a higher degree. The implications of Davis's line of prophets, like his gospels, were clear: revelation was not limited to Christian scripture nor was the canon ever closed.

Africans, Natives Americans, and "Primitive Religion"

Yet, much as the reach of Jacksonian democracy was contested, the attitude of Davis and other Harmonialists, not to mention later Spiritualists, toward African and Native American traditions was ambiguous, sometimes embodying the typical nineteenth-century racist chauvinism that denied these the status of religion and sometimes challenging such exclusion.[141] Lacking scriptural texts—a major hallmark of a religion in comparative religion taxonomies, such as that of the famous German philologist F. Max Müller—Native American and African spiritual practices were, in the eyes of most white Europeans and Americans, examples of fetishism or primitive religion rather than full-fledged religions.[142] Emerson and his circle paid little heed to such traditions,[143] and comparative religion scholars like James Freeman Clarke lumped them together as "Tribal" religions, "the religions of the primitive or childlike races," lacking Christianity's civilizing power.[144] Unsurprisingly, the "primitive" religions went largely excluded from the ecumenical World's Parliament of Religions in 1893, though, ironically, Spiritualists were not invited either, speaking to their continuing struggle to be seen as a "real" religion.[145]

For Davis's part, the tension in *The Principles of Nature* between universal progressive evolution (including in theology) and a perennialist impulse to ground true religion in eternal natural principles led him, like many American Deists and Founding Fathers before, notably Jefferson, to denigrate Africans, yet celebrate "the aboriginal inhabitants of America" and their "conceptions of the Great Spirit."[146] Both, however, ranked lower than whites in Davis's racialist hierarchies.[147] Cut off from the rest of the world by the deluge,[148] the indigenous peoples of America were "socially united" and thus "were not led to conceive of gross errors." Instead, they received "truthful conceptions," which "descended through all the succeeding generations of this people down to the present time." With their reverence for nature and Swedenborgian-like belief "that the spirit-land was analogous to the one on which they dwelt," they represented "the first instance . . . in which human thought took a

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proper, truthful, and natural direction." Free from "disunity," "wickedness," and "abomination," "their thoughts were natural, spontaneous, true, and celestial."[149]

Reflecting well Davis's distaste for institutional and scriptural religion and inverting the trope of the heathen Indian, he advised "theologians, philosophers, and metaphysicians"—learned "men of erudition"—to follow the Indian example by setting aside "highmindedness and pretended enlightenment" and embracing "*true* wisdom, derivable from the inexpressible beauties of a smiling Nature!"[150] Generally speaking, such high regard for Native American spirituality persisted into Spiritualism, albeit in stereotypical fashion, whereby Indian spirit guides dispensed nature-based healing wisdom and protection and authenticated the myth of the vanishing Indian.[151] Such romanticized fascination remains a legacy to later metaphysical and New Age thought.[152]

Sadly, Africans did not fare as well as Native Americans in Davis's system, despite his antislavery stance.[153] While Davis considered perfection the destiny of every human, the logic of progression presupposed a continuum of physical and spiritual development within the human family at any given time in conformity with the rigid racial hierarchies of the nineteenth century. For Davis, there were five varieties of human, all from a single source, but with black and white at opposite ends of the spectrum and all progress tending toward whiteness[154]: "Black was the color of the first types of man, which were very imperfect, and confined to Africa."[155] To the proto-humans in his prehistory of earth, Davis ascribed unflattering, racist characteristics and compared them to "Caffers," "Jalofs," and "Mandingoes."[156] These racial hierarchies were replicated throughout the solar system[157] and into the spirit land.[158]

About African religion, Davis was conspicuously silent. *The Principles of Nature* omits the issue altogether. Elsewhere, he associated the "Negro" stage of human development with "Fetichism" in theology, defined fairly conventionally as the "first phase of idolatry, worship of exterior objects in Nature, images, chieftains, &c."[159] Frances H. (Fanny) Green, however—a frequent contributor of poetry to the *Univercœlum* and co-editor of the *Spirit Messenger* and, in contrast to later Spiritualism, one of the few women associated with the Harmonialist circle—took a more charitable view in an article titled "The Ministry of Trees." Referring to "the simple African, who bows down and worships . . . his beautiful Mazamba tree," she mused that "not wholly heathen . . . can he be, whose God is so enshrined." Indeed, such worship must be superior to digging in the dirt, "searching ever for a yellow dust,

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which we consecrate, and enshrine, and worship—with all strange rites, and fearful sacrifices, even of human life, under the name of GOLD."[160] For Green at least, Africans possessed some true conception of the divine in nature, however crude. The supposedly homogenous nature worship of Africans, while primitive, also lent it a certain degree of virtue, especially when contrasted with the crass materialism, violence, and greed of gold-hungry Americans—the true idolaters.

