

# Spirituality

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“SPIRITUALITY” is a slippery concept. Various positioned, as Peter van der Veer observes, “as the opposite of materiality, as distinctive from the body, [and] as distinctive from both the religious and the secular,” spirituality frustrates conceptual divides even as it invites us to construct them.<sup>1</sup> The term’s indeterminacy, however, also enables it to negotiate boundaries in a way that makes it particularly valuable for understanding the religious landscape of the late nineteenth century, which saw the unprecedented emergence of a dizzying range of new heterodox spiritual practices and beliefs, including enthusiasm for spiritualist séances and telepathy, the development of “psychical research” into unexplained phenomena, the flourishing of esoteric and occult movements such as Theosophy and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and avid interest in neo-Pagan religions and practices.<sup>2</sup> Departing from orthodox religious doctrines and institutions while still positing modes of engagement with a transcendent reality that strained empirical frameworks, these emergent movements and practices exposed the porous late Victorian boundary between the secular and the sacred, between the scientific and the supernatural, and between the material and the numinous.

Scholarship has often understood this proliferation of spiritualities as a reaction to the nineteenth-century “crisis of faith,” as Victorians, unable to adhere to the rigid orthodoxies of Christian belief while still emotionally dissatisfied with the equally rigid materialist cosmos of scientific naturalism, turned to new spiritual practices in “an effort to counter their insecurity, to calm their fears, and to seek answers where contemporary churches were ambiguous.”<sup>3</sup> More recently, however, scholars of late Victorian spirituality have told a very different story, informed both by the questioning of the secularization thesis in religious studies as well as by a growing consensus that, in the disciplinary ferment of the late nineteenth century, the dividing line between “legitimate” and “pseudo” science was fuzzy rather than clear-cut.<sup>4</sup> From these perspectives, new forms

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of spirituality were not an eccentric pocket of resistance to secular modernity; indeed, they flourished not in opposition to, but rather in harmony with, the ascendancy of scientific frameworks for understanding the world. Alex Owen, for instance, has influentially argued for an understanding of *fin de siècle* spiritualities “as integral to much that was most selfconsciously new at the turn of the century,” particularly in the way they “renegotiat[ed] the rationalism and even scientism of the period without sacrificing . . . ultimate claims to meaning.”<sup>5</sup> Jason A. Josephson-Storm, too, outlines a new understanding of the late Victorian disciplinary development of the sciences as intimately bound up with spiritual practices, rather than as a secular or disenchanted turn away from them.<sup>6</sup>

One of the most intriguing revelations of this body of scholarship is that Victorian spirituality was not the binary opposite of either the “material” or the “scientific.” Rather, the spiritual was an ill-defined and contested territory in which both scientific and spiritual practitioners in the late nineteenth century sought to shore up the discursive authority of their respective knowledge practices. Occultist and Theosophical writers often insisted on the scientific validity of spiritual experiences by reconceptualizing spirit as a rarefied form of matter (albeit one overlooked by the materialist sciences that denied its existence). Thus the famous Theosophist convert Annie Besant wrote in 1889 that “‘Spirit’ is a misleading word, for historically, it connotes immateriality and a supernatural kind of existence, and the Theosophist believes neither in the one nor the other. With him all living things act in and through a material basis, and ‘matter’ and ‘spirit’ are not found dissociated. But he alleges that matter exists in states other than those at present known to science.”<sup>7</sup> In the sciences, too, the spiritual realm overlapped with the material world in perplexing ways, often acting as a placeholder for future scientific discovery rather than a holdover from the fading domain of religious orthodoxy. As Richard Noakes has argued, for instance, the nascent field of Victorian physics grappled avidly with quasi-material concepts and unseen forces such as ether, magnetism, and atoms in ways that rendered the field amenable to the exploration of spiritual phenomena in the very process of its constitution as a discipline.<sup>8</sup>

The changing ecology of literary genre at the *fin de siècle* played a crucial and underdiscussed role in mediating this vexed relationship between spirituality and science. Indeed, as Christine Ferguson has lately suggested, “the era’s occultural turn arguably had its most profound influence not on the religious but on the literary marketplace,” as the

decline of the triple-decker novel opened up space for new, shorter forms of romance, occult fiction, and emergent genres that are now often classified retrospectively as modes of speculative fiction: science fiction, fantasy, and “weird” fiction.<sup>9</sup> Attending to these genres reveals the key role of popular writers, many of whom were women, in framing spiritual practices as an openness to futurity.<sup>10</sup> It also raises questions about how we construct genealogies of speculative genres such as science fiction and fantasy, which are frequently divided along a putative line between scientific rationalism and an openness to the supernatural.<sup>11</sup>