Ancient Indian Spiritualism

Such critiques remind us that the language of universal religion cuts two ways. A growing body of scholarship complicates traditional postcolonial historiography in which Euro-American notions of *religion* were unilaterally imposed upon the colonial periphery, while still acknowledging the asymmetry of this discourse.[161] Such complexity is exemplified by several fascinating episodes scholars have noted involving individuals from India appropriating the language of universal religion in order to present their traditions back to appreciative European and American audiences and gain legitimacy for them, partaking in the construction of these *religions* in complex and entangled lines of influence. James Turner, for example, describes the Harvard Unitarian infatuation with Rámmohan Roy, founder of the Brahmo Samaj ("The Society of God"). Himself already in dialogue with English Unitarian missionaries, Roy asserted that the original Hindu religion had been monotheistic before its corruption. This "Hindu Unitarianism" was the pure Ur-religion, happily compatible with Christian Unitarianism. Significantly, the young Emerson was among the Unitarians who took an interest in Roy.[162] Indeed, Emerson's interest in Indian texts later led the celebrated Bengali monk Swami Vivekananda to claim Indian origins for the Concord movement, even as he revealed an Emersonian understanding of universal religion and Hinduism in his lectures to liberal audiences at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions and beyond. In doing so, Vivekananda joined other Indian reformers in "essentially reversing the cultural flow and bringing their transcendentalized versions of Hinduism to the West."[163] Into the twentieth century, Michael Bergunder has argued that Mohandas Gandhi's representation of Hinduism as essentially pluralistic and his belief in a common core underpinning all religions were deeply informed by his involvement with the Theosophical Society and Esoteric Christian Union.[164]

Similar figures sparked interest among Davis's circle. The first of these was "Lehanteka," a purported "Hindoo priest" and "celestial

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medium" visiting California in 1853. His lectures, attended by Dr. A. B. Pope, were summarized in S. B. Brittan's *Spiritual Telegraph* and by William Fishbough in the *American Phrenological Journal*. The second case was a follower of "the religion of Brahm," identified only as "Soodra," who explicitly compared Vedic teachings to Davis's philosophy in an 1866 letter to the Chicago-based *Religio-Philosophical Journal*, a later Spiritualist periodical with heavy Harmonialist leanings. Both cases hold out the tantalizing possibility of early instances where the discourse constructing universal religion flowed in reverse insofar as both made claims of "Hindoo" primacy regarding metaphysical teachings.

Lehanteka's philosophy of nature, the *Telegraph* reported, taught that everything "serves in some way to transfer matter from a lower to a higher state of refinement,"[165] a sentiment sure to evoke Davis's laws of progression and development in readers. Similarly, Fishbough noted Lehanteka's division of the human into three departments, the highest being "an interior . . . soul-essence" allowing the mind to act "by *direct volition*" on the external world. "This he calls the *celestial* department of the soul, and its full development and exercise he calls 'magic,' or 'celestial wisdom,'" something "possessed, in common, by the Hindoo priesthood from time immemorial." Lehanteka could also "produce illusions upon susceptible minds" like the "electro-psychologists [i.e., Mesmerists], so called, of our own country."[166] Adding an interesting complication to Emily Ogden's argument that the manipulation of an enchanted subject's "credulity" by a Mesmerist placed the latter in the role of a "false priest," who knowingly wielded the impostures of ancient priests and magi to disenchanted ends, here Fishbough saw not delusion but authentication.[167] "These psychological arts and sciences, which among us are of recent discovery," Fishbough marveled, "have been known and practised among the sacerdotal orders of the Hindoos from immemorial time." Their independent emergence in different times and places "should certainly go far to remove any remaining doubts as to their reality" and "foundation in nature."[168] Certainly, Lehanteka possessed power over the impressionable, but he did so by wielding ancient occult knowledge rather than imposture—his magic, science.

Moreover, gesturing toward the emphasis on mental power that increasingly characterized metaphysical discourse,[169] Lehanteka announced that "the natural object of our bodies is to organize mind"; thus "science and religion are calculated to qualify minds for the next state of transformation."[170] Here he implicitly suggested that, like Spiritualism, "Hindoo" religion held the key to avoiding the pull of materialism through a totalizing synthesis of science and religion, what Joy Dixon calls a "counter ontology."[171]

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Soodra made the similar claim that ancient Indian wisdom predated and authenticated Harmonialist-Spiritualist teachings, revealing how, despite the ambiguity of universal religion with regard to race, it could be deployed to claim legitimacy for those who would otherwise be branded as "heathens." Soodra's "Gems of Hindooism"—by now used freely as an abstract noun, equivalent to Christianity[172]—offered extracts from the Vedas, "illustrative of some of the beauties of our ancient religious faith." These "sentiments," however, sounded an awful like Davis's philosophy. For instance, the Vedic God was unitary, abstract, all-powerful, and immanent, rescued in Soodra's telling from discrediting charges of polytheism: "one living and true God; everlasting, without parts or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness. . . . He overspreads all creatures. . . . He is the Supreme Soul." In short, "To know that God *is*, and that *all* is God, this is the substance of the Vedas." Rearticulated as a series of metaphysical propositions, outward rites and practice receded before the rational (indeed, Harmonialist) teachings of Vedic philosophy. In matter of fact, the "modern Harmonial Philosophy," Soodra claimed, "in its essentials, is resuscitated ancient Hindooism."[173] The tables had turned on Davis. Whereas for the Poughkeepsie seer "Hindoo" religion had been the first stage of an evolutionary ascent that led to the Harmonial Philosophy, for Soodra it was humanity's oldest and best religion, something Davis could rearticulate for his own culture but never surpass.

Whether or not Lehanteka and Soodra were who they said they were, and not, as the Spiritualist J. R. Buchanan suggested of Lehanteka, "a shrewd American or English impostor,"[174] is almost beside the point. If they were Indian, as they claimed, they are surprisingly early examples of Asian spiritual practices being refracted through an esoteric-transcendental lens and presented to an American audience as authentic expressions of a "Hindoo religion," more ancient and scientific than Christianity—a way of turning religious evolution on its head by positing that the older religion was the purer one. If impostors, they nonetheless reveal interesting facets of the Spiritualist construction of *religion* as a comparative and generic category, with "Hindooism" construed as an ancient articulation of the eternal religious essence—characterized by abstract spiritual principles and identical with Harmonialist-Spiritualist teachings. Like an invisible church, they stretched the bounds of an imagined community of Spiritualists into the mists of time and around the globe. Moreover, the drive to seek ancient wisdom in the mystic and contemplative East foreshadows the Asian turn normally associated with Theosophy and New Thought later in the century. Yet this interest is already apparent in Spiritualism, though admittedly less pronounced.

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This universalized understanding of religion as possessing an occult core beneath its individualized expressions is probably one of the most significant and under-appreciated legacies that Davis, by way of Spiritualism, left to later New Thought and Theosophy. There is certainly strong evidence that the Davisian-Harmonialist imagining of *religion* found its way into the bloodstream of Theosophy. Beyond clear echoes of Davis in Theosophist teachings, Blavatsky and Olcott were acquainted with the Spiritualist James Martin Peebles, a former Universalist minister and admirer of Davis who became infatuated with Asian spiritual traditions following an encounter with a "learned Chinaman" in California in 1861. In the wake of this meeting, Peebles became convinced of the superiority of ancient Eastern wisdom and abandoned his position as the western editor for the *Banner of Light* to travel to Asia and study the "rudiments of Spiritualism," becoming, in his own words, a one-man "Parliament of Religions."[175]

Much like Davis, but with deeper engagement with orientalist scholarship, Peebles argued in *Seers of the Ages* (1869) for Judaism's and Christianity's ancient Asian roots. Jesus was really a Spiritualist medium who was deified in direct imitation of "Chrishna of India." Further back, "Abraham himself was, without the least doubt, a *Brahmin*" and the "Pentateuch of Moses was nearly all made up from the Brahminical Vedas and Phœnician manuscripts."[176] Significantly, it was Peebles who later furnished Blavatsky and Olcott with his contacts in India, aiding in the founding of Theosophical Societies there.[177] These societies, in turn, enabled further instances of reversed flows of religious ideas into Europe and North America.

The considerable reach of Davis's ideas and later reception was in no small part facilitated by the prominence of his circle in important Spiritualist journals. Given the importance of reading communities for lending coherence to the Spiritualist movement, the power of editorial positions to shape the terms of debate is hard to overemphasize.[178] Most prolifically, S. B. Brittan not only edited the *Univercœlum* and co-owned the largest Spiritualist press with Charles Partridge but at various times edited major Spiritualist papers like the *Shekinah*, the *Spiritual Age* with A. E. Newton, and the *Spiritual Telegraph*—the second largest Spiritualist paper after the *Banner of Light* with perhaps five thousand subscribers in 1857. After the dissolution of the *Univercœlum*, R. P. Ambler's *Spirit Messenger* served as a major organ for Davis's ideas. Davis's teachings also featured prominently in the *Religio-Philosophical Journal*, a rational counterweight to the *Banner of Light*, which lasted only slightly longer.[179]

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Employing a global history of religion(s) reading of Andrew Jackson Davis and those in his circle invites new avenues of research and a more nuanced understanding of the complex global entanglements informing the development of *religion* as it applied to the loose but significant group of Spiritualists influenced by Davis's writings. Most scholarship places Davis squarely in an American context, a synthesizer of European currents such as Swedenborgianism, Mesmerism, Fourierism, Neoplatonism, and various streams of Enlightenment and Romantic thought, all of which swirled together in his person to give Spiritualism a semicoherent theology. Surely he was; but this misses that Davis and his associates lived in a moment when scientific materialism posed a deep challenge to traditional understandings of religion and sources of religious authority, and wherein globalizing forces necessitated new frameworks—a seeming denominationalism on a world scale. A normative concept of religion provided a utopian *telos* toward which the religious evolution of the world was understood to be advancing and oriented a confusing pluralism amid a religious situation in which old anchors like the Bible became unmoored. Without this additional level of analysis, Davis's universalism is but one more "discovery" of the world's religions, only partially intelligible—a seeker collecting gems. To see Harmonialist attitudes to the spiritual teachings of the world as an expression of Neoplatonic plenty, an extension of universalist soteriology, or a deistic aversion to churchly religion are partial explanations that miss that the very comparative and universal approach scholars have described in Spiritualism more broadly is predicated on the categorization of different religions as such. Like the Transcendentalists they so admired, the Harmonialists took an active hand in inventing the traditions they drew from. In many ways, this looked like what Emerson and his cadre were doing; in others, it was radically different, reflecting their different social worlds and ability to command legitimacy amid the changing contours of America's religious landscape.