A tantalizing example is Marie Corelli’s 1886 *A Romance of Two Worlds*, a novel that established Corelli’s status as a fin de siècle juggernaut whose books, despite being critically reviled, outsold those of virtually every canonical Victorian author. The plot follows an unnamed ingenue heroine who, under the tutelage of a magician adept, is inducted into an esoteric movement called “The Electric Creed of Christianity” through a series of spiritual experiences that include hypnosis, telepathy, and astral travel to other planets in the company of angelic beings, one of whom is Jesus Christ himself. Although the novel decries a materialist scientific framework that would negate these experiences, it also relentlessly mobilizes scientific language to reconceptualize the spiritual as a form of “human electricity” yet unknown to science. The heroine reflects: “At one time people mocked at the wild idea that a message could flash in a moment of time from one side of the Atlantic to the other by means of a cable laid under the sea; now . . . it is an established fact. . . . Granting human electricity to exist, why should not a communication be established, like a sort of spiritual Atlantic cable, between man and the beings of other spheres and other solar systems?”<sup>12</sup> In equating interplanetary telepathy with the technological invention of the telegraph, Corelli frames spirituality not as the residual trace of a receding religious past but as the harbinger of a future envisioned in thoroughly scientific terms. Is Corelli’s novel an incipient form of science fiction or a fantasy that unfolds along supernatural lines? The novel’s deliberate merging of spiritual experience with scientific experimentation suggests how these genre categories themselves encode assumptions about the boundary between religion and science, spirit and matter.

Corelli’s novel reveals the success of new fictional genres in capitalizing on the confusion of discursive authority around the status of the spiritual toward the end of the century, and the important role played by these genres in establishing fin de siècle spirituality as a discourse of futurity that channeled rather than resisted modernizing currents.

It also suggests how attending to the boundary-crossing tendency of late Victorian spirituality might in turn enable closer attention to the porousness of our own literary categories.

## NOTES

1. Peter van der Veer, "Spirituality in Modern Society," *Social Research* 76, no. 4 (2009): 1097.
2. Van der Veer also highlights spirituality's vagueness as conceptually valuable but focuses primarily on the term's usefulness for making connections between European and Asian modernities. Key scholarly works on late nineteenth-century spiritual movements in Britain include Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1950–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Alan Gauld, *The Founders of Psychical Research* (London: Routledge, 1968); Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) and *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); and Dennis Denisoff, *Decadent Ecology in British Literature and Art, 1860–1910: Decay, Desire, and the Pagan Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).
3. Oppenheim, *The Other World*, 1. See also Frank Turner, *Between Science and Religion: The Reaction to Scientific Naturalism in Late Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).
4. On the secularization thesis, see especially Jason A. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017). On the fuzzy line between legitimate and illegitimate science, see, for instance, Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), and Richard Noakes, *Physics and Psychics: The Occult and the Sciences in Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
5. Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 7, 11.
6. As Josephson-Storm puts it, the "account of modernity as despiritualization is itself a myth" (*The Myth of Disenchantment*, 2).
7. Annie Besant, *Why I Became a Theosophist* (London: Freethought, 1889), 25.

8. Noakes, *Physics*, 15–16.
9. Christine Ferguson, “New Religions and Esotericism,” in *The Routledge Companion to Victorian Literature*, edited by Dennis Denisoff and Talia Schaffer (New York: Routledge, 2020), 418. J. Jeffrey Franklin also points to the late Victorian “gothic romance” as a genre that “strove mightily to reconcile religion and science through the construction of fictional physicotheologies” (*Spirit Matters: Occult Beliefs, Alternative Religions, and the Crisis of Faith in Victorian Britain* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018], xv).
10. This point is indebted to the work of Mimi Winick, who argues for the importance of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women writers, specifically women scholars of religion such as Jane Harrison and Jessie Weston, in theorizing spirituality as a key component of modernization. See especially Winick, “Scholarly Enchantment,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 73, no. 2 (2018): 187–226. Winick further develops this argument in her book manuscript, “Ecstatic Inquiry: Religion, Literature, and the Feminist Mythological Imagination, 1870–1930.” For more on the centrality of women to Victorian spiritual movements, see also Jill Galvan, *The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channeling, the Occult, and Communication Technologies, 1859–1919* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), and Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).
11. Darko Suvin, for example, famously argues that science fiction emerged in the nineteenth century as a “cognitive” (i.e., rationalizing) genre, in contradistinction to fantasy, which he sees as “anti-cognitive” and “inimical to the empirical world and its laws” due to its engagement with the supernatural (Suvin, “On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre,” *College English* 34, no. 3 [1972]: 375–76).
12. Marie Corelli, *A Romance of Two Worlds* (London: Richard Bentley, 1886), 1:315–16.