Of course, Davis and company represent only a part of the complex and multifaceted construction of *religion(s)* in nineteenth-century America, inevitably never complete nor uniform. Much more research is needed on the role of other esoteric or metaphysical movements in popularizing modern and pluralistic understandings of *religion* and differentiating it from *science* and similar categories. An approach that is attentive to global entanglements and multidirectional lines of influence complicates both our understanding of Davis's legacy, an important figure in his own right, and the history of *religion* more broadly. Particularly within the American context, these threads have yet to be untangled, a task that is likely also to add

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layers of nuance to debates surrounding the periodization of modern *religion*. Though great swathes of the country vehemently rejected Davis and his vision of religious harmony—a poor man's Emersonianism in the age of Jackson—the abstract and pluralistic construction of *religion* he helped propagate persists, reverberating through the metaphysical discourse community and beyond.

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Notes

[1]Robert W. Delp, "A Spiritualist in Connecticut: Andrew Jackson Davis, the Hartford Years, 1850–1854," *The New England Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (1980): 356–57; "The Hartford Bible Convention," *New York Tribune*, June 4, 1853, 4.

[2]Andrew Jackson Davis, *Free Thoughts Concerning Religion; or, Nature versus Theology* (Boston: William White and Co., 1870), 7.

[3]"The Bible Convention," *New York Tribune*, June 3, 1853, 5; "The Hartford Bible Convention," 4; Delp, "A Spiritualist in Connecticut," 361–62.

[4]"Anti-Bible Convention," *Hartford Daily Courant*, June 7, 1853, 2.

[5]"The Last Hartford Convention," *New York Times*, June 3, 1853, 4.

[6]"The Bible Convention at Hartford," *The Liberator* 23, no. 24 (June 17, 1853): 95; Davis, *Free Thoughts Concerning Religion*, 11; "Anti-Bible Convention," 2; "From the Hartford Daily Times. The Bible Convention," *The Liberator* 23, no. 24 (June 17, 1853): 96.

[7]See, e.g., the foundational study Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

[8]Bruce Lincoln, *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 8–9, passim.

[9]Davis, *Free Thoughts Concerning Religion*, 9. Consider also Horace Bushnell's squeamishness about engaging Davis in debate. Catherine L. Albanese, "Horace Bushnell among the Metaphysicians," *Church History* 79, no. 3 (2010): 617.

[10]Delp, "A Spiritualist in Connecticut," 357; "The Bible Convention and the Clergy of Hartford," *New York Daily Tribune*, April 29, 1853, 6.

[11]Peter S. Field, *The Crisis of the Standing Order: Clerical Intellectuals and Cultural Authority in Massachusetts, 1780–1833* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998).

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[12]The episode is reminiscent of Lincoln's discussion of Odysseus's violent ejection of Thersites from the assembly—the removal of an unauthorized speaker from the authorized place. Lincoln, *Authority*, 26, 75–76.

[13]For the prior history of the construction of *religion(s)*, especially among seventeenth- and eighteenth-century freethinkers, see Guy G. Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Peter Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Peter Byrne, *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion: The Legacy of Deism* (London: Routledge, 1989).

[14]Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 15–50, quotation 51. As Brent Nongbri observes, subsequent scholarship has importantly moved beyond simple "reification" and has emphasized *religion*'s co-constitutive formation with concepts like *secularism*. Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 4–5. See also, Talal Asad, "Reading a Modern Classic: W. C. Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion*," *History of Religions* 40, 3 (2001).

[15]See Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 106–31.

[16]As several scholars of Spiritualism have pointed out, Spiritualism was not without conservative elements. See Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 149–51; Robert S. Cox, *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 145–61.

[17]James Turner, *Religion Enters the Academy: The Origins of the Scholarly Study of Religion in America* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2011), 6–7.

[18]Michael J. Altman, "'Religion, Religions, Religious' in America: Toward a Smithian Account of 'Evangelicalism'," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 31 (2019): 72–74. Altman specifically refers to Johnathan Z. Smith's 1998 essay, "Religion, Religions, Religious," but the larger point stands about scholarship concerning the American construction of *religion* more generally. Smith's essay is in *Critical Terms for Religious Study*, edited by Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269–84.

[19]Turner, *Religion Enters the Academy*.

[20]Alan D. Hodder, "Asia in Emerson and Emerson in Asia," in *Mr. Emerson's Revolution*, ed. Jean McClure Mudge (Cambridge: Open Books, 2015), 373–405.

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[21]Jan Stievermann, "Emersonian Transcendentalism and the Invention of Religion(s) in the Nineteenth Century," *ESQ: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture* 67, no. 3–4 (2021): 533–70, https://doi.org/10.1353/esq.2021.0019.

[22]Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2005); Michael Bergunder, "Experiments with Theosophical Truth: Gandhi, Esotericism, and Global Religious History," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82, no. 2 (2014): 398–426; Michael Bergunder, "'Religion' and 'Science' Within a Global Religious History," *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 16 (2016): 86–141; Hans Martin Krämer and Julian Strube, eds., *Theosophy across Boundaries: Transcultural and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on a Modern Esoteric Movement* (New York: SUNY Press, 2020); Michael J. Altman, *Heathen, Hindoo, Hindu: American Representations of India, 1721–1893* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 98–119; Jason Ā Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 115–20. A positive sign of this development is a recent roundtable issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (December 2021), which demonstrates a growing scholarly interest in Theosophy and constructions of religion.

[23]Bergunder, "'Religion' and 'Science'," 101.

[24]John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America: With Reference to Ghosts, Protestant Subcultures, Machines, and their Metaphors; Featuring Discussions of Mass Media, Moby-Dick, Spirituality, Phrenology, Anthropology, Sing Sing State Penitentiary, and Sex with the New Motive Power* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 39–45, 175–81; John Lardas Modern, *Neuromatic: or, A Particular History of Religion and the Brain* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021), 136–208.

[25]Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

[26]John Benedict Buescher, *The Other Side of Salvation: Spiritualism and the Nineteenth-Century Religious Experience* (Boston: Skinner House, 2004).

[27]Jason Ā Josephson-Storm has similarly noted the influence of Spiritualism on E. B. Tylor's theories of religion, though Davis, arguably the movement's key thinker, is absent from his analysis. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, 94–101, 120–24. Older studies that explore Spiritualism's connection to psychical research and anthropology are R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford

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University Press, 1977); Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[28]See Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 46–48.

[29]Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

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

[31]The term *spirituality* requires as much historicization as *religion*, as Leigh Eric Schmidt shows in *Restless Souls* and John Lardas Modern in *Secularism in Antebellum America*, 119–82.

[32]On nineteenth-century debates over ongoing revelation and the canon, see David F. Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[33]S. B. Brittan, "The Church of the Future," *The Univercœlum and Spiritual Philosopher* 1, no. 21 (April 22, 1848): 328.

[34]Thomas Cook, "Great Men—A. J. Davis," *Religio-Philosophical Journal* 20, no. 21 (Aug. 5, 1876): 161.

[35]Max Weber, *Max Weber on Charisma and Instituion Building: Selected Papers*, ed. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), esp. 253–67.

[36]Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Magic Staff: An Autobiography of Andrew Jackson Davis*, 8th ed. (Boston: Bella Marsh, 1867), 28–33. First published in 1857.

[37]Lincoln, *Authority*, 112.

[38]The phrase, which is the basis for the title of Catherine Albanese's magisterial work, is from Andrew Jackson Davis, *Beyond the Valley; A Sequel to 'The Magic Staff'* (Boston: Colby and Rich, 1885), 323–26. On the inseparability of Spiritualist religious beliefs from their political aims and ideology surrounding social organization, see Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 35–59; Cox, *Body and Soul*, 136–45; Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*, 178–80, 246–54.

[39]Uriah Clark, *The Spiritualist Register, with a Counting House and Speaker's Almanac; Containing Facts and Statistics of Spiritualism, for 1857* (Auburn, NY: U. Clark, 1857), 22, 24; Uriah Clark, *Fifth Annual Spiritualist Register, with a Calendar and Speaker's Almanac, for 1861* (Auburn, N.Y.: U. Clark, 1861), 34.

[40]David K. Nartonis, "The Rise of 19th-century American Spiritualism, 1854–1873," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, no. 2 (2010): 364–72, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40664707.

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[41]Foundational works in this regard are Ann Braude's *Radical Spirits* and Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

[42]The oft-repeated claim is that the book when through thirty-four editions. Slater Brown, however, observes that the thirteenth edition was released in 1866 and the thirtieth in 1868 with no extant editions in between, suggesting an error that the publishers were happy to let stand. Slater Brown, *The Heyday of Spiritualism* (New York: Pocket Books, 1972), 96–97.

[43]"Spiritual and Progressive Books," *American Book Sellers' Guide* 3, no. 2 (February 1, 1871): 62.

[44]The term *univercœlum* is Davis's neologism for "the united revolving heavens," probably derived from Swedenborg's Latin phrase *universum coelum*, "the whole heaven." "Univercœlum," The International Association for the Preservation of Spiritualist and Occult Periodicals, updated 14 April 2020, accessed 8 August, 2022, http://iapsop.com/archive/materials/univercoelum/index.html; Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 34–35, 45; Emma Hardinge Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism: A Twenty Years' Record of the Communion between Earth and the World of the Spirits* (New York, 1870), 28.

[45]Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 35; Cox, *Body and Soul*, 7–10, 75.

[46]Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 260, 220; Stephen R. Prothero, *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 19–20, 23, 28.

[47]Andrew Jackson Davis, *Memoranda of Persons, Places, and Events; Embracing Authentic Facts, Visions, Impressions, Discoveries, in Magnetism, Clairvoyance, Spiritualism. Also Quotations from the Opposition* (Boston: William White and Co., 1868), 465–88; Daniel Cyranka, "Religious Revolutionaries and Spiritualism in Germany around 1848," *Aries* 16, no. 1 (2016): 27–33.

[48]"The Rationalism of the Day. Andrew Jackson Davis—Spiritual Manifestations—Rappings, etc., etc.," in *The United States Democratic Review* (New York: 251 Broadway, 1853), 270, 272.

[49]Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind*, 10th ed. (New York: S. S. Lyon and W. Fishbough, 1852). First published 1847.

[50]Prior to *The Principles of Nature*, the Universalist minister Rev. Gibson Smith published a short pamphlet of Davis's clairvoyant lectures in 1845 entitled *Lectures on Clairmativeness: or, Human Magnetism*, though Davis later disavowed it. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 207.

[51]For Chambers and *Vestiges*, see James A. Secord, *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret*

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Authorship of Vestiges of the Natural Creation (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000).

[52]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 121–31.

[53]See David Jaffee, "The Village Enlightenment in New England, 1760–1820," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1990): 327–46, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2938091; Craig James Hazen, *The Village Enlightenment in America: Popular Religion and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

[54]On the Spiritualist emphasis on science and empiricism, see Moore, *In Search of White Crows*, 7, 19, 23–39; Oppenheim, *The Other World*.

[55]Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Great Harmonia: Being a Philosophical Revelation of the Natural, Spiritual, and Celestial Universe: Vol. I., The Physician*, 4th ed. (New York: J. S. Redfield; Fowlers and Wells, 1850), 48, 70, 47.

[56]See, for example, Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004); Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*; Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2008), 121–53.

[57]For the ambivalent relationship between Spiritualism and evolution, see Cox, *Body and Soul*, 211–32.

[58]Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 397–99; Fuller, *Spiritual, but not Religious*, 61, 68.

[59]S. B. Brittan, "Spiritualism: Its Nature and Mission," in *The Shekinah, vol. 1*, ed. S. B. Brittan (New York: Partridge and Brittan, 1852), 3.

[60]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 329, 335–36.

[61]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 405.

[62]See, for example, "Art. II. Asiatic Researches; or Translations of the Society instituted in Bengal, for inquiring into the History and Antiquities, the Arts, Sciences, and Literature of Asia. Volume VIII. 4vo. 518 pp. Calcutta, printed. 1805," in *British Critic, for January, February, March, April, May, June* (London: Law and Gilbert, 1810), 221–22. On euhemerism, see Frank E. Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), 83–125.

[63]Brown, *The Heyday of Spiritualism*, 99–104; Altman, *Heathen, Hindoo, Hindu*, 10, 48–73; Turner, *Religion Enters the Academy*, 24, 33–34.

[64]Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature (1836)," in *The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings*, ed. Lawrence Buell (New York: The Modern Library, 2006), 44.

[65]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 330.

[66]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 377.

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[67]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 382.
[68]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 379–82.
[69]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 384.
[70]Altman, *Heathen, Hindoo, Hindu*, 22.
[71]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 388.
[72]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 384–85.
[73]Altman, *Heathen, Hindoo, Hindu*, 17.
[74]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 403.
[75]William Fishbough, "The Theological Conception; Its Growth, Dependencies, and Probable Ultimate Form," *The Univercœlum and Spiritual Philosopher* 2, no. 18 (September 30, 1848): 274; R. P. Ambler, "The Idea of Three Gods," *The Spirit Messenger* 2, no. 3 (June 1, 1852): 94. On the twofold philosophy, see Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions*, 16; Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods*, 65–69. Popular textbooks like Samuel Goodrich's *The World and its Inhabitants* (1856) also informed Americans of the existence of a "Hindoo Trinity"; however, its fundamental difference from the Christian Trinity was always at the fore. See Altman, *Heathen, Hindoo, Hindu*, 58–59.
[76]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 394–95, 399.
[77]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 387–88.
[78]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 390.
[79]Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions*, 103, 106–107, 131–38.
[80]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 381.
[81]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 724.
[82]Peter Harrison, "'Science' and 'Religion': Constructing the Boundaries," *The Journal of Religion* 86, no. 1 (2006): 93.
[83]Christopher A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2011), 340–43, 350–51; Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth-Century*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 892–94, 900.
[84]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 19.
[85]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 711.
[86]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 528–29.
[87]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 409.
[88]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 711–12.
[89]See, for example, Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 722–23.
[90]Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions*, 9–10, 19–28, 144–46.
[91]Turner, *Religion Enters the Academy*, 24–33, 46; Altman, *Heathen, Hindoo, Hindu*, 13–14, 91–95.
[92]I follow Seth Perry in understanding the Bible as a discursive *site* of authority rather than as possessing authority in and of itself. Seth

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Perry, *Bible Culture and Authority in the Early United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[93]That is, a *Shastra*, which Davis understood to be a single work rather than a type of text.

[94]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 408–409.

[95]Altman, *Heathen, Hindoo, Hindu*, 23.

[96]See Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[97]Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 61; Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*, 19, 179–80.

[98]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 557.

[99]For Spiritualist republicanism, see Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 35–59. See also, Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*, 178–80.

[100]Andrew Jackson Davis, "Declaration of Independence," *The Spirit Messenger* 1, no. 43 (May 31, 1851): 337. Perhaps this says as much about the semi-scriptural place of the Declaration in American culture as it does about Davis's attempt to unseat biblical exclusivism.

[101]Davis, *Free Thoughts Concerning Religion*, 12, 27, 28, 38.

[102]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 533.

[103]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 581.

[104]Andrew Jackson Davis, *Arabula; or, the Divine Guest. Containing a New Collection of Gospels* (Boston: William White and Co., 1868), 3; Andrew Jackson Davis, *A Sacred Book, Containing Old and New Gospels: Derived and Translated from the Inspirations of Original Saints* (Boston: William White and Co., 1873), v.

[105]Davis, *Arabula*, 99, 303–12, 336, 326, 330, 317. Frothingham was president of the Free Religious Association.

[106]See, for example, Davis, *The Magic Staff*, 272–73.

[107]Stievermann, "Emersonian Transcendentalism and the Invention of Religion(s)," 552.

[108]Davis, *Arabula*, 119–28; Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Children's Progressive Lyceum* (Boston: Colby and Rich, 1893).

[109]See Schmidt, *Restless Souls.*

[110]Davis, *Arabula*, 332–38, 345–53. On Eliza Farnham, see Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*, 243–78; Modern, *Neuromatic*, 299–310.

[111]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 557–58.

[112]See Kirsten Fischer, *American Freethinker: Elihu Palmer and the Struggle for Religious Freedom in the New Nation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

[113]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 1.

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[114]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 730.

[115]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 1.

[116]Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Comprising His Essays, Lectures, Poems, and Orations*, vol. III (London: George Bell and Sons, 1886), 383.

[117]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 734–82.

[118]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 766.

[119]For debates about secularism, see Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

[120]See Cox, *Body and Soul*, on Spiritualist social harmony and sympathy. For a racially inflected articulation of these ideals, see Emily Suzanne Clark, *A Luminous Brotherhood: Afro-Creole Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 115–49.

[121]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 340.

[122]Cathy Gutierrez, *Plato's Ghost: Spiritualism in the American Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.

[123]Harrison, "'Science' and 'Religion'," 86.

[124]See Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions*, 10–14.

[125]Bergunder, "'Religion' and 'Science'," 118, 133.

[126]Davis, *Free Thoughts Concerning Religion*, 27–28.

[127]Gutierrez, *Plato's Ghost*, 4.

[128]S. B. Brittan, "The Signs of the Times," *The Univercœlum and Spiritual Philosopher* 1, no. 1 (December 4, 1847): 11.

[129]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 565–66.

[130]Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, ed., *American Scriptures: An Anthology of Sacred Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 117.

[131]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 561–63.

[132]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 562.

[133]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 580.

[134]Davis, *Arabula*, 37–38. Elsewhere, Davis explained, "Christ is another name for Arabula." Davis, *Sacred Book*, 70. The word *Arabula* purportedly came from the spirit land. Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Great Harmonia: Being a Progressive Revelation of the Eternal Principles Which Inspire Mind and Govern Matter: Vol. V., The Thinker* (New York: A. J. Davis and Co., 1861), 428. First published 1859.

[135]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 573.

[136]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 583–86, 590.

[137]See Harrison, "'Science' and 'Religion'," 94; Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 69; Stievermann, "Emersonian Transcendentalism and the Invention of Religion(s)," 535.

[138]Davis, *The Great Harmonia V*, 81, 84, 79.

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[139]Thomas A. Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844–1912: Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 118.

[140]Davis, *The Great Harmonia V*, 278, 250, 253–54.

[141]For the highly ambiguous place of race in Spiritualism, see Clark, *A Luminous Brotherhood*; Christine Ferguson, *Determined Spirits: Eugenics, Heredity and Racial Regeneration in Anglo-American Spiritualist Writing, 1848–1930* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 233–53; Cox, *Body and Soul*, 145–232.

[142]Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 3–4, 212; Tomoko Masuzawa, "Troubles with Materiality: The Ghost of Fetishism in the Nineteenth Century," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42, no. 2 (2000): 242–67, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500002462; Tisa Wenger, *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

[143]Stievermann, "Emersonian Transcendentalism and the Invention of Religion(s)," 613.

[144]Turner, *Religion Enters the Academy*, 48. See also David Murray, *Matter, Magic, and Spirit: Representing Indian and African American Belief* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 9–70. Incidentally, Clarke had an interest in Spiritualism. Cox, *Body and Soul*, 80, 83–85.

[145]Richard Hughes Seager, *The World's Parliament of Religions: the East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), xv, 21–23; *Proceedings of the National Delegate Convention of Spiritualists of the United States of America. Held in Chicago, Illinois, September 27, 28, and 29, 1893* (Washington, DC: Stormont and Jackson, 1893), 42–46.

[146]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 395–96.

[147]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 366; see also, Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Magic Staff: An Autobiography of Andrew Jackson Davis*, 8th ed. (Boston: Bella Marsh, 1867), 376.

[148]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 362.

[149]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 396–97.

[150]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 397–98.

[151]See McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*, 66–93; Cox, *Body and Soul*, 189–211.

[152]See Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 248–53, 471–72, 505; Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Philip Jenkin, *Dream Catchers: How Mainstream America Discovered Native Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[153]See Delp, "A Spiritualist in Connecticut," 357–59.

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[154]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 366–67.
[155]Davis, *The Magic Staff*, 374.
[156]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 319, 321.
[157]Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 172–209.
[158]Andrew Jackson Davis, *Death and the After-Life. Eight Evening Lecutres on the Summer-Land*, 4th ed. (Boston: William White and Co., 1871), 182–86. First published 1865.
[159]Davis, *The Magic Staff*, 377.
[160]Frances H. Green, "The Ministry of Trees," *The Univercœlum and Spiritual Philosopher* 1, no. 11 (February 12, 1848): 171; Frances H. Green, "The Ministry of Trees," *The Spirit Messenger* 1, no. 45 (June 14, 1851): 357–58.
[161]For a summary of this position, see Giovanni Maltese and Julian Strube, "Global Religious History," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 33 (2021): 229–57.
[162]Turner, *Religion Enters the Academy*, 34–36; Stievermann, "Emersonian Transcendentalism and the Invention of Religion(s)," 541.
[163]Stievermann, "Emersonian Transcendentalism and the Invention of Religion(s)," 560–62.
[164]Bergunder, "Experiments with Theosophical Truth."
[165]A. B. Pope, "Hindoo Mysteries in California," in *The Spiritual Telegraph, vol. 1*, ed. S. B. Brittan (New York: Patridge and Brittan, 1853), 347.
[166]William Fishbough, "Psychological Mysteries of the Hindoos," *American Phrenological Journal* 18, no. 2 (August 1, 1853): 33.
[167]Emily Ogden, *Credulity: A Cultural History of US Mesmerism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 77–82, passim.
[168]Fishbough, "Psychological Mysteries of the Hindoos," 33.
[169]See Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit.*
[170]Pope, "Hindoo Mysteries in California," 347.
[171]Joy Dixon, "'Thoughts Are Things': Theosophy, Religion, and the History of the Real," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 89, no. 4 (2021): 1172.
[172]See Altman, *Heathen, Hindoo, Hindu*, 21.
[173]Soodra, "Gems of Hindooism—Extracts from the Vedas," *Religio-Philosophical Journal* 2, no. 10 (June 2, 1866): 2.
[174]Joseph R. Buchanan, "Hindoo Philosophy," in *The Spiritual Telegraph, vol. 2*, ed. S. B. Brittan (New York: Patridge and Brittan, 1853), 49.
[175]Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, 197–98.
[176]James M. Peebles, *Seers of the Ages: Embracing Spiritualism Past and Present. Doctrines Stated and Moral Tendencies Defined* (Boston: William White and Co., 1869), 80, 28, 45.

[177]Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, 198; K. Paul Johnson, *The Masters Revealed: Madame Blavatsky and the Myth of the Great White Lodge* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), 75–79.

[178]Ann Braude, "News from the Spirit World: A Checklist of American Spiritualist Periodicals, 1847–1900," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 99, no. 2 (1990): 399–462; Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789–1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 41, 147.

[179]Buescher, *The Other Side of Salvation*, 71–73; Clark, *Spiritualist Register 1857*, 32; Braude, "News from the Spirit World," 403.

ABSTRACT *That the concept of religion is of recent construction is well established in the literature. What is less understood is the American contribution to this global discourse, in particular its nineteenth-century popularization below the upper echelons of Unitarians, Transcendentalists, and comparative religion scholars. The small but very influential group of Spiritualists associated with the seer Andrew Jackson Davis offer a fascinating window into popular construals of religion and world religions —here, internally oriented, naturalized, and evolutionary—taking shape amid increasing globalization and the challenge of scientific materialism. The subdiscourse articulated by Davis and his circle provides an interesting case not only for its antiinstitutional and individualized qualities but also for its radical decentering of Christianity and paradoxical relationship to science. Moreover, Davis's efforts to define true religion and frame his system as its purest expression are connected to struggles for legitimacy within the public sphere and contests concerning religious authority.*

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